Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Strange Fire Q&A, Part 2
Scripture: Selected Scriptures
Code: 70-35

PHIL: Well I promised last week to ask you some questions about the more outlandish…

JOHN: May I introduce you first?

PHIL: Yes, go ahead.

JOHN: This is my long-term friend Phil Johnson who just celebrated his…what anniversary with us? Thirty…

PHIL: Thirty years.

JOHN: Thirty years in serving here and I remember the first Sunday he and Darlene sat on the front row right there when they came 30 years ago and for how many years with Grace To You?

PHIL: Thirty

JOHN: All thirty…all thirty years, now leading Grace To You for many years, so thank you, sir. (Applause)

PHIL: Thank you. It's thirty years that have gone by in a flash and it's just as exciting to me today as it was then.

JOHN: Really?

PHIL: Yeah.

JOHN: Good. That's good.

PHIL: Yeah, it is.

Now last week I promised I would ask you some questions about the more outlandish televangelists and the snake handlers and sort of other ranked charlatans which are part of the Charismatic Movement. And I thought about it over the two weeks and if we have time, we might get to that, but I was left last time with several theological questions I want to ask you and most of the people in our

audience aren't as likely to be confused by someone like Benny Hinn or Paula White as they would be with some of the continuationists who hold to more traditional confessions of faith, closer to us theologically and so that's what I'm really concerned about. And I think it would be helpful if I began with some questions about doctrine and Scripture and I want to try to ask you the kinds of questions that I think our Charismatic friends who share our commitment to the gospel might want to ask you if they were up here with you. And then if we have time left over at the end, we'll get to the other things.

JOHN: Okay.

PHIL: I've had several Charismatics tell me that to them cessationism sounds an awful lot like skepticism so that, you know, instead of accepting the testimony of people who say that the Holy Spirit is doing miracles today, we tend to begin our position from a place of Agnosticism, or skepticism as if our presumption is kind of state of disbelief. From the Charismatics point of view, can you see why that would be a concern?

JOHN: Well yeah, they see it as skepticism because they think they're right. It's that simple. If you think you're right, then you're going to view some rejection as skepticism and nothing more. You're not going to say, "Well, that person could be right, that's reasonable, that's rational, that's biblical. You're just going to bag it in the bag of skepticism.

I would say the rejection of the Charismatic Movement as such is not skepticism, it's just outright rejection. I'm not skeptical about it in the sense that I'm questioning the legitimacy of it, I'm not really asking that question anymore. I think it's illegitimate.

PHIL: Right.

JOHN: So this is not skepticism, this is just rejection. I just don't think there's a biblical case for that Movement. So if you want to…if you want to call it skepticism, that's simply a reflection of the fact that you don't believe what I'm saying and you affirm the Movement. So you simply dismiss it as skepticism. The problem with that is they endeavor to take that skepticism and apply it not to the Movement, but to the Holy Spirit.

PHIL: Right.

JOHN: So then they say you're skeptical of the Holy Spirit, you're skeptical of the power of the Spirit, you're skeptical of the work of the Holy Spirit.

PHIL: No, you don't believe in the Holy Spirit…

JOHN: Or you don't even believe in the Holy Spirit. I've heard people say through the years, you know, "John MacArthur has an effective ministry, just imagine what he'd be if he had the Holy Spirit."

Literally. “Well what would happen in his ministry if he didn’t reject the Holy Spirit? If he was open to the Spirit?” So I understand that to be labeled skeptical of the Movement is their way of dismissing me and then they want to extend it and they never want to say, “Let’s go to the Word of God and discuss the issue of tongues, let’s go to the Word of God and discuss the issue of prophecy.” It’s much more effective to dismiss me by saying, “He denies the Holy Spirit.”

PHIL: What would you say to a Charismatic to reassure him that you are not skeptical of all things miraculous?

JOHN: I’m not skeptical of anything that fits Scripture. I affirm everything that is scriptural. Do I affirm miracles? Of course, in the biblical sense as defined in the Bible, as revealed in the Bible. But I will not accept a miracle claim from someone that cannot be verified and that does not fit the biblical pattern.

PHIL: Yeah, sub-biblical miracles are really….

JOHN: Well, you know, people throw that word around. You know, “I went to the mall and there was a parking place near Sears. It was a miracle.” That’s not a miracle.

PHIL: Yeah. In fact, hold that thought because I want to get to that. I have a question about that very thing.

JOHN: You’ve had that miracle in your life?

PHIL: Yes, it happens to me all the time. Yeah…yeah. No, my question is going to be with regard to…”If that’s not a miracle, what do you call it?” But let me get there. There was a…last year a famous pastor issued a video that went on the internet in which he said, “Cessationism is a kind of deism.” He was basically making this charge that at the root of it is a spirit of unbelief…

JOHN: Okay, I need to stop and define that. Cessationism, for you that don’t know what we’re talking about, is the belief that the gifts that, the sign gifts, the miracle gifts that belong to the Apostles ceased when the Apostles ceased. We talk about cessationism, we’re talking about the fact that at the end of the era of the Apostles, the signs of an Apostle ceased which were miracles and signs and wonders. Just so you understand that.

PHIL: Yeah, 2 Corinthians 12:12 refers to those…

JOHN: Signs of an Apostle. And by the way, in the book I have right here, chapter 5 may be the most important chapter in the book, this is a pre-publication copy, and it shows how the Apostles have ceased. And if Apostles have ceased, then everything that was attendant upon the Apostles’ ministry ceased when the Apostles ceased because it was inimitable to them.

Now the second thing you said in that was…

PHIL: Well, he's saying it's a kind of…it has at its heart a spirit of unbelief. He says it's a worldly way of thinking that has more in common with atheism…

JOHN: Oh yeah, deism. Yeah…well deism, just to define deism, deism is the notion, it's an old notion, some of the founding fathers of America were deists, the idea that God made everything, created everything, there is a God, He made everything and then He just walks away and just kind of lets it all go. That's the view of deism. You believe in God, you believe in God as Creator, you believe in God as power, but God's not involved anymore, He walks away.

So when people accuse me of not believing in the supernatural, not believing in miracles, they say that's akin to being a deist, that God started everything and He's no longer involved.

PHIL: Or that He shut Himself off from working.

JOHN: Yeah, He's transcendent without being imminent.

PHIL: Yeah, so respond to that.

JOHN: Well, of course, that's absurd to say that God…because God…because I say God is not healing people in the way they did in the Apostles' era, He's not raising dead people the way Jesus did. He's not doing signs and wonders. He's not creating limbs and food and all those things. Is not to say that God is not active at all. God is the one in whom we live, and move and have our being. If God for one split second took His power and His presence out of the universe, it would cease to exist.

And then you can go beyond that to spiritual life. The great miracle that God is doing, you saw a testimony of three of those miracles tonight, the miracle of new life. "If any man is in Christ, he's a new creation." God is doing spiritual work of salvation. He's also doing the spiritual work of sanctification as He conforms believers to the ministry of the Holy Spirit by the Word into the image of Christ. He's doing the work of conviction through the Holy Spirit, convicting the world of sin and righteousness and judgment. We're begotten again by the power of the Spirit which is the work of God through the Word. We're sanctified through the Word. The Word is alive and powerful. That the Scripture is made alive and active in our own lives. We're led by the Holy Spirit. We…we are informed by the Holy Spirit. That is to say we are illuminated as to our understanding of Scripture by the work of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

So and I guess maybe I could sum it up by saying, "How could you say that God's not involved when He lives inside the believer?" No one is denying that. We're simply talking about the manifestations of God that were miraculous associated with Jesus and the Apostles having ceased. In fact, keep this in

mind, the miracles that Jesus did and the miracles the Apostles did when Jesus was ministering were powerful miracles done in an era where the fullness of the Holy Spirit had not yet really come. Because Jesus said, “He is with you, He shall be in you.” And that happened on the Day of Pentateuch. So, rather than saying God is less involved at this period after the ministry of Jesus and the Apostles, that would lead me to believe that He is more involved. The Holy Spirit was with you and shall be in you is a question of degree. In some way the fullness of the Spirit has come as the fullness of the revelation of God has come, and He has gone back to heaven and sent His Holy Spirit. So I don’t believe in less of God’s power and presence and Spirit, if anything, I believe in more of it. It’s only the question of how it manifests itself and whether or not those very unique things that were occurring in the time of the Apostles continue after the Apostles, which would be very confusing because they were to mark out the Apostles and validate their message before there was a Scripture, before Scripture was compiled. Now that it’s compiled, we don’t need miracles to validate a prophet, all we need to know is how he matches up with Scripture. And that’s the problem. Benny Hinn claims to do miracles to validate his ministry. The problem is, he has terrible theology and misrepresents Scripture. And God’s not going to validate that through miracles. If you compare him with Scripture, and he doesn’t match the Scripture, then he’s a false prophet.

PHIL: If somebody came to you and said, “I want to understand the ministry of the Holy Spirit today,” what passages of Scripture would you point them to?

JOHN: Well, first of all, if you’re talking about the work of salvation which would be the great work that the Holy Spirit is doing, you would start with a couple of things. You would start, first of all, with John 16, He convicts the world of sin and righteousness and judgment. So how is this darkened sinner, this dead sinner, this blind sinner, this double-blind sinner, blinded by his own fallenness, double blinded by Satan’s development of a system that holds him in bondage, how is he supposed to see the truth? How is he supposed to be convicted about his sin? How’s he supposed to feel badly about what he loves to do? Men love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil. So how do you flip him and have him hate what he loves? That’s a work of the Holy Spirit. That’s not a work of man. The Spirit convicts the world of sin and righteousness and judgment.

You also have to believe that the natural man, 1 Corinthians 2, doesn’t understand the things of God, the only way he can understand Him is through the Holy Spirit because they’re spiritually discerned and it is only the Spirit that gives clarity on Scripture. So we would say that the Spirit convicts of sin, and the Spirit illuminates the mind to understand the truth. And then the Spirit regenerates, the Spirit literally gives life, we’re born of the Spirit, John 3, begotten by the Holy Spirit.

So that’s where the ministry of the Spirit in a human being begins. But I would even back up one spot before that on a broad level and say this, the world is bad but the world is not as bad as it could be. Okay? I mean, it’s not as bad as it could be, right? You can take a vacation to a beautiful place, you can interact with people who aren’t Christians, you can go to a hospital and get good care from

people who have no knowledge of Christ. The world is bad but it's not as bad as it could be.

Do you know why the world is not as bad as it could be? Because it is restrained. It is restrained by the one that Paul writes about in 2 Thessalonians who is called the restrainer. So even before the work of conviction and illumination and regeneration and sanctification and glorification, there is the restraining work of the Holy Spirit. In the future there is coming a period of time that the Bible identifies as the Great Tribulation when the restrainer no longer restrains. Then the world will be essentially as bad as it can be. That's when you read about the things that are in the book of Revelation, horrendous, horrific things…a number of things will happen. The Antichrist will take power. The false prophet will aid and abet him. Sin will run rampant over the world. People will be slaughtering each other, killing within the family, hell will open up and demons out of hell will overrun the world in a way that they don't now. That's when the restrainer stops restraining. That doesn't mean during that time that the Holy Spirit isn't here. He's omnipresent, He is here. He is here and the gospel will be preached, and people will be saved in those seven years. More people will be saved, I think, than any other period in history from every tongue and tribe and people and nation. But He will no longer restrain. Those works of the Holy Spirit go on all the time through human history until the end.

PHIL: Now see, if you ask me, "Help me understand the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the church today," I would give that person your messages from Romans 8.

JOHN: Sure, and that's where this whole thing started. It was when I was preaching through Romans 8, I don't know when, some time ago, what?

PHIL: A year ago, a year and a half, maybe.

JOHN: A year ago, or a year and a half ago. I started into Romans 8 and I wanted to show the true ministry of the Holy Spirit in Romans 8. That's where you would go. I mean, that's what you're driving out. I would start in the gospel of John in chapter 16, I would look at 1 Corinthians 2, and then I would end up in Romans 8 because there you have what life in the Spirit is. If you want to know the full range of the Spirit's ministry, that's where it is. And by the way, that's the three chapters before the final chapter, dealing with Romans 8 and the true ministry of the Holy Spirit. No one is denying the true ministry of the Holy Spirit. What we're denying is a phenomena or the absence of a phenomena, a claimed phenomena, a falsely claimed phenomena attributed to the Holy Spirit that has nothing to do with Him.

PHIL: Actually I was driving at all of those. I'm glad you mentioned John 16 and all those other passages because all those that you named are the key passages on the ministry of the Holy Spirit today, and not one of them says anything about speaking in tongues.

JOHN: No. It doesn't say anything about miracles either.

PHIL: Right. Now respond to this. In one of his books, Jack Deere, Jack Deere was a professor at Dallas Seminary who converted to Charismatic theology and he's written a few books on the subject. In one of his books he says…he suggests the following hypothetical, he writes, "If you were to lock a brand new Christian in a room with a Bible and tell him to study what the Scriptures have to say about healing and miracles, he would never come out of that room a cessationist." And elsewhere he adds, "No one ever just picked up the Bible, started reading and came to the conclusion that God is not doing signs and wonders anymore, or that the gifts of the Holy Spirit have passed away. The doctrine of cessationism did not originate from a careful study of the Scriptures. The doctrine of cessationism originated in experience." Respond to that.

JOHN: What he's saying is that we're cessationists because we haven't had the experience.

PHIL: Right.

JOHN: You know, that is really bad history. That is terrible history. At the end of the book…

PHIL: I was going to say the same thing because between the Bible and that guy…

JOHN: Between the Bible…

PHIL: And that guy locked in the room, you've got…

JOHN: William Fox Parham(?) who invented this stuff.

PHIL: You've got twenty centuries…

JOHN: You've got twenty centuries when nobody was affirming that except aberrant groups. Voices from church history, we have John Chrysostom, the fourth century, Augustine, Theodoret7 of Cyrus in the fifth century, Martin Luther in the fifteenth and sixteenth century, John Calvin, John Owen, Thomas Watson, Matthew Henry, John Gill, Jonathan Edwards, James Buchanan, Robert Dabney in the nineteenth century, Charles Spurgeon in the nineteenth century, George Smeaten in the nineteenth century, the great Abraham Kuyper in the nineteenth and a little into the twentieth, William Shedd in the nineteenth, Benjamin Warfield in the twentieth century, Arthur Pink, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, they all are cessationists. They all declare that these things have ceased.

So to say that there has been a continual stream of legitimate, biblical scholarship conviction and confidence in the sign gifts is just not the case.

PHIL: Yes, and the other side of that is, if you cite those instances throughout church history, and there are some where people claimed miracles happened, and you examine those claims, you find a lot of them are just rooted in superstition. They're Catholic stories about…

JOHN: Yeah, well how about the latest two that are going to make Pope—which one of the popes?

PHIL: Pope John Paul.

JOHN: Pope John Paul now is going to be sainted because they found that he did two miracles. Both are bogus claims. So yeah, there are still people trying to claim miracles happen but upon examination…but look at that, if he's a saint and he was old when he died, and they can only find two questionable miracles? And this is all that a saint can produce who's such a saint that he ends up being the saint of all saints over all other saints?

PHIL: Not only that, he's being canonized probably faster than any…

JOHN: Faster than anybody else, yeah. Well it's like they've got to get something good in there with all the disaster that's going on. But…yeah, Jack Deere's(?) comments about that being the norm, you would have to literally be ignorant of church history to buy into that. That kind of argument would do well with a lot of folks who don't know the truth about the history of the church and they would buy into that. But anybody who knows the history of the church, knows that the idea of cessation didn't get invented in the twentieth century by us. That's just bizarre.

PHIL: Well, and as you pointed out two weeks ago, even the contemporary things that are happening that are claimed as apostolic signs and so on, really aren't like the signs described in Scripture. Speaking in tongues today is, you know, just a lot of random syllables, not a recognizable language. In the Scripture that was…

JOHN: No, and back to the issue of John Paul, I read an article today which completely debunks the miracle that supposedly causes him to be canonized.

PHIL: What kind of miracle was it?

JOHN: I don't know, it was some healing, but there are people who have… who are very cynical that any such thing ever happened. So…

PHIL: Right. I want to get to healing but let's go back to the word "miracle." You indicated that, you know, it's loosely used these days. We ought to define it. That word is tossed around and abused these days so that virtually every remarkable providence or stunning answer to prayer is categorized as a miracle. You have in…I think in your commentary on 1 Corinthians, you define miracle this way.

It’s a supernatural intrusion into the natural world and its natural laws explainable only by divine intervention.

JOHN: Yeah.

PHIL: Warfield had a similar definition. He said that distinguishing characteristics of a true miracle, the thing that makes them different from the counterfeits are one, it occurs in the external world and it’s therefore objectively real and not merely a mental phenomenon, not just, you know, something that happens in somebody’s mind. And number two, he said, its cause is a new supernatural force intruded into the complex of nature and not a natural force. And he said that’s true even if it’s a natural force under the providential control of God, that’s not a miracle, it’s an act of providence. Would you agree with that distinction?

JOHN: Yeah, absolutely! A miracle in the biblical definition has no natural explanation. It has…there’s not even the possibility of a natural explanation. Sometimes when somebody goes through cancer treatment and the cancer is somehow disappears and they go into some kind of remission and time goes by, people say that’s a miracle.

PHIL: Or the unexpected parking space. Things as simple as that.

JOHN: That’s not necessarily a miracle because that is not manifestly supernatural. That is not something that has no other explanation.

PHIL: And yet we wouldn’t deny that that could well be God at work. God orchestrated that as He does all things, providentially. Right?

JOHN: Providentially, providentially God…God can work in the human body in wonderful ways. The body is an amazing thing to begin with. And God works through the science of medicine and God can supernaturally be involved in those kinds of things. But God has placed in human life order and system and human wisdom and knowledge and opportunity and all of that that can bring about providentially those kinds of things. And I think particularly in the world in which we live. If you’re living during the Black Death when millions and millions and millions of people are dying all over Europe, you know, that’s not a real good time to be a miracle working evangelist. You’re not going to be running around gathering people into a tent and saving their life. But in a world where you have so much science so highly developed that people can be helped, it’s very easy to sort of say, “Well, this is a miracle and that’s a miracle,” when that would not be the only possible explanation. If God’s going to do a miracle, there isn’t going to be any other explanation. That’s going to be when you see a guy come back from Afghanistan who had his right leg blown off and the next time you see him he’s got a leg. That’s a miracle. That’s…that’s something for which there is no human explanation.

PHIL: A key element of your definition and Warfield's is that it's something that contravenes the natural order of.

JOHN: It violates the natural order. It intrudes into the natural order. Providence is where God manipulates the natural order.

PHIL: Now let me read you a contrasting definition. This is from Wayne Grudem and it's much broader. He says, "A miracle is a less common kind of God's activity in which He arouses people's awe and wonder and bears witness to Himself." So it's anything that God does that's out of the ordinary that would bear witness to Him and arouse your awe. So I would guess by Grudem's definition, the parking space, he would classify that as a miracle.

JOHN: Phil, what does out of the ordinary mean?

PHIL: Well, an open parking space at the mall. That's out of the ordinary. At least it is for me anyway.

JOHN: You know, that kind of silliness attached to God is beneath Him.

PHIL: Yeah, but…here's the point I want to make. You might say that something, even something as mundane as that, would be an answer to prayer, right?

JOHN: Well, you know, yeah here's why. That wouldn't be at the mall. Any time you can find a parking place to the mall, things go bad right away.

PHIL: Yeah, okay.

JOHN: Yeah, cause you start rolling out the credit card…that's not good. That's…but, if you're racing to the hospital and you've got a dying child in the backseat, and you don't know where you're going, you can't find your way, and all of a sudden you have a thought, maybe I should turn right here. You pull in and you're at the emergency, you could say there's a divine providence working at that point that delivered you at that place at that critical time for the salvation of life, for saving a life. I think those kinds of things…we all know stories about the ambulance arrived just in time, or the rescue came in just in time, or I was about to pull out and a truck went flashing by and something caused me to stop. Those kinds of providences that God works in the world, I don't question the providences of God in that.

PHIL: Yeah, the Puritans used to refer to that as an extraordinary providence.

JOHN: But I don't like that phrase either because all providence is extraordinary. Right? Or it isn't divine providence. But some of it is more wonderful than others…

PHIL: That's right and that's what they meant by extraordinary. It was the kind of thing. It grabbed your attention and you said, "God did that."

JOHN: But the miracle would be…the miracle would be that you didn't need a car to go to the mall.

PHIL: Right.

JOHN: You just were there.

PHIL: Here's my question….Here's my question. Is that…cause I think that's an important distinction. I'm not sure Wayne Grudem would say it's an important distinction. He seems to treat it very casually. But I would say it's critical whether you classify that as a miracle or an act of providence.

JOHN: It is critical.

PHIL: Because with providence, what we're recognizing is that God is at work in everything that happens.

JOHN: Look, in my life I would say there's rarely a day that goes by that I'm not surprised by providence. I mean, a day goes by that I'm not surprised by providence. Somebody comes across my path, something happens that is so obviously divinely orchestrated. I live…that's my entire life, that's how I live. I see the divine providence of God in and out of my life on a daily basis. And I know there are times that I don't even see it but His providence works. So I would never deny that God is at work, accomplishing His purposes through me in ways that are imperceptible to me. That goes on in the lives of His people and in the world. But a miracle is a completely different reality. It is not God orchestrating the natural events. It is God stopping the natural events and injecting a clearly supernatural event.

PHIL: Right.

JOHN: And to say you believe in miracles and then redefine miracle as nothing but a providence…

PHIL: Doesn't really help anything, does it?

JOHN: It doesn't help.

PHIL: Plus, the point I've tried lovingly to make with my Charismatic friends is…whose faith is deficient?

JOHN: You still have Charismatic friends?

PHIL: I do…I do. They're very persistent friends. But whose faith is deficient? Is it the guy who sees that God is at work in providence in everything that happens, or is it the guy who thinks God's only working when He does a miracle? The deficient faith is the guy who thinks God's only working if He's doing miracles. And so when somebody says to me…You don't believe in the Holy Spirit because you don't believe in miracles…

JOHN: Guess what. That is such a good point, Phil. It's really a very good insight. The deficient faith is to think that God only works in miracles, but only when He suspends things. And, of course, when you think that's the only way God works, you invent that stuff in your own mind, to create a reality. And I said this last time, I'll say it again. These people don't have great faith, they have doubt looking for proof. They don't have great faith. Great faith sees God at work in everything. I would say I have a far greater understanding of the power of God in the world than they do because I see God's providence working in everything, absolutely everything.

You know, there's a certain calm in me, even in the most challenging and stressful realities of life because I'm not panicked hoping for a miracle. I'm absolutely settled on the fact that God is providentially at work and will accomplish His perfect will which is always right and best. And that's a settled place of peace. I can't imagine anything else.

At the Strange Fire Conference, Joni Eareckson Tada is going to come and she's going to talk about a life without a miracle. You know, there are so many people who've laid hands on her, prayed for miracles to happen, told her she lacked faith. She sees the providence of God in her life every day. She has a greater view of the power of God than a Charismatic asking for a miracle. As if that could actually happen. And you know in a sense…

PHIL: That's a great point.

JOHN: You don't need a miracle if God is orchestrating everything. That is the miracle. What miracle do you need? Do you want something other than God orchestrating everything? What would be better than that?

PHIL: In fact, the historic Protestant view is that in history and in Scripture, miracles serve a definitive purpose.

JOHN: Absolutely.

PHIL: And what is that purpose?

JOHN: To authenticate the messenger of God and the work of God at a given point in time. We talked about it last time. Go to the whole Old Testament. The Old Testament covers hundreds and hundreds of years, from the creation to the New Testament, four thousand years. Try to find miracles, as I said last time, when God does intervene, most of the time people die. It's judgment. There are two periods of miracles around Moses and Egypt and around Elijah and Elisha and that's it. Until you get to the New Testament, an explosion of miracles to validate the person of Jesus Christ. We said that in the gospel of John, right? I mean, He's demonstrating His deity through these miracles and He's authenticating His Apostles or preaching the truth in a world of lies. How do you know who the true teacher is? The one who is validated by visible, undeniable, supernatural invasions into the natural world. But when the ministry of Christ is done, and the ministry of the Apostles is done, even as you get to the end of the book of Acts, the miracles begin to completely disappear. People stay sick. They don't get healed. And in no epistle in the New Testament is anybody ever told to look for a miracle, seek for a miracle, pray for a miracle.

PHIL: Here's what John Calvin wrote about that, tell me if you agree with this. "It is unreasonable to ask for miracles, or to find them where there is no new gospel. The miraculous attestation of that one single gospel suffices for all lands and all times and no further miracles are to be expected in connection with it." Do you agree with that?

JOHN: That is a great statement. And we would expect that from maybe the greatest mind that biblical theology has ever known, John Calvin, and a biblically, scripturally saturated mind at that, yeah, to seek for miracles would be to assume a new revelation from God in some way replacing the old one.

PHIL: Then that leads to this question. This is a little tougher. Do you then totally rule out miracles today? That is do you deny the possibility of miracles? Is there any biblical or doctrinal argument that suggests that God limits Himself from working in that fashion? Or if God decided to, could He do a miracle now?

JOHN: Oh, if God decided He could do anything. I mean, that's obvious. God has not chosen to do miracles in this era because He has revealed Himself in His Son and the record of His Son is on the pages of Holy Scripture and **Scripture is the miracle. Scripture is the consummate miracle, holy men were moved by the Spirit of God. They wrote down that the miracle of inspiration, the miracle of revelation, the production of the Word of God, that is the miracle.** Could God do a miracle? Of course. Will He do some in the future? Absolutely. They will come back powerfully at the end of the age. Clearly. And again when they come back powerfully at the end of the age, for the most part they're going to be judgment miracles again. They're going to be miracles that the world isn't going to want to see, supernatural miracles that will be devastating to the world.

But I do think there will be other miracles. There will be visions and there will be prophecies and revelations at the end of the age. I mean, that's the promise of Joel, reiterated at the Day of Pentecost and affirmed for the end times.

PHIL: What would you say to the Charismatic who says that is being fulfilled today, that's what the Charismatic Movement is all about?

JOHN: It just doesn't match up to the biblical standard. The moon hasn't turned to blood. The stars aren't falling out of the sky. Those eschatological events, I think, are associated with the time of those miracles.

Here…the bottom line is this. They keep talking about miracles and no one can verify any of them. They can't verify any of them. I mean, just healing lower back pain is not convincing.

PHIL: No, although…

JOHN: It's all that invisible stuff. And, you know, psychosomatic…people…disorders people think they have things…but you don't see a real visible, demonstrable verifiable authenticated miracle. How many people have gone after that? I mean, in the book we talk about that. People have gone after…they've got to Benny Hinn and take…you give me your best five miracles and we'll survey every one of them…and they come up with nothing…nothing. They don't happen. And this is the guy at the top of the food chain doing miracles. People went after Kathryn Kuhlman's miracles…supposed miracles. They couldn't verify any of them. I read an entire book trying to validate her miracles. There was no validation possible.

So…and this would be your experience, right? You've never seen a dead person made alive. You've never seen a person without a limb get a limb. You've never seen somebody in a wheelchair with muscular dystrophy or some kind of severe disability and we have hundreds of those precious people around here, get out of a wheelchair. And the question I always ask is why are they at Grace Church and not Church on the Way? What are they doing here. Because if those people can do miracles, that's where they ought to be. The answer to that is they've been there. And now they're here.

PHIL: All right, and yet I know you and I know that you pray for people to be healed.

JOHN: Sure, I pray that because I'm told to pray that…in Scripture. To pray for those that are sick. To pray…

PHIL: What is your expectation…

JOHN: Okay, let me give you a parallel.

PHIL: Okay.

JOHN: I pray for people to be saved because I'm commanded to pray for people to be saved. Right? Paul says that to Timothy.

PHIL: Right.

JOHN: We're commanded to pray for the salvation of people. I pray that but because I know God has told me to pray that and God supernaturally can save people. If I'm told to pray for the sick, which I am in Scripture, I have to believe that God can bring wellness to a sick person. I believe that. The question is, how does He do that? Does He save people today by slamming them into the dirt on the Damascus Road? No. He saves them invisibly by the ministry of the Holy Spirit in his heart ….

PHIL: Through the means of the gospel…

JOHN: Through the means of the gospel. And I think the healings that God does and I believe God heals, I believe when, you know, a few years ago when Patricia had her car accident, I think it's been twenty years, and broke her neck and broke C2 and C3 above the respiration. I think God providentially ordered those little bones in her neck that it completely shattered and fragmented, He kept them from touching her spinal column. When I had blood clots, DVTs on both lungs, I believe the Lord kept those from going through my heart and killing me. I think God works that way.

PHIL: When I had lower back pain, you prayed for me and…

JOHN: I did. Did it go away when I prayed for you?

PHIL: Well, after I had surgery, yeah. (Laughter)

JOHN: Oh yeah. See, that's exactly…that's not a miracle, that's not a…I prayed that you would find the right surgeon. That's what I prayed.

PHIL: Well, and I believe…actually…

JOHN: I had back pain and I had surgery.

PHIL: And I say this with absolute seriousness, I believe the Lord answered your prayers. But He did it through means.

JOHN: Did it through means rather than stopping the natural process and invading the natural process. But having said that, Phil, it is clear that there is a limit to how His providence works. If you have a stone-blind person, blind from birth with non-functioning eyes, praying that God will give that person two new eyes, God has demonstrated that that is not the way He works in this era. If you're talking about a person who is wheelchair bound from birth, praying that they will wake up one morning and have a completely healthy, whole, functioning body is not the way God works.

So having said that, we are basically back to providence again. We're back to the fact that God does work providentially in mysterious ways in the natural order of things, accomplishing His will. But He does not suspend what is natural and completely invade it with a supernatural act as He did during the ministry of Jesus and the Apostles, that is critical. All those definitions are critical. And I think that's why we reject this Movement because it fails to recognize reality. Take a look around. That's not happening. That's not happening. And so rather than trusting and rejoicing in the providence of God and what He is doing, they beg God to do things that He is not doing. And the fallout, let me tell you, the fallout is not good.

PHIL: A lot of disillusionment, yeah. This is a crucial point. The question is not is God working, it's how is He working.

JOHN: How is He working?

PHIL: It's not does God do miracles but will He do miracles?

JOHN: Can He do miracles? Of course. Has He chosen to do them in this age? No. But He didn't choose to do them throughout human history except at rare occasions.

PHIL: Is there anything spiritually unhealthy about looking for and longing for miracles?

JOHN: Yes, and you've already pointed it out. It is a failure to accept God in the way that He works now and to praise Him and honor Him and glorify Him and thank Him for what He's doing now.

We were talking this morning with a father in our church in the elders prayer time, you were there, and he came in and he was telling about his little seven-year-old boy who has cycle-cell anemia and they tried to do a bone marrow transplant and the red corpuscles were accepted by the…from the donor and the white ones were not. They don't know exactly why. And so his whole immune system is completely suppressed. They didn't know that until eight weeks after when they were supposed to get the final, and now he's supposed to go back in and have the whole thing and hope it works again. You've got eight weeks of waiting again and hope and if it doesn't work, you know, really tragic things begin to happen. He's at the best place he can be, I think. This is going to surprise you maybe. I think he's at the best place he can be, he's in the Children's Hospital of Los Angeles. That's better than

being in a Benny Hinn meeting, I promise you…I promise you. Because if God's going to work, God is going to work through the means that God has allowed man to use to do the best they can for that little life. But there are people…people who would drag that kind of a child to a meeting and never get to the platform, believe me…never get to the platform to be videoed. They'd be eliminated in the process of screening and go away horribly disillusioned.

So yes God works, but He works in the way that He has chosen to work and to fail to recognize that is to dishonor God. So I think there's a worship issue. They want to say that they're the ones who really believe in God and the Holy Spirit and they are the ones who are the most exuberant worshipers of God. And again, this is not a great expression of faith, nor is it a great recognition of God and how He works, this is a failure to believe and a failure to recognize how God is working.

PHIL: Yeah, it's always been hard for me to grasp how a Reformed guy who supposedly believes in the providence of God can sort of cling to Charismatic theology which seems to contradict the whole idea of divine providence.

JOHN: Yeah, when he says Reformed he means people who believe in the gospel the right way. Right?

PHIL: Well yeah…yeah. But people who believe in the sovereignty of God in every element of life.

What…this is a bigger overarching question, what in your view is the single most dangerous element of the Charismatic Movement?

JOHN: It's utter lack of commitment to a sound interpretation of Scripture. Everything is a feeling, intuitive, rightly dividing the Word is the key to everything. If you don't do that, you have no discernment. And if you have no discernment, then everything goes flying apart. So the great problem in the Movement is, and you can back up to this, and you would know this, the clergy are untrained, right? I mean, almost universally in the Charismatic Movement you have untrained ministers, untrained pastors. And if they have had some level of training, they haven't developed the skill or the commitment to the Word of God to do the hard work of really exegeting and expositing the Word of God so that they get it right. So that is at the heart of the matter.

Alongside of that, and this may surprise people, is they have a low view of Scripture. So they don't work on the Scripture because they view their own intuition and their own experience as equal or superior to Scripture. I've had people…I remember when I was writing Charismatic Chaos, I had a quote in there from some woman prophetess who said, "I really don't care what Scripture says, I know what I feel." Well that's defining the system. So they have a low view of Scripture, and if you have a low view of Scripture, you don't have a high view of exegesis and interpretation, hermeneutics, and the study of Scripture. What you're trying to do is simply understand your feelings.

And that is the problem with the Movement. And even the people who are, you know, good theologians who kind of give them cover, those reformed continuationists, I think give them way too much space to follow their feelings. Look, feelings follow truth accurately and properly and normally.

People think of me as sort of unfeeling, unemotional. That's not true. You know, I'm not an up-and-down kind of person temperament wise, but my life is full of joy, gratitude, thankfulness, fulfillment, satisfaction all the time, I live in a realm of joy and really nothing diminishes that joy. There are times when there are things that capture my heart that are things to be concerned about, but nothing assaults that joy. It's not artificial, it's real, it's connected to what I know to be true about God.

On the other hand, if you don't have those kinds of confidences, you sort of need to be whipped into that kind of artificial emotion and that's what you see in so much of that Movement because they don't have a substantial theology that can produce a real lasting kind of joy. They have to be stirred up on the emotional level.

PHIL: Yeah, that's exactly what I would have said as well. In fact, I've been to a couple of Charismatic churches that are sounder than most, have a sound commitment to the gospel and all that, where in their morning services they open up a time for people to stand up and say, "Here's what the Lord has revealed to me this week." And in effect, in doing that they reopen the canon. They're hearing things from God that aren't in Scripture and this becomes…they treat it like some sort of authoritative prophecy then, or possibly some sort of erroneous, possibly erroneous prophecy which downgrades the idea of revelation. Either way it does damage to the authority of Scripture.

JOHN: Yeah, there's a chapter in here on that and I remember going back that there was a guy who wrote a book on prophecy in the church, and he said this…I think it's in the Charismatic Chaos book, "We know that when Tom or Mary stand up in the church and say "thus saith the Lord," it is either true or it isn't."

PHIL: Yeah.

JOHN: Really, that is not helpful. So by what measure do we know that it's true or it isn't? That would be the view of the contemporary continuationists, fallible prophecy.

PHIL: Right. Fallible revelation.

JOHN: If it's prophecy, we've got to leave room for it. It may not be true. Well, you know what happened to prophets who lied in the Scripture, they were to be stoned and I don't think God's lowered His standards, so there's plenty of information in the book that addresses that issue, because it's a very important issue. How can you say God is speaking, we think, but we're not sure.

PHIL: Yeah, that puts divine revelation on the same level as the horoscope in the newspaper. It might seem uncannily correct, but then again it might just be totally far-fetched. Who knows? What good is that? I couldn't read the horoscope for that kind of guidance.

JOHN: And there's something else about the horoscope while we're talking about it, people can…

PHIL: You read mine this morning.

JOHN: No, I didn't read it. But people will, if they keep reading that stuff, conform their lives to it and make a self-fulfilling prophecy. And the same thing happens in the Charismatic Movement. You keep giving prophecies to people like you're supposed to marry Alice over here, and you have three months and if you don't marry her in three months, somebody else is going to come in. And so, somebody rushes to Alice who hasn't got the message and says, you know, I'm supposed to marry you. Whoa, whoa, wait a minute. And if you don't marry me, you're going to have a fate worse than death.

I mean literally, people will take those kinds of things…that's a rather simple illustration of the fact…and they'll make themselves fulfilling prophecies.

PHIL: It worked for me. That's how I got Darlene to marry me.

JOHN: I knew there had to be something more than just…

PHIL: We're running out of time quickly here…

JOHN: We are? Goodness.

PHIL: Yeah we are, sadly. Let me just…

JOHN: Phil and I talk like this all the time and this is true.

PHIL: Yeah, we could go on for hours.

JOHN: We have these tremendous discussions all the time.

PHIL: In fact, I've got several more pages here.

JOHN: Oh Phil.

PHIL: We've gotten a couple of…

JOHN: Shall we do it again?

PHIL: I'll do one more.

JOHN: You want to do one more? One more? (Applause)

PHIL: We've seen a couple of responses from pretty well-known Charismatics who know that we're having this conference in October and they've written and it's the Browns, I guess. Rodney Howard Brown and Michael Brown, no relation to one another, but both of them say they find it astonishing that you would criticize a Movement that has so many followers worldwide. Here's their arguments. Rodney Howard Brown writes, "These men—he's talking about people like you and me—

JOHN: He, by the way, is the guy who started the laughing revival.

PHIL: He calls himself the Holy Ghost Bartender.

JOHN: Yeah.

PHIL: And he makes people drunk in the Spirit. He says, "These men—the people who are speaking at our conference in October—think that because of excesses in the church, they have a right to write off the fastest growing sector of Christianity, over eight-hundred-million people in the earth today…he says…that would be as bad as writing off Jesus because one of the Twelve was Judas Iscariot."

JOHN: Boy, there's some real clear logic.

PHIL: I'll let you respond to it. Let me read Michael Brown who says, "More people have been saved wonderfully saved, as a result of Pentecostal…of the Pentecostal Charismatic Movement worldwide than through any other Movement in church history to the tune of perhaps a half billion souls."

So the argument is, the Lord is obviously using this ministry to grow the size of the visible church, how can you criticize it?

JOHN: First of all, because it's full of biblical error and…

PHIL: That would be reason enough.

JOHN: Yeah that would be reason enough. But secondly, this is the really frightening thing, there are probably eight-hundred-million people who think they're saved because they've made some kind of connection. That's the frightening reality. But then, what would that prove anyway? There are more

people than that in India who aren't saved in one country. So we could conclude then that Hinduism is a work of God. They're more people than that who aren't saved in Islam, so we can conclude that Islam is the truth. That proves nothing. And, in fact, the parallel with Jesus and the disciples is a horrendous lack of reason because Jesus was killed by the society He was in, and all there were were a few hundred followers of Jesus after a three-year ministry. So does that prove that He was not of God? I mean, that kind of reasoning is the kind of reasoning that's consistent with that Movement.

PHIL: And you have to keep in mind that Jesus Himself said there would be multitudes…

JOHN: Well few there be that find it. And Jesus said, "Many will say, 'Lord, Lord,' and I'm going to say, 'Depart from Me, I don't know you.'" Many will say Lord, Lord.

PHIL: And the thing those people would point to was the great works they did, the miracles they performed, all the Charismatic…

JOHN: Well that's what they say. We've…you know, we've done many miracles in Your name, and we've preached in Your name. And He says, "Depart from Me, I don't know you." That…that Matthew 7 passage is pretty direct at the Charismatic Movement. The idea that eight hundred million people around the world have bought into this also has to be clarified further. The statistics that we have and I think we can remember them in the book, are somewhere close to ninety percent of those people believe in the prosperity gospel. So the attachment they have to Jesus primarily connects with the fact that if they come to Jesus, they're going to get money. They're going to get success, a false offer. So that's…but that's how I would expect them to defend it because they couldn't defend it biblically, they couldn't defend it doctrinally, theologically. To defend anything on the basis of the number of people that are in the Movement is a foolish thing. It's the very opposite of what Jesus said to expect.

Well, then the worst, to give those people the notion that they're Christians because they've made some motion of their hand, or prayed some simple prayer, and think Jesus is the key to getting them what they want.

PHIL: And that, by the way, is not merely a Charismatic problem. The evangelical Movement, Charismatic and non-Charismatic, is filled with people who have made false professions of faith, or who are self-deceived, that's been one of the themes of your ministry over the years.

JOHN: That goes back to the Gospel According to Jesus and all the other books on the gospel, trying to preach the gospel to the church. You know, when I went through seminary, you know, they try to prepare us because, you know, we're seminary students, way back…I graduated from seminary in '64. And there were current issues, this is what you need to know to answer these current issues. Nobody told me that when I came out of seminary, I was going to have to clarify the true gospel for the evangelical church, but that's what we've spent a lot of our years trying to do, starting with the

book on The Gospel According to Jesus; The Gospel According to the Apostles. The third one in the trilogy is…down the road maybe in a while, The Gospel According to Paul. We did a conference on Truth Matters on the gospel according to Paul. Always trying to clarify the gospel because Satan wants to deceive people. He doesn't…he doesn't want to chase people away from Christianity, he wants to bring people in to Christianity on false premises so they feel comfortable.

PHIL: Good point.

JOHN: Yeah.

PHIL: All right, we are overtime, so…I think you have new members to welcome. So…I'll get out of the way here.

JOHN: I do, I'm glad to do that.

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