

Smoke and Mirrors

Scripture: 1 John 4:1–6

Code: B161027

John MacArthur kicked a charismatic hornet's nest in 2013. His book—[*Strange Fire*](#)—became a flashpoint of heated debate regarding Charismatic theology and practice.

That book, as well as the Strange Fire conference, argued that charismatic forms of worship are not a work of the Holy Spirit, but rather an affront to Him. John's assessment was stern and blunt:

To claim He is the one who empowers self-willed, whimsical, and unbiblical worship is to treat God with contempt. To turn the Spirit into a spectacle is to worship God in a way He deplores. That's why the many irreverent antics and twisted doctrines brought into the church by the contemporary Charismatic Movement are equal to (or even worse than) the strange fire of Nadab and Abihu (cf. Leviticus 10:1–3). [1] John MacArthur, *Strange Fire: The Danger of Offending the Holy Spirit with Counterfeit Worship* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2013) xi.

The response was both vigorous and rapid, with critics calling on John MacArthur to tone down his rhetoric. Some responses, as in the case of R.T. Kendall, were even pre-emptive.

In a radio interview, Kendall recounted that his publisher, Charisma House, asked him to write a book answering John MacArthur's book prior to its publication. *Holy Fire* is the product of that request. Kendall noted that he did not have the opportunity to read *Strange Fire* until after his own book was published. Upon reading it, he felt confident that his book was more than adequate as a preemptive answer to MacArthur's work.

Holy Fire boasts thirty-two written endorsements as well as a forward by Jack Hayford, a foremost leader in the charismatic movement. Also included is a special recommendation by Greg Haslam, Kendall's successor and pastor of Westminster Chapel in London. These endorsements amount to high praise from a broad spectrum of the charismatic movement. In his forward, Jack Hayford suggests "*Holy Fire* will become a point of reference for many, and that as years pass, it will find enduring use for a generation or more." [2] R.T. Kendall, *Holy Fire: A Balanced, Biblical Look at the Holy Spirit's Work in Our Lives* (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House, 2014) xxi. A book on the Holy Spirit by a reformed charismatic author with such praise deserves our careful attention.

Dr. R.T. Kendall (D.Phil., Oxford University) possesses theological and academic credentials not usually synonymous with the charismatic movement. He was the second successor to Martyn Lloyd-Jones at Westminster Chapel in 1977 and pastored the church for twenty-five years. It's surprising that someone with that pedigree would respond to a book he had not yet read. Nonetheless, we still had good reason to expect Kendall to produce a literary response that was discerning, thorough, and textually driven—even if he did disagree with John MacArthur. Sadly, *Holy Fire* falls short of the mark on all three counts.

Naïve and Not Discerning

Throughout the book Kendall rightly cautions charismatics against excesses, manipulative practices, and counterfeit manifestations.

He writes, “I find it disquieting too when prominent healing evangelists absolutely forbid people in wheelchairs from being pushed to the front of the auditorium before the services.” [3] *Holy Fire*, 112. Along those lines, Kendall affirms that a lot of purported healings are fraudulent. [4] *Holy Fire*, 160.

On prophecy he writes, “What must be avoided in any case is people saying, ‘Thus saith the Lord’ or ‘The Lord told me.’ Speaking like this is not only highly presumptuous but it is taking the Lord’s name in vain.” [5] *Holy Fire*, 150.

He also rightly warns against serious theological error prevalent in charismatic circles. These errors include prosperity theology, open theism, hyper grace, and universalism. [6] *Holy Fire*, 64-78. Kendall appears to agree with John MacArthur’s assessment of the theological problems among charismatics:

I only know that the common denominator of [Pentecostals and charismatics] today is no longer the manifest power of God but the in-your-face promise of financial blessing if you give generously to one’s ministry—their ministry. [7] *Holy Fire*, 65.

But for all that refreshing honesty, Kendall’s naïveté makes his correction about as effective as a UN weapons inspection—he knows the problem exists, but refuses to hold anyone accountable. Instead of naming the culprits, he allowed them to endorse his book. *Holy Fire* is replete with commendations by many of the worst perpetrators of the crimes Kendall warns against—John Arnott, Mike Bickle, John Hagee, and Bill Johnson, to name a few. Such is the delusion (or deceitfulness) of these men that they can read Kendall’s admonitions and think it applies to some other charlatan. Moreover, while renouncing “Thus saith the Lord,” Kendall is more than willing to speak out the other side of his mouth:

The late Oral Roberts was the most famous of these [people with the supernatural gift of healing]. I was privileged to meet him at his home in California three times. On one of those occasions he told me of a moment when the Lord spoke powerfully to him in his hallway a few days before. [8] *Holy Fire*, 148.

This failure in discernment not only prevents Kendall from correcting the errors in his movement, it ensures that his readers will never be able to avoid them.

Selective and Not Thorough

Another major problem with *Holy Fire* is that Kendall’s interaction with Scripture isn’t comprehensive enough. That is not to say that Scripture is absent from the book altogether—it contains hundreds of references to Scripture—or that Kendall neglects doing any exegesis. But he does fail to use or rightly divide God’s Word at the most critical points of defining and defending charismatic theology.

In the matter of speaking in tongues, Kendall asks:

Is the gift of tongues or praying in tongues (1 Corinthians 14:2, 14) the same phenomenon as the 120 received on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:4)? Possibly not. It may have been something different. The best scholars among Pentecostals and charismatics differ on this, and I see no need to make an issue of this. [9] *Holy Fire*, 30.

Later in the book when he works through the different gifts of the Spirit, he writes:

In my opinion, [the tongues of Acts and 1 Corinthians] are not necessarily the same. . . . I say again, if it were not for the stigma of this particular gift—given the notoriety it has received, I don't think the gifts of the Spirit would be nearly so controversial. [10] *Holy Fire*, 151.

These quotes constitute the totality of interaction with Scripture Kendall offers on the subject of tongues. Throughout the book, Kendall portrays the gift of tongues as inarticulate sounds. He affirms that tongues may or may not be kick-started by a person speaking gibberish, but denies that all believers can or should expect to speak in tongues. [11] *Holy Fire*, 140-45. Though the Apostle Paul writes extensively about the nature, use, and purpose of tongues in 1 Corinthians 12-14, Kendall makes no attempt to offer biblical instruction on tongues. Instead, he offers his opinion and a number of accounts of how he and others have experienced charismatic tongues.

Similarly, as Kendall walks through the gifts of the Spirit as listed in 1 Corinthians 12:8-11, he offers no biblical support for why he defines the nature and practice of the gifts as he does. With each gift he offers a definition and usually one or more examples of a modern use of the gift. But in no case does he look at the biblical data relevant for understanding the nature of the gifts.

This is all the more disturbing in light of his sober admonition, "Twice Paul said we should 'eagerly desire' the gifts (1 Corinthians 12:31; 14:1). The onus is on us all to show how closely we wish to adhere to Scripture by coveting the gifts of the Holy Spirit." [12] *Holy Fire*, 151. Unfortunately, Kendall offers no help to the reader who desires to "adhere to Scripture" when it comes to the nature and use of the gifts themselves.

Experientially and Not Textually Driven

The tragic irony of *Holy Fire* is that it ultimately ends up reinforcing *Strange Fire* instead of refuting it. In his attempt to correct John MacArthur's evaluation of the charismatic movement as unbiblical, Kendall actually ends up demonstrating MacArthur's point. His methodology for testing the validity of charismatic claims has no biblical basis whatsoever.

Kendall sets out to answer the question, "How can you, the reader, be sure that what I have stated is true?" [13] *Holy Fire*, 153. This is the right question for any Bible teacher to ask. Those who teach "will incur a stricter judgment" (James 3:1) in part because they influence believers in ways that affect their earthly and eternal lives. Therefore, it is incumbent upon any teacher to ensure that he is "accurately handling the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15), and that his listeners are encouraged to compare his teaching with Scripture (Acts 17:11). Therefore the question Kendall raises is an important one—especially on the issue of the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Kendall acknowledges his own weaknesses in discerning the true work of the Holy Spirit: "I know what it is to be deceived, let down, disillusioned, and betrayed by those I adored and trusted. It is

enough to make a person a professional cynic. But I have survived.” [14] *Holy Fire*, 153. So how does Kendall suggest we practice discernment? “There are four things that give us a pretty safe tip whether or not we are witnessing the Holy Spirit. They are: fearlessness, power, love, and self-control.” [15] *Holy Fire*, 154. Notice what is missing? Kendall makes no mention that one should evaluate charismatic experiences with Scripture.

Addressing how one knows whether manifestations of power are of the Holy Spirit, Kendall writes, “The gift of discernment is needed when it comes to preachers claiming power, for people can be so gullible. I fear this of myself, this being one of the reasons I myself have been deceived at times.” [16] *Holy Fire*, 160. So how does one discern whether claims of power are authentic? According to Kendall, one must have the gift of discernment. He offers no other test.

This is a pastoral concern, because if Kendall—a highly educated and experienced pastor and scholar—cannot discern whether miraculous claims are genuine, what hope does the ordinary Christian have? Especially when he admits that “it is almost always not what the faith healers claimed.” The result of this teaching is that all to whom the Spirit has not given the gift of discernment are consigned to deception.

But according to Scripture, any believer can properly evaluate claims of power by comparing what is taught and practiced by supposed faith healers with Scripture. The Holy Spirit has given us tests to discern spirits (1 John 4:1–6) as well as tests to discern true and false prophets (Matthew 7:15-20; 1 Corinthians 14:37-38; Galatians 1:8).

Kendall's Broader Brush

The charismatic howls of protest were almost deafening when the Strange Fire conference exposed the most bizarre and extreme elements of their movement. They argued that John MacArthur was using too broad a brush in tarring the whole movement with the excesses of the fringe.

But Kendall uses the broadest brush we've seen thus far when he places cessationism on the same level of error as things he elsewhere labels as gross heresies:

But cessationism quenches the Holy Spirit as much as the previously mentioned teachings [open theism and the Prosperity Gospel] that displease Him. You will not likely convince a cessationist to believe that the living God heals supernaturally today. [17] *Holy Fire*, 160.

While Kendall rightly describes open theism as satanic [18] *Holy Fire*, 75. and prosperity theology as the worst error to infiltrate the church [19] *Holy Fire*, 64., he misrepresents and caricatures cessationism in such a way to make cessationists malign the character and work of God. I am not aware of any cessationist—certainly not the most prominent voices such as John MacArthur—who believe what Kendall suggests they believe.

Conclusion

Given the high praise for *Holy Fire* by a wide spectrum of charismatic leaders, one ought to be concerned about the productivity—or lack thereof—of interaction between cessationists and charismatics over the text of Scripture. One should also be concerned for how *Holy Fire* will influence

believers who lack the knowledge and biblical grounding necessary to evaluate Kendall's teaching with the historical record and Scripture.

It has been three years since Strange Fire cast the spotlight on charismatic errors. R.T. Kendall's preemptive response exemplifies the tenor of responses from charismatics and their sympathizers. They put a frightening lack of discernment on display and refuse to interact exegetically with the text of Scripture, leading to serious concerns over their ability to protect their flocks from false teachers.

Note: This article is a brief summary of an academic book review written by Gabriel Powell. To read that review, [click here](#).

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