

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

John MacArthur's Interview at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

Scripture: Revelation 22:18–19

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Earlier this week, John MacArthur was a guest speaker at [Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary](#). During his visit, he was [interviewed by Dr. Jason Allen](#). Their brief discussion primarily focused on the charismatic movement, Reformed continuationists, and the recent Strange Fire conference. And since these are John's first public comments about Strange Fire since the conference, we thought you'd be interested and encouraged to read what he had to say. What follows is a transcript of their discussion. –GTU Staff

Dr. Allen:

Dr. MacArthur, it is a joy to host you in the Spurgeon Room on the campus of Midwestern Seminary in the President's home. We are delighted to have you here for the *Spurgeon Lectures*, and you have already encouraged us through your preaching ministry this morning. I want to hop right into a conversation that is hot and that is on your mind, obviously, in recent weeks. You hosted—just a matter of days ago—the Strange Fire conference at Grace Community Church. I want to revisit that and talk through it some. I would love to follow up on different aspects of that conference. I will make a confession on the front end of the conversation: I was genuinely surprised—maybe even shocked—by the level of interest that it generated. I was shocked because I have followed your ministry for a number of years, and you have been speaking about this issue to a greater or lesser degree for more than forty years. So, I would love to know—now that we are a few days removed from the conference—were you surprised by the interest and even the intensity that the conference itself generated?

Dr. MacArthur:

I think to some degree we were surprised. The first day there were 127 nations live streaming that event, and there were twenty-five thousand separate connects. We do not know how many people were behind that. That was the first day, and it got greater the second day and greater the third day. I do not know that I really expected that, but I did expect a bigger response than books I have written in the past, or emphases I've made on this in the past simply because the Reformed noncessationists or the Reformed continuationists made space in the broad realm of evangelicalism for the elements of the charismatic movement.

If you say prophecy continues, miracles continue, tongues continue, signs and wonders are still valid, then you have opened up a world of possibility. So, what has happened is, when I wrote *Charismatic Chaos* or the book called *The Charismatics* or addressed this in the past, it was contained. It was contained originally within classical Pentecostalism. Then it spread a little bit into the Second Wave, which is when the charismatic experience infiltrated the Roman Catholic Church and the mainline denominations. It was still outside evangelicalism.

With the arrival of people like Wayne Grudem, who really did open the door when he did his

dissertation on prophecy and talked about prophecy still existing as *fallible* prophecy. Then it was picked up by D.A. Carson, and it was picked up by John Piper and Sam Storms and other people like that. These are respected people that are really honored by all of us on some fronts. So, it has made space in evangelicalism for this particular view. Now when you confront this view, you are not just targeting heterodox groups. You are hitting orthodox groups.

Dr. Allen:

Right.

Dr. MacArthur:

So, it is simply the breadth of the tolerance of that which created the response. There was no negative response particularly coming from classic Pentecostals, like the Foursquare assemblies. Most of the heat coming at us was coming from evangelical continuationists.

Dr. Allen:

When you think about the movement as a whole—the charismatic movement, and the different strains of it—what particular strain, or strains, animates you the most about the harm they are doing to the church?

Dr. MacArthur:

That is a very good question. I think the more bizarre the aberration, the more disturbing it is.

I go back to where I was when I first wrote on this many, many years ago. I just find the possibility of continuing revelation very disturbing. I do not care what form it is in. You can say, “Well, it is not equal to Scripture; it could be fallible.” I just see that as a major problem. What you are now telling me—whether it is somebody listening for the voice of God; whether it is somebody writing a book, like Sarah Young, in which she is talking as if she is Jesus in the first person speaking to me—whatever form you are now adding to Scripture, to me it is very disturbing.

That, I think, is the foundational issue. So, if you allow for anything beyond Scripture, then you have to ask, “By what criteria do we judge that this is truly the voice of God?” If there are not objective, fixed, divinely revealed criteria for that, you cannot control the movement.

Dr. Allen:

Right. Absolutely. It calls into question, and really undermines, the whole logic of 2 Timothy 3:16–17, that Scripture has been given so that the man of God may be *thoroughly* equipped, adequate for *every good work*.

Dr. MacArthur:

So, am I inadequate? From the perspective of the charismatics, they would see me as inadequate

because they think I do not have the baptism of the Holy Spirit, the classical one. In other words, if they are the old-line Pentecostals, they say speaking in tongues is the evidence of the baptism of the Spirit, and if I haven't done it, then I do not have it.

From the continuationists' viewpoint, I am not hearing God speak, so I am somehow locked in time to the past, and if I do not hear the voice of God, I am missing out on something.

In any case, yes, it stuffs me in the corner, apart from whatever the Holy Spirit may be doing or saying in the moment.

Dr. Allen:

The three books you have written especially dealing with this issue are *The Charismatics*—I guess that was in the mid-1970s—*Charismatic Chaos*, in the early 1990s—and now *Strange Fire*. How are those books different, or is *Strange Fire* in essence a reissuing of *Charismatic Chaos*?

Dr. MacArthur:

The Charismatics and *Charismatic Chaos* were somewhat similar. *Strange Fire* is completely different. The movement has demanded this. The closing chapter in *Strange Fire* is entitled "An Open Letter to My Continuationists Friends," and it addresses them. The opening chapters look at the current state of the movement.

It is far worse now than it was then in terms of the extreme kinds of behaviors, I think. You have to change the illustrations, but I think it has to be evaluated on a completely fresh and new basis. I think there are much more tightly, carefully argued sections on prophecy, tongues, healing, and the legitimacy of these gifts than what they were.

The historical argument is there, but maybe the major difference in the book—or one component that people would benefit from—is the actual history of the movement. Where does it come from? You know the fruit by the root. The chapter on the history alone is frightening.

Then, the second chapter, that we have not done anything with in the past, is on the apostles. If the apostles ceased—if it is true that there are no more apostles or that there were twelve minus Judas, plus Matthias and Paul—then there is a dramatic change in the church and the gifting to the church. Since apostles are called *gifts* in Ephesians 4, if there are no apostles, then we know some gifts have ceased.

Dr. Allen:

Right.

Dr. MacArthur:

If the apostles ceased, then there is a cessation. If the apostles cease, then the signs and wonders of an apostle cease—so the whole argument of apostleship is important.

The other argument in this book—that I think is really critical—is that the continuationists are saying that prophecy exists, but it is not infallible. Then, it is not what biblical prophecy is. Tongues exists, but it is not language. Then, it is not what biblical tongues were. Healings exist, but they are not like the healings of Jesus. If that is true, then you are essentially a *de facto* cessationist because you just said these are not that. So what are they? You are a cessationist who has invented something that is not in the New Testament.

There is no such thing in the Bible as fallible prophecy from God. There is no such thing as gibberish, and there is no such thing as moderate, indiscernible healing. So whatever it is that you are calling prophecy, healing, and tongues is not that. What I am trying to do with these guys is say, “You cannot call yourself a continuationist because, by your own admission, it is not the same. So, what is it, and why are you inventing it?”

Dr. Allen:

More of a “hypothetical continuationist.”

Dr. MacArthur:

Yes. Why are you doing this? Who are you conceding this to? Do you feel it is necessary for you to have some supernatural, mystical phenomenon to confirm your faith? Are you deferring to your wife who was raised in the charismatic movement, or are you trying to find space in the big evangelical picture, so you are giving this concession? I just do not understand why you would invent things—call them biblical names—when you know they are not the biblical reality.

That is the direction the book goes. Just a quick footnote to that: The kickback has been, “Oh, you are painting with a broad brush,” or, “You have not acknowledged that there are good things that happen in the movement.” So far, we have not seen anything that argues the *biblical* points. Eventually, the book *Strange Fire*, the conference, and what was said there is going to have to be debated on the grounds of biblical interpretation. That is where we would like to force the issue.

Dr. Allen:

So, since you referenced the conference and some of the buzz and criticism that has come from it—just to ask a very direct question—Is there any edge you left sharp that you wish you would have rounded, or anything you left unsaid that in hindsight you wish you would have said, or any second guessing? Obviously, I know you are established theologically. I do not mean in that sense, but is there anything about it that, if you could redo it, you would do differently or not include?

Dr. MacArthur:

That is a really good question. You know as a preacher, you say what is in your notes, and then you say what comes into your head, right?

Dr. Allen:

Right.

Dr. MacArthur:

So, if you could go back to almost any sermon you preached and said it again another way, you would do that. Our dear, beloved Charles Spurgeon: People read his sermons, and most people do not realize that is not what he preached. That is, in some cases, hardly close to what he preached because he got those dictation notes from the people who took his notes. He got that stuff on Monday, and I have actual copies hanging in my office at home of his editing himself off of those transcripts.

So, sure, we would all do that. Here was the approach; this was a very serious issue. Misrepresenting the Holy Spirit—there is nothing more serious than that. Accusing the Holy Spirit of things that He would not have anything to do with is a serious issue. In all honesty, we wanted to push this thing to the limit. This was landing at the beach. This was D-day.

Dr. Allen:

Right.

Dr. MacArthur:

We came with everything we had. Having done that, we wanted to see the response. Where is it going to come from? I told the guys it is going to come in two ways. They are going to say, “You are lumping us all together,” and they are going to say, “You have not affirmed the good things.”

So at that point we will blunt that point a bit and come back and say, “Look, I said this many times, so did everybody else. There are Christians in the movement who are faithful pastors that love the Bible and are trying to do the best they can. There are moderate aspects of that movement, and there are extreme.”

Dr. Allen:

Sure.

Dr. MacArthur:

They are all connected. So, the brush can be broad, but we do need to recognize that there are differences, and we do need to express gratitude for those who have taught the gospel and preached the gospel. As a result, people have been converted.

Now, as we establish where we are, we will begin to speak in that fashion. Then, we still have to get to the biblical argument.

Dr. Allen:

Sure.

Dr. MacArthur:

In a conversation I had with one of the leading continuationists, he said, “Well, what I need to do then is write a book in response.”

I said, “Exactly.”

Dr. Allen:

Very good. In your mind, do you have a working distinction between charismatics and continuationists? Or do you see that as one category of terms that can be used interchangeably?

Dr. MacArthur:

I would just listen to what they call themselves. I do not know that I would openly call someone a charismatic who does not take that label, and they are sort of wobbling on that. There are some who did call themselves charismatics. We quote one in the book who is now wanting to call himself a continuationist because he wants to distance himself from all that [the word *charismatic*] means. I really do not mind the labels, but I do not want to throw labels around. Charismatic, I think, is a good term because it is a term that refers to those who think the gifts of grace are still fully operational. So, it is not a pejorative in any sense—and unless they disdain that term, which I have not heard anybody do that, I think you can call people charismatics.

I think even the classics, who would be known as Pentecostals, would call themselves charismatics in the sense that they are open to the continuation of the gifts.

Dr. Allen:

When you think about the global charismatic movement, estimates of their number is about 500 million, so an incredible mass of people. They are nearly half the size of the Roman Catholic Church. And people, if they are on the American side of the conversation—and that circle is the evangelical side of the conversation—they tend to think of the nutty people, the fringe, as being the red herring. They think of the norm being the John Pipers, the Wayne Grudem, the Martyn Lloyd-Joneses. If you do a global assessment, you realize, “No, really John Piper and Wayne Grudem are more the red herrings.”

Dr. MacArthur:

Yes, they are the fringe. All you have to do is turn on any charismatic network. Just pick any one. You will see the same panoply of false teachers, prosperity gospel preachers, healers, health and wealth guys, and you will hear the same claims to healing. Somebody who wants to present himself as a news anchor kind of image like Pat Robertson is saying things that are just as nutty as some

far-out healer in a tent.

So, it is everywhere. I do not know that they would all want to be put in the same package, but as I said before, once you say that the Holy Spirit is talking—and you do not have any static, fixed way to evaluate that, to define that, or to say yes or no to that—you really cannot control the thing.

We have to defer to the default position which is this: We know that John Piper, Wayne Grudem, and people like that are not crazy. They are not nutty. They are not going to fall into those kinds of patterns. What they need to do, of course, is rise up and condemn those kinds of aberrations, and I would like to see more of that.

Dr. Allen:

Thank you. You have been so faithful as a prophetic voice to the church for so many years—whether it was the lordship controversy or the issues of creationism, gender roles, or your concerns about the charismatic movement as you have spoken to for decades. So, thank you for your consistency, your faithfulness, and for being an Ephesians 4:15 man—speaking the truth in love, even when it is difficult, even when you are challenging your friends and your brothers.

Dr. MacArthur:

Well, thank you. For me it is about the truth. I have no desire to harm friends or lose friends in the process, but I am compelled by the truth. I really think that my friends are too; and as long as we can keep that conversation going and speak the truth in love, it can be beneficial, and hopefully we can find our way to the unity that comes around the truth. As I said at the conference, it is better to be divided by the truth than united by error.

Dr. Allen:

That is right. Very well said. Well, thank you for revisiting Strange Fire with us, and for your book. Thank you for the gift of your book last night. I look forward to reading it in the days ahead.

Dr. MacArthur:

Thank you.

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