

A Brief Biblical Response to MacArthur's *Strange Fire*

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John MacArthur's abhorrence of "further revelation" via prophecy and related spiritual gifts derives, not from scripture (as we shall see), but from the frustration of Calvinists under Cromwell of watching so many of their members defect to the Quakers, the crazy charismatics of the time: people falling down, making a lot of noise and, horror of horrors, encountering Jesus in visions, prophecies, and healings. Sound familiar? Calvinist scholastics responded to this outrage with the *Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF)*—often now regarded as the gold standard of Protestant (Calvinist) theology.

Despite the charismatic experiences of even some of the authors of the *WCF*, and especially their founder, John Knox, whose charismatic experiences were abundant and powerful, the dogmatists managed to ram through this narrow, unpopular Calvinist paragraph in 1546, which, was to be imposed by threat of death on the British Isles—including Catholic Ireland (something like Obamacare). This curious history is thoroughly documented in a revised PhD dissertation by Garnet H Milne, *The Westminster Confession of Faith and the Cessation of Special Revelation* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2007). See review in *Pneuma* 31:2 (2009), 318.

1. . . . It pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal Himself, and to declare that His will unto His Church [Heb 1:1] and afterwards for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the Church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, to commit the same **wholly unto writing** [Prov22:19-21; Lk1:3; Rom15:4; Mt 4:4]; which makes the Holy Scripture to be most necessary [2Tm 3:15; 2Pt 1:19]; **those former ways of God's revealing His will unto His people** [miracles, prophecy] **being now ceased** [Heb1:1-2]. [Emphasis mine]

When the *WCF* was presented to Parliament for approval, the suspicious MPs bounced the document back, quite reasonably fearful that this document was asserting itself as a substitute for scripture itself! They demanded that the writers support every claim in the Confession with a clear grounding in the Bible. The writers grudgingly complied, though their exegetical skills fell far short of supporting their elaborate theologizing. If you can make sense of how these scripture verses they added [in brackets] support the dogmatic claims in this paragraph, then you are a far more insightful exegete than I.

Yet, this paragraph 1 of the *WCF* is the principal grounds for John MacArthur's rejection continuing revelation—except as it appears in "non-propositional" expression in the revealing scriptures and in the Calvinist *ordo salutis*: Predestination, Election, Calling, Regeneration, Faith, Repentance, Justification, Sanctification, Perseverance, Glorification (MacArthur, *Strange Fire*, 179-230). Despite the concession that "revelation" occurs normatively today even in these Calvinist stages of "salvation," MacArthur insists the gifts of "continuing revelation" such as prophecy and words of knowledge have ceased!

It is against MacArthur's amazing claim, that I produced *What's Wrong with Protestant Theology: Traditions vs. Biblical Emphasis* (Tulsa: Word & Spirit, 2013). In this book I argue on a transparent "hermeneutic of emphasis" (not what does the Bible *say*—you can make it "say" anything—but what does it *emphasize*), that not only does the Bible NOT teach cessation of prophecy, but that the experience of the revealed, prophetic word *is the central, normative message* of the Bible!!

Proof of this is:

- Denial of the direct, immediate voice of God is *the central temptation* for mankind (Gen 3 (Eve & Adam—mankind); Ex 20 (Israelites); Mt4, Lk4 (Jesus); Heb 12 (all the rest of us). We are commanded "Do NOT REFUSE the One Who speaks [present tense]" (Heb 12:25). Hebrews emphasizes: "**Today**, if you hear his voice" (Ps 97:5; Hb3:7; 3:15; 4:7).
- The central plot line of all of God's role models, Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac-Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, the Judges, the prophets, Jesus, the apostles) is: they hear the voice of God and obey it under great resistance. THAT is the normative pattern for the reader!
- ***The goal of the Bible is the New Covenant.*** *What's Wrong* shows that the *essence* of this New Covenant is the *Spirit of prophecy and revelation*. It's the punch line of the Pentecost sermon which cites a totally neglected (for dogmatic reasons!) programmatic prophecy: Isa 59:21. (See Appendix IV in 2nd ed of *On the Cessation of the Charismata*). This parallels the more often quoted New Covenant passage about the revealed Law "in the heart" (Jer 31:33>2Cor3; Heb 8-12).
- ***The mission of Jesus*** was not simply to "die on the cross for our sins"—this focus is based on the Reformation need to answer the great question of that time: "How much does it cost to go to heaven?" Romanist priests were charging money for indulgences to get sprung from Purgatory. (Read *What's Wrong* for a more complete explanation). *The mission of Jesus is explicit: "He will baptize you in the Holy Spirit"* which meant to receive the New Covenant Spirit of revelation and utterance. Jesus' death on the cross was not the New Covenant itself: it crucially *ratified* and *mediated* the New Covenant, which is the Spirit (Heb 8-10). No cross, no New Covenant Spirit.
- The ***content of Jesus' teaching to his disciples*** must not be ignored (as Protestants do). What did Jesus teach his disciples to do? What is the content of the "mid-term exams" in Mt 10; Mk 6; Lk 9&10, repeated in Mt 28:19-20 and Acts 1:8? It's all about *expressing the Spirit in power*. Traditional Protestants dismiss these early commissions as only for the "apostles," showing that they understand NT apostles as 16th century popes, not as role models for the reader: "Imitate me as I imitate Christ" Paul says (1Cor11:1; cf. Heb6:12).
- The Eucharist of 1Cor11 must be tied to its context: 1Cor12. "Discerning the body" means to discern the "New Covenant in my blood" which is the "body" of charismatic believers whom the Corinthian elitists were rejecting. By breaking Jesus' "covenant" of the Spirit and gifts, "many of you are weak, sick, and have fallen asleep"—a situation that could have been avoided had they allowed these "members" of Jesus' body to function in healing, prophecy, etc. If your church has communion and does not allow spiritual gifts to operate, you are *denying Jesus' [charismatic] body and blood [meaning of Jesus' sacrifice]*.

- Countless verses of scripture teach the continuing gift of prophecy and other charismata, e.g., “the *charismata* and calling of God are *not withdrawn*” (Rom11:29). God ideally “energizes *all* of the gifts in *everyone*” (1Cor12:6). “In the *last days* I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh” [we are in the “last days” 2Tm3:1; Heb1:1; 2Pt3:3]. See Ruthven, *On the Cessation of the Charismata* (Tulsa: Word & Spirit, 2011), esp ch 4 for summary.

Bottom line: so far away from the Protestant tradition that denies the prophetic New Covenant Spirit of prophecy and power, the *Bible itself* makes the reality of the prophetic Spirit of Jesus the *central experience* of the Christian message.

I realize that all this seems radical and extreme. But I urge you to examine for yourself the supporting *biblical* arguments for all this in *What's Wrong with Protestant Theology*—as opposed to the fiat dogmatics of scholastic Protestantism.

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