

Another Look at the Charismatic Movement: Strange Fire Six Years Later (Phil Johnson)

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

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Well, six years have passed since we had the Strange Fire Conference right here in this auditorium, and that was a great time. I know there was a lot of pushback and complaints from the charismatic press about it. But the truth is, the people who were here and the people who have watched online, I know they were greatly edified by it. Before that conference was even over, people were saying, "We need to have a sequel. We need to have a follow-up and say more." And I said, "Yeah, we could do Strange Fire, Part 2: Holy Smoke." But we had to wait because John MacArthur's 50th anniversary was coming, and we didn't want to choose a topic like that for his 50th anniversary, because his ministry is so much bigger than that. So we chose our subject: "Sola Scriptura," and especially, "The Sufficiency of Scripture." And I'm so glad we did.

You know, everywhere I've spoken, literally, for the past six years, every conference I go to, every church I visit, I meet people who tell me that they came out of the charismatic movement, or they were liberated from the superstition of the prosperity gospel and all of that because of that conference or because of the *Strange Fire* book. And yet, there is still more that needs to be said about the dangers of the charismatic error. Justin Peters did a great job in his session yesterday, and I want to add a hearty amen to everything he said. And so, tonight what I want to do is kind of a postscript to his message, because you cannot deal honestly with the sufficiency of Scripture without spending a considerable amount of time discussing the charismatic movement, because the core doctrines of that movement are fundamentally incompatible with the principle of sola Scriptura.

I realize that many charismatics would want to dispute that. They will insist that they do believe wholeheartedly in sola Scriptura. But at the very least, they need to acknowledge that there is a glaring contradiction between modern charismatic theology and historic Protestant convictions regarding the singular authority of Scripture as the one true and infallibly God-breathed message from God to His people in the post-apostolic church. Charismatics don't really believe that the Bible as we have it contains everything you need for spiritual maturity and growth in grace and the pursuit of God's glory. And, in fact, that is the whole point of charismatic theology; and they say it all the time, if you listen. Pentecostals use the expression "Full Gospel" to describe their systems, signifying the belief that the complete gospel is not contained in the pages of Scripture. You don't have the full gospel without Pentecostal gifts and miraculous signs and wonders.

David Wilkerson, who was one of the most influential charismatics of the past half century claimed that – and these are his exact words – "A fully preached gospel must include signs and wonders," which is to say that you're not really preaching the whole gospel if all you do is open the Bible and proclaim its message. But you must also display charismatic gifts. And that idea is a direct assault on the sufficiency of Scripture.

And just so you know, this is not a new doctrine that we have concocted, the sufficiency of Scripture. It's not a new idea; we didn't invent it. This is what the Westminster Confession of Faith – which was written, by the way, in 1647 – here's what they said about the sufficiency of Scripture. Quote: "The

whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for God's own glory, man's salvation, faith and life is either expressly set down in Scripture or by good and necessary consequence maybe deduced from Scripture, unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit or of traditions of men." And that was 1647.

A hundred years before that was written, the Belgic Confession said it like this. Quote: "Since it is forbidden to add unto or take away anything from the Word of God, it does thereby evidently appear that the doctrine thereof" – that is, the doctrine in the Bible – "is most perfect and complete in all respects." And one year before that was written, the Scottish Confession said the same thing really a lot more simply and in fewer words. I love the pithiness of the Scots. And they borrowed this directly from 2 Timothy 3:17. Here's what the Scottish Confession says: "We believe and confess the Scriptures of God sufficient to instruct and make the man of God perfect." That's 1560.

And you know what? Even the Anglicans got this right. Here's what the Church of England affirmed in 1562 when, for the first time, they published *The Thirty-nine Articles of Religion*, they said this. Quote: "Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation so that whatsoever is not read therein nor may be proved thereby is not to be required of any man that it should be believed as an article of the faith or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation."

Now every one of those classic confessions of faith – and that just scratches the surface, I could go on – all of them either implicitly or explicitly rule out the private prophecies and the supplemental messages from God that Justin talked about last night, and that are so common, especially in charismatic circles, but even beyond that – let's be honest. Notice the language: "New revelations of the Spirit." That's the expression used in the Westminster Confession of Faith. But new revelations of the Spirit are a staple in every district of the charismatic community. Every classic Protestant confession of faith takes this same position against the charismatic view. And the Bible agrees: extrabiblical prophecies have no authority whatsoever next to the written Word of God. And Scripture alone is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work. That's the biblical statement the sufficiency of Scripture.

The Bible is perfectly sufficient, and that means someone's personal impression based on a dream or a vision or a voice in the head has no place in the church's teaching ministry. Those things have no legitimate authority over the conscience of any believer. We are to order our lives by a more sure word of prophecy, namely Scripture. And yet people who claim to have received new revelation from God are more common, especially in charismatic circles nowadays, more common among the charismatics, I think, even than people who speak in tongues. The movement, you know, was originally founded on the notion that speaking in tongues is the necessary mark of Holy Spirit baptism. You weren't baptized by the Holy Spirit if you didn't speak in tongues.

But today, most of the hype among charismatics is about these fresh messages from God. And yet, I have never heard a single legitimate prophecy from a charismatic source. All of them are either demonstrably false prophecies or superficial spiritual clichés – you know, empty but pious-sounding platitudes – or they are silly statements that are either so vague or so confusing as to be utterly worthless, such as God telling you where to go buy a turkey. And that wasn't even a charismatic source, but it's the same kind of thing. Dreams and visions and inner voices are the vehicles through which most charismatic prophecies are received today. And some charismatics even believe that God gives them prophetic messages, signs, and clues in the most mundane features of everyday

life. I once heard a charismatic prophetess tell how she was speaking to someone and she saw a bird fly by the window and was convinced that this was a horrible omen of some kind. That's not Christianity, that is superstitious sorcery.

Listen to charismatic prophets talk and you will notice that there's a standard list of jargon that they all use. They love the word "breakthrough," you know. "Next year is always going to be a season of divine breakthrough." I did a search for that word at just one website, Charisma News, and it returned more than 3,100 results: breakthrough. There's an article that tells you, for example, how to receive a point of breakthrough by mail – actually, by email. I have not a clue what that means. But another article tells you with all seriousness, "Breakthrough has a loud, distinct sound." That's something my teenagers would make a joke about. Here's another one, also from *Charisma* magazine. No, now come on. Another one from *Charisma* magazine: "We are moving into a time of accelerated breakthrough." I could keep going with these because, as I said, I Google searched from one website, returned 3,100 examples. But you get the point.

But here's my point. Think about the fuzziness of a prophecy like, "We are moving into a time of accelerated breakthrough." What does that even mean? What exactly are we breaking through? They never seem to be able to explain distinctly what the prophecy means; and I, frankly, think that's deliberate, because you can adapt an ambiguous prophecy or word of knowledge to anything if you make up your interpretation after the fact. And they do.

Nothing is more pliable than charismatic prophecy. And apparently, large numbers of people are fooled by this game that charismatic prophets continually play. Here's my point. Rarely is there anything truly profound or significant in what the prophets actually say. Their soothsaying says nothing. The very best of charismatic prophecies are of no more use than the sayings that you find in fortune cookies and newspaper horoscopes. And when they do try to get specific, when they try to foretell future events, for example, it seems the prophets are always wrong.

Charisma magazine is full of this stuff. Most of you, I think, will surely have heard about the infamous article that they featured three years ago by one of their famous, most famous, and their favorite prophetess, Jennifer LeClaire, and the article was titled "When the Sneaky Squid Spirit Start Stalking You," and it starts out like this – I'll read it. She says, "When my friend told me she saw a vision of herself with a big squid lodged atop her head, I knew enough about the unseen world to understand a spiritual attack was underway. What I didn't know was that a sneaky squid spirit would soon start stalking me. Right about now you may be scratching your head and asking with all sincerity, 'What in the world is a squid spirit?'" She did get that prophecy right; I was scratching my head, asking that question.

"Essentially" – she says – "it's a spirit of mind-control, but its affects go way beyond what you would think." And the article goes on to build an entire doctrine about sneaky squid spirits. Again, that's Jennifer LeClaire. And last year, a funny – well, a thing happened. The side wall of the building where she rents for her ministry literally collapsed. It was a brick wall, an old building, and the outer wall kind of slid down, slid off the side. And I thought surely, when I saw a news article about that, that she was going to blame the squid spirit. But she said it was a python spirit this time.

You know, Justin Peters follows this stuff a whole lot more diligently than I can stand, and he tells me – his comment was, "Well, yeah, Mrs. LeClaire apparently has a whole zoo of animal spirits that torment her." And that includes demon fish, other than the sneaky squid too, evidentially.

A year ago, *Charisma* published an article by her titled “Are Water Spirits for Real?” subtitled, “The Truth About Marine Demons.” I’ll read you a bit of it. She writes, “Hideous marine demons are trolling below the surface of the ocean with a deadly agenda to kill, steal, and destroy lives. You can’t see them any more than you can see spirits of fear or rejection; but they are actively engaged in aquatic ministry.” Of course, she says, “They don’t only work in the water, they just make their home base there. Water spirits are rising,” she says. “The first step to defeating these demons is not to be ignorant of their devices.”

And she’s written a book, *The Spiritual Warrior’s Guide to Defeating Water Spirits*. I looked it up on Amazon to see if I could maybe preview an excerpt from that book without having to buy it, and I was amazed to find there’s a sizeable list of books written by charismatics about deadly sea demons. There’s one titled *Marine Spirits and Mystifying Sea Beings*. Another one titled *Ruling World Water Spirits*. And another intriguing book titled *The Witchdoctor and the Man*, subtitled, *City Under the Sea*, and it’s a book by a charismatic author who says he learned the secrets of marine demons from an African witchdoctor who came to Jesus. But the truth is – and I hope you can hear it – this is still nothing more than witchdoctory-type stuff, and it has nothing to do with anything taught by Scripture. It’s just one more example, a clear example of how charismatic superstition regularly impinges on the principle of sola Scriptura.

Charisma is the largest magazine of charismatic movement, and they routinely publish these purported, prophetic revelations of people like Jennifer LeClaire on their website and on their featured blogs. Just two weeks ago, one of their writers posted his annual prophecy for the coming year 2020. He writes this. Quote: “I saw angels filling up pens with Holy Ghost ink. Words written with resurrection power will heal the sick, raise the dead, and cast out devils. Anointed funeral readings may interrupt the service.” He says, “I sense the Lord saying, ‘My roof-tearing angels have been released, and they have your address for primetime delivery.’ I see angels with slingshots hurling books into the new year, hitting the foreheads of giants.”

I hope you got as much out of that as I did. And don’t ask me what it means. But the folks at *Charisma* magazine seemed to take it seriously. Though serious is a relative term when you’re talking about today’s charismatics, the magazine constantly gives publicity to people who insist that they are hearing these messages from the Lord that are fresher, and therefore more relevant than Scripture; and the magazine is telling the charismatic world, “We need to pay attention to this stuff.”

Now I know I’ve belabored the point, and forgive me for that. But candidly, I don’t know of any doctrine or denomination or movement that is influencing evangelicals today that is more hostile to the Reformation doctrine of biblical sufficiency than the charismatic movement. And it’s obvious, or it should be, that in the 120 years or so since modern Pentecostalism began, that movement and all its spiritual offspring have been responsible for more unorthodox doctrines, more false prophecies, more fake miracles, more greed-mongering charlatans, and more outlandish spiritual chicanery than all others combined. In fact, I’m confident that if you gathered up all of the quasi-Christian cults from Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses to Christian scientist and did a headcount of the people who have been duped by their false gospels or deceived with their false christs, the charismatic movement would probably exceed them all. You study the roots of the movement, its embryonic origins and early days, examine the theology that gave birth to it, and consider the moral character of some of its earliest heroes, and all of this is recounted for you in detail in the book *Strange Fire*; and if you do that study, you will discover that the charismatic movement is a diseased tree that sprang

from a corrupt seed, and over the years it has born an abundance of bad fruit. Just as Jesus said, “A diseased tree cannot bear good fruit.”

Now I know my saying those things so forthrightly will shock and probably even offend some of you, because you may have been taught that when someone claims the Holy Spirit is doing something bizarre it’s supposed to be off limits for any kind of evaluation or judgment, because charismatics frequently threaten their critics with the false assertion that you might accidentally commit an unpardonable sin if you question whether the latest charismatic delirium is really the work of the Holy Spirit. It’s not a question you’re supposed to ask. But that’s a foolish and superstitious way of thinking.

As I said during Strange Fire six years ago, the irony is that those who fear they might blaspheme the Holy Spirit by putting charismatic claims to the test actually do blaspheme Him by regularly attributing to Him works He has not done and things He has not said. But it has become more or less the dominant opinion even among leading evangelicals who are not charismatics. The leading opinion seems to be that the charismatic movement should be off limits for our criticism. Around the time the Toronto Blessing, the Holy Laughter craze peaked in the 1990s, it seemed like evangelical thought leaders decided that for the sake of unity in Christ and out of simple common courtesy, we really ought to just set aside all our differences with the charismatic movement and never bring that up again, as if none of our differences were ever really very serious anyway. But they are serious; and the way the charismatic teaching has eroded evangelical confidence in the sufficiency of Scripture is proof of that.

Now let me also be clear. I am not saying – and I do not believe that everyone in the charismatic movement is a rank heretic. And I don’t believe also – I want to make this clear – I don’t believe that every blasphemy that invokes the Holy Spirit’s name is an unpardonable sin. The sin that Jesus warned about in Matthew 12 was very specific, and it’s not about judging charismatic claims. Most of us know people with Pentecostal leanings who are nevertheless sound with regard to the gospel. They understand and believe the essential doctrines of historical evangelical orthodoxy. Even though they’re inconsistent in how they apply sola Scriptura, they genuinely know Christ and love Him; they are our brothers and sisters in Christ.

I’m not saying that about every charismatic, I’m saying there are charismatics out there who fit that description. And I’ll be the first to say, I know several people who are in that category and I count them as dear brethren. Believe it or not, I have long-time friends, sweet brothers and sisters in Christ, who are charismatics. John MacArthur often says he’s not concerned about whether certain charismatics are going to go to heaven, he’s afraid they might zoom on by.

But I know people always ask, “Well, why condemn the movement rather than just those people who are out on the far out fringe? Aren’t you painting with a broad brush?” I got that question a lot in the wake of Strange Fire, and so I wrote a post on the Grace to You blog answering that very question right after the Strange Fire Conference. It’s still there, you can look it up. It’s titled, the article is titled, “The Broad Brush.” Google it, you can read what I said. But let me give a further answer before I move on.

First, I think the question of who is mainstream and who are the fringe usually get muddled when we’re talking about the charismatic movement. You know, normally when you’re talking about a large movement of any kind – the political parties, or hobbyist groups, or secret societies, or religious

organizations, or whatever – usually the mainstream are generally more moderate and more reasonable than the fringe, and the nutty people on the outside constitute the fringe. And that's why we have the expression "lunatic fringe." And, of course, the moderate reasonable people usually outnumber the lunatic fringe. But in the charismatic movement, the ratio is reversed. I think we need to face this honestly. The great majority of charismatics worldwide follow the televangelists: Benny Hinn, T. D. Jakes, Joel Osteen, Kenneth Copeland, Creflo Dollar, Jesse Duplantis – people like that. And then there are the monster megachurches that are connected with the Hillsong network, and Bethel Church in Redding, California, and all of those men and ministries, every one of them aggressively promote the prosperity gospel, which is a false gospel about which I'll have some more to say before hour's end.

But Africa, in particular, has its own massive menagerie of charismatic leaders who have imbibed the very worst flavors of heresy from the American charismatic movement. And in many cases, they blended the bizarre ideas they take from the charismatic movement, blended them with ideas borrowed from African animism. I have a thick file of news items about charismatic charlatans in Africa who bilk people with false promises and fake miracles and dupe their followers into doing bizarre and irrational things, like the pastor who made his people literally get on their hands and knees and eat the grass, because after all, the pastor said, these are the sheep of His flock. Or worse, there was a charismatic pastor who made a rule forbidding the women in his flock from wearing underwear to church. How anyone can look at that and say, "Here's a Spirit-filled man," I don't know.

But these are the toxic versions of false Christianity that have grown out of the charismatic movement, devoid of any actual gospel content; and yet, their followers are invariably counted by the statisticians who claim that the charismatic movement has reached more people with the gospel than any other movement since the Protestant Reformation. They always count these crackpots. And judging from the audiences they draw, it seems clear that phony ministers with false gospels greatly outnumber, I mean vastly outnumber the few charismatics who at least believe the true gospel and know in their hearts that the Scriptures are a more sure word than the prophecies that they quote to one another.

To sum up, I think most people would have a totally different opinion about who is fringe and who are mainstream if they would simply consider a few questions like, "Who has the most influence? Who has hands on the wheels and is steering the big movement? Who sells the most books and attracts the biggest audiences? Who boasts the most devoted followers and stands out as the most visible figures worldwide?" And here, perhaps, is the most revealing question: "Whom do most people support with their money?" because after all, Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

Where is the heart of the charismatic movement? It's not really hard to answer, is it? Bottom line: it's the prosperity gospel guys, the TBN and the televangelists; they are the ones who represent the true mainstream of the charismatic movement. And the so called Reformed charismatics like John Piper, these are a comparatively small minority, fractionally small when you really consider the numbers.

So that's the first reason that I don't feel obliged to make endless disclaimers implying that these evil influences that we keep pointing out in the charismatic movement are just isolated extremists. They are not. The fact is, there are systemic problems with the doctrine itself; and that's really leading into my second reason why I don't make all those disclaimers.

My sane and sober charismatic friends are not only a small minority in the larger movement, the fact is, there's a reason they are more sound and more biblical than the great bulk of charismatics, and it is precisely because on the essential points of theology and the gospel itself, they do depart from the charismatic tradition. To one degree or another, they follow the Reformers and the great heritage of Protestantism rather than the guys like Oral Roberts. Look, for example, at what Reformed continuationists teach about theology proper and Christology and soteriology, and in some cases, even sanctification. What these sound charismatics is markedly different on all of those areas than the charismatic mainstream. And I embrace them as brothers because we share a common commitment to a set of core biblical principles that set those guys apart from the mainstream of the charismatic movement.

What it is that makes them more sound and sober, more biblically-minded Christians than the large majority of Charismatics is that they depart from the movement on these important issues. If you were to list all of the things that keep the sound charismatics on the narrow way, the truth is, nothing on your list would be distinctive to the charismatic movement, what keeps them in the realm of evangelical orthodoxy has nothing to do with their charismatic opinions. And the more they borrow from the charismatic side, the more they will be drawn away from the authority and sufficiency of Scripture.

Consider, for example, Matt Chandler – you saw him last night. And I'm sure he possesses the winsomeness and the teaching tools and enough biblical knowledge to be a fine biblical teacher. But like countless other charismatics, he has concluded – you heard it last night – that if you're not receiving and declaring to other people new and original revelations from God, then your faith just isn't bold enough; and so he has that dream about sharks and pirate ships and whatnot. Listen, if you want a living example of how charismatic beliefs undermine people's confidence in the sufficiency of Scripture, there you have it. Watch that Matt Chandler video again.

And that's the third reason I don't want to dampen my criticisms of the charismatic movement with constant disclaimers. Even the most moderate charismatics, the most sound of charismatic teachers actually act as like a gateway drug that does lead people into the realm of bizarre mysticism.

Take the case of Dr. C. Peter Wagner. He was once a cessationist by conviction. When I first heard of him in the 1970s, one of his books was a textbook I had to read at Moody Bible Institute. He was head of the Institute for Evangelism and Church Growth at Fuller Seminary, and he taught in the School of World Mission there. He was obsessed with methodology, and he had a purely pragmatic way of evaluating movements and doctrines. He seemed to think that explosive growth is always a sure sign of God's blessing, and he ultimately became a charismatic because that was the fastest-growing segment of Christianity. And so through the '80s and '90s, he became more and more intrigued by the possibility of using charismatic signs and wonders as a tool for church growth. The Toronto Blessing was at its peak; people were being slain in the Spirit. The Vineyard movement was rapidly growing under John Wimber's leadership; and Peter Wagner joined that movement just about the same time prophetic pronouncements were beginning to eclipse tongues as the main feature that charismatics were interested in.

So all of that was going on. And Peter Wagner wrote glowingly and enthusiastically about all of that. He embraced it, he owned it, he strongly promoted it, and he gradually became drawn further and further into the bizarre mainstream of the charismatic movement. He dabbled in several fringe

charismatic movements, including the Latter Rain – some of you have heard of these – the Manifest Sons of God, Joel's Army, Third Wave charismaticism, and the G12 movement.

And if you're not familiar with all of those, it doesn't matter a great deal. There are several common characteristics that were shared by virtually all of the leaders in all of those movements. For example, they all tended to be somewhat domineering in their approach to leadership, they were outlandish in their claims regarding miracles and prophecy, and all of them were drawn to bizarre phenomena like holy laughter and drunken or frenetic behavior and trance-like states where people were supposedly slain in the Spirit. And most of them claimed prophetic gifts, and in their preaching they often declared their own private prophecies with no reference whatsoever to Scripture. And Peter Wagner watched these movements and concluded that these men, and some of them women, were modern-day equivalents of the apostles. And at his encouragement, most of the leaders in those groups took the title "apostle" for themselves, and they formed this amorphous network of similar ministries using the name Peter Wagner suggested: The New Apostolic Reformation, the New Apostolic Reformation.

You've heard of it. We'll call it the NAR. It's a huge and fast-growing movement today. Peter Wagner claimed that this new movement, the New Apostolic Reformation, constituted a fifth major branch of the Christian faith, so that you had the Coptics, the Eastern Orthodox, the Roman Catholics, the Protestants, and now the New Apostolic Reformation – a whole different flavor of Christianity.

It's a massive movement now that is growing, as I said, quickly; and one of their goals is to amalgamate the entire charismatic movement into one massive organization or movement that will gain dominion over both church and government, secular government. And notice this: all of their pet practices lack any biblical support whatsoever. Everything distinctive about them – private prophecies, the bizarre manifestations – and I'm talking about the drunkenness and holy laughter and slaying one another in a spirit. And above all, this idea of self-appointed apostles, the defining doctrine of the NAR, is the claim that in their movement God has restored the New Testament offices of apostle and prophet.

But their apostles and their prophets don't meet the basic biblical qualifications for those offices. For one thing, none of their apostles has seen the risen Christ in the flesh – and that was the requirement. And every one of their vaunted prophets has prophesied falsely – that's documentable. The NAR prophets even routinely contradict one another; and when they pretend to be foretelling the future, their prophecies are wrong practically, if not literally, every time.

But here's the point I want you to see. All of those things, every one of the things I just named begins with a de facto denial of the sufficiency of Scripture. It grows from the belief that the Bible isn't enough, and that the preached gospel is not really the power of God unto salvation. They're convinced that we need new prophecies and ongoing miracles in order to persuade an unbelieving world. They don't really believe the gospel is the power of God unto salvation. They're so desperate for miracles that they willingly let themselves be fooled by practically any kind of charlatan who claims to have heard from God or who pretends to have miracle-working power. And the movement itself literally thrives on the pretense that these things really are happening.

And I'll give the NAR charismatics credit for this: they are the only consistent continuationists. The milder charismatics, including guys like Wayne Grudem and Jack Deere and Sam Storms – all of them will admit that the gifts and miracles that charismatics are experiencing today are not really

apostolic-quality phenomena. Tongue-speaking is random or repetitive syllables, it's not translatable languages. People who are born lame or blind or deaf don't really get healed today. The dead aren't being raised, prophecies are fallible, and on and on. It's clearly not the same as it was in the early church, and the milder charismatics will admit that. And as I've said many times, charismatics who are honest enough to admit that fact have actually conceded the heart of the cessationist argument, that the actual signs of an apostle, the New Testament charismatic gifts simply are not in evidence anywhere in the church today.

And apostolic miracles did cease well before the end of the first century. I've made the argument; you can see them fading out even in the pages of Scripture. Paul didn't send Timothy a prayer cloth for his stomach troubles, he told him, "Use a little wine as medicine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments," and that's 1 Timothy 5:23. He also tells Timothy, "I left Trophimus, who was ill, at my Miletus." Why didn't he heal him?

And the leaders in the NAR see and understand that there's a great incongruity if you claim continuationism while you admit that you can't do apostolic-quality miracles. So they pretend that they can do everything that the apostles did. They insist that everything distinctive about the apostolic era is still functioning their movement today. That's, of course, what's reflected in their name: the New Apostolic Reformation. That's why they regard the offices of apostle and prophet as still functional. They say they are able to speak in tongues that are recognizable, translatable human languages. They can't produce any recordings of that, but they claim they can. They say that they can give sight to the blind, that they can heal visible congenital disabilities, that they can raise the dead. Some even claim they can walk on water.

And again, they haven't actually demonstrated any of those abilities yet; but rather than admit the failure of their whole project, they've absorbed and championed practically every fraud and every abhorrent doctrine that ever came out of the realm of Pentecostal tomfoolery. That includes false prophecies, phony miracles, rank superstition, spiritual abuse, man worship, materialism, greed, false promises – all of it. And their default message is the very same twisted, phony prosperity gospel that Kenneth Hagin popularized and hordes of televangelists have been peddling for decades. It is all about physical health and earthly wealth and material prosperity, and it is a false gospel.

And apparently, the masterminds of the NAR have decided to amalgamate all of the very worst fruits of Pentecostal chicanery and blend it all into one massive heresy. And it's not really new, it's not truly apostolic in either its content or its character, and it's certainly not going to result in any kind of reformation. So their whole name is a lie. But with the rising influence of Hillsong and the Bethel School of Miracle Magic or whatever they call it, this is now mainstream charismatic doctrine.

Again, it's just a tangled mess of heresies. And I don't use the word "heresy" lightly. Members of the NAR borrow the name of Jesus and they talk about preaching the gospel, but their message is conspicuously different from the gospel that's given to us in Scripture. And in fact, the distinctive doctrines in their belief system have no deep roots in either Scripture or church history. In fact, they embody all the major characteristics given in Scripture about false apostles and false prophets and false teachers who have crept in unnoticed, secretly bringing destructive heresies. They are precisely the kind of false prophets described in 2 Peter and in the epistle of Jude. For example, they're sensual, meaning that their message and their methodology appeal deliberately to human feelings and human experience rather than biblical truth. That's sensuality. And frankly, this is a common

characteristic of all charismatics, but it reaches a fever pitch in the NAR; and it stems, again, from a lack of conviction that the Bible alone is sufficient.

Charismatics are trained both by precept and by example to let their feelings and their experience – and in the NAR, their prophets and apostles – interpret Scripture for them, rather than vice versa. And this is precisely the same tendency the Protestant Reformers rejected in the Roman Catholic system. Only, if anything, it's worse, because in the charismatic movement, even the foundational truths of Christianity aren't necessarily considered to be nonnegotiable truths. So the charismatic movement is full of people who play games with the doctrine of the Trinity or invent novel views about the humanity and the deity of Christ, or they refuse to see the Canon of Scripture as meaningfully closed. And furthermore, prophets and apostles in the NAR churches wield autocratic power, because after all, if you're in a church that's led by an apostle and under the instruction of a prophet, there really isn't much for elders and pastors and teachers to do. Decisions are made according to the whims of their apostles and the fantasies of their prophets.

Dominionism is another key feature of the NAR belief system. Dominionism: it's the notion that we as Christians, the church collectively needs to harness the power and the political machinery of earthly government and thereby usher in the kingdom of Jesus that He preached about. In other words, we need to take dominion over this world – hence, dominionism.

And think about it: that view is the polar opposite of what Christ says the church is supposed to be and do. Matthew 20, verses 25 through 28, Jesus says, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave." He's saying that you're not called to take dominion over anybody. But dominionism is exactly what draws many NAR types into the political realm.

You know that when Texas Governor Rick Perry ran for president in the last election cycle there was a lot of discussion about his ties to the NAR because he had prayer meetings with NAR leaders like Lou Engle and Don Finto, and the media took notice of this. And similarly, Donald Trump appointed Paula White as his spiritual advisor, which makes it even more appalling that all those supposedly respectable evangelical men endorsed her. She is best known as a kind of saucy charismatic television celebrity, and she has close ties to the NAR, the leadership of the NAR movement. And the one characteristic that binds all NAR apostles to the celebrity televangelists and the true mainstream of the charismatic movement is their shared commitment to greed, greed. Like most of the charismatic televangelists, the NAR embraces a doctrine that, in effect, seeks to sanctify covetousness, starting with the craving for wealth and material comforts, and the gaudy symbols of luxury and affluence. You could see that one the set when Jan and Paul Crouch are running TBN.

In short, the NAR view of the gospel incorporates all of the central dogmas of the prosperity gospel – the notion that godliness is a means of gain; and the belief that if you have God's favor, you're going to be healthy and wealthy, and in every sense, prosperous. And that in and of itself ought to be sufficient proof that this movement, the NAR, is a dangerous false version of Christianity. It's a corruption of everything Christ taught.

Greed is singled out in Scripture as a characteristic that is common to virtually all religious charlatans. Second Peter 2, verse 3 says of false teachers in general, "In their greed they will exploit you with false words." And why this seems so hard for the people who watch religious television to

discern is, frankly, a mystery to me, because Jesus said of false prophets, “You will recognize them by their fruits.” That’s Matthew 7:16. “A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.” And when a man or a woman openly caters to the lusts of the flesh, has a greedy obsession with money, makes countless false prophecies, performs phony miracles, and lives a lifestyle that has more in common with Ahab and Jezebel than with Christ and the disciples, that is a seriously corrupt tree. Of such people, 2 Peter 2:10 says, “They indulge of the lust of defiling passion and despise authority.”

And if you doubt that, look at the life and the reputation of Todd Bentley, one of the main characters at the center of the New Apostolic Reformation over the past decade. This is his movement, the movement he embraced, and it embraced him. Bentley is perhaps the best-known and most notorious figure in the whole NAR community. He’s a Canadian-born, former alcoholic and drug addict, who at age 15 was convicted of sexual assault against a younger boy. And just two years after that, he professed conversion and began preaching. And in 2008, he skyrocketed to fame as the main preacher in a series of so-called revival meetings in Lakeland, Florida. And at the peak of his early fame, a group of the best-known NAR apostles stepped in and formerly commissioned him to ministry. The participants in Todd Bentley’s commissioning service were a who’s who of NAR leadership, including Peter Wagner and Bill Johnson and Rick Joyner and John Arnott and Stacey Campbell and Paul Cain and Ché Ahn – all them were there.

But then later that same year, Bentley ignited a scandal because he left his wife, and it came to light that he was involved in an adulterous relationship with a staff member. And then slightly more than a year later in 2010, before that scandal had even begun to die down, Rick Joyner, who is the head of Morning Star Ministries and one of the key leaders in the NAR and famous for his advocacy of fresh prophecies, got together with Bill Johnson – that’s “Bill” Johnson – who is the – get that right, seriously. He is the lead pastor at Bethel Church in Redding, California. Together the two of them laid hands on Bentley and declared him restored to the preaching ministry.

And Bentley’s style of healing was similar to what we saw last night from Smith Wigglesworth. Bentley would actually punch people in the stomach, or kick them in the face, or shove them to the ground. He would sometimes lie on the ground himself and laugh demonically. He’s been saying and doing scandalous things continuously for more than ten years now, and yet Rick Joyner continues to this day to prop him up.

Two months ago on August 22nd, a protege of Bentley’s published a lengthy post on Facebook documenting at least ten cases in which witnesses have accused Bentley of serious perverse sexual addiction, some of these cases involve multiple victims. Bentley was allegedly involved in pornography, homosexuality, wife-swapping, and other grosser perversions that I won’t even describe. And the evidence against him was definitive. It included screenshots of his attempts to seduce people online in order to get them to participate in perverted sexual activities.

Now obviously I wouldn’t normally go into even that much detail about an individual’s moral depravity, but it is important to see the monstrous gravity and unbridled excess of Todd Bentley’s perversions. And candidly, when the most recent wave of news about him hit, I wasn’t terribly surprised by it, because going back all the way to when he first rose to prominence in 2008, most of us saw and spoke out about Bentley’s obvious corrupt moral character and his false teachings. But charismatics doggedly defended him. They were reluctant to entertain any criticisms of the man. And even John Piper declined to say anything critical about Todd Bentley until after the exposure of

Bentley's adultery. His bizarre onstage behavior and the outlandish style apparently posed no problem whatsoever to the charismatic movement, because after all, the typical charismatic today actually believes that when the Holy Spirit works, it's always going to be in a weird manner.

And again, there is that debilitating, discernment-killing fear they have of speaking against the Holy Spirit. And to this day, Rick Joyner now is still defending Todd Bentley. In the wake of those recent allegations, he posted a Facebook Live video in which he said, "Todd Bentley's accusers" – these are his exact words – "really dangerous people." And then he added this. Quote: "This kind of over-the-top ruthless thing that's come against Todd has encouraged me that God's about to use this guy in an incredible way."

Now with all of that as background, consider some of the specific things Peter and Jude say about the characteristics of evil false teachers. Peter says, for example, that they are brash, boasters; blasphemers who promise freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption. That's 2 Peter 2:19. Jude verse 10 says, "These people blaspheme all that they do not understand," – and verse 16 – "following their own sinful desires; they are loud-mouthed boasters."

Can you think of anyone who fits those biblical descriptions better than Todd Bentley and the NAR leaders? Neither can I. This is a highly dangerous movement.

Now I'll say this once more. There is – it's true – there is a remnant of charismatics who have not yet bowed the knee to damnable heresy; and I accept them as brethren, I love them in Christ. And my challenge to them has always been, "Critique your own movement with a modicum of bold biblical discernment, and I would be more than happy to leave the task of correcting charismatics to you guys, while I turn my critical eye to some lesser threat in the evangelical universe."

But that is not happening. Six years later, it's not happening. As I said, the sane and sober charismatics actually serve as a gateway drug to draw people into the vortex of charismatic error. Some of them purposely turn a blind eye to the manifest errors of their charismatic brethren while they angrily scold critics who try to point out these dangers to other people.

Michael Brown, for example, famously claimed not long ago when someone challenged him on his relationship to NAR leaders. He claimed that the NAR is just a myth and that critics of the NAR are spinning a conspiracy theory. You familiar with Michael Brown? He is a charismatic radio personality whose reach now extends well beyond the charismatic community. He claims to be an expert with regard to the charismatic movement, and he is personal friends and sometimes a partner with all of the best-known charismatics in this league of cohorts that makes up the NAR. He's connected to these people, but he believes – he says he doesn't know anything about their movement. So on the one hand, Dr. Brown likes to portray himself as an opponent and a critic of the worst charismatic abuses. He would love to be classified as one of the more moderate and biblically-minded charismatics. And I have some non-charismatic friends who think he's sound enough and that he actually belongs in the moderate category.

But on the other hand, although he made, perhaps, more noise than anybody with criticisms of the Strange Fire Conference, starting weeks before the conference even took place. Before anybody said anything, he was critical of it. His analysis of the charismatic movement, however, never seemed to sound any helpful or meaningful warnings. He does acknowledge that there are serious

errors in the charismatic movement, but it's always in the most general way possible. What I mean is, he never actually points out any specific cases of fraud or falsehood, and he never names the guilty parties. And that in and of itself might be okay if Dr. Brown had not repeatedly come out forcefully to the defense of some of the charismatic movement's worst charlatans.

He has, for example, defended both Benny Hinn and Kenneth Copeland. And in the wake of these latest revelations about Todd Bentley's moral perversions, Michael Brown wrote this. He says, "I have no comment on the most recent accusations against Todd since I don't know what's false and what's true." That has routinely been his answer when he's challenged to acknowledge or critique specific cases of charismatic charlatanry. Despite his boasted familiarity with regard to the charismatic, his expertise about that movement, he typically claims that he's totally unaware of what's going on in some of the most visible and influential charismatic circles. So I don't recommend taking any advice or instruction from a person who refuses to see and correct these egregious errors, or even challenge the heresies that this movement is aggressively peddling. If you yield the authority and sufficiency of Scripture to the charismatic perspective, you will be drawn into even more serious error. It is inevitable.

In fact, take it from an actual apostle: Peter. And I want you to turn with me to 2 Peter 1. Justin referred to this last night; I want to take a little closer look at it. Justin was exactly right in how he dealt with this. Let's look at this text. Here's how Peter proclaimed the authority and sufficiency of Scripture over every kind of human experience.

Second Peter chapter 1, verses 16 through 18 I'll read. He wrote, "We did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For when He received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to Him by the Majestic Glory, 'This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,' we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with Him on the holy mountain." He's talking about the transfiguration of Christ. And he goes on to say in verse 19, "And we something more sure, the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts."

You get that: "A lamp shining in the dark place." Everything else is darkness. What is the lamp? It wasn't Peter's experience, it was the Word of God. He is describing an event. Like Justin said last night, "Greater experience than anything you have ever experienced, or me."

This was the transfiguration of Christ. This was the most spectacular spiritual experience of his life, maybe alongside his seeing the resurrected Christ; but this was certainly brighter and more glorious. This was when our Lord appeared in His fully glory; and Peter heard the voice of God from heaven. He saw Moses and Elijah face to face. And best of all, he got a preview of Christ in His glory, the thing that all of us long to see.

And this was not a dream or a vision. This wasn't an impression in Peter's mind or a figment of his imagination. This was real life. That's what he's saying when he says, "We did not follow cleverly devised myths." He saw it with his own eyes; he says so: "We were eyewitnesses." He heard the voice of God with his own ears; he says that, too: "We ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven." And notice the plural, "we." "We were eyewitnesses. We ourselves heard." He was there in person with other apostolic eyewitnesses: "We were with Him on the holy mount."

Think about that. There was nothing about this experience that was merely subjective, because not only Peter, but also James and John could confirm this was as real as it gets. And yet, Peter goes on to say that even what he heard with his own ears and saw with his own eyes was not as authoritative as the eternal Word of God contained in Scripture. Verse 19 again: “And we have something more sure, the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place,” – in other words, this is your only legitimate source of light – “until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, knowing this first of all,” – and he’s clearly talking about Scripture here because he says so – “that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation. For no prophecy” – and he’s talking again about the prophecy of Scripture – “was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”

He is not saying that his eyewitness testimony makes the prophecy of Scripture more sure. Some people try to interpret it that way. Well, it’s more sure because he gives eyewitness testimony to. What he’s saying is that the written Word of God by its very nature is more sure than his own personal experience. Same thing I preached about the other day. And that is confirmed by his argument in verses 20 and 21 where he establishes the authority and the divine origin of every prophecy of Scripture.

And the Greek word order in verse 19 actually supports this is the only true meaning of this text: “We have more sure the prophetic word.” More sure than what? More sure than experience. Even the valid, genuine eyewitness of experience of multiple apostles, real apostles, not self-appointed ones. Peter is saying that the written Word is an even more reliable source of truth than his own experience. Or to paraphrase, his meaning to his readers, his message that he’s trying to get across, it’s this: “Look, James, John and I saw Christ’s glory firsthand. But if you don’t believe us, there is one authority even more certain than our testimony: it’s the written Word of God.” And that “we” at the beginning of verse 19 is generic, not emphatic; so it means “you and I,” not just, “we who witnessed the transfiguration.” He’s saying in effect, “All of us who are believers have a word of prophecy that is more sure than any voice from heaven, and certainly more reliable than the pronouncements of those self-styled prophets who consistently get it wrong.”

The prophecy of Scripture,” – verse 20 – “is more sure, more reliable, and more authoritative than anyone’s experiences, even Peter’s.” That surely puts these subjective impressions in their proper place, right? Because remember, Peter’s describing an experience that really wasn’t subjective. What he saw and heard was objectively real, not just an impression in his mind, but a thing that others actually experienced with him and could give eyewitness testimony to.

But Peter knew that the written Word of God is even more authoritative than the shared experience of three apostles. Why would anyone seek truth from an admittedly fallible charismatic prophet when we have such a sure word? Peter reminds us that we would do well to pay attention to Scripture as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until Jesus returns. “Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” Scripture is authoritative, it is reliable, and best of all, it is sufficient. Let’s pray.

Lord, help us to be obedient to the clear commandments of Your Word. We trust the goodness of Your providence, to order our steps rightly in all that we do beyond that. May we by our obedience honor Christ, and may we understand and believe and live as if Your Word is sufficient. It is all the light we need. May we order our lives by that light for the glory of Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

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