

Chapter 13

BIBLICAL TRUTH AND EXPERIENCE

-a Reply to John F. MacArthur, Jr.

In his book *Charismatic Chaos*, John F. MacArthur, Jr. frequently stresses the priority of biblical truth over experience. For example, "Experience, however, is not the test of biblical truth; rather, biblical truth stands in final judgment on experience."¹ MacArthur writes these words in connection with his charge that charismatics give priority to experience over Scripture.

As one against whom MacArthur levels this charge,² I should like to make reply.³ I have no disagreement with MacArthur about the priority of biblical truth or theology over experience,⁴ but I am concerned primarily about the way MacArthur handles biblical truth in regard to the charismatic renewal. So I will speak to that matter first. Thereafter, I will briefly comment on MacArthur's relationship to experience.

I

Biblical Truth

MacArthur claims to stand forthrightly on biblical truth. It is "our responsibility to examine everything carefully in light of Scripture" (22), MacArthur declares. Let us examine how MacArthur operates with relevant scriptural truth. We will begin by turning first to chapter 7, "How Do Spiritual Gifts Operate?" and note several statements. I begin here because a primary concern of the charismatic renewal relates to spiritual gifts.

MacArthur writes in regard to 1 Corinthians 14:19 that "condemning the Corinthians' misuse of the gift of tongues, the apostle [Paul] argued that all ministry of spiritual gifts in the church should be aimed at people's *minds* [italics his]" (157). MacArthur thereupon quotes Paul's words, "In the church I desire to speak five words with my mind, that I may instruct others also, rather than ten thousand words in a tongue (NASB)." I must reply to MacArthur that Paul's statement about people's minds relates only to his preference for prophecy over tongues in the church assembly. He by no means is declaring that all spiritual gifts should be "aimed at people's minds." Indeed, in the elaboration of 1 Corinthians 12-14, Paul deals with quite a number of spiritual gifts, including faith, healings, miracles, and tongues (12:8-10) that are not basically mental operations. However, in regard to tongues, MacArthur seeks to bring them under the mental umbrella by adding later that "the true gift of tongues was the ability to speak in a foreign language" (166).

MacArthur's statement is far wide of the mark, for, with the possible exception of Pentecost, there is no suggestion in the New Testament that tongues were foreign languages. For example, speaking in tongues by the Roman centurion and household (Acts 10:46) is set within the context of worship—"speaking in tongues and extolling God" (RSV); moreover, what point would there have been in their speaking foreign languages? Further, Paul quite explicitly dissociates speaking in tongues from a mental activity (i.e., speaking in a foreign language) by saying, "If I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful" (1 Cor. 14:14 RSV). Then Paul adds, "What am I to do? I will pray with the spirit and I will pray with the mind also" (v. 15a RSV). Praying in a tongue, according to Paul, is *not*

praying in a foreign language, a mental activity, but praying with the spirit wherein the mind is idle or unfruitful.

Further, in this chapter MacArthur contrasts "the true gift of tongues" with "ecstatic speech," adding that "nothing in the New Testament suggests that the gift of languages was ecstatic speech" (166). Ecstatic speech, according to MacArthur, borders on the demonic, for in the next sentence he states, "God would not give a gift that is the same as the one used by Satan to hold people in the grip of false religions." Thus, tongues are either foreign languages or demonically inspired⁵ utterances. MacArthur fails to recognize a third possibility, namely, that true tongues are neither foreign languages nor demonically inspired speech but *spiritual utterances*. Or in Paul's words, they are praying "with the spirit."

We observe next that, in regard to the situation of the Corinthian church, MacArthur speaks of "spiritual confusion." His words: "The depth of the spiritual confusion in Corinth certainly revealed that many of the ecstatic and miraculous phenomena in their midst were not true spiritual gifts" (169). Hence, according to MacArthur, the ecstatic and miraculous mixed together in deep spiritual confusion was the problem Paul had to deal with. To reply: this was surely *not* the problem; it was rather the Corinthians' *disorder* in the expression of the gifts. Paul's final words in 1 Corinthians 12-14 are: "All things should be done decently and in order" (14:40 RSV).

MacArthur, however, goes back to Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 12:3-5- -"I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says 'Jesus be cursed!' and no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' but by the Holy Spirit" (RSV). Thereupon MacArthur adds: "In fact, it seems obvious that if people in the Corinthian assembly were calling Jesus accursed, the gifts they claimed to have received from the Holy Spirit were counterfeit" (169-70). Paul, however, makes no connection between such a cursing of Jesus (by whom Paul does not say) and any Corinthian activity in spiritual gifts. The Corinthians may have exaggerated the importance of certain gifts, they may have shown too little love in their expression, and there may have been disorderliness, but in no way does Paul suggest that some of the expressions were not from God. The gifts were all from the Holy Spirit who, says Paul, "apportions to each one individually as he wills" (1 Cor. 12:11 RSV).

MacArthur, viewing the Corinthian situation as one of "deep spiritual confusion," thereupon applies this to the charismatic movement by adding: "Who can deny that the charismatic movement as a whole is suffering from exactly the same spiritual problems that Paul found in the Corinthian church?" (170). Yes, there are many of the same spiritual problems⁶ but not from saying "Jesus be cursed" with resulting counterfeit gifts. "Jesus is Lord" is the continuing affirmation, and the gifts basically are from the Holy Spirit.

Is there then a valid operation of the spiritual gifts? MacArthur affirms such in the last sentence of chapter 7: "The church can be built up only when the spiritual gifts are used properly, when Scripture is understood and taught accurately, and when believers are walking in the Spirit with self-control, committed to obeying the Word of God" (170). I can agree heartily with this statement; however, in regard to the spiritual gifts operating "properly," it turns out that MacArthur is actually referring only to certain ones.

In this regard let us move on to a statement of MacArthur's in chapter 9, "Does God Heal?" MacArthur speaks of several of the spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12:8-10 as "*temporary sign gifts*" (199; italics his). He adds: "These were specific enablements given to certain believers for the purpose of authenticating or confirming God's Word when it was proclaimed in the early church before the

Scriptures were written. The temporary sign gifts included prophecy (revelatory prophecy⁷), miracles, healings, tongues, and interpretation of tongues. The sign gifts had a unique purpose: to give the apostles credentials, that is, to let the people know that these men all spoke the truth of God. Once the Word of God was inscripturated, the sign gifts were no longer needed and they ceased" (199). So it turns out that the words "when the spiritual gifts are used properly" can only refer now to what MacArthur calls "*permanent edifying gifts*" (199; italics his). These include "knowledge, wisdom, prophecy (authoritative preaching), teaching, exhortation, faith (or prayer), discernment, showing mercy, giving, administration, and helps" (199). Thus regarding the nine spiritual gifts that Paul delineates in 1 Corinthians 12:8-10, only four in some sense continue to be available: word of wisdom, word of knowledge, faith, and discerning of spirits.⁸ It follows, for example, in regard to healing, that "those who claim the gift of healing do not really have it" (203). According to MacArthur, God has withdrawn the gift long ago.

Before looking further into the reasons MacArthur gives for the cessation of many spiritual gifts, I can only first react in amazement. For Paul in no way suggests a division of the gifts between temporary and permanent, or that any of these would have no place in the future life of the church. The gifts are all mixed together, MacArthur's (not Paul's) "temporary" and "permanent"⁹ in no particular order, and all are headed by Paul's statement, "To each is given..." (1 Cor. 12:7 RSV). Moreover, according to Paul, they are *all* apportionments of the Holy Spirit and *all* are needed for the proper functioning of the body of believers. In regard specifically to the gift of healing, how can MacArthur dare to say it cannot exist today when Paul states: "to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:9 RSV)? This is just as much a continuing gift of the Holy Spirit as any "permanent" gift that Paul names. MacArthur surely does not have Paul on his side in declaring that the gift of healing has ceased.

The reasons MacArthur gives for the cessation of the "sign gifts" are equally questionable. On the one hand, as noted, MacArthur says that these gifts occurred to authenticate the proclamation of the gospel only as long as the Word of God was not inscripturated; on the other hand, that the gifts occurred only to certify genuine apostleship. Once there was no longer need for apostolic credentialing and the canon of Scripture was completed, the gifts would be withdrawn. However, the spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12 are *not* apostolic credentials: they are manifestations of the Holy Spirit in the assembly among ordinary church members. Further, there is not the slightest hint that the "sign gifts" will cease with the completion of Scripture because they are no longer needed. On the latter point, what possibly can the finalizing of the canon have to do with the cessation of spiritual gifts? There is surely no mention in the New Testament itself- -the completed canon- -that some of the spiritual gifts have finally been withdrawn.

MacArthur's position is indeed a peculiar one. The Corinthians presumably could practice all the spiritual gifts because the apostles were still around and Scripture was not yet complete. However, once the apostles were gone from the scene and their teachings had been inscripturated, the Corinthians could no longer exercise such gifts as healings, miracles, and tongues. Did Paul himself even hint at this? Had he so notified the Corinthians? Does he suggest this in any of his letters? Such questions hardly need a serious answer.

What is most disturbing- -to repeat- -about MacArthur's position on the "sign gifts" is that by declaring their cessation he does not hesitate to rule out all subsequent expression of these gifts. We have already commented on MacArthur's statement that "those who claim the gift of healing do not really have it." MacArthur spends much effort to demonstrate empirically that all claims to the gift of healing today are fake claims, but such demonstration does not really matter because, according to MacArthur, *in actuality* the gift has long ago been removed by God Himself. So when MacArthur takes a jaundiced look at any and all contemporary expressions of healing, it really cannot be otherwise.

Now let us observe how similarly MacArthur speaks about miracles. In an earlier chapter (5), entitled, "Does God Do Miracles Today?" MacArthur declares, "I am convinced that the miracles, signs, and wonders being claimed today in the charismatic movement have nothing in common with apostolic miracles" (109). The reason MacArthur gives later: "Nothing in Scripture indicates that the miracles of the apostolic age were meant to be continuous in subsequent ages" (117). MacArthur has many disparaging remarks about the character of contemporary claims to "signs and wonders" (especially in chap. 6, "What is Behind the 'Third Wave?'"), and seeks to show their spuriousness. Indeed, from MacArthur's perspective, miracle claims, as with healing, must be spurious, not because of any sensational expression, but because miracles no longer can possibly take place! It is surely not without significance that MacArthur, herald of biblical truth over against experience, does not hesitate to use contemporary experience to fortify his negative viewpoint!

Looking further into MacArthur's chapter on miracles, we note that he recognizes miracles in the New Testament as also occurring through others closely associated with the apostles. He writes: "Miracles were unique to the apostles and those who worked most closely with them" (120-21). Still, MacArthur adds in the next sentence, "The average Christian had no ability to perform signs and wonders" (121). We must question, first, if others than the apostles could also work miracles, what happens to the view that miracles are uniquely apostolic credentials; second, if others who worked closely with them could work miracles, how can one rule out "the average Christian"? MacArthur identifies those who "worked most closely with him" as those "*commissioned* by him," and writes that "no miracles ever occurred in the entire New Testament record except in the presence of an apostle or one directly commissioned by an apostle" (121). Examples that MacArthur mentions are Stephen and Philip; however, MacArthur quickly adds, "the power never went any further" (121). I must rejoin: if such power never went any further, what does Paul mean in writing the Corinthians "to another [is given] the working of miracles" (1 Cor. 12:10 RSV)? Was such a person "commissioned" by Paul? Hardly. He would seem to fit far better into the category of "average Christian." But, according to MacArthur, as noted, such a person could not perform miracles!

Another attempt by MacArthur (in chap. 4) to assign such gifts as miracles, healings, and tongues to the apostolic circle is evidenced in the way he treats Mark 16:17-18: "These signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover." MacArthur, assuming that the verses are a reflection of an original inspired manuscript, states: "It is incorrect to assert that these signs should be the norm for all believers today" (102).

However, this clearly is MacArthur's judgment; but by no means does the text suggest inapplicability for believers at any time. MacArthur seeks to shore up his view by appealing, first, to history, namely, that believers in general have not demonstrated these signs, and second, that biblically, "these signs were true of one certain group--the apostolic community" (102). To reply: if Mark 16:17-18 reflects a genuine word of Jesus, it would seem much better to take this as a possibility for all believers rather than boldly to contradict the text. Also, discounting Mark 16:17-18 because of a view derived from other texts that presumably only the apostolic community could do such signs hardly seems credible. The words of Mark 16:17-18--"these signs will accompany those who believe" (RSV)--unmistakably go far beyond "the apostolic community."

In his clear affirmation that certain gifts were limited to the apostolic circle, MacArthur frequently quotes 2 Corinthians 12:12 and Hebrews 2:3-4. Paul writes in the Corinthian passage, "The signs of a true apostle were performed among you in all patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works"

(RSV). Such a statement, according to MacArthur, emphasizes that miracles were singular "proofs" of apostleship; accordingly, "If doing miracles had been the common experience of ordinary Christians, it would be foolish for Paul to try to prove his apostleship by citing the miracles he had done" (121). However, Paul's statement, I must reply, was not intended to position himself over against "ordinary Christians" but to emphasize that he was "not in the least inferior to the 'super-apostles'"¹⁰ (2 Cor. 12:11 NIV). Hence, Paul is not saying that miracles were limited to apostles, but that "as a true apostle" he performed genuine miracles. Incidentally, if Paul were saying in 2 Corinthians 12, as MacArthur claims, that miracles were a kind of apostolic preserve, Paul is contradicting what he says in 1 Corinthians 12 about miracles being one of the gifts in the body that the Holy Spirit sovereignly apportions. Not only does Paul say to "ordinary [non-apostolic] Christians" "to another the working of miracles" (v. 10), but also later adds the category of miracles as *separate* from apostles: "God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, *then* workers of miracles" (v. 28 RSV). In sum, 2 Corinthians 12:12 cannot consistently be used to rule out miracles from common Christian experience.

What about Hebrews 2:3-4? The author of Hebrews, speaking about "a great salvation," adds that "it was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard him, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed each according to his will" (RSV). Unquestionably, miracles are here attributed to "those who heard" the Lord, their witness being "attested" or "confirmed" by "signs...wonders...miracles...gifts of the Holy Spirit." The apostles may be identified as those about whom Hebrews speaks, for surely they "heard" the Lord and worked many miracles; however, that by no means limits miracles to the apostles. A statement of occurrence is not necessarily a statement of circumscription. In this connection I would call attention to a question of Paul to the Galatians: "Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of law, or by hearing with faith?" (3:5 RSV). Here is a somewhat similar statement to Hebrews regarding miracles and the Holy Spirit, but without any suggestion in Galatians that the apostles (or an apostle) were those who worked the miracles. The miracles, in Paul's words- -and with no reference to himself- -simply occurred "among" the Galatians. The Galatian situation seems not too different from the Corinthian where "ordinary Christians"- -as we have seen- -surely worked miracles. MacArthur, incidentally, while frequently citing Hebrews 2:3-4 never mentions Galatians 3:5. This, as is frequently the case, is an unbalanced use of God's written Word.

I would also call attention to the prayer of the company of believers in Acts 4:23-31. Peter and John had wrought a miracle of healing on a lame man and were later threatened and imprisoned. Then verse 23 begins: "On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them. When they [the 'people'] heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God" (NIV). The prayer of the people, the gathered believers, concludes: "Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus" (NIV). The apostles Peter and John were there- -and presumably the other ten apostles- -but the prayer was obviously that of the larger company of believers who prayed for boldness to witness *and* for miracles to be performed through them by Jesus. There is no suggestion in their prayer that miracles will be done thereafter only by the apostles in their midst. Earlier in Acts there is the statement that "many wonders and signs were done through the apostles" (2:43). However, some time later, as we have just noted, the larger company prayed that the Lord would accompany their witness by "miraculous signs and wonders." Would they have prayed thus, especially with the apostles present, if miracles were a sole apostolic prerogative? Further, who knows but that later miracles performed by

non-apostles Stephen and Philip were an answer to the prayer of the company of believers rather than the result of apostolic commissioning? MacArthur again has drawn the net too tight in his elimination of "ordinary Christians" from miraculous activity.

Finally, in the matter of biblical truth I would like to return to MacArthur's view of speaking in tongues, especially chapter 10, "Is the Gift of Tongues for Today?" I will also make some reference to chapter 8, "What was Happening in the Early Church?"

MacArthur states: "Tongues are mentioned in three books of the Bible: Mark (16:17); Acts (2, 10, 19); and 1 Corinthians (12-14)" (224). However, says MacArthur, we may first eliminate Mark 16:17- "Those who believe...will speak in new tongues," because "Mark 16:17 simply mentions tongues as an apostolic sign" (224). Really? Such biblical interpretation is far from the mark. The text has no reference whatever to apostles or apostolic signs: it refers totally to "those who believe." Thus all the more egregious is the statement, earlier quoted, in regard to Mark 16:17 by MacArthur: "It is incorrect to assert that these signs [including tongues] should be the norm for all believers." This obviously is MacArthur's opinion, but it is *not* what Mark 16:17 says. It would be far more profitable and edifying if MacArthur, rather than distorting the text, might question what are "new tongues," and, for example, how do they relate to tongues spoken in the Acts accounts and in 1 Corinthians? On the Day of Pentecost people spoke in "other tongues" (Acts 2:4). Were these "new tongues"- -or what? How do "new tongues" relate to "strange tongues" in 1 Corinthians 14:21? MacArthur's determination to remove "tongues" from the Christian community at large seems so strong that he fails to pursue many challenging possibilities.

In regard to Acts 2, 10, and 19 MacArthur seeks to dismiss these references by saying that since Acts is "primarily historical narrative...the extraordinary, miraculous events [including tongues] it recounts do not represent a normative pattern for the entire church age" (224). Despite the questionableness of a view that historical narrative provides no pattern for the ensuing church age, I will simply comment that MacArthur views all tongues in Acts as human languages, and allows that view to control his interpretation of tongues in 1 Corinthians 12-14. For example, MacArthur comments: "Nowhere does the Bible teach that the gift of tongues is anything other than human languages" (226). Actually, as we have seen, 1 Corinthians 12-14 by no means corroborates this view.

Let us move on again to the Corinthian chapters. I have already made several comments, especially in reference to chapter 12, so will now note two other of MacArthur's interpretations.

First, there is MacArthur's view of 1 Corinthians 13:8: "Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away" (NASB). MacArthur claims that prophecy and knowledge will be done away "when the perfect comes" (v. 10), the perfect being viewed as the eternal state- -"face to face" (v. 12). However, tongues, without regard to the final perfection, will simply cease: "the gift of tongues will 'stop itself'" (231 n.20). MacArthur adds: "*When* is not stipulated, but they won't be around when the perfect thing arrives. History suggests that tongues ceased shortly after Paul wrote this epistle" (ibid.) To put it bluntly, MacArthur is skewing this passage badly. For one thing, Paul never intended to separate a period of future prophecy and knowledge from that of tongues. They will *all* end when the perfect comes. "Done away" and "cease" are simply stylistic variants,¹¹ not references to different time schedules. For another, since MacArthur views prophecy and knowledge as continuing to the consummation, he is constrained to posit them both as "permanent gifts." Prophecy, accordingly, says MacArthur, in this context is not a miraculous gift but "the ability to proclaim truth powerfully" (ibid.). Such a view of prophecy is altogether foreign to the biblical meaning, and totally rationalizes what Paul is saying. Still again, MacArthur finally does not rely on the biblical data but on presumed historical

evidence that tongues ceased shortly after Paul's letter. Such a statement is quite controversial¹²; moreover, it shows an attitude that is too dogmatic regarding history. MacArthur so much as says: If the Bible is not convincing that tongues will shortly stop, history is! This is not a very scholarly way of dealing with an issue of much importance.

Second, I must comment on MacArthur's interpretation of 1 Corinthians 14:2 and 4. 1 Corinthians 14:2 reads: "One who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit" (RSV). MacArthur quotes these words of Paul and then adds, "he was using irony, pointing out the futility of speaking in tongues without an interpreter, because only God would know if anything was said" (228). Using irony? How possibly can one see irony in Paul's words which are a simple and profound statement that tongues are addressed to God, not to men, and that mysteries, hidden things, are being spoken? To be sure, interpretation is needed, as Paul later says, for other believers to be edified (v. 5), but that does not in any way discount the fact that tongues are essentially addressed to God.¹³ MacArthur is way off target. But worse is yet to come: MacArthur adds in a footnote,¹⁴ "Because of the absence of any definite article in the Greek text, it is also possible to translate this verse as, 'One who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to *a god*' [italics his]-referring to a pagan deity" (228 n.17). To a pagan deity? I can reply only that MacArthur's words are not only exegetically quite questionable¹⁵ but very close to being blasphemous. "Mysteries in the Spirit" to a pagan deity? It is not hard to see why MacArthur continues in the footnote with the reminder: "Either way ["to God" or "to a god"], 1 Corinthians 14:2 is condemnation, not commendation." Again this is exegetically indefensible: there is no genuine option, nor is Paul by any means condemning such speaking in tongues.

Next we note Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 14:4- "He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church" (RSV). MacArthur writes, "Paul was not commending the use of tongues for self-edification, but condemning people who were using the gift in violation of its purpose and in disregard of the principle of love" (228). To reply: while it is true that the Corinthians lacked much in terms of love (note 1 Corinthians 13) and may have been valuing tongues more highly than prophecy, this does not mean that Paul was negating or condemning the value of tongues for self-edification. MacArthur's further statement about one who speaks in tongues that "the chief value he gets out of it is the building of his own ego" (229) is, to say the least, deplorable. MacArthur's biases¹⁶ are so strong that he cannot envision the possibility of language as prayer to God in which there is at the same time genuine spiritual edification.¹⁷ Why must one think of self-edification as selfish ego-building? To leave Paul for a moment- -Jude writes: "You, beloved, build yourselves up on your most holy faith; pray in the Holy Spirit"¹⁸ (v. 20 RSV). This indeed is an injunction to self-edification, and has nothing to do with "building" one's "own ego." Not dissimilarly Paul was commending the use of tongues for self-edification, for being built up in faith.

However, tongues as such do not immediately edify the church whereas prophecy does- "but he who prophesies edifies the church." So Paul adds: "Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy" (v. 5a RSV). Furthermore, when tongues are interpreted they are equal in value to prophecy: "He who prophesies is greater than he who speaks in tongues, unless some one interprets, so that the church may be edified" (v. 5b RSV). It is obvious that Paul is not disparaging tongues but is desirous that they be used through interpretation to edify the body of believers.

But let us go back to the value of tongues. MacArthur sees them at best in terms of egocentric activity, at worst as possibly diabolical (addressed to "a god"). He would therefore surely warn against any practice of tongues. Thus he is light years away from Paul who declared, "I want you all to speak in tongues." MacArthur can only urge people to stay away from all such practice, and thus falls victim to

Paul's later words, "So, my brethren, earnestly desire to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues" (v. 39). MacArthur may not directly forbid, but his attitude is so negative that this conclusion follows practically.

MacArthur finally seeks to fortify his negativity by saying quite bluntly: "The tongues being spoken today are not biblical. Those who speak in tongues are not practicing the gift described in Scripture" (244). This is a confusing statement. Since, as we earlier observed, MacArthur views tongues in the Bible as foreign languages- -"the true gift of tongues was the ability to speak in a foreign language,"¹⁹ and since his view, as noted, is highly questionable, MacArthur has really no adequate way of coping with the contemporary phenomenon. MacArthur's additional view, as noted, is that false tongues in the Bible were "ecstatic speech." Since today foreign languages cannot be proved as occurring, all that can remain is ecstatic and irrational utterance.²⁰ It is quite unfortunate, but by a basic misunderstanding of the nature of biblical tongues as *spiritual utterance* (praying with the spirit, uttering mysteries in the spirit, the extolling of God in transcendent speech, and so on), MacArthur is incapable of rendering adequate judgment on the contemporary scene.

To sum up this section: it is apparent that MacArthur's professed allegiance to biblical truth is quite problematic. His claim to stand fully on the Bible in regard to charismatic matters cannot be substantiated. MacArthur correctly states that biblical truth stands in final judgment on all experience; however, his views of that truth are so confused that his judgments far miss the mark. There is evidently an anti-charismatic bias operating that colors and slants all of his writing about charismatic matters.

II Experience

Now we turn to the matter of experience. MacArthur, in chapter 1, "Is Experience a Valid Test of Faith?," speaks affirmatively of experience by declaring personally, "Many of my own spiritual experiences have been profound, overwhelming, life-changing events" (24). Then he adds, "Spiritual experience by definition is an internal awareness that involves strong emotion in response to the truth of God's Word, amplified by the Holy Spirit and applied by him to us personally." How does this differ from what charismatics say?

MacArthur proceeds: "Charismatics err because they tend to build their teachings on experience, rather than understanding that authentic experience happens in *response* [italics his] to truth." Thus, according to MacArthur, both non-charismatics and charismatics affirm experience, but the latter fail to do so in response to biblical truth.

Before commenting on charismatics and experience, I must immediately comment that if "authentic experience happens in response to the truth of God's Word," and there is some misapprehension of that truth, then the ensuing experience may very well be partial or lacking. Since, as we have seen, MacArthur is seriously off base in much of the scriptural data relating to things charismatic, his experience can hardly be adequate. By failure to interpret certain Scriptures accurately, his resulting experience unfortunately can only be short-circuited. So while he pillories charismatics for claims to certain experiences, MacArthur boxes himself off from sharing in them.

The most obvious example of this is speaking in tongues. MacArthur, by holding that genuine speaking in tongues was originally speaking in foreign languages (a misapprehension) and that the gift of tongues has necessarily ceased (a serious error), virtually closes the door to any recognition of tongues as valid today or for the church or for his own personal spiritual life!

Charismatics generally have no problem here: they read about tongues in the Bible, hear the words,

"They will speak in new tongues," note in Acts that many people spoke in tongues, and hear Paul's words "to another tongues" and "I want you all to speak in tongues." Thus when people speak in tongues, is this a matter of putting experience first or *acting on biblical truth*? Charismatics do not spend their time evacuating the plain teaching of Scripture by intellectualizing tongues, or claiming such as only an apostolic prerogative, or seeking to discover a scriptural cut-off time. Charismatics are humbly grateful that this biblical truth has come alive in their experience. Whose experience then is authentic?

MacArthur seems determined to disavow all such spiritual gifts as tongues, healings, and miracles. There are, to be sure, charismatics that exaggerate in all these areas, but at least they are open *because of the biblical record*. Thus they are able to experience those things that MacArthur strongly resists. Charismatics do not therefore begin with experience; rather, their experience is the outworking of scriptural truth. Experience is not (here I agree with MacArthur) a valid test of truth; *but* it surely does serve to *confirm* the teachings of the Bible.

Furthermore, in regard to MacArthur, it follows that by his denial of the continuing validity of many of the spiritual gifts, he effectively shuts himself off from any real apprehension of them. Experience of the biblical gifts, while not primary (the Scriptures must remain first), opens up deeper understanding. MacArthur unfortunately does not have this, so that his discussion about the spiritual gifts not only lacks biblical validity, but also lacks genuine vitality. *Vital* understanding of such biblical realities, for example, as justification and regeneration, calls for participation and experience. So it is with spiritual gifts.

In his Introduction MacArthur quotes my words: "Against the background of sharing in the Holy Spirit and the consequent gifts of the Holy Spirit, information, instruction, and teaching concerning them becomes relevant. A fundamental thesis may here be set forth: *Any vital information concerning the gifts of the Spirit, the pneumatic charismata, presupposes a participation in them*. Without such a participation, whatever is said about the gifts may only result in confusion and error"²¹ (19). This is the quotation to which I earlier referred²² that was followed by MacArthur's words, "Experience, however, is not the test of biblical truth, rather, biblical truth stands in final judgment on experience."

MacArthur misunderstands my words. I was not saying that experience is the test of biblical truth; rather, that participation makes for *vital* understanding. Without such participation- -as is true for all the realities of the Christian faith- -there may be some intellectual apprehension but little more. Especially if there is negativity about the possibility of the biblical realities happening, in this case the spiritual gifts, there can be even more serious misunderstanding. I do not hesitate to say it again: there may be only "confusion and error."

Let me illustrate this further by once more referring to speaking in tongues. The reality of tongues is unquestionably in the New Testament. Unless, however, one has spoken in tongues, it is not possible to grasp the full meaning. Until one can share with Paul his experience of praying "with the spirit" (as well as with the mind), there may be not only confusion but also opposition. In MacArthur's case there is obviously a lack of sensitivity in regard to those who speak in tongues. He can shed little light because he stands in the dark. Paul could write the Corinthians about the purpose of tongues as one *who himself shared the experience*; MacArthur, struggling to distance himself, consequently has little to say that is vital or helpful.

This brings me to the point of emphasizing the damaging effect of lack of experience. MacArthur faults charismatics for their presumed primary stress on experience- -and doubtless some charismatics may lay too much emphasis here. However, even more critical can be lack of experience wherein there is little or no confirmation of the biblical witness. Thus there is no empathy for the original scriptural

texts. It is as if MacArthur is on a different wave length, so that nothing comes through clearly. There is a kind of bewilderment- -for MacArthur professes to see many good things about the charismatic movement²³- -but because of lack of experience cannot really understand what it is all about.

Far worse than charismatic *chaos* is non-charismatic *negativity*. In the charismatic movement prophecy *may* be over done, healings over claimed, miracles over stressed, tongues over employed, but far worse is the negativity that makes no room for these spiritual realities to occur. Moreover, if these are indeed gifts of the Holy Spirit, and they are happening today, is there not the very serious danger of opposition to them being opposition to the Holy Spirit Himself?

Finally, in a brotherly fashion, I would encourage John MacArthur to reinvestigate his theological and biblical moorings; and to be open to fresh activities of the Holy Spirit in his life and ministry. May it so be.

Appendix:

I would like to speak to three charges MacArthur levels against me in reference to quotations from my early book, *The Era of the Spirit*.²⁴

1. *Theology should be adapted to experience*

"J. Rodman Williams argues that we should adapt our theology to experience, rather than insisting that experience be evaluated by theology" (45). Then MacArthur quotes my words, "What I have been attempting to stress is that the theological implications of this dynamic movement of the Spirit are of no little significance. At the critical center there is the knowledge that something has happened!" MacArthur interrupts my words at that point; in the original they continue (without an exclamation point) "for which one has difficulty finding adequate theological language or ways of relating it to various doctrines of the Christian faith." By breaking my statement with "something has happened," MacArthur can add, "That is the key- *something has happened*. Never mind if it fits 'airy-fairy' doctrine or theology" (45-46).²⁵ Thus MacArthur tries to include me in a statement made a few sentences earlier, "The experiential wave rolls on, and doctrine and theology are being washed out the door" (45). To identify my position as not caring about doctrine and theology is grossly unjust.²⁶ But what I am saying is that the "dynamic movement of the Spirit" (an objective, biblical, and primarily nonexperiential reality) is difficult to express in adequate theological language. A parallel would be the difficulty the early church had in finding adequate theological language to express, for example, the Incarnation or the Triune reality of God. Today the same thing, I believe, is happening in the area of the Holy Spirit (an area for which the church has never found adequate theological expression), so that we are called upon particularly in our time to serious theological work.

Thus MacArthur completely misunderstands and misrepresents me: my concern is anything but the washing away of theology or doctrine. Indeed three pages earlier in *Era of the Spirit* (p. 52) I say, "Let us push on theologically"- -and the basic thrust of the whole book is theological against the background of the movement of God's Holy Spirit. Thus I am *not* suggesting that we should "adapt our theology to experience" but to the biblically grounded activity of God in the Holy Spirit.

2. *Christians can add to the Bible*

"Williams is declaring that Christians can add to the Bible- -and that they can accept others' additions to Scripture as normal and conventional" (51). MacArthur's charge against me is against the

background of a fairly lengthy quotation of mine which begins: "The Bible truly has become a fellow witness to God's present activity." Then I comment about Christians who may speak a "'Thus says the Lord'...even going beyond the words of the Bible," and I add the words: "The Spirit as the living God moves through and beyond the records of past witness, however valuable such records are as a model for what happens today" (50). In no way do I declare that "Christians can add to the Bible," or that they can make "additions to Scripture." All I am saying is that God as the living God who spoke in the Bible still speaks- -He is not silent. What He said there is the "model" (= pattern, norm) for speaking today. Hence any "Thus says the Lord"- -whatever the wording- -must be wholly consonant with Scripture to be truly a word from God.

3. *Charismatic prophecy is divine revelation equal to Scripture*

After another lengthy quotation of mine about prophecy, MacArthur concludes: "That is tantamount to saying that current instances of charismatic prophecy are divine revelation equal to Scripture" (55). In the quotation I speak of how prophecy is recurring today: "In prophecy God speaks....Most of us of course were familiar with prophetic utterance as recorded in the Bible....Many of us also had convinced ourselves that prophecy ended with the New Testament (despite all the New Testament evidence to the contrary), until suddenly through the dynamic thrust of the Holy Spirit prophecy comes alive again. Now we wonder how we could have misread the New Testament for so long!" *In no way* do I say in these words that charismatic prophecy is "divine revelation equal to Scripture." All legitimate prophecy must stand under *the norm of Scripture*. I am grateful that MacArthur added my words from another source: "I vigorously affirm the decisive authority of Scripture; hence, God does not speak just as authoritatively today as He spoke to the biblical authors. But *He does continue* to speak (He did not stop with the close of the New Testament canon)."²⁷ Nevertheless MacArthur adds, "The distinction between biblical authority and additional revelation seems to be artificial. How could some of God's words be less authoritative than others?" (56). Note again: I said nothing about "additional revelation." Prophecy beyond Scripture is *not* additional revelation; nor does it carry the authority of Scripture. Surely God speaks today, for example, often through preaching and teaching, but His words therein spoken are less authoritative than those in the Bible. Prophecy does have a directness about it; it is a gift of the Holy Spirit. But it must always stand under God's inscripturated Word.

Footnotes

¹*Charismatic Chaos*, 19.

²MacArthur's words immediately follow a quotation by him from my book *Renewal Theology*, vol. 2, *Salvation, the Holy Spirit, and Christian Living*, 326.

³Shortly after MacArthur's previous book *The Charismatics: A Doctrinal Perspective* appeared, I wrote a paper privately circulated entitled *A Reply to The Charismatics: A Doctrinal Perspective* (1979). Since MacArthur's recent book is largely a revision of the first, I will seek in this article to provide an updated and more public reply.

⁴Despite MacArthur's statement: "J. Rodman Williams argues that we should adapt our theology to experience, rather than insisting that experience be evaluated by theology" (*Charismatic Chaos*, 45). I will return to this later (see *Appendix*).

⁵We shall note hereafter that MacArthur does not view all tongues today as demonically inspired: they may also be learned behavior or psychologically induced utterance.

⁶I would not deny that the counterfeit may occur (there is always the possibility of alien voices in a church assembly), but that was not Paul's real concern. MacArthur seems intent on making the counterfeit, even the demonic, the basic issue.

⁷These are MacArthur's words. He makes a distinction between prophecy as "revelatory prophecy" and prophecy as "authoritative preaching" (199). The latter, MacArthur claims, is a continuing gift. Such a view is patently unbiblical.

Prophecy cannot at any time be subsumed under the category of "authoritative preaching." There is no biblical basis for such.

⁸I say "in some sense" because MacArthur has modified even these four: knowledge for word of knowledge, wisdom for word of wisdom, prayer (possibly) for faith, discernment for discerning of spirits.

⁹A student in one of my classes after reading *Charismatic Chaos* and MacArthur's division of the spiritual gifts into temporary and permanent, asked in a written critique: "Is MacArthur perhaps receiving extrabiblical revelation?" Maybe MacArthur would like to reply!

¹⁰According to BAGD, "the super-apostles...[were] either the original apostles...or, perhaps with more probability, the opponents of Paul in Ephesus" (see 'uperlion). If the latter is the case, Paul's concern is all the more clearly *not* to establish his credentials over against "ordinary Christians" but in relation to "self-inflated super-apostles" (Philip E. Hughes' characterization in his commentary, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT, 455).

¹¹Gordon Fee writes: "Some have argued that the change of verbs (including the change of voice) with tongues...has independent significance, as though this meant that tongues might cease before prophecy and knowledge. But that misses Paul's concern rather widely. The change of verbs is purely rhetorical" (*First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NITNC, 643-44 n.17). D. A. Carson similarly speaks of "stylistic variation" (*Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12-14*, 66).

¹²For a more balanced viewpoint see Grant Osborne's article, "Tongues, Speaking in," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 1100-03.

¹³Recall, again, Acts 10:46-"speaking in tongues and extolling God." Also, on the Day of Pentecost speaking "in other tongues" was declaring "the mighty works of God" (Acts 2:11). Only thereafter did Peter address the crowd, "Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem..." (v. 14).

¹⁴The footnote, with minor verbal differences, is a part of the main text in MacArthur's earlier book, *The Charismatics: A Doctrinal Perspective* (see p. 161). One should be grateful, I suppose, that the statement above has been lowered to a footnote. However, either way it is a most unfortunate misinterpretation.

¹⁵E.g., Paul begins his letter to the Corinthians, "Paul, called to be an apostle by the will of God." Since "God" is likewise without a definite article there, theoretically one could also translate by "the will of a god." But who (not even MacArthur) would entertain such an idea?

¹⁶Gordon Fee writes in this connection that MacArthur's "biases intrude on his interpretation" (*First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT, 657 n.24).

¹⁷What Paul actually was condemning was not the value of tongues for self-edification but their community expression without interpretation following. See verses 13-16.

¹⁸Praying in the Holy Spirit probably was in tongues. Richard J. Bauckham, commenting on Jude 20, states that the language "indicates charismatic prayer in which the words are given by the Spirit" (*2 Peter and Jude*, WBC, 113). James D. G. Dunn writes similarly: "A reference to charismatic prayer, including glossolalic prayer, may...be presumed for Jude 20" (*Jesus and the Spirit*, 246). However, even if one were to argue against Jude 20 as referring to glossolalia, the point still remains: there is need for self-edification; it is not as such ego satisfaction.

¹⁹Can one possibly imagine Paul to mean: "I want you all to speak *in a foreign language*"?

²⁰Either satanic or psychological in origin. Tongues may be "*satanic or demonic*" (239), "*learned behavior*" (240), or "*psychologically induced*" (242, emphases MacArthur's). I would not disagree that "false tongues" may be any, or all, of these. The problem is that MacArthur places *all* contemporary glossolalia under these categories. True tongues are none of these.

²¹From *Renewal Theology*, vol. 2, *Salvation, the Holy Spirit, and Christian Living*, 326 (emphasis in the original).

²²In footnote 2.

²³Perhaps more so in his earlier volume *The Charismatics* where he has a fine concluding chapter entitled, "What Can We Learn from the Charismatic Movement?" That chapter is omitted in *Charismatic Chaos*.

²⁴Since 1971 I have written two further books on the Holy Spirit, *The Pentecostal Reality* and *The Gift of the Holy Spirit Today*. Also the major portion of *Renewal Theology*, vol. 2, *Salvation, the Holy Spirit, and Christian Living*, is directed to

the Holy Spirit. I earlier commented in this article on MacArthur's quotation from *Renewal Theology*, vol. 2.

²⁵MacArthur does proceed at this point with the rest of my statement above; however, by virtue of his words just quoted he severely distorts my viewpoint.

²⁶In addition to *Renewal Theology*, vol. 2 (previously mentioned), I have also written *Renewal Theology*, vol. 1, *God, the World, and Redemption* and *Renewal Theology*, vol. 3, *The Church, Kingdom, and Last Things* . This hardly suggests on my part a lack of concern for theology.

²⁷Quoted from *Logos Journal*, "Opinion" (May-June, 1977), 35.