

The Issues in Charismatic Theology

Introduction

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1. Introduction

Charismatic Theology is a recent challenge relative to the 2,000 years of church history. The word “Charismatic” or its root form “Charisma” did not even exist in English dictionaries as recently as seventy years ago. The word was created from the Greek word for “grace.” The growth of Pentecostalism’s emphasis of certain supernatural gifts of the Holy Spirit led to the word becoming a part of our vocabulary.

What defines one as Charismatic? The singular issue that categorizes a theology as “Charismatic” is Continuationism. Continuationism is the belief that all the gifts of the Holy Spirit are functioning in the present day as they did in the first century church. The contrasting belief is known as Cessationism, which views the gifts that either were revelatory in nature or supporting the direct revelation of God ended with the founding of the church in the completion of the New Testament.

The issues that exist in Charismatic Theology also include a wide number of issues that have resulted from this belief in Continuationism beyond the alleged practice of certain spiritual gifts that were practiced in the New Testament. This class will delve into a variety of subjects which affect the church today.

2. The influence of Charismatic theology

One reason so many churches are impacted by the errors of Charismatic Theology is due to its widespread acceptance. For the past one hundred years the growth of the those believing in doctrines presently associated with the Charismatic Movement has been remarkable. The Pew Research Center estimates that roughly five hundred million of the two billion who identify themselves as Christians worldwide are connected to Charismatic Theology. Seventy million of these are involved with the Assemblies of God alone.

As a result of its spread, we all have friends, family, co-workers, etc who are connected to the Charismatic Movement. Its spread throughout most denominations has affected a great number of non-Charismatic churches in regard to various theological issues. More and more people communicate Charismatic beliefs without even an awareness of doing so. This increases the need to bring clarification to what the Word of God teaches on such subjects.

3. Attraction of Charismatic Theology

What explains this remarkable growth of Charismatic churches? Is this the work of the Holy Spirit? Only to the degree that this growth is founded upon the truth of God's revelation. At its essence, Charismatic Theology is based upon the subjective and emotional more than the objective and rational. The final source of authority in the Charismatic Movement is personal experience more than the Scripture. The Scripture is used in support of the subjective experiences.

Throughout Church history there has been eras of time of over emphasis upon the subjective emotions. From the monasticism in the early church, to the mysticism of the medieval church, to the pietism of the seventeenth century, each followed prior times of an overemphasis on the head over the heart. The Charismatic Movement is the counter response to the theological liberal rationalism of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The appeal to emotionalism is strong. People want to feel a close relationship with God and Charismatic teaching claims to offer this. There is a desire to listen to people who profess a special knowledge from God. The experiences of Charismatic worship brings hope of emotional connection with God. The more emotionally moved among us are more susceptible. However, our final source of authority must be the truth of the Scripture and not our personal experiences or our emotions. The pragmatic consideration of what attracts people ought not to be a significant evaluation criteria for the truth of God.

4. Types of Charismatic perspectives

Certainly, not all Charismatics believe the same. In this variety there can be broad generalizations about various groupings of Charismatic perspectives. These are not hard and fast distinctions and there is a blending among the groups, much like a series of overlapping circles.

a. Overtly heretical Charismatics

These type of Charismatics deny a fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith where even the majority of others who believe in the Continuationist doctrine would agree that one cannot be a Christian and deny certain doctrines. While many Charismatics are not particularly clear regarding certain essential doctrines of the Christian faith, what lands people into this category is an outright denial of the doctrines necessary for saving faith.

The most notable sect are the Oneness Pentecostals, who deny the Trinity. The largest group of Oneness Pentecostals is the United Pentecostal Church.

b. Cult-like Charismatic organizations

Besides theologically heretical Charismatics who opposed the essentials of Christianity, there are Charismatic organizations whose practices can be considered cultish in a sociological sense. Such sociological practices include mind control, authoritarian leadership, requirements for submission in personal areas of life, special knowledge about the spiritual conditions of others, indoctrination, making it difficult for people to leave a fellowship, etc.

The Charismatic Movement is certainly not unique to including those who use manipulative, authoritarian practices but the overemphasis on emotional fervency breeds an undiscerning allegiance to those who claim to be representatives of God. Any individual claiming to have a unique line of revelation from God in particular are able to leverage this to control the thoughts and actions of others.

This potential is latent in any church leader who believes they know the mind of God regarding specific applications of the Word of God. When church leaders give extra-biblical directives over the individual lives of others, it becomes cultish in a sociological sense. This can be quite true for those who believe God is uniquely speaking to them. The International House of Prayer, Maranatha Ministries, and the Shepherding Movement are a few examples of Charismatic authoritarianism.

c. Unaccepted Extremist Charismatics

Extremist Charismatics are likewise also viewed negatively by the vast majority of Charismatics, but not for what is considered to be outright heresy but rather for extremely foolish practices, such as snake-handling and drinking poison. This is a very small percentage of Charismatics.

d. More accepted extremist Charismatics

This category practices bizarre behavior such as loud exclamations of ecstasy and emotional euphoria (known as “holy laughing”) and making loud animal noises but are not condemned by most Charismatics. Indeed some of the most well-known Charismatic leaders actively supported these behaviors. Examples of this were found in the Toronto Airport Vineyard Church in Toronto, Canada in 1994, known as the “Toronto Blessing,” in Pensacola, Florida in 1996, known as the “Brownsville Revival,” and the “Lakeland Revival” in Florida in 2008.

A vast number of Charismatics have a desire to experience such remarkable emotional manifestations that are assigned to the Holy Spirit. Thousands travel long ways to seek such experiences, in spite of how strange the behaviors may appear. While not commonly practiced among Charismatics as a whole, the expressions of religious ecstasy is generally viewed favorably by most in the Charismatic Movement.

e. Prosperity Movement

One of the most visible forms of Charismatic Theology centers around the belief that the will of God necessarily includes material blessing for followers of Christ. This view has received much attention since it populates Christian television through Charismatic leaders such as Oral Roberts, Kenneth Hagin, Kenneth Copeland, and more recently, Benny Hinn and Joel Osteen.

Also referred to as the Prosperity Gospel, the Health and Wealth Gospel, or as “Name it and Claim it,” this perspective is rooted in the so-called “healing ministries” of Pentecostalism. With both healing and financial wealth, if a person fails to receive God’s blessing the reason is because of their lack of faith. This prominent segment of the Charismatic Movement has been quite influential due to their media presence. It has also been the most destructive to the cause of Christ, leading many to great misunderstandings about the gospel, about the promises of God, about the blessings of eternity in light of this present life, etc, etc. So many have a low view of Christ as a result.

f. Traditional Pentecostal

Pentecostalism predated the Charismatic Movement by over half a century. In the early 1900s, certain religious leaders began conducting alleged healing services which drew a large number of people. This led to the founding of denominations such as the Assemblies of God (1914). Pentecostalism is related to specific Pentecostal denominations where as the Charismatic Movement, with similar theology, is interdenominational.

Doctrines of traditional Pentecostalism include the belief that the baptism of the Holy Spirit comes after salvation and is evidenced by the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues. Some later Pentecostals have disavowed the notion that the gift of tongues is a necessary sign of the indwelling Holy Spirit but this belief remains apart of many doctrinal statements.

g. Signs and Wonders Charismatics

Also known as the “Third Wave of the Holy Spirit,” the Signs and Wonders perspective was advanced by John Wimber and the Vineyard Association of Churches. The “Third Wave” follows the first wave of Pentecostalism and the second wave of the Charismatic Movement. This views the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit as normative for the church today.

An essential part of the Third Wave is viewing that miracles are critical for the missionary endeavor. Effective evangelism, dubbed “Power Evangelism,” is seen as the Holy Spirit as moving “signs and wonders” throughout mainstream churches to reach unsaved people through miraculous activity so that they may believe (contra Luke 16:31).

h. Evangelical Charismatics

This large segment consists of churches that do not normally conduct healing services, who do not encourage outbursts of alleged tongues speaking, and whose worship services are very similar to non-Charismatic churches. They do not support the belief that speaking in tongues is the evidence of the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and at times they are willing to criticize the gravest excesses of Charismatics. Yet theologically, they are in the same vein of supporting Charismatic Theology. Calvary Chapel is an example of a more biblically oriented evangelical Charismatic fellowship.

i. Open but Cautious

“Open but cautious” has come to categorize the vast number of evangelical Christians who do not practice Charismatic beliefs but find it difficult to reject Charismatic Theology. They are “Open” in the sense that they believe that the spiritual gifts of healing, miracles, tongues speaking, etc. do exist even though they may have never see it for themselves. They are “Cautious” in that they are uncomfortable with much of the Charismatic practices they have observed and do not want to validate what they consider to be excesses. This view has become common in non-Charismatic churches because of a significant lack of understanding about the biblical gifts, combined with a desire to avoid being viewed as divisive or condemnatory of fellow believers in Christ.

j. Reformed Charismatics

This subset of Charismatic believers is very small relative to the movement as a whole but is significant as far as connections with people in our church. These are people who espouse the doctrines of Continuationism but who also hold to the doctrine of election and have thus adopted the title of Reformed. As seen in their willingness to believe the teaching of the Scripture regarding the doctrines of the grace of God in salvation, this group is far more biblically oriented than their fellow Charismatics. Such Reformed Charismatic leaders as John Piper, Wayne Grudem, Francis Chan, C.J. Mahaney and Joshua Harris have been even promoted in various ways by men such as John MacArthur who have been a stalwart in defending the Scripture against much of the Charismatic doctrinal influence.

The rub comes in their lack of willingness to separate themselves from Charismatic doctrines that quickly become damaging to the church. While there is much to appreciate about Reformed Charismatics, they are in a sense a small version of the same animal. Acceptance of this form of Charismatic as a respected teacher to guide the church of Christ into the truth of the Word of God inevitably runs into difficulties. This has been seen when there has been opposition from Reformed Charismatics to the Cessationist teaching of MacArthur to bring correction to even the worst of the Charismatic excesses. It is hard to expect people that allow for much of Charismatic beliefs to not have those doctrines impact their ministry.

5. Survey of the Issues in Charismatic Theology

Issues that we will address in this series of classes surround the broad areas of the Gospel, Revelation and Ministry. How we come to know God, how we know what God is saying, and how we know what God wants us to do summarize our topics.

With regard to the gospel, the general belief is that Charismatics are fellow believers in Christ and therefore are preaching the same gospel. As seen in our overview of types of Charismatics, there is quite a diversity within this movement and the integrity of the Gospel ministry will vary. Nevertheless, issues that are gospel related that affect the broad spectrum of Charismatic churches and ministries include:

- a. The content of the gospel message
- b. The effect of prosperity teaching on the gospel message
- c. The practice of decisionism
- d. The effect of ecumenism upon the gospel message
- e. Arminianism

With regard to God's revelation to man, there are many issues that exist in Charismatic Theology, including:

- a. Prophecy
- b. Knowledge
- c. Miracles
- d. Tongues
- e. God's will

With regard to how God wants us to build His church for the work of service to Him, issues include:

- a. Sanctification
- b. The qualifications for ministry
- c. Worship
- d. Spiritual Warfare
- e. Faith
- f. Missions
- g. Ministering to Charismatics

These issues will be examined from the perspective of how they may affect our church rather than looking at the most extreme manifestations of Charismatic Theology in each area. The goal is to assure our fidelity to the Bible in the teaching and practice of ministry in our church.