

Issues in Charismatic Theology

Spirituality

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1. Introduction

Spirituality is a major emphasis, both spoken and assumed, in the Charismatic Movement. The overarching sense that is communicated in various forms is that the Charismatic experience is where God is really at work. God is thought to have anointed people who deliver a close relationship with God to their followers.

True vibrancy of faith in God is seen in the fruit of the Holy Spirit, which is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). Zealous activities or enthusiastic expressions are not necessarily manifestations of our relationship with God. Much of what makes the Charismatic Movement distinct feeds off these other religious practices that give the appearance of zealous spirituality but are of the flesh.

This sense of spirituality is created in two basic ways: (1) doctrinal through teaching and (2) practical through function.

2. The Charismatic doctrine of the Holy Spirit

As we have covered in prior classes, Pentecostalism has long advanced the belief that the baptism of the Holy Spirit is an event that follows salvation and is evidenced by speaking in tongues. Many Charismatics today have either deemphasized the baptism of the Holy Spirit or agree that all Christians have been baptized with the Holy Spirit. Even so, the sense of the special work of the Holy Spirit through certain manifestations beyond one's character quality (Galatians 5:22-23) looms large.

This may seem to correspond to biblical teaching but there is a fundamental distinction between the Charismatic view of the Holy Spirit and the biblical view of the Holy Spirit. As we have seen, 1 Corinthians 12:13 teaches that all believers have the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, Ephesians 1:3 teaches that all believers have been blessed in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. We have the Spirit (Romans 8:9), who has sealed us (Ephesians 1:13-14) and who is in us (1 Corinthians 6:19).

We have all of the Holy Spirit. Being filled with the Spirit has nothing to do with getting more of the Holy Spirit, but rather yielding ourselves to the Holy Spirit. The Charismatic verbiage of inviting the Holy Spirit, asking Him to come, pleading for His presence, ignores the teaching of Scripture regarding the Holy Spirit's role in our lives.

The Holy Spirit is understood as the agent of power among Charismatics. Whether through the baptism of the Holy Spirit as a second work of grace in the life of the believer, or some other crisis moment, the Spirit is viewed as the means by which power is unleashed in the life of the Christian. Thus Charismatic ministries build toward moments of a so-called outpouring of the Holy Spirit more than advocating a sustained consistent practice of faithfulness in our walk with God. We quench the work of the Spirit in our lives through the practice of sin. No emotionalism can overcome our unfaithfulness to the Lord.

3. The Charismatic doctrine of perfectionism

Perfectionism is the doctrine that it is possible for a Christian to achieve a sinless lifestyle. It is a belief held in a variety of Christian denominations, such as Wesleyanism and Methodism, and the holiness movement. These influences led to “Holiness Pentecostalism” which has spread into the Charismatic Movement to certain degrees. This doctrine is also known as Entire Sanctification.

Charismatic teaching emphasizes the importance of a momentous Divine work in the life of a Christian subsequent to their initial faith in Christ. This has been called the “second baptism of the Holy Spirit” or a “second work of grace” where an earnest desire, often at some length of time, is required to receive this blessing and be empowered to live a life that overcomes sin.

Most Charismatics today would disavow perfectionism as a doctrine but will function in a similar way through the belief in the baptism of the Holy Spirit that brings such spiritual enrichment to overcome sinfulness. Perceived encounters with the Spirit led to a conviction of pure holiness.

This temptation to view ourselves as above sin plagues believers of all types. This comes from a delusion of our spiritual condition, from a lack of understanding of the doctrine of sin, and from a Christian culture that looks on the external actions and views sin as certain major rebellions. We must beware of lowering God’s demand to “be perfect as our Heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48) and replace it with “be better than most others.”

4. The Charismatic doctrine of prosperity

Since the Prosperity Gospel is proclaimed by many of the most high profiled television preachers of our day, it has a far reaching effect upon those in churches who do not oppose such teachers. Even when Charismatic pastors themselves do not advocate teachings that God wants all His people to be healthy and wealthy, their general failure to speak out against such teachers provides a listening ear for those in their congregation.

A recent survey from 2018 in the periodical *Christianity Today* demonstrates just how widespread such teaching is within the universal church. A summary of their data suggests the Prosperity Gospel has been quite influential:

- 26% agree that in order to receive material blessings from God, we must do something for God.
- 38% say their church teaches that if we give money to the church, God will bless us in return
- 69% of American church attenders believe that God wants them financially prosperous. Only 20% disagree with this and another 10% are unsure.

It is no surprise that Pentecostal church attenders are substantially more likely to agree with prosperity teaching. This view of prosperity corresponds to the faulty perspective that spirituality is related to financial blessing. Christians who are considered more sacrificial in their contributions to their church will be blessed with material blessings and thus there is a clear metric regarding one's spirituality.

This has long been a temptation of mankind to consider external blessings as evidence of spirituality. This is why the disciples asked Jesus if the man born blind had sinned (John 9). This is also a basis for Christ's rejection as He did not appear with the blessed external trappings as expected (Isaiah 52:13-53:12).

4. The Charismatic practice of anointed leaders

Anointed leaders could be anyone who has been "moved by the Spirit." Commonly in Charismatic circles, the pastor is regarded as "anointed of God." They are viewed as having a special presence of God for the role in which they function.

This view of the anointing of God upon Charismatic leaders results in leaders who view themselves as more spiritual than others in the body of Christ. It is not uncommon of Christians to think more highly of themselves than they ought to (Romans 12:3) but when they view themselves as specially anointed there becomes even more of a self-righteous sense of empowerment. Worse is when they are unqualified leaders (cf. Titus 1, 1 Timothy 3) and are afforded great influence over the flock of God.

This view of the anointing of God upon Charismatic leaders results in authority exercised by them over the lives of people. This authority drifts toward sociological cultish practices. Directives of anointed church leaders lead to abuse of authority with people obeying men rather than God.

This occurs among the non-Charismatic when leaders are exalted because of their credential, church size, publications, or trendiness. While God has gifted many whom He uses to bless His people in abundant ways, we ought not to adhere to anyone, regardless of how spiritual they appear, instead of Christ alone.

5. The Charismatic practice of emotionalism

In our series we have frequently noted the significant error of understanding truth through the lens of personal experience. Evaluating spiritual truth claims on the basis of personal experience and feelings diminishes the objective truths of the Scripture. The addition or subtraction of biblical truth cannot be made without elevating the external criteria above the word of God, regardless of the evaluation criteria (human reasoning, church tradition, experience, feelings, etc). Feelings supercede Scripture as the arbiter of spiritual truth.

However, there is a secondary problem with this overemphasis upon emotional experience. Not only does it undermine the truth of the Scripture but it fosters a continued appetite for the next experience. Once we diverge from revelation of God's Word and search for more beyond the Bible there is no end to our insatiable desire for the next experience. This explains much of the wackiness found in the various parts of the Charismatic Movement. One supposed manifestation of the Holy Spirit leads to the next and the next.

We can be susceptible to the same desires for experiences outside of the Charismatic Movement if we give undo significance and attachment to anything beyond God and His Word. This is true regardless of how religious something may seem or how popular it may become.

6. The Charismatic practice of anti-intellectualism

One result of the elevation of personal experiences is the corresponding diminishing of careful study and analysis. This is why there has been a disdain for academic pursuits from the earliest days of Pentecostalism. While in non-Charismatic churches there is an over-emphasis upon academic degrees, Charismatic churches devalue such pursuits. If the Scripture is not studied then the teaching of the Scripture to study and value the written Word is missed.

Another aspect that has fostered anti-intellectualism in the Charismatic Movement is the belief in modern-day prophecy. If people can speak from direct revelation, the desire for the existing revelation can depreciate. The study of the Word requires more diligence (2 Timothy 2:15) than the belief in receiving "words from the Lord." The effect upon spirituality of anti-intellectualism rests in the diminishing of the Scripture. When God's revelation is not pursued eagerly then our spiritual life will suffer (Matthew 4:4).

7. Conclusion

We are spiritual because of the Lord's choosing of us with the seal of His Holy Spirit. We all have received every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ (Ephesians 1:3). We are misguided when we view either ourselves or our fellow believers as being more or less spiritual based upon any evaluation beyond their faithfulness to God's Word in their life and teaching.