
THE CHARISMATIC QUESTION

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A BINARY ISSUE

It's a yes or no question. The question is, "Are the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit *normative* for today?" It's not "Did the Holy Spirit do miracles?" or even "Can the Holy Spirit do miracles?" The question is "Should we be seeking to employ these miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit?" There may be degrees of continuationism, but the essential question is whether one is a continuationist or a cessationist.

THE NEED FOR GRACE AND TRUTH

We need to be truthful and gracious in our evaluation and critique of charismatics. Nobody appreciates being broad-brushed. Not all charismatics are "crazies": some charismatics are brothers; others are unbelievers. We lose credibility when we lump them all together. More to the point, we are dishonest in our warning if we treat all charismatics as unbelievers.

A BRIEF HISTORY

An understanding of the history of the three "waves" of charismatism is helpful. C. Peter Wagner first outlined these three "waves" of the Spirit's miraculous outpouring in the early 1980s.

THE FIRST WAVE (1906–1950)

The First Wave came from the old line Pentecostals. The Asuza Street revival in 1906 marked the beginning of this wave, and its theological basis grounded miraculous healing in the atonement (cf. Isa 53:4; Matt 8:17). Speaking in tongues was evidence of the baptism of the Holy Spirit, a second work of grace sought by believers. For the most part, the First Wave was relegated to several Pentecostal denominations and did not make inroads elsewhere.

THE SECOND WAVE (1950–1980)

The Second Wave began in the 1950s and held the same theological convictions, but wielded by successful and winsome personalities, morphed into Word Faith teaching and the prosperity gospel. Now the blessing of the Spirit poured out on believers resulted in both physical health *and* material wealth. Evangelicals, mainline denominations, and even Catholics were part of the Second Wave.

THE THIRD WAVE (1980–)

Led by C. Peter Wagner, professor at Fuller Seminary, and John Wimber, founder of the Vineyard churches, the Third Wave was a mainly evangelical movement. Denouncing the errant theological bases of the early charismatics, it built its theology upon an inaugurated eschatology. The presence of the kingdom of God "already, but not yet" brought kingdom power and kingdom miracles. Wagner taught the kingdom of God would advance through "power encounters" and that missionaries should seek miraculous power to show indigenous peoples the superiority of Jesus Christ to their deities. Wimber's Vineyard churches grew rapidly through "power evangelism" which advocated the spread of the gospel through "signs and wonders" as in the book of Acts. Significant theologians of the Third Wave include Gordon Fee, Jack Deere, and Wayne Grudem.

THE CENTRAL ISSUE: ONGOING REVELATION

At its core, the charismatic question is whether or not God is currently giving new revelation.

If so, where does that leave the Bible? Progressive revelation means that later revelation supersedes earlier revelation (cf. Heb 8:7, 13). The sufficiency of the Scripture for the believer is called into serious question.

If not, what use is the office of apostle? The authority of the apostles to speak on behalf of the resurrected Christ is the basis of our understanding of New Testament canonicity. If no one is currently speaking for God, then what is left for an apostle to do?

If not, what does that do to prophecy and tongues? Prophecy and tongues depend upon the existence of ongoing revelation.

- New Testament prophecy was a *revelatory gift*, forming the foundation of the church, especially the new revelation about the body of Christ being composed of Jews and Gentiles who have put their faith in Jesus (cf. Eph 2:20; 3:5).
- As God's revelation, prophecy was to be held to the same standards of all who spoke for God—*inerrancy*. Otherwise, what would be the point of warning about *false* prophets (1 John 4:1)?
- Although necessary in the founding of the church, the exercise of prophecy in the church was only part of the complete revelation God would give. When that complete revelation was realized, there would no longer be a need for the partial revelation of prophecy (1 Cor 13:8–10).
- If prophecy is no longer normative for the church, then tongues have ceased as well, since tongues are a subset of prophecy (prophetic revelation plus a miraculous sign). The miraculous sign authenticated that the message was from God (e.g., Acts 2:4–13).

If not, what purpose do miracles serve? Miracles in the church were not merely a handy way to keep everybody healthy and safe—think of all the times God *didn't* open prison doors or heal his people in the book of Acts (cf. 1 Tim 5:23; 2 Tim 4:20). Miracles serve to authenticate the messengers of God (cf. Rev 11). The miraculous gifts in the New Testament church are authenticating signs that someone was speaking for God. If God is not revealing himself, then there is no longer any need for miracles.

A SHORT BIBLIOGRAPHY

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