

Afterword: Beyond the Charismatic Experience

Robert Graves

Most of us are familiar with the wonderful program called “Toys for Tots.” Firemen and other civil servants collect secondhand toys of all kinds; they work to put the sparkle back in the doll’s eye, and then they distribute these refurbished toys to needy boys and girls who may not otherwise receive a Christmas gift. Last December I told my children to gather up all the toys they wanted to give to this organization. We ended up with a sack full of toys, once cherished but now discarded. As my children have matured they have grown tired of, or simply outgrown, these toys. Applying this maturing process to the spiritual dimension, we might raise two questions.

First, *Could we grow tired of the charismatic experience?* And second, *Could we outgrow this experience?* The answer to the first question is *possibly*. A tongues-centered spirituality will quickly pale. This explains the occasional recanting of a disappointed Pentecostal or charismatic. Nothing could be more suffocating than wrapping oneself up in the tongues experience. There is, of course, much more to the Bible than 1 Corinthians 14; and there is much more to spirituality than using one’s spiritual gift.

The answer to the second question—*Could we outgrow the charismatic experience?*—is a resounding *no*. The apostle Paul spoke in tongues twenty years after he was filled with the Spirit, and he never supposed that he would quit this side of glory (1 Corinthians 13:8-10). Some have called the gift of tongues a beginner’s gift. But we must not infer from this that the Christian somehow graduates beyond the need of this gift. That occurs only when we see Christ face-to-face. And even then it may not be that we no longer need tongues to express our adoration and praise of the Lamb; it may be that tongues cease because they are fully understood by heaven’s transformation. After all, there must be some adjustment in our languages in heaven, for thousands of dialects will be represented among the redeemed. (I seriously doubt that I will be speaking with a Southern accent throughout eternity!) Tongues are to be considered a beginner’s gift only in the sense that they are normally the first charismatic gift manifested in the Christian who experiences a post-conversion baptism in the Spirit.

There is a sense in which the Christian never goes beyond the charismatic experience. For the experience is not something that one goes beyond, but something that he carries along as God works out His progressive will in the Christian’s life. To ask what is beyond the charismatic experience is similar to asking what is beyond patience or what is beyond joy. The gifts of the Spirit are not goals to strive for or surpass; they are more like tools or helps. In another sense there *is* something beyond the gifts. There is that for which the gifts are given. That, of course, is *ministry*; *this* is that which is beyond the charismatic experience.

Body Ministry

Charismatic theology, more than any other, argues for lay participation within the church—all are participants, no one is merely a spectator. In charismatic Christianity the distinction between lay and clergy is blurred. *We are all ministers!* This, I believe, is one reason that the Pentecostal-charismatic renewal is opposed by certain churchmen. They are threatened. In reality there is no reason for this reaction, for it does not follow that all are leaders just because all are ministers. Charismatic fellowships, too, must have leaders.

The Pentecostal-charismatic renewal has awakened the Church to the full spectrum of spiritual gifts. Not only has God given to the Church pastors, evangelists, missionaries, and teachers, but every day souls are added to the Church and to these souls are distributed a variety of spiritual gifts from the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:7, 11).

To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another the ability to speak in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues.

(1 Corinthians 12:8-10)

Until the advent of the Pentecostal movement near the turn of the twentieth century, the full array of these gifts was of little importance to the Church. It was though 1 Corinthians 12-14 had been ripped from the Bible. But the Pentecostal-charismatic renewal has reestablished the importance of each gift *and, thus, the importance of each Christian as a minister.*

A Final Word to Charismatic and Non-Charismatic Pastors

It is important to note that 1 Corinthians 12 is not centrally concerned with spiritual gifts. Paul's intent is to teach the Corinthians something about unity and equality: All the gifts come from the same source (verses 4-6); all are for the common good; all are vital members of one body, the Body of Christ (verses 12-27). The church that does not recognize the complete Pauline repertoire of gifts should not expect to experience the unity and equality of which Paul wrote, for such a church has already stifled some of the manifestations of the Spirit. More than that, *such a church has crushed the individual Christians whom God would use with these gifts.* On the other hand, it cannot be said that unity and equality exist within charismatic fellowships simply because they recognize all of the New Testament gifts. Otherwise, Paul would not have had to write as he did to the Corinthians. Some Pentecostal-charismatic churches and fellowships are making the same mistake that the Corinthians seemed to have made. They exalt vocal gifts and snub service gifts. This preempts equality, thus making unity impossible.

Biblically, the gift of helps should receive the same attention as the gifts of prophecy; the person who shows mercy and the person who speaks in tongues should be held with equal esteem. Then there will be equality, and such a Body can dwell in unity. Wise is the charismatic pastor who strives for such equality among his members. And biblical, though daring, is the non-charismatic pastor who accepts and cultivates the God-given ministries of *all* who would be his parishioners.

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