

## A SOBER APPRAISAL OF THE CHARISMATIC GIFTS

It is a great pity that people called “Charismatics” and the Pentecostals have, in the eyes of many people, occupied the field in discussions about charismatic gifts. They concentrate on prophecy, healing, and speaking in tongues, the more spectacular of the charismatic gifts. It seems that the congregation at Corinth was more interested in speaking in tongues than in prophecy. Most of 1 Corinthians 14 argues that prophecy is more useful than speaking in tongues, because it edifies people. Speaking in tongues was not to occur in a congregational setting unless someone was present who, it was known in advance, could interpret it (1 Cor 14:5, 13, 27-28).

People who speak a lot about charismatic gifts often make other Christians nervous, because they often imply that, unless a person is charismatic by their definition, they are second-rate Christians or not even Christians at all. That is not so. Paul insists that the gifts of the Spirit are bestowed differently on all Christians (Rm 12:6; 1 Cor 12:7-11). Paul expressly wrote, “Not all are apostles, are they? Not all are prophets, are they? Not all are teachers, are they? Not all work miracles, do they? Not all have charismatic gifts of healing, do they? Not all speak in tongues, do they? Not all interpret, do they?” (1 Cor 12:29-30).

There is no doubt that certain things were different in the early church. Miracles were evident particularly in the apostles to give credibility to the Christian Gospel in a world where both Jews and Gentile pagans were hostile to it. In defence of his own apostleship, Paul wrote, “Truly, the signs of an apostle were accomplished among you with all perseverance, in miraculous signs, wonders, and mighty deeds” (2 Cor 12:12). However, because Paul wrote, “Not all are apostles, are they? Not all are prophets, are they?” (1 Cor 12:29), it should not be claimed that we may expect either apostles today or prophets today. Charismatics often place both apostles and prophets on lists that they encourage Christians to use to rate themselves. The apostles were unique in the church, despite what the members of the Apostolic Church claim. One of the qualifications was that they had seen the risen Lord, and they were used by the Holy Spirit to speak and write the Word of God by inspiration (2 Ths 2:15). We do not have apostles today, but we have their inspired Word to guide us.

In the church of the New Testament, prophets were not merely gifted leaders of congregations. Originally many congregations in the early church had members who had been endowed with a charismatic gift of prophecy (Rm 12:6; 1 Cor 12:10, 28; 14:1-32; Eph 4:11). Prophecy should not simply be equated with preaching the Word of God, or giving insightful interpretations of it. It regularly included the prediction of future events. Paul also wrote, “If we have prophecy, let us use it in agreement with the faith!” Even a prophet had a limit, and needed to exercise personal responsibility. Paul warned about enthusiastic “spiritual people” who did not stay on the sober ground of the faith. When Paul wrote about the “analogy of the faith”, “the faith” was the objectively revealed Gospel for people to believe. Although God was the Giver, Christians had to make responsible use of His gifts. In 1 Cor 14 Paul reminded the Corinthians that prophets had to submit to the scrutiny of other prophets. “Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others judge! However, if anything is revealed to another who is sitting by, let the first keep silent! For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all may be encouraged. Moreover, the spirits of prophets are subordinate to [other] prophets. For God is not a God of disorder but of peace” (1 Cor 14:29-33).

One of the tests of a false prophet in the Old Testament was whether what a person who claimed to be a prophet said came true. However, modern Charismatics often glibly use language like “The Lord told me”, or “The Lord told me not to”, when they are not talking about what God’s Word in Scripture has said. What they are doing is hunting for signs or expressing hunches, and claiming the authority of God for them. Jeremiah particularly warned people who had a dream to call it a dream and not claim “This is what the Lord has said” for it (Jr 23:9-22). A person who claims to speak with the authority of God calls down on himself the curses on a false prophet if the Lord has not in fact spoken to him. In fact, revelation is closed. There may be further unfolding of the prophecies in Scripture, but the last book of the New Testament warned not to add anything or take away anything from that book of prophecy (Rv 22:18-19), just as the people of the Old Testament had been warned, “You shall not add anything to the Word that I am commanding you, and you shall not take anything away from it” (Dt 4:2).

What about claims of miraculous healings? We have to point out that each claim must be examined separately. If false teaching is associated with a claim, we should not hesitate to ascribe it to Satan, even though we have to be very careful not to ascribe to Satan something that may have come from the Spirit of God (Mt 12:24-32). We have to point out that many alleged healings are in the psychosomatic domain, like tension headaches, where a person’s attitude often affects his health. We simply do not hear about amputated limbs being restored or dead people being raised. On the other side, a great deal of harm is done where people had thought they were healed when they fell over (or were pushed) backwards in a healing session, only to find that their problem was still with them. Their situation is now worse. They find that their trouble has continued, but they are also left to conclude that their faith was not genuine. This is a sad form of legalism. Many people who come in Pentecostals’ front doors go out of their back doors, disillusioned with Christianity because of their disappointments.

The greatest trouble with modern “Charismatics” is doctrinal. Significantly, they go wrong first of all about baptism. They are taught to disparage what they call “water baptism”, and to yearn for “Spirit baptism”. They forget that baptism with water only without the Holy Spirit applied only to the preparatory baptism of John the Baptist. They often wrongly associate what they call “Spirit baptism” with speaking in tongues, not, as Scripture teaches, with Christian baptism itself, with water. The whole Charismatic and Pentecostal movement is an extension of the approach to Christianity that looks

away from the objective means of grace. This tendency was present in the Anabaptists during the Reformation. It was continued in the low regard for the Gospel and the Sacraments in Pietism and Methodism. The idea in Methodism that Christians should seek a second or subsequent experience after conversion or baptism was continued in the Holiness Bodies, who interpreted such a subsequent experience as complete perfection. It was further continued in Pentecostalism in the search for a second “baptism” subsequent to Christian baptism, mostly identified with speaking in tongues.

We have to say that much of what is claimed to be speaking in tongues has to be designated as demonic. No one should be encouraged to cast off restraints, or try to induce speaking in tongues by uttering sounds. People in pagan religions also speak in tongues. On the other hand, speaking in tongues was indeed a charismatic gift, and may be so today (1 Cor 14:39b) Speaking in tongues is expressly mentioned on only three occasions in the book of Acts (Ac 2; 10; 19). If a person is granted this gift, he or she should praise God for it, but observe the limitations to it that are set down in 1 Corinthians 14. It may be used in private, may not be used in an assembly where there is no interpreter. It is of no use to edify others if there is no one who can interpret.

In general, it has to be said that one of the gifts that people who call themselves “Charismatics” lack most is the gift of discrimination. It is the ability to use a doctrinal test, to check whether what purports to come from the Spirit is correct. This is what “distinguishing between spirits” means in 1 Corinthians 12:10.

We have already said that different gifts of the Spirit are given to all Christians, in different measures, and for the edification of others. All Christians should readily acknowledge themselves as charismatic in this correct sense. What Romans 12 in particular teaches us is some of the most useful of the charismatic gifts are not spectacular at all. Although they are given by the Spirit, they may be learned. They include ministering to others, teaching others, encouraging others, giving generously, exercising diligent leadership, and cheerfully showing mercy to people who need it. These also give Christian people credibility in our world where people are often cynical and suspicious, and are attractive advertisements of genuine faith, which ought to be active in love. We should not underrate acts of loving kindness and hospitality. After the discussion of charismatic gifts in 1 Corinthians 12, Paul wrote, “Eagerly desire the greater gifts! I shall also show you what the best way is by far” (1 Cor 12:31). This prepares for his exposition of Christian love in 1 Corinthians 13. Without it, even the tongues of angels and sacrificial giving are empty and useless.