

The Issues in Charismatic Theology

The Gospel

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1. Introduction

Many people become Christians through the ministry of churches that teach Charismatic Theology. Many Charismatic churches communicate the gospel of the good news of Jesus Christ clearly and meaningfully. The integrity of the gospel message is not necessarily or fundamentally challenged by Charismatic theology. However, this does not mean there are no issues related to the gospel. Our class today will consider these issues and their significance.

2. The theology of Arminianism

It is quite rare to find a Charismatic church that does not embrace some form of Arminianism. It is only in recent years that any Charismatic leader has taught otherwise and those are very, very small in number.

Arminianism is derived from Jacobus Arminius (1559 - 1609), a Dutch theologian who opposed the theology of the Reformers. The year after his death, his followers presented a statement known as The Remonstrance to the governing authorities of Holland in which they outlined Arminianism as set forth in five articles, summarized as following:

1. Free Will or Human Ability: Man inherited weakness from Adam and although is far removed from perfect righteousness is still free to do spiritual good.
2. Conditional Election: God looked forward and saw those that would choose Him then elected those that He saw would want to be saved of their own free will.
3. Universal Redemption or General Atonement: The atonement of Christ is intended for everyone and is applied by the power of the Holy Spirit in response to the will of the sinner.
4. Resistible Grace: The Holy Spirit can be effectually resisted and His purposes frustrated and cannot impart life unless the sinner is willing to have this life imparted.
5. Falling From Grace: Perseverance is dependent on obedience. A saved man can fall from salvation – if man takes the initiative in salvation, he retains responsibility for the final outcome.

This teaching led to the convening of The Synod of Dort in Dordrecht from November 1618 to May 1619, which concluded Arminianism was not orthodox. Canons were written to summarize the orthodox position. The articles of Dort have come to be known as the “five points of Calvinism.” Remonstrant ministers were ousted from their pulpits at the conclusion of the synod. The doctrine was still held to by some but it never had the influence in Europe that it was to have in England and America.

Today many denominations are sympathetic to Arminianism and nearly all Charismatic churches are of this perspective.

In essence, they believe that that God gives indispensable help in salvation, but that ultimately it is the free will of man which decides their eternal state. Accordingly, salvation is accomplished through the combined efforts of God (who takes the initiative) and man (who must respond); man’s response being the determining factor. God has provided salvation for everyone, but His provision becomes effective only for those who, of their own free will, choose to cooperate with Him and accept His offer of grace. Thus, man’s will plays the decisive role and man, not God, determines who will be recipients of the gift of salvation.

3. The problems for the gospel

a. Decisionism

When man is viewed as having the determinative role in salvation, a great effort is often made to ensure a person makes the correct decision. These efforts move far beyond the simple communication of information to the use of various tactics of persuasion.

The roots of Pentecostalism are from the Arminianism of the holiness movement of the nineteenth century. The revivalism of the mid 1800s, including the Second Great Awakening (1857-60), were emotionally based and practices such as the use of the “anxious seat” where the unbeliever could consider accepting Christ while being prayed over. Early Pentecostalism was built off of such revival meetings in the early twentieth century.

The practice of pressuring people to receive Christ runs counter to John 3:8, “The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.” The work of God in bringing people to Himself is sovereignly controlled by Him and just as there is nothing we can do to save ourselves, there is nothing we can do to save another.

This approach explains why such a high percentage of people who respond to the call to faith in a public context are nowhere to be found in Christianity afterward, and those that are in church typically were already professing salvation in Christ prior to the evangelistic event. This is true even for non-Charismatic evangelists such as Billy Graham who himself estimated only 25% of those coming forward for salvation actually became Christians and outside evaluations have put the percentage at between 3% and 6%.

As Paul Washer has put it, “Most people today in our churches are lost, and they demonstrate that they are lost because their entire Christianity is nothing more than, ‘They made a decision.’ Where in the Bible does it say we are born again from a decision we make? I know it might look like the small percentage that went forward were saved by a decision but is that really the case? Faith is a gift of God. Faith comes by hearing. The gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes. We find out, by Jesus, a correct response to the gospel is to ‘Repent and believe the gospel’.”

Our approach to communicating the gospel can fall into the same belief that our methods will accomplish what God’s alone can do, bring salvation to one’s soul. Attempts at creating a sense of urgency will do nothing apart from the quickening of their heart by the Holy Spirit. Our words of impending judgment will fall flat unless the Spirit convicts them of their sin, God’s righteousness and His judgment (John 16:8, “and He, when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment”). Church services designed to draw the unsaved will draw no one unless the Father gives them to the Son (John 6:44, “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day”).

b. The full gospel

Incomplete promises of salvation apart from the repentance from sin may be attractive and draw a following but our message of the Great Commission is “that Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day; and that *repentance* for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning in Jerusalem” (Luke 24:46-47). Repentance for the forgiveness of sins is a part of the good news.

This lack of completeness of the gospel is commonplace in many churches, inside and outside of the Charismatic Movement. However, the Charismatic emphasis on emotional response comes at the sacrifice of doctrinal instruction. In order to reduce the number of people responding in confusion to such ministry, truth from the Scripture ought to be accurately and clearly communicated. Emotionalism can be a barrier for understanding and elicit a response that is only momentary.

Furthermore, the eagerness for widespread response is a disincentive to give attention to negative information such as repentance from one’s sin. While many non-Charismatic churches overemphasize the significance of large numbers of responses, the hype of emotionalism breeds response for the sake of response. When attention is paid to the numbers of responders then tactics can be employed to increase such numbers.

Finally, the influence of the Prosperity Movement among Charismatics has led to a great emphasis upon earthly blessings of God and a corresponding diminishing of the eternal consequences of sin. People responding because they want a better life on earth will be disappointed since the calling of the Lord is for citizenship in heaven, not prosperity on earth. Whoever wishes to save his life will lose it (Luke 9:24).

c. Losing Salvation

Since one part of Arminianism includes the belief that a person can resist the grace of God in salvation, it follows that a Christian is able to lose their salvation through their rebellion to God. This is in contrast to the biblical doctrine of the eternal security of the believer as taught in Romans 8:29-30, “For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren; and whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.” All who are justified will be glorified. Furthermore, Christ’s sacrifice for sin was for past and future sin “but He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, sat down at the right hand of God” (Hebrews 10:12). Our future sinfulness is forgiven.

The Arminian view that one can lose their salvation through their unbelief is based upon the error that their belief was produced by themselves rather than entirely by God’s unilateral grace. The very reason salvation is by God’s grace alone is so that no one will boast in what they have done (Ephesians 2:8-9). This view of the work of man in salvation explains much of the overemphasis on emotionalism and manipulation of people within Charismatic circles. The promise of God that all believers will obtain eternal life is sure (John 3:36; 6:37-39; 1 Peter 1:4-5)

While the doctrine of eternal security may not seem equal to the gospel, it is certainly a big factor in the preaching of Charismatics. The uncertainty of the work of God in bringing faith to His people results in the onus on the work of man. The free gift of God being eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 6:23) is replaced with the work of man in not only receiving but continuing in the faith.

Simply put, the free gift of God is eternal life by God’s grace imparting saving faith to those He has chosen. Eternal life is not a temporary condition. It is an everlasting relationship with God, who promises to deliver those who believe. To fail to understand this has far reaching implications for proclaiming God’s truth of salvation in Christ.

This fits the decisionistic preaching that encourages a profession of faith and a sinner’s prayer. Once a profession is made, allegiance to the church is expected through support of the pastor and regular tithing at least 10% to the church. If the person continues, their salvation is not in question but if they falter then they can lose their salvation. This leads to spiritual manipulation to prevent such people from falling from grace. People then may have a false confidence in their standing before God when the church is satisfied with their participation, even if true faith is lacking. Conversely, sincere believers in Christ are held to some artificial standard of conformity. Thus true faith may be fully manifested but not in ways satisfactory to the church leadership and a person’s faith is called into question. Giving people false hope of their salvation and undermining people’s confidence in the promises are two serious problems with the doctrine that teaches you can lose your salvation.

d. Doctrinal ambiguity

By the nature of the experientialism that defines the Charismatic Movement, the objective truths of the Scripture become loose. The gospel proclamations are more emotional than informational. Which leads to the issue of the gospel content and how much content is necessary for faith in Christ.

The truth that salvation is by God's grace leads to the recognition that God's work is not dependent on the completeness of our words in order to effect life change. This is not to excuse our carelessness but God brings people to faith through a great many various ways. None of us had a full understanding of the gospel when we came to Christ even if we were blessed with an opportunity to hear the word taught well. We learn more and more about the gospel as we continue in faith.

So as believers learn the gospel more fully, they embrace it. They may not initially have much of an understanding of doctrinal concepts such as the imputed righteousness of Christ, the substitutionary atonement, the nature of Christ as both God and man, but as they learn the truth of the word they accept it.

The problem occurs with doctrinal error regarding the gospel. To be unsure of the deity of Christ due to lack of knowledge is very different than denying who Christ is. Inability to explain the gospel well is very different than teaching what is opposed to the gospel. It is the denial of the essentials of the Christian faith that results in a false gospel.

However, when people are not faithfully taught the completeness of the gospel in order to develop a depth of understanding, they become more open to false teaching. The significance of consistent good teaching guards against the rise of bad teaching. In addition, when there is a failure to provide understanding to the completeness of the gospel, unbelievers who are unconvinced about Christ can settle in more comfortably into a fellowship when there is a lack of clarity regarding the gospel. Unfortunately, while a great many Charismatic churches communicate the truth of Christ's death for the sin of man to bring forgiveness and eternal life, the challenge comes with other doctrines that are added. The ecumenical nature of the Charismatic Movement leads them to be working in conjunction with those who are straying from the truth. This results in confusion regarding the gospel.

We can see the difficulty that Charismatic teachers have in avoiding error even if they themselves seek to stay true to the gospel, even the best cases such as a Charismatic evangelist Greg Laurie. Laurie is the senior pastor of Harvest Christian Fellowship, a mega-church in Riverside, California and has held many large scale evangelistic events since 1990, know as "Harvest Crusades." Phil Johnson, executive director of Grace to You, wrote to deny an alleged endorsement of Laurie's Harvest Crusades, "Laurie's own doctrinal boundaries are so hazy that there's hardly any variety of popular religion or spiritual chicanery that he won't align himself with, as long as it calls itself 'Christian' and gains a large following."

Prosperity Theology has spread the message of health and wealth far and wide in Charismatic churches. The prosperity gospel spreads as people are exposed to it teaching through media, particularly television. Charismatic leaders are very reluctant to be critical of it and it therefore exists unchecked even if the church leadership are not advocates themselves. As more church members are sympathetic with Prosperity Theology, the church can drift toward supporting such teaching.

A good example of how the prosperity gospel becomes embedded in Charismatic churches is Hillsong Church, known widely through its music and a mega-church in Australia with over 100,000 members in its various affiliated churches world-wide. Al Mohler, President of Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville provides this evaluation of their gospel message, “What has made Hillsong distinctive is a minimization of the actual content of the Gospel, and a far more diffuse presentation of spirituality” and called it “a prosperity movement for millennials.” It’s senior pastor, Brian Houston, has written books entitled, *You Need More Money* and *How to Live in Health and Wholeness*. Hillsong is influential among common Charismatics through their music ministry.

e. Spiritual elitence

The exalting of certain believers who are supposedly filled with the Spirit and who manifest spiritual gifts not only produces pride in those willing to embrace such learned behavior, it undermines the faith of those who are not practicing such manifestations. This is a serious problem for those true believers who have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ (Ephesians 1:3). When people who are resistant to being led into such practices as Charismatic ecstatic utterances and claims for prophecy can be viewed as second class Christians.

In addition, when material blessing does not come a believer’s way they are tempted to doubt the substance of their faith. As their physical maladies continue to plague them, there becomes a sense of failure to believe God fully. Worse is the doubt in the power of God by some who do not see healing or blessing. While this may not seem related to the gospel, it certainly confuses what real genuine faith really is. True saving faith is believing in Christ, which includes His promises. Belief in promises that God never made is not faith but is presumption. Even non-Charismatics can fall into the trap of thinking our hope in a certain uncertain outcomes must lead us to think and speak as if it were going to come about. Yet our perseverance through undesired situations is typically a much truer manifestation of actual faith in the God whose will we submit ourselves to.

4. Conclusion

When most people consider the Charismatic Movement they think of issues that are not gospel related. However, the gospel is affected by much of the bad doctrine surrounding the movement. It diminishes the focus on the truth and sufficiency of the Word and can confuse those in Charismatic churches. We ought not assume a knowledge of part of the gospel means an embrace of it all when we minister to those involved in their churches.