

Issues in Charismatic Theology

Ministering to Charismatics

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1. Introduction

Our study into issues in Charismatic theology is for more than our own personal benefit but hopefully to equip us to better serve others according to biblical truth. As we learn, we mature in guarding ourselves against false teaching and foolish speculation. But we also develop a greater ability to serve the Lord in ministry to others. This class will evaluate how to serve others who have been affected by the errors propagated by the Charismatic Movement.

Not all have been influenced in the same way by such theology and those who have will not necessarily respond the same. While there are certainly differences among people, the ministry to all of them is similar. We seek to teach all men about Jesus Christ and encourage them to follow Him. Yet there is value in considering how to serve individuals with certain Charismatic backgrounds. Individuals are different but there is some ability in ways to serve Charismatics as a whole as well as within subgroups of them.

2. The goal of ministry to Charismatics

The goal of ministering to those influenced by Charismatic theology is the same as our goal for anyone else. We seek to make disciples of all men, regardless of their background and if they have trusted in Christ and are therefore believers, our goal is to teach them all Christ has commanded us (Matthew 28:19-20). We proclaim Christ so that all might be presented complete in Christ. This is the purpose of our ministry labor (Colossians 1:28-29).

The goal of teaching all men about Jesus Christ and encouraging them to follow Him should not be confused with getting them to attend our church. While the doctrine of the church you attend is a very important factor for spiritual growth, we should not assume that good doctrine in a church necessarily equals learning. Likewise, we should not assume that doctrinal issues in a church necessarily prevents learning. We learn not only by good teaching but even by teaching that causes us to evaluate what we have heard in light of biblical truth.

People with such religious backgrounds may be used to churches recruiting people. There may well be an expectation that we will be interested in doing what they have seen others do. To genuinely help people to know the Scripture better will not only serve them well but it may give them a fresh sense of what makes churches different.

3. The pivotal issue in ministry to Charismatics

While the end desire is to help everyone, including those who have been influenced by Charismatic theology, to follow Christ by faith and grow in their understanding and obedience through the power of the Holy Spirit, there is one underlying doctrine that drives ministry to Charismatics: Bibliology. Specifically, the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture as our final authority of spiritual truth.

If indeed the Scripture is completed with the New Testament and through it we have the knowledge of God which provides us everything pertaining to our life and our godliness (2 Peter 1:3), then it is the sole authority as God's revelation. Every other means that people use to evaluate truth is flawed. Our thinking may be wrong. Our feelings lead us astray. People are misguided, even church leaders. There is no other competing source of authority for our spiritual life other than God's revelation in the word of God.

This truth may be acknowledged by many but their embrace of it may lapse when something conflicts with the teaching of the Bible. Their mind may be unwilling to yield, their emotions may cause them to waffle, pressure from others may be too strong to counter, or they may defer their church leader's perspective. The result is that the Bible becomes something short of our final authority when it gets trumped by something else.

With the Charismatic Movement, emotions and experiences are often treated with equal confidence as the Scripture itself. Beliefs are advocated based upon experiential evidence and such beliefs are validated based upon pragmatic considerations. If we are going to serve those who have been influenced by Charismatic teaching, we must address the truth of the Scripture as our bedrock source of spiritual truth. In essence, all roads will lead to this issue.

4. Evaluating a person's Charismatic beliefs

Not all Charismatics embrace all aspects of Charismatic teaching. There is diversity between Charismatic churches and within individual churches. Furthermore, a great many non-Charismatics have adopted some Charismatic beliefs. It is worth taking the time to understand what each person actually believes about the doctrines that surround the Charismatic Movement in order to serve them.

According to a Pew Forum survey from 2006, a sizable majority of Charismatics largely or totally agree with the teaching of the Prosperity Gospel. This means that those who self-identify themselves as a Charismatic believer are likely to have a favorable view of some of the most extreme aspects of Charismatic theology. The percentage of those Charismatics believing in health and wealth theology increases if they are from outside the United States. Yet a substantial minority of Charismatics disagree with prosperity theology (roughly one-third). So we must use discernment in understanding how Charismatic the person we are speaking to actually is.

Of course you do not need to attend a Charismatic church or self-identify as Charismatic to believe in the Prosperity Gospel as it is distributed daily through cable television. Most Christians who are outside of the Charismatic Movement have been influenced in some degree by its teaching in some capacity. So while there are generalizations, we cannot draw conclusions about a person's thinking about Charismatic theology simply based upon church affiliation.

Furthermore, if we cannot rely upon their church affiliation, we must grow in our ability to understand a person's belief system by our communication with them. The best way to do this is by asking them non-threatening questions. Most people are happy to tell you what they think. As you become more aware of Charismatic teachers, Charismatic jargon, and Charismatic theology and practice, you will be able to discern how to minister gracefully to each person. This avoids jumping to a conclusion about what someone believes based upon a stereotype only to be proved wrong. It also builds the relationship that God may use to advance His truth.

5. Evaluating a person's attachment to Charismatic beliefs

There are certainly degrees of conviction that people have toward the Charismatic Movement even in light of their beliefs. One can hold to a limited number of Charismatic theological issues but do so strongly while another can hold to a great deal of such thinking with a weaker conviction. Below are a few classifications of how committed a person might be to the Charismatic Movement.

a. Those who have become disillusioned with Charismatic doctrine

Some are able to examine the error of Charismatic theology from their own understanding of the Bible. In doing so they are able to see some of the more significant issues that exist and begin to oppose them. This represents the most straight-forward opportunity for ministry.

While the people who arrive at their own conclusions about the doctrinal errors that they have found in Charismatic doctrine are further along, we must remember that the issues with Charismatic theology are many. Those from a Charismatic background may observe some issues clearly but very likely will have others that require patience and instruction. Yet their rejection of some of what they formerly believed will provide them a basis for reconsidering other areas.

We ought not to expect that simply because there has been a repudiation of certain doctrine beliefs that the basis for discerning doctrinal error is firmly in place. They may have rejected some doctrines for reasons beyond an analysis of the Scripture. Simply arriving at a good conclusion is less important than the reason why we arrived at a good conclusion. The means is more important than the end. The word of God must be the basis for our beliefs, not our own opinions.

b. Those who have become disillusioned with Charismatic experiences

Some have come face-to-face with how the claims and promises of the Charismatic Movement have fallen short of reality. As happens with many people, events take place in churches that leave people disappointed. Expectations are not met, relationships become broken, and the grass looks greener somewhere else. This is hardly unique to the Charismatic Movement as it is part of the human experience.

When such disillusionment occurs, there are opportunities for ministry. Often these difficulties come from some type of conflict where the person did not get what they wanted, were not adequately respected, or were themselves sinful or foolish in their own conduct. Sometimes difficulties will come when Charismatic teaching does not result in certain outcomes. When expectations of healing, deliverance, or emotional happiness without suffering are unfulfilled, there are great moments to discuss the truth of Scripture as it relates to such expectations. We can teach what the Bible says about such misguided perspectives and help the person to escape their theological confusion. Because of the growing negative views, there may well be a willingness to consider other biblical issues.

Because of their doctrine, Charismatic churches, and particularly those tainted by the Prosperity Gospel, are ripe for promising what cannot be delivered. As people become disenchanting, there are ministry opportunities in regard to biblical truth. But we must be patient as such moments for ministry may not occur often. The challenge is that the basis of their difficulties is emotional experience more than careful consideration. There will be a multitude of loosely connected ideas without a fundamental basis for evaluating them. Adherence to anecdotes, speculations, conjecture and subjective views of the Bible lead to an inability to successfully evaluate what is most important in the Christian life.

c. Those who have begun to question Charismatic doctrine or practice

Many will question a part of what they are taught without connecting it to the deeper issue of the authority of the Scripture. This occurs when they have an overall positive view of the teacher or church and have many long-term relationships. Even the most analytical person can be underappreciating the breadth of which Charismatic error has affected their thinking.

Nevertheless, beginning to question parts of what they hear is certainly a step in the right direction and can be built upon as we interact with their reasons for their questions. We can possibly use this as a means to help them connect more dots to other issues that are related. However, we have to keep in mind our goal of ministry is to learn about Christ and His word. Attacking a person's church can not only be mean-spirited but the goal is to help their understanding of the Scripture rather than detach them from their church

Many are typically slow to arrive a firm rejection of such doctrine out of an emotional connectedness for the fellowship they have been associating with. The sense of loyalty might become more compelling than the sense of truth.

d. Those who have accepted Charismatic doctrine and practice

A great many Charismatics have accepted the teachings that they have become accustomed to without reservation or even analysis. They likely have never engaged someone critical yet knowledgeable of the Charismatic Movement. In the modern age of tolerance and ecumenism, there are fewer and fewer who are willing to engage in such a discussion. They are not looking to reconsider their beliefs and are content to accept those who might disagree with such beliefs. These are particularly challenging people to help in that they tend to be less than interested in an engagement with the subject of the Charismatic Movement.

While it is pretty difficult to talk about theological issues with someone who has no interest, this does not mean there are not spiritual issues that can be discussed profitably. When these other topics arise, whether it is a personal crisis or a matter of church teaching or practice, the Scripture can be discussed as the source of spiritual truth and instruction. Seeking out these times to engage the Bible can be used by God to build a ministry to the person.

The best approach to helping people who are entrenched in Charismatic theology is to encourage them toward involvement with the Scripture. As people grow in their appreciation for the meaningfulness of God's word (Matthew 4:4, Hebrews 4:12, Hebrews 5:11-14, 1 Peter 2:2) they will learn its value in shaping their thinking (Romans 12:2). Growing in confidence of the sufficiency of God's word through the power of the Holy Spirit may help supplant the man made ways that they have been accustomed to practicing their spiritual life.

e. Those who are propagate Charismatic doctrine and practice

These are the Charismatic apologists. They are the teachers and are uniquely challenged because they have invested so much into their ministry of Charismatic renewal. There may be financial issues with reconsidering their beliefs and there will be relationship issues with reconsidering their beliefs.

Remember that the ability to embrace the truth of God's word is a gift of God's grace. There is no need to argue or debate with those who disagree. We can be respectful, kind and gracious in our discussions. At a minimum, we will learn more about the Charismatic Movement from one representative of it. God is able to use the questions we ask, the Scripture we reference, and the concerns that we address for the furtherance of His work in the person's life.

While those who are disillusioned in some respect with the Charismatic Movement may be helped by involvement with your Christian friends, those who are seeking to advance their beliefs could be detrimental to the overall ministry of the church. Thus it is important to discern how teachable a person is before including them in situations where they might be disruptive.

6. Pay close attention to yourself

Paul wrote to Timothy to “pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching” (1 Timothy 4:16). Teaching well, exhorting in sound doctrine and refuting those who contradict, is essential (Titus 1:9) but our teaching is worthless without godliness. Such knowledge will just puff up but love builds up. If we become pugnacious, contentious, arrogant or belligerent, we are falling short of God’s will and we do harm to the ministry that we seek to have. When we correct and exhort others we must do so with great patience (2 Timothy 4:2).

Beyond our own personal failure to demonstrate the fruit of the Holy Spirit in our attitude, speech, and actions, we do more than personally fail the Lord. We may make the future ministry of others more challenging. This is one of the difficulties we encounter when we seek to help those within the Charismatic Movement. Just as we may have preconceived notions about what they believe, so may they about us. They may well have had a negative encounter with someone seeking to argue with them about their beliefs. This can cause them to be less interested in potentially repeating such a negative encounter with someone of a different doctrinal perspective.

7. Conclusion

Charismatics have been led astray by a host of doctrinal errors and we must see them as ensnared by their confusion. Yet we ought not to consider ourselves able to do what only God can do. Many people, even believers in Christ, have become ensnared to various confusions. Their thinking is immature and their religious background is a barrier for their accurate perception of reality, both as it exists in the Scripture as well as actual experience and events. The Lord has made each person unique, including their strengths and weaknesses. This should lead us to be patient with all men, particularly those who have been led astray by bad doctrine.

As all ministry is the work of God, we can seek to engage with people and humbly and prayerfully seek those who are interested in learning more about Christ and the Scripture. As the word of God is embraced, the Lord can do His work in the hearts of man, graciously using our giftedness as He sees fit. There is no need for discouragement on our part if progress is not readily apparent.

When we find those who are responsive to the word we must encourage them in true faith. Their spiritual life will thrive if they walk according to God’s actual promises, rather than the wishes that they have been accustomed. Fellow believers who value the word of God are of great value to model true faith and eagerness for a biblical spirituality. This transformation of faith will come from loving God with all the mind, heart, soul and strength rather than being emotionally and experientially driven. We walk by faith, not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7).