

Charismatic Feelings

Professor David F. Wells of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary maintains that somewhere in the passage from the late 19th century to the late 20th century a considerable part of evangelical Christianity ceased to be doctrinal. I believe he is right. Theological systems and arguments have steadily lost their interest and authority for the people in the pew. Even in our own Reformed circles doctrinal discussions no longer seem to arouse the interest as they did in the past. Is the increasing inability to articulate precise doctrine a result of a greater reliance on the inner subjective feelings rather than on Scriptures? How often don't Christians talk about "I feel" or "I believe" rather than, "The Bible says"?

The highly visible charismatic movement tends to downplay the Scriptures. It shows an aversion to doctrine. Experience has become the norm. This subordination to the believers' private experience is illustrated by the charismatics' acceptance of the gift of prophecy. Spiritual authority rests on the present activity of the Holy Spirit as much as on the Bible itself. As Catherine Marshall put it: "Jesus' promise of 'further truth' gives us clear reason to believe that not all the truth and instruction Christ has to give us is contained in the canon of the Old and New Testaments . . . He who is Truth will never find the people of any given century able to receive everything He wants to give. Because the Holy Spirit is a living, always contemporary Personality, down all the centuries there must be an ever unfolding manifestation of Jesus, His Personality, His ways of dealing with us along with new, fresh disclosures of the Father." Thus the Spirit of God can go beyond the canon of Scriptures to give new insights or some "word of knowledge."

Super Spirituality

The charismatics tend to revel in super-spirituality, and to focus on the spectacular and the extra-ordinary. Their preoccupation with the inner self inhibits an intensive study of theological and moral questions for which the Scriptures plainly call. To reach an emotional high seems more important than hard thinking on the crucial issues of our times. Doctrinal and ethical questions take second place over against the development of the inner life.

Dr. J.I. Packer comments that theological reflection does not turn the charismatics on; they know that this is not what their movement is all about. Their biblical exposition is simple to the point of naiveté, and few seem to know or care that in their own ranks different theologies of charismatic experience are promoted. No wonder that doctrinal confusion abounds among the charismatics. As a result, and to no surprise, the ecumenical movement has shown deep interest in the charismatic experience. This experience has brought together in a hurry Baptists, Anglicans, Roman Catholics and even the Reformed. Since few doctrinal questions are raised, unity is quickly achieved. Crucial differences, which went back to the Reformation and even before, are swept under the rug. They no longer seem to matter too much anymore. Great stress is put on love as the true basis of unity. Spirit baptism is for them such an all-embracing religious

experience that it renders denominational and theological barriers insignificant as a deterrent to Christian fellowship. Not doctrine but experience is the tie that binds.

Experience the Key

A Protestant charismatic, J. Rodman Williams, president of the Melodyland School of Theology, testified that the Spirit baptism experience had rendered meaningless the old doctrinal disputes. He wrote about his celebration of the Lord's Supper with Roman Catholics and Protestants: ". . . we often in the past argued the nice points of the 'Real Presence' among ourselves. Such now is completely done away, and in the fellowship of the Spirit we sit down together at the Lord's Supper not to discuss the Real Presence, but to enjoy it. I can ... recall occasions of full participation at the Lord's Supper in traditions as widely different as Roman Catholics and Assembly of God, Episcopalian and the Church of Christ." Dr. Williams testimony provides ample evidence for the charismatics' practice of validating belief and commitment through personal experience. Objective truth takes secondary place in the Christian's life. Not the truth question but love unites.

But experiences have never been a safe guide. They are not trustworthy. They have not been able to give and cannot provide a sound foundation for faith and practice. Dr. Packer calls experience a "slippery word." This means that an experience a Christian may have may not necessarily be Christian. Comments Packer: "As for inner urges, it is surely enough to point out that some people have inner urges, strong and recurring, sometimes reinforced by voices, visions, and dreams, to rape, to take revenge, to inflict pain, to molest children sexually, and to kill themselves. Is any of that the leading of the Spirit? The question answers itself."

The charismatics appear to have privatized the Christian faith. The focus is more on the inner life than on Kingdom service in this hurting world. Since the gospel is thus reduced to a private faith, "a born-again religion," it avoids conflicts with the secular mindset. Judging by the electronic church, the message can only survive when it is marketable. The public usually gets what it wants rather than what it needs. An Old Testament figure like Jeremiah would quickly lose his ratings if he could have been on television.

Extra Revelation?

Does the Holy Spirit reveal truths apart from Scripture? When one believes in extra revelation he is walking on treacherous ground. Subjective experience becomes the norm rather than Scripture. The Holy Spirit does not reveal normative truth except as it is already revealed in the Scriptures themselves. Not what we feel in our heart but what the Scriptures state is the basis for our faith and action. The Holy Spirit authored the Scriptures. The Spirit glorifies Christ, the heart of the Scriptures. How do we know that we are saved? Karl Barth once confessed as the most profound thought discovered, during his lifetime of study, the old song for children: "Jesus loves me! This I know, For the Bible tells me so . . ." This old children's song clinches the argument. Truth is objective. The Holy Spirit gives us the assurance of being loved, redeemed, adopted

into the family of God through Jesus. The Spirit glorifies Christ. He does this all through the inerrant Scriptures.

He does not unveil some hidden "truths" behind the revelation given in the Old and the New Testaments. In no way He adds to, subtracts from or changes the truth of revelation. Carl F. Henry warns that every departure from the express teaching of Scripture, every appeal to a knowledge immediately given by the Spirit rather than through the Word of God, increases the possibility of generating another novel cult. All of us do well to take this warning to heart.

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