

Charismatic theology and practice – an assessment

Introduction

Different Christians have had different degrees of exposure to Pentecostalism and the charismatic movement. Some have little idea of what those terms mean. Others have been members of charismatic churches but now are “ex-charismatics.” Others still find charismatic or Pentecostal churches to be the places where they best belong.

The following paper aims to set out Biblical reflections both on the theology and practice of the charismatic movement and also on the place of “experience” in the Christian life.

There is much that we can learn from some of our charismatic brethren. John MacArthur – one of the more trenchant critics of the charismatic movement – observes nine lessons that we can learn from the charismatic movement.¹ They are:

1. Dead orthodoxy can never replace a warm and vital relationship with God.
2. Scripture is alive and active; it goes beyond movements to pierce the hearts of men.
3. Leadership can never forget to lead; charismatic churches almost always have a strong leader or leaders.
4. Knowledge cannot replace brotherly love.
5. Emotions must be led by the truth but at the same time truth must not suppress emotion.
6. Human effort will never replace the work of the Spirit.
7. All Christians need to be aggressive with the proclamation of the gospel.
8. People need to participate in worship.
9. Christians need to put greater demands on themselves in regard to commitment.

It is worth acknowledging at the outset that some of the reactions against charismatic excess have been over-reactions. Nevertheless, in what follows it is argued that many features *distinctive* to charismatic theology and practice (i.e. not found in other “branches” of evangelicalism) are unhelpful and sometimes unbiblical.

The following paper includes sections on the following crucial questions:

1. How does God speak?
2. What is our attitude to the miraculous?
3. What is our attitude to Satan and evil?
4. How does the Holy Spirit fill us?
5. How does the Holy Spirit gift us?
6. What is the place of music and the emotions in the Christian life?

First, we set out a brief history of Pentecostalism and the charismatics. There is very little new under the sun, and church history can help us both to assess modern trends and to give us proper perspective.

A brief history of Pentecostalism and the charismatic movement

There are now more than 11,000 Pentecostal denominations across the world. Pentecostalism is the biggest Protestant movement in the world, with more than 400 million members. How did this come about?

The so-called **first wave** of the charismatic movement began in the early 20th century.² The key events date from 1901 and took place at a Bible school in Topeka Kansas. Here Charles Parham taught a distinctive doctrine of baptism in the Spirit, including the idea that speaking in tongues was a mark of baptism. The real

¹ John MacArthur, *The charismatics: a doctrinal perspective*.

² Some of its features are observable previously: e.g. the Montanist sect in the 2nd century and the followers of Edward Irving in 19th century London both claimed new revelation from God. Also, the “holiness movement” of the 18th-19th centuries taught a two-stage doctrine of salvation, according to which a person is saved by grace and then subsequently experiences the work of the Spirit leading to total sanctification.

birth of Pentecostalism occurred in 1906 when the preaching of the African-American minister William Seymour sparked the Azusa St Revival in Los Angeles. This saw thousands of people speaking in tongues.

What were some of the distinctive of these early Pentecostals? Firstly, they were Bible people: the Scriptures and Bible doctrine mattered greatly to them. Secondly, their desire to be Biblical led them to read the Bible in a rather naive way: simply, they read of tongues in Bible and assumed automatically that such things were universal Christian experience. Thirdly, in the first wave baptism in the Spirit and tongues were more important than prophecy and the idea of fresh revelation from God.

The **second wave** began in the 1960s and saw the penetration of Pentecostals into mainline denominations. Many evangelicals moved into the charismatic movement (including classical evangelicals like Martyn Lloyd-Jones, who – on the basis of his reading of church history – developed a two-stage view of the sealing of the Spirit. From 1967 there were even Pentecostals within the Roman Catholic church. Many of the same features of first wave Pentecostalism were initially present. But increasingly *experience* over-rode doctrinal differences, such that you could find Roman Catholics and Protestants meeting together, on the basis of that they had baptism in the Spirit and experience of spiritual gifts in common.

The **third wave** began in 1981, as John Wimber taught a course at Fuller Theological Seminary entitled “Signs and wonders.” These phenomena, he claimed, always accompanied real evangelism. The subsequent movement shunned labels like charismatic or Pentecostal, and its members did not necessarily believe in or emphasise tongue-speaking or baptism in the Spirit. They tended to move outside mainline denominations (e.g. “Restorationist” churches in the UK). Groups included “Power evangelism”, the Kansas City Prophets, and the Toronto and Pensacola Blessings. Another hallmark was a growing millenarianism: there was an upsurge of prophetic insights, revivals and claims that the end of the world was imminent.

Before turning to theological evaluation we will make **two observations** from the history of the movement. Firstly, there is a constant need for novelty: new emphases (baptism in the Spirit, then tongue-speaking, then signs and wonders) and new groups (Kansas City Prophets, then Toronto, then Pensacola, etc.). Arguably, this reflects a need to maintain momentum in the wake of disappointment and unfulfilled claims.

Secondly, it is crucial to distinguish between “charismatic evangelicals” and “evangelical charismatics.”

- The former are people who know and preach the gospel, for whom orthodox doctrine matters hugely (e.g. Sam Storms, Wayne Grudem).
- The latter may be 2nd or 3rd generation charismatics who never had evangelical truth passed on to them.³ They may be “whacky” in the extreme (e.g. Benny Hinn), devoid of evangelical doctrine.

It is unfair to charge the former group with the errors of the latter. However, we must acknowledge the extraordinary reach and penetration of the latter group, with whom we have little or nothing in common.⁴

Having considered a brief history of Pentecostalism we seek now to answer a series of key questions. Someone with strongly charismatic inclinations may find they disagree with the following – in which case it

³ Wayne Grudem, who identifies himself as a charismatic, has expressed serious concern about younger charismatics. He observes that their parents and grandparents often grew up in Brethren churches and thus were steeped in the Bible before moving into the charismatic scene. Younger ones, he fears, have little or no Bible in their background.

⁴ A significant group among extreme charismatics is the “Word-Faith movement” (sometimes called simply “Positive confession”) which is associated with Kenneth Copeland and Kenneth Hagan, and is taught by the Hackney-based KICC, which is not only the biggest church in London but in the whole of Europe. “Word-Faith” theology teaches that faith is a powerful force which both God and man can use. The force in faith can be released as someone (Christian or not) speaks the right words. The claim is that if you speak words claiming money, health, and spiritual success you will automatically receive these things, whereas if you speak a “negative confession” (e.g. “I’ll never get better) you will do yourself harm. Whilst using some of the vocabulary of orthodox Christianity (e.g. “faith”, “God”, “blessing”, etc.) this is basically magic paganism which seeks to use words like spells in order to manipulate God and reality. Sometimes these “confessions” are accompanied by external rituals. This is probably not even Christian.

would be good to discuss this together. But it's our hope that this material will strengthen our confidence in the Lord Jesus and in the powerful work of his Word and Spirit.

Consideration of each question is divided into three parts: (i) it begins with a statement of Bible doctrine (which could be developed much more fully – see the reading list at the end for suggestions on how to study further). (ii) Each also sets out potential fault-lines in charismatic understanding and practice, while seeking to avoid the danger of setting up false stereotypes. (iii) And, lest we be wrongly reactive or negative, there are also positive applications for each point.

Issue 1: How does God speak? How do we encounter God?

(a) Summary: God speaks sufficiently in the Bible.

Here we connect with the Doctrine of Scripture and particularly with the sufficiency of Scripture. The Bible's claim about itself is that it is the Word of God: "all Scripture is God-breathed" (2 Timothy 3:16). Because the Bible is the Word of God – and not merely the words of human authors – it will be effective to achieve what God wants it to do. As a result, we do not need the Bible plus other voices, tools or powers in order to hear God speak to experience the work of God. Here are some important Bible texts:

Jude 1:3 Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints.

- The underlined phrase is significant. It means that the faith (i.e. body of doctrine received from God in the Scriptures) is given "once-for-all-time" (Greek: *hapax*). Just as Jesus' saving work was accomplished "once-for-all-time" in his never-to-be-repeated life, death and resurrection, so the Word which testifies to this salvation and applies it powerfully to the hearts of men and women is also never-to-be-repeated. There is no need for further revelation or fresh words from God.

2 Timothy 3:16-17 "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,¹⁷ so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."

- Here we note that that the Bible equips thoroughly (not partly) in order to provide for every good work (not just some).

Acts 20:32 "Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

- By the word of God's grace we are built up and given a heavenly inheritance. In other words, the Bible is powerful and effective to do this spiritual work in us.

Hebrews 1:1-3 "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways,² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe.³ The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven."

- The opening verses of Hebrews make two parallel statements. These can be seen in the following table. As we read the left-hand column (v1), and then compare it with the right-hand column (v2) it is important to note the contrast.

In the past...	But in these last days...
...God spoke	... he has spoken
...to our forefathers	... to us
...through the prophets	...by his Son (who is heir, creator, saviour, etc.)
...at many times and in various ways,	.

- In Old Testament times God spoke to forefathers through the prophets in different ways; through them the books of the OT were written. But *now* in these “last days” (= the whole period of time between Jesus’ resurrection and return in judgement) He has spoken to us by His Son. Just as Jesus work of salvation has been completed (see v3), so the word of salvation which comes by Jesus and by his apostles in the NT is also complete.

These texts imply that there is no need for further “special revelation” from God. God has not promised it and we are not to look for it. For, God works in power by his Spirit and through his Word to accomplish in us all that he wants to do.

A question: **what about “prophecy” in the church today?** In the Old Testament the “prophet” is a person given special revelation from God, to speak to the people, and whose words (because of their divine origin) cannot err. (See Deut. 18:15-22). In the New Testament we need to draw the following distinctions with respect to prophets and prophecy:

- Acts 2 teaches that *all Christians* “shall prophesy” (Acts 2:17), i.e. all Christians are prophets in that we all the knowledge of God which in the OT was the preserve of the prophet alone.
- Revelation 11 describes the ongoing activity of *the church* as “prophesying” (Revelation 11:1-13), i.e. the relationship of the church to the world is one of speaking God’s powerful word.
- Ephesians (2:20, 3:5, 4:11) speaks of the office of “apostles and prophets” within the NT church.

The NT prophets of whom we read in Ephesians are *not* the prophets of the Old Testament. Ephesians 3:5 makes clear that, together with the apostles, they were recipients of revelation which had not been made known to previous generations. The “prophets” we read of in Ephesians were, in other words, contemporary with the apostles and associated with them. Specific examples are found in the book of Acts:

- Acts 11:27-28, Agabus foretells “by the Spirit that there would be a great famine” – which happened;
- Acts 13:1-2, “prophets and teachers” through whom the Holy Spirit speaks;
- Acts 21:9-14, Agabus uses a prophetic sign act (linking him to OT prophets like Ezekiel and Isaiah) and speaks the Spirit’s words concerning Paul’s imprisonment
- Acts 28:17 tells us that Paul understands this prediction to have been fulfilled.

NT prophets like Agabus spoke truth from God, with God’s authority, and without error. In that respect they were like the prophets of the OT. Their task, together with the apostles, was to provide the “foundation” of the NT church (see Eph. 2:20). Everything we need to know for salvation and sanctification has been given us through the teaching of the apostles and prophets. The early churches didn’t have the complete New Testament. The apostles – plus an authoritative and infallible prophetic ministry – laid the foundation for the church in those early days, until such time as the NT was completed.

With the foundation established we do not need further revelation from God, and should not expect to find prophets in the church today. As we’ve seen above, the Bible’s own understanding is that it is entirely sufficient revelation from God. The gift and office of Apostle has clearly ceased (apostles were required to be eyewitnesses of the risen Jesus and appointed by him to this office, see Acts 2:21-22). And there is every reason for thinking that the gift and office of Prophet has also ceased with the completion of Scripture.

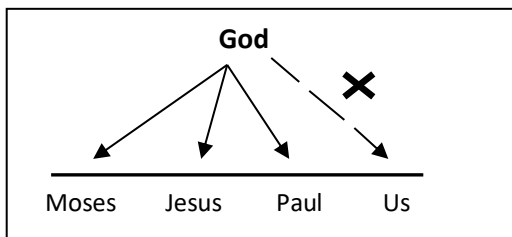
The Westminster Confession (our doctrinal basis – to which our elders subscribe) expresses Scripture’s sufficiency like this:

- “those former ways of God’s revealing His will unto His people being now ceased” [WCF 1.1].
- “The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men...” [WCF 1.6].

(b) Danger: beware fresh words from God

An important application of the sufficiency of Scripture is that the Christian, Church, and church leader is to be suspicious of claims to offer fresh voices from God. We don't need and shouldn't look for fresh words from God. Of course God can speak directly. He occasionally does EXTRA-ordinary things, but we shouldn't imagine that they are ordinary or normal. His Word is more than enough.

Put another way: the word that God speaks to us now is the word that he first spoke through his apostles and prophets of old (Moses, Jesus, Paul etc). In order to hear God's word to us today we attend to what he spoke to them back then. We shouldn't short-circuit this process in search of direct revelation from God. This is what the following diagram seeks to illustrate:



Charismatic and Pentecostal theology can deny the sufficiency of Scripture. Where the Bible should be ruling over God's people, it is sometimes replaced by human experience. What may this look like in practice?

- Claiming to be "led by the Spirit" rather than by the Word.
- Exalting the intuitive and the immediate: "if I think this thing, it must of course be from God." Very often "I've got a feeling that..." is interpreted as "This is what God is saying."
- Explicitly claiming direct words from God: "I think God is saying..."

However, when you claim the authority of God himself for what is ultimately the opinion of a human being we are in real trouble. There are several serious dangers:

- Subjectivism: truth from God shifts and changes according to the whim of the human mouthpiece.
- Abuse: a Christian leader can easily take on the status of an OT prophet or mouthpiece of God. It is striking that some extreme charismatic churches (which are really cults) discourage Bible reading. In this respect they are similar to historic Roman Catholicism which exalted the authority of priests and the church as mediators of revelation from God.
- Perhaps worst of all: when the Bible is downplayed God's clear and powerful voice (which saves, builds up, gives joy and confidence and an eternal inheritance) is muzzled.

Common charismatic attitudes to revelation often betray this serious error: **they separate the work of the Spirit from the Word of God.** God the Holy Spirit works through his word. The Spirit inspired Scripture and powerfully uses it (2 Tim. 3:16, etc.). It is important to remember that the work of the Holy Spirit is primarily a mediated work: that is, ordinarily he uses MEANS, principally the Word (and the Sacraments). There is an unhelpful emphasis in some charismatic circles which seeks an *un-mediated* or direct experience of God.⁵

(c) Positive application: treasure Scripture – God is speaking to you.

God speaks by his Word and through his Spirit. What he calls us to do is HEAR AND BELIEVE what he has already spoken. And we must not forget that God's ancient word is what he **continues to speak to us** now. What he spoke in the past by the apostles and prophets he is speaking freshly now. Note for example the citation of an OT text in Hebrews 3:7 which is prefaced by the words "as the Spirit says...". God's ancient word is fresh, living and powerful. Preaching or reading your Bible is not an encounter with a history book. It

⁵ This feature is common also in quietist Christianity (e.g. so-called "Celtic Christianity") and in the ancient heresy of Gnosticism, which despised "matter" and "things" and pursued an intangible experience of the divine. It is hard not to see some alarming comparisons between some charismatic emphases and Gnostic thought.

is sitting under the voice of Spirit of God. If we want an encounter with God, then it is in Scripture that we will meet him.

Further, the Spirit “illuminates” Scripture to us freshly – continuing to reveal how the unchanging Word applies in every situation. And believers are today sometimes moved by God to offer supernatural insights into events and situations. For, whilst some special gifts in the NT era are no longer given to the church, some continuing gifts have certain things in common with them. There are, for example, analogies between the ministry of the apostle and the ministry of the preacher; the Puritans sometimes termed preaching as “prophesying.”⁶

Issue 2: What is our attitude to the miraculous?

(a) Summary: God is infinitely powerful. But miracles are not normative, nor are they now necessary to authenticate the gospel.

God can do and actually does do whatever he wants. He made the world and nothing is too hard for him (Jer 32:17). He sustains and upholds everything – from the spinning of the planets to the falling of the sparrow. He is neither powerless nor absent from our world and from our lives. Actually, all God’s deeds toward men are miracles – be it healing someone via chemotherapy or healing someone via suspending his normal ways of operating.

But what about those acts of his that are obviously unusual? What about those things which require him to suspend what we might call “laws of nature” (an unhelpful term which simply mean “the way God usually does things”)? We believe that **God can do miracles now**. There is no reason to conclude that God has bound himself NOT to ever intervene extraordinarily. Here is how the Westminster Confession of Faith speaks about how God works:

“God, in His ordinary providence, makes use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them, at His pleasure.” (WCF 5.3)

Thus, it is lovely to hear of the Lord healing someone of a longstanding illness – without medical intervention and in an extraordinary way. From which we conclude: “the Lord is very kind!”

But **what should be our level of expectation of such things?** We read about miracles in the Bible – so should we regularly experience miracles now? Note two key points:

Firstly, **miracles are not normative – even in Bible times**. Miracles occur in “patches” in the Bible story (principally in the periods of Moses and Joshua, Elijah and Elisha, and Jesus and his apostles. There are long periods within the Bible when the miraculous was *not* normal. During these times God called on his people to exercise faith in Him and in his Word and promises, without the presence of overt miracles.

Even within the NT itself there is a notable decrease in incidents of the miraculous. Thus, the later epistles show little evidence of the kind of miraculous activity that we read about in the gospels and in Acts. And even within the gospel narrative itself miraculous incidents sharply decline in frequency (e.g. there are 16 miracles recorded in the first half chapters of Mark’s gospel, but only two in the second half).

Secondly, we must need to note that **regular miracles performed a function then that is no longer needed now**. Miracles in the Bible usher in new eras in revelation and they authenticate God’s special spokesmen.

⁶ John Owen commented: “But although all these gifts and operations *ceased* in some respect, some of them absolutely, and some of them as to the immediate manner of communication and degree of excellency; yet so far as the edification of the church was concerned in them, something that is *analogous* unto them was and is continued.” (Cited in Sinclair Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit*, p233)

Thus we read in 2 Cor. 12:12 that “The things that mark an apostle – signs, wonders and miracles – were done among you with great perseverance.” The apostles and prophets are dead. They no longer need miracles to demonstrate that they are God’s special spokesmen. Why? Because Scripture is complete and the miraculous signs that indicate the truthfulness of Christ and the gospel are those miracles which are recorded in Scripture.

In summary: God can do whatever he wants to do. But there is no reason to look for the overtly miraculous as ordinary experience.

(b) Danger: a wrong expectation of the miraculous encourages false faith, destroys true faith, and risks corruption

Many Pentecostal or Charismatic churches elevate the quest for the miraculous to a very high place. Pentecostalism in many places tends to attract the poor and working class – people who lack lots of things, not least access to health care. It is not hard to see why a church serving such people would want to have regular miracles, nor why people would attend such churches.

God is very, very kind. He can heal miraculously if he wants to. It may be that in places where there is little or no health care he chooses to kindly give a greater quantity of healings than elsewhere (although that is pure speculation). We note, too, that the Gospel does – as a rule – transform the physical and material circumstances of believers: e.g. a converted alcoholic may, by the power of God’s Spirit, experience transformation of his desires and life.

However, there is a wrong expectation of the miraculous that is deeply harmful.

Firstly, a wrong expectation of the miraculous can encourage false faith.

Jesus and his apostles consistently warn that faith based on miracles is false faith. It would be worth reading through each of the following references – Mark 1:34-38, 8:11-12,15, John 2:23-24, 4:48-50, 6:26, 20:29-31, and 1 Corinthians 1:22-25.

Secondly, a wrong expectation of the miraculous can destroy true faith.

In extreme charismatic churches bad things (e.g. suffering) tend to be attributed to a lack of faith: “if you trusted God enough this wouldn’t happen.” That is downright heresy and the pastoral consequences of it are horrific. Whilst it is mildly amusing to hear a Pentecostal midwife claim that “if you really believe then you won’t feel any pain in childbirth” (true story), it is tragic to hear of someone’s faith being rocked as God fails to deliver healing from terminal illness.

Thirdly, a wrong expectation of the miraculous ignores human corruption and Satanic activity.

When a “miracle” happens it can be attributed to one of three sources:

- It may be a genuine work of God.
- It may be a sham. The testimony of many “ex-charismatics” makes this plain. The pressure to deliver miracles Sunday by Sunday is intense. It is unsurprising that human corruption and deceit follows.
- It may be a work of Satan. Jesus tells us in Mark 13:22 that “false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform signs and miracles to deceive the elect-- if that were possible.”

Thus, where we find claims that miracles are normal and regular we need to be realistic about their truthfulness and origin.⁷

⁷ A real and Bible-based approach to the miraculous is important in relating both to charismatic churches and also to claims of the miraculous in Roman Catholicism. Ever since the time of the Reformation, Protestants have sought to respond to claims of miracles in popular Catholic piety. Very recently the Pope John Paul was canonised on the basis that he healed a nun of Parkinson’s disease.

(c) Positive application: rejoice in ALL God's miracles – and live by faith

We want to rejoice in all God's works: those that use normal means and those that don't. But we recognise that miracles – especially healing (which is often the focus in charismatic churches) is neither normative nor necessary to authenticate the gospel. Furthermore, we are called to **live by faith and not by sight**. We are not in the new creation yet. A key feature of life this side of heaven is the reality of suffering and the Cross.

Thus, "we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose" (Rom 8:28); in context "all things" include and are principally painful things. In Philippians 3:10 Paul records his desire which is "to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death."

Here is how the Puritan Richard Baxter put it:

"Insist not so much on your desires after vision, as to undervalue the lower apprehensions of faith; but love God by the way of faith... Know better the difference between thy travel and thy home; and know what is fit for passengers to expect... Thou must live, and love, and run, and fight, and conquer, and suffer by faith, if ever thou wilt come to see and to possess the crown." (Richard Baxter, Christian Directory, p130).

At one level we are not to expect too much of life outside of heaven: suffering and the shadow of the Cross are the norm for every believer. We want to resist the temptation to an over-realised eschatology: seeking to import to the present age things that properly only belong in the new creation when suffering and sin are removed from our world and experience and when believers are clothed with the resurrection body.

Issue 3: What is our attitude to Satan and evil?

(a) Summary: Satan is real and powerful, but under God's authority and defeated by Christ

The Bible teaches that evil is real and personal. Who is Satan? Satan is a real angelic being, albeit invisible (Ephesians 6:12). He seems to have been part of an angelic rebellion (2 Peter 2:4).

What does Satan do? He accuses people (Zech. 3:1-5), tempts people to sin (Matt 4, 1 Cor. 7), snatches God's word away from some (Mark 4:15), wants to harm people (Lk 22:31), lies and kills (John 8:44), persecutes Christians (Revelation 2:10), and disguises himself as an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14).

Crucially, however, Satan's power is nowhere near as great as that of the Triune God. As one writer put it: he is "God's Satan," operating entirely under His hand. Satan acts only by God's permission (Job 1:7-12); as the gospel goes out so Satan falls from heaven (Lk 10:17-18); Jesus came to destroy Satan (Heb 2:14) and has power over all other spiritual powers (1 Pet. 3:22); Jesus has destroyed his power to accuse believers (Col. 2:13-15, Zech 3); those united to Christ will join in his work of crushing Satan (Rom 16:20).

(b) Danger: imagining that God and Satan are more-or-less equal powers

This idea is a revival of a longstanding heresy that we find, for instance, in Manichaeism. In modern times we would call it "dualism": it is the idea that God and Satan are more-or-less equal in power and are locked in a battle the outcome of which is uncertain.

Some charismatic groups portray God, Satan and evil very much in this way. Often they will connect Satan's work with the idea of "territorial spirits." These are said to be evil spirits who rule over physical and geographical areas. It is claimed that they need to be "rebuked" and that homes and districts must be "claimed" by Christians on behalf of God. Additionally, some Charismatics will rebuke evil spirits in a believer, assuming that a demon is responsible for sickness or suffering in their life. The result can be a fearful attitude towards Satan and evil.

These practices and emphases are irresponsible and unbiblical. In addition to the Bible texts adduced above we note the following:

- everything in this world is under God's sovereign control. He upholds all things by the word of his power (Heb. 1:3).
- Charismatic teaching on spiritual warfare can misunderstand *how* God achieves his victory over Satan (by the Cross, and by the proclamation of the gospel) and the *extent of his victory* which is total. Whilst all non-Christians are (by God's sovereign permission) under the control of Satan (Eph. 2:1-3, John 8:42-45), the Lord is still utterly sovereign. Further, his ordinary means of freeing people from sin, death and Satan is by the proclamation of the gospel (John 5:24, Rom 10:13-17).
- Arguably, the practice of "rebuking evil spirits" or "claiming territory from evil spirits" distracts massively from the God-given method of saving people which is simply to pray and to talk about Jesus.
- Seeking to cast demons out of a Christian ignores the fact that when converted, a Christian is definitely and totally transferred from the realm of Satan to the realm of Christ (e.g. Colossians 1:13-14). This side of glory Christians will continue to struggle both with sin and suffering. This is the sovereign will of God and is part life in a fallen world.

(c) Positive application: be confident in Christ's victory over sin, evil and Satan

The devil does still prowl round like a roaring lion – and thus we are to be alert and watchful. However, Christ's victory on the Cross entirely robs Satan of his ability to accuse me before a holy God.

Thus in Colossians 2:15 Paul writes that, "having disarmed the powers and authorities, [Christ] made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross." This should be the source of great joy and assurance for the Christian person. Ultimately, Satan can do me no harm.

Issue 4: How does the Holy Spirit fill us?

(a) Summary: all Christians are filled with the Spirit from conversion

Most charismatic churches teach a "baptism in the Spirit" which is subsequent to conversion. This is sometimes called a "second blessing." During the 19th century the "Keswick" or "holiness" movement taught that a Christian needed a second blessing in order to achieve total victory over sin. Pentecostal and charismatic theology often teaches that Christians need a second blessing in order to experience God more fully. The implication is that until you have this experience you are lacking all of God's Spirit in you. A classic illustration (e.g. from the Alpha Course) is that you have a "gas pilot light" burning inside you, but until a second blessing occurs you aren't burning on all cylinders as a Christian.

This is not what the Bible teaches. All Christians are filled with the Spirit from conversion.

Firstly, **the phrase "baptism in the Spirit" never refers to an event subsequent to conversion.**⁸ In the gospels this phrase is used by John the Baptist who is anticipating the work of the coming Christ who will pour out his Spirit. In Acts it also speaks of the day of Pentecost. In 1 Cor. 12:13 it is clearly describing a work enjoyed by all Christians without exception.

But what of the disciples who trust in Christ but don't receive the Spirit until the day of Pentecost? Are they a model of two-stage blessing? No. We must remember the uniqueness of the disciples situation. They could not receive the Spirit at the same time that they believed, for the simple reason that until Pentecost the Spirit had not been poured out. From then on, belief in Christ and filling with the Spirit occur at the same time.

Secondly, **instances in Acts of believers receiving the Spirit subsequent to conversion indicate unique moments in the spread of the gospel.** In the Acts of the apostles we read of the Spirit being poured out in

⁸The phrase "baptism in the Holy Spirit" occurs in Matt 3:11, Mk 1:8, Lk 3:16, Jn 1:33, Acts 1:5, 11:16, 1 Cor 12:13.

chapters 2,8,10 and 19. Chapter 2 is the definitive outpouring of the day of Pentecost. What then of later references to the Spirit being poured out on people who already believe?

The events of Acts 8 and Acts 10 are as unrepeatable and “one-off” as the day of Pentecost or Jesus’ death upon the Cross. The story of Acts (and indeed the story of all human history) is captured in Acts 1:8 – the gospel will go from Jerusalem and Judea to Samaria and thence to the ends of the earth. In Acts 8 and 10 we read of mini-Pentecosts as the Spirit is poured out no longer on Jews alone (as in Acts 2), but on the half-Jewish outcast Samaritans and then upon the Gentiles. These are special and one-off events.⁹

Thirdly, **all Christians receive the Spirit at the moment of conversion.** Paul writes in Ephesians 1:13: “And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit”

The Greek of Eph. 1:13 will not allow for a two-stage process: believing and sealing are simultaneous. 1 Corinthians 12:13 and John 14:23 (in context) make the same point.

(b) Danger: second blessing theology divides the Son and Spirit – and creates two classes of Christian

A theological danger: second blessing theology divides the persons and work of God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. On this understanding it is possible to believe in Jesus and not have the fullness of the Spirit. This begs the question: Is the work of the Son somehow insufficient?

It also misunderstands the Spirit’s work, which is to unite believers to Jesus in whom they have every spiritual blessing (Eph 1:3). In fact, the work of the Spirit is to make Jesus present within us. (See Romans 8:9, John 14:18).

Pastorally, there is great harm from creating two classes of Christian: this can lead to lack of assurance on the one hand and arrogance or presumption on the other.

(c) Positive application: continually seek the Spirit’s work in your life -

Someone who has been filled with the Holy Spirit at conversion (i.e. any Christian!) can nonetheless daily be filled with Him (e.g. Acts 4:31). This is not a second blessing. It is a daily and ongoing reality for the believer, seeking more of the Spirit’s work and fruit in their life. Strikingly, in the Acts of the Apostles filling with the Spirit almost always leads the believer to speak boldly of Christ: it is associated with evangelism.¹⁰

Issue 5: How does the Holy Spirit gift us?

(a) Summary: God the Spirit gives different gifts to different Christians – all for the common good.

Ephesians 4:11-16 and 1 Corinthians chapters 12-14 teach that the Spirit gives different gifts for building up of the body and for the sake of the common good of the church (e.g. 1 Cor. 12:4,7). These gifts include apparently mundane things like “administration” (1 Cor. 12:28), and they are not given for personal spiritual benefit but for the good of the whole body. The problem in the Corinthian church was a chronic lack of love for one another, as church members selfishly exercised gifts for their own benefit.

(b) Danger: requiring all real Christians to possess certain gifts is divisive and unbiblical

There is great danger in exalting some gifts over other (notably those that seem more obviously supernatural). All spiritual gifts come from God and all are necessary for the good of the body.

It is sometimes implied that you are only a real Christian if you have one particular gift, often the gift of ecstatic speech (what is nowadays called “speaking in tongues”). This is, for instance, what is implied in the

⁹ In Acts 19 it is likely that the people were not Christians at the start of the incident.

¹⁰ Wayne Grudem identifies himself as a charismatic. Interestingly, in his Systematic Theology (pp763-787) he shows compellingly how second-blessing theology is based on an extremely bad reading of the Bible.

Alpha Course by the weight of material it gives to the subject. It is dangerous – potentially heretical even – to require something of a believer which is not actually a requisite of salvation.

But what of “speaking in tongues”? Many people practice it, and testify that it blesses or assures them. It is hard to assess the modern phenomenon of tongue-speaking:

- Scriptural references to it are few. Acts chapter 2 does not describe ecstatic or apparently nonsensical speech, but the miraculous gift of actual human languages.
- It is claimed that the Corinthian church was engaged in something different, namely a kind of speech which did not involve the mind (1 Cor. 14:14). This is the sole scriptural basis for the modern practice of tongue-speaking.
- It is more likely that references in 1 Corinthians are, like in Acts 2, to the miraculous gift of known human languages (Gk. *glossa*), which was being practiced without interpretation in a selfish and unloving manner.
- Historically, there are no references to speaking in ecstatic speech prior to 1901, with the exception of heretical groups in the second century and the 17th-18th centuries. We note, also, that tongue-speaking is found in pagan religions around the world (e.g. some parts of Hinduism).
- It is unlikely, therefore, that modern tongue-speaking is the same as that found in the earliest days of the NT church.

Whatever the origin and reality of tongue-speaking may be, at the very least we must say that it is deeply unhelpful to exalt it over other gifts.

(c) Positive application: serve lovingly for the sake of others

As we read through 1 Cor. 12-13 it is striking how many times Paul talks about “building up” the body. See 12:7, 25, 14:3,4,5,6,12,17,19,26,31. When we exercise spiritual gifts – whatever they are – we are to do so for the sake of others. In particular, we are to prioritise gifts of the Word (cf. 14:1).

We reminded that, especially when we gather for corporate worship, we do so not only (or primarily) as individuals but as part of the whole body. We’re called to give ourselves first to our Triune God, and next to the encouragement of our brethren. Simply, gathered worship is never to be a selfish or individualistic pursuit.

Issue 6: What is the place of music in church?

(a) Summary: Truth-filled singing is a necessary and wonderful part of our praise, prayer and teaching

Music and congregational singing matters. Here the great German Reformer, Martin Luther, encourages us:

"I, Doctor Martin Luther, wish all lovers of the unshackled art of music grace and peace from God the Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ! I truly desire that all Christians would love and regard as worthy the lovely gift of music, which is a precious, worthy, and costly treasure given to mankind by God... next to the Word of God, the noble art of music is the greatest treasure in the world. It controls our thoughts, minds, hearts, and spirits... A person who gives this some thought and yet does not regard music as a marvelous creation of God, must be a clodhopper indeed and does not deserve to be called a human being; he should be permitted to hear nothing but the braying of asses and the grunting of hogs." (Martin Luther, Foreword to Georg Rhau's "Symphoniae iucundae")

In Ephesians 5:19-20 we read: “Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord,²⁰ always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Notice from these verses what happens when we sing. There is both a horizontal and vertical dimension to our congregational singing. In song we teach ONE ANOTHER truth from God. In song we sing TO THE LORD.

But why are we to *sing*, both to the Lord and to each other? As we sing God's truth becomes more memorable (do you find it easier to remember songs and hymns than Scripture verses?) and our affections are stirred. And this is how God intended it.

God made us with both **reason** and **affections**. Firstly, we are rational or reasonable creatures. Truth matters to us. We need order, logic and reasons. We are not like animals who are driven simply by base instincts. Of course, sin has messed up our ability to think truly. But we are still reasonable creatures.

But, secondly, we are also affectionate creatures. "Affections" is an old-fashioned word that speaks of something rather stronger than our "emotions." It refers to deep and strong inclinations within us. Our senses perceive things, our minds evaluate them, and then our affections respond with either strong desire (toward things that are good and beautiful) or strong revulsion (from things that are repulsive to us). It is really important to understand our affections or "desiring" nature. We never do anything that we do not desire or think is good for us. Of course, sin has messed up our affections: we desire sinful things or we overly desire good things. But we remain creatures with God-given affections.

In fact, we were made with "reasonable affections." These two faculties can be distinguished, but they cannot be separated. Our aim as Christian people must be to do all we can (under God's hand) to move our wills to incline towards the Lord and His ways and to be repulsed from sin, the world and the devil.

Therefore, our preaching, biblestudy and personal conversation (as well as song and hymn words) needs to be full of rich Bible truth, told in ways that capture our imaginations and affections. As Martyn Lloyd-Jones famously said: a sermon is to be "logic on fire." One of the functions of congregational *singing* is to take God's truth and to deploy it in such a way that our minds are filled and our affections moved.

(b) Danger: a wrong view of music narrows our understanding of "worship" and can be manipulative

In some circles "worship" is identified solely or primarily with congregational music and singing. A "time of worship" means a time of singing. This is far too narrow a definition of "worship." Texts like Romans 12:1 emphasise that the whole of life is "worship." And, the special activity of gathered worship (which is the chief end of the church) includes the full range of praying, preaching, reading Scripture as well as singing.

One faulty idea present in many church circles is that music connects us directly to God. This may be taught explicitly or only implied. As we have seen previously, there is something deep within us that wants to connect with God in an unmediated and direct way. However, in his wisdom relationship with God is mediated, principally by God's Word. To teach that you can have an experience of the Spirit apart from the Word of God unhelpfully separates Word and Spirit.

Connected with this is the extremely unhelpful language of "worship leader." There is no such category of person in the NT. If the chief musician or band leader is thought able to bring people into the presence of God then this person has, in effect, achieved the status of a cultic priest. That function, however, was abolished utterly with the work of Christ upon the Cross (Heb. 8).

Here are two helpful quotes on the danger of thinking that "God is in the music":

"If in making music or listening to it I assume that faith will bring substance and evidence to the music, so as [to] make it more "worshipful," I am getting into real trouble. If I truly love the music—that is, if I have chosen a church that uses "my music" and I am deeply moved by it—I can make the mistake of coupling faith to the musical experience by assuming that the power and effectiveness of music is what brings substance and evidence to my faith. I can then quite easily forge a connection between the power of music and the nearness of the Lord. Once this happens, I may even slip fully into the sin of equating the power of music and the nearness of the Lord. At that point music joins the bread and wine in the creation of a new sacrament or even a new kind of transubstantiation.

Or let's say that I deeply love Jesus but I detest the music—it is not “my music.” What am I then to do in the absence of a linkage between having faith and loving the music? Where is God in all of this? If he is in the music, I will never find him, because to me there is no substance or evidence, even though others are seemingly finding him there. Do I wait for the right kind of music so that my faith becomes effectual? Do I look for another church, hoping that my faith will be fed and my felt needs met? Or do I turn from the music to the Lord, knowing that faith remains faith and the music is merely music and not a sacramental substance that mediates between God and me? I hope that the last question becomes the only question. Otherwise, faith needs exterior scaffolding for worship to become authentic worship.”¹¹

(c) Positive application: speak to one another and sing to the Lord (Eph. 5:19)

Remember how God has made us: as rational and affectionate creatures, who will love Christ more as our minds feed on rich Bible truth in ways that warm up our hearts with love for Him, for holiness and for heaven.

Enjoy the congregational gathering and give yourself to it (even if the musical choices and delivery aren't quite in accord with your own personal taste!). Sometimes we do indeed get a little glimpse of the heavenly gathering as meet in gathered Lord's Day worship – not just as we sing, but as we confess, pray, and receive the reading and preaching of God's Word.

Recommended further reading (* = longer and/or harder!)

On the doctrine of Scripture:

- * J.I. Packer, *Fundamentalism and word of God*
- J.I. Packer, *God has Spoken*

On the person and work of God the Holy Spirit

- Graham Beynon, *Experiencing the Spirit*
- J.I. Packer, *Keep in step with the Spirit*
- Christopher Ash, *Hearing the Spirit: knowing the Father through the Son*
- * Sinclair Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit*
- * B.B. Warfield, *The person and work of the Holy Spirit*

On guidance and the voice of God:

- Kevin DeYoung, *Just do something*

On spiritual gifts:

- Thomas Schreiner, *Why I am a cessationist*, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/cessationist/>
- Thomas Schreiner, *It all depends upon prophecy: a brief case for nuanced cessationism* (Themelios 44 /1) - <http://themelios.thegospelcoalition.org/article/it-all-depends-upon-prophecy-a-brief-case-for-nuanced-cessationism>
- Tim Challies, *Why I am not a continuationist* <https://www.challies.com/articles/why-i-am-not-continuationist/>
- * Richard Gaffin, *Perspectives on Pentecost: New Testament teaching on the gifts of the Holy Spirit*

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¹¹ Harold Best, “Unceasing worship”, pp29-30. Cited on DeYoung, *Restless and Reformed* (Kevin De Young's blog on The Gospel Coalition website).