

A Friendly Word to My 'Cautiously Charismatic' Colleagues

In recent years, I have heard Christian leaders describe themselves as “open but cautious” when it comes to the gifts and power of the Spirit for today, including tongues and prophecy and healing. Others have described themselves as “charismatics with seatbelts.” But is that really a biblical position to hold? Is it a healthy spiritual perspective?

To speak directly to my cautiously charismatic colleagues, are you “open but cautious” when it comes to following Jesus? Or believing God’s Word? Or giving yourself to the Great Commission? Or loving God? Why, then, when it comes to the gifts and power of the Spirit for today are you open but cautious?

When it comes to your overall devotion to the Lord, do you wear those same seatbelts? Or do you wear them when you get alone with God in prayer? Or when you engage in corporate worship? Or when you share the gospel with the lost? Why put those seatbelts on only when it comes to the things of the Spirit?

I know, of course, what you *mean* when you use some of these terms. You’re saying, “I believe that the Spirit is still moving today with various gifts and manifestations of power. But there’s a lot of flaky stuff out there, and I don’t want any part of that.”

Or, “Yes, the Word is clear on this, but there are also many warnings about spiritual abuses in the Bible, which is why I am ‘open but cautious.’”

In response, I would say that there are plenty of flaky things

in noncharismatic circles too, not to mention all kinds of bizarre and even cult-like interpretations of the Bible in noncharismatic circles. By that same logic, shouldn't we be open but cautious with the Bible itself?

And yes, the Word does warn against spiritual abuses. But it also warns against moral failures and doctrinal errors and wrong leadership practices, just to name a few.

Should we then wear those safety belts at all times and in all situations? Shouldn't we just say, "I'm a Christian with seatbelts"?

You can quickly see where this kind of thinking leads.

Not only so, but Paul is quite emphatic as to what our attitude should be, and he expresses himself most strongly when writing to a church that was filled with spiritual abuses (along with divisions, serious moral failings and major doctrinal error).

I'm speaking, of course, of the church of Corinth, to whom Paul says in his initial greeting, "I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in him you have been enriched in every way—with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge—God thus confirming our testimony about Christ among you. *Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift* as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed" (1 Cor. 1:4-7, NIV, author's emphasis).

So, despite the very real abuses he will address later in his letter, he commends them for not lacking any spiritual gift. This was important for him to point out as something highly commendable.

Then, he writes, "Now about the gifts of the Spirit, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed" (1 Cor. 12:1), meaning that this was not a subject to be avoided. Quite the contrary. And he explicitly attributed these

spiritual gifts to the Father, Son and Spirit (12:4-6).

As for correcting the spiritual abuses at Corinth, he begins that section of his letter with these words: "Follow the way of love and eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit, especially prophecy" (14:1). That hardly sounds like "open but cautious" to me, let alone Paul saying, "Be sure to get those seatbelts on!"

And having corrected the wrong order at Corinth, he then painted a picture of what a properly ordered meeting would look like (as they met together in small groups in homes): "What then shall we say, brothers and sisters? When you come together, each of you has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. Everything must be done so that the church may be built up" (14:26). Is that what we cultivate in our gatherings?

Then, this final, closing word: "Therefore, my brothers and sisters, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way" (14:39-40).

Elsewhere, writing to another congregation, he had these instructions when it came to prophecy: "Do not quench the Spirit. Do not treat prophecies with contempt but test them all; hold on to what is good, reject every kind of evil" (1 Thess. 5:19-22).

Notice that he first exhorted these believers not to put out of the Spirit's fire and not to despise prophecies before he gave them practical guidelines for testing prophetic words. First, he was saying, embrace and desire this important work of the Spirit. Then, as you do with every other teaching and purported revelation, test it carefully.

In sum, he was saying, "Embrace and desire and pursue these powerful and effective workings of the Spirit. And be sure to follow these guidelines when you do."

That's why, after His Resurrection, Jesus told His disciples that they must wait for the Spirit's enduement before they began to preach the gospel (Luke 24:49, Acts 1:8). He did not add, "But when the Spirit comes, get those seatbelts on!"

And that's why, when the Spirit was poured out at Pentecost in Acts 2, leaving the crowd divided as to whether this was something good or bad, Peter simply explained that this was what Joel prophesied (see Acts 2:1-17). Then he said at the end of his sermon, "If you will repent and turn to God, putting your faith in Jesus, God will give this same Spirit to you!" (See Acts 2:26).

So, just as you are not "open but cautious" when it comes to your relationship with the Father and the Son and you don't wear seatbelts in your devotion to the Lord, live the same way when it comes to the Spirit and His gifts. Dive in wholeheartedly and without reservation, embrace the true and reject the counterfeit, and be sure to enjoy the ride. {eoa}

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