

Strange Fire: Can We All Agree That Experience of God Is Vital?

Charismatics and **Pentecostals** have been saddened by the Strange Fire conference and book, since it feels like an attempt to turn back the clock. I am old enough to remember the painful division in churches and families that were commonplace in the 1970s and 1980s. Similar problems also accompanied the earlier **Pentecostal movement**. I am sure that our youthful enthusiastic naivety prompted some of the arguments. But just as in the aftermath of this recent conference, it was the angry rejection from some Christians that stung the most.

It has been a joyous thing, then, in recent years to see walls between these two groups in Christ's body gradually crumble. There has been an increasing recognition from both sides that we need each other. Charismatics will often listen to or read materials by preachers who are scholars of the **Bible**, even when we know they don't quite agree with us. Meanwhile, many noncharismatic churches have enthusiastically adopted our worship music and allow themselves to be inspired by our passion for Jesus. We have begun to feel like one family of God. It would be a pity if we lost these mutual benefits as a result of the latest arguments.

The contribution the **charismatic movement** brings is not solely tied up in the **gifts of the Spirit**. Or, at least, not in their public operation. What lies behind many of our churches, often packed with young people, is an emphasis on a living relationship with Jesus by His Spirit. That experience of God is vital to the Christian walk. It is sad indeed if some Christians today feel frightened to pursue such encounters or talk about them with others.

Seeking God's presence is something that has been encouraged by many leading Christians throughout the centuries. We stand as heirs of a rich stream of experiential faith. I will share just a few examples here.

Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, possibly the most respected English-speaking pastor of the 20th century, said, "New Testament **Christianity** is not just a formal, polite, correct and orthodox kind of faith and belief. No! What characterizes it is this element of love and passion, this pneumatic element, this life, this vigor, this abandon, this exuberance—and, as I say, it has ever characterized the life of the church in all periods of revival and of reawakening."

Francis Schaeffer agrees: "Christianity is not just a mental assent that certain doctrines are true—not even that the right doctrines are true. This is only the beginning. This would be rather like a starving man sitting in front of great heaps of food and saying, 'I believe the food exists; I believe it is real,' and yet never eating it. It is not enough merely to say, 'I am a Christian,' and then in practice to live as if present contact with the **supernatural** were something far off and strange. Many Christians I know seem to act as though they come in contact with the supernatural just twice—once when they are justified and become a Christian, and once when they die.

"Some Christians seem to think that when they are born again, they become a self-contained unit, like a storage battery. From that time on, they have to go on their own pep and their own power until they die. But this is wrong. After we are justified, once for all through faith in Christ, we are to live in **supernatural** communion with the Lord every moment; we are to be like lights plugged into an electric socket. The **Bible** makes it plain that our joy and spiritual power depend on a continuing relation to God. If we do not love and draw on the Lord as we should, the plug gets pulled out and the spiritual power and the spiritual joy stop."

Charles Spurgeon also believed an encounter with God should have tangible effects: “You feel Him; His presence is photographed upon your spirit; your very heart trembles with awe of Him, and you say with Jacob, ‘Surely God is in this place.’”

Even the great American theologian **Jonathan Edwards** confessed, “I have many times had a sense of the glory of the third person in the Trinity, in His office of Sanctifier; in His holy operations communicating divine light and life to the soul. God, in the communications of His **Holy Spirit**, has appeared as an infinite fountain of divine glory and sweetness; being full and sufficient to fill and satisfy the soul: pouring forth itself in sweet communications, like the sun in its glory, sweetly and pleasantly diffusing light and life.”

Jesus has not called us into a relationship with a book, even one as essential and glorious as the Bible. He has called us to know Him. He promised He would remain with us until His return. Sadly, many Christians today are not conscious of His presence. But Jesus promised us: “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. ... If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him” (John 14:18, 23, ESV).

We can and should remind God of this promise and ask Him to make Himself known to us. This is a lifelong pursuit, and the apostle Paul devoted himself to seeking the presence of Jesus. All Christians can and should do the same:

“I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him ... that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead” (Phil. 3:8–11).

Adrian Warnock is a blogger and author based in London, where he serves on the leadership team of Jubilee Church. The ideas in this article are further explored in his book *Raised With Christ*, a chapter of which is available for free download. Adrian has also written a series of posts reviewing *Strange Fire*.