

The Charismatic Movement: Dead or Alive?

We can quibble over when the previous wave of the Holy Spirit ended. But what's important is that we follow God's presence into a new season.

Some readers were offended when I declared in an online column a few weeks ago that the charismatic movement is dead. One woman even accused me of heresy, since—in her words—I believe “the age of the Holy Spirit has ended.” (I didn’t say that.) Others on the opposite side of the spectrum asked why I waited so long to state the obvious. All this discussion prompted me to address the issue further.

I am not a coroner. But I do believe the historic period we call the American charismatic movement ended a while ago. By making that pronouncement I was NOT saying that (1) the Holy Spirit isn’t moving today; (2) the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit aren’t available to us any more; or (3) people who are associated with this movement are all washed up.

“Rather than worshiping God around a monument to the past, let’s find out where He’s going and follow the glory cloud.”

On the contrary, we could be on the cusp of one of the most dynamic spiritual awakenings in history, and it will most certainly be accompanied by the supernatural work of the Spirit. Yet if we want to shift with Him into the next season we must lay aside old mindsets and worn-out religious paradigms that we picked up during the past 40 years. When God comes to do “a new thing,” as Isaiah promised He would (Isa. 43:19, NASB), we must embrace new priorities, recalibrate our spiritual values and set aside the baggage of the past.

New wine requires new wineskins. New growth only comes after pruning. Change is often painful.

The history books will record that the charismatic movement began in 1967 with the Duquesne revival in Pittsburgh (there were earlier birth pangs with Episcopalians in the late 1950s) and that the movement waned by the late 1980s. Charismatic renewal was a visitation of God—ushering millions of people from mainline church backgrounds into an experience with the Holy Spirit and renewing many older Pentecostal churches.

There were subsequent outpourings of the Spirit in the 1990s, of course—namely the Toronto Blessing and the Pensacola Revival—but the overall movement was fragmenting. The televangelism scandals of 1987 and the implosion of the Discipleship Movement two years later made it obvious that something was rotten underneath the polished veneer of charismania.

This doesn't mean the past 20 years have been insignificant. Huge advances have occurred on the international mission field. Yet some of the most notable spiritual trends in the United States in recent years have been associated with evangelicals who don't have ties to charismatics. These include Rick Warren, Beth Moore, Louie Giglio, Henry Blackaby, Bill Hybels, Andy Stanley and Erwin McManus. We are naïve (and arrogant) if we think the only people God is using in this hour are members of our own charismatic subculture.

When I say the charismatic movement is dead I am issuing an obvious challenge. It is time for us to lay aside the past so we can embrace the future. We are in a season when church leaders should be asking the hard questions:

- Are we locked into the past in an unhealthy way?
- Are we using language, methods or ministry styles that are stale, dated and ineffective?
- Are we training younger people to lead the next generation?
- Are we willing to slaughter any sacred cows and pet doctrines that hinder outreach and church growth?

Old Testament laws forbid people from touching anything dead (see Lev. 21:1,11). That's because corpses spread disease. Dead things stink and defile.

This is certainly true of dead religion. It can make a church barren and lifeless, even if it is hidden under a superficial coating of trendy songs and casual clothes. It's not enough to update your music and take off your tie. We need the new life of the Spirit. Something new must happen inside us.

God once told Moses to put a bronze serpent on a stick and hold it in the air. When people looked at the snake they were healed. Centuries later, King Hezekiah destroyed this image because people had begun to worship it (see 2 Kings 18:4). What God meant for good later became a hindrance. Sometimes spiritual things have an expiration date!

Of course God's moral law never changes, and neither does His character. But He may not move today in the same way He did in 1975; the strategies He gave us in 1990 are not necessarily for churches now. The Holy Spirit doesn't want us to follow a rote formula; He wants us to seek His presence as He moves through history.

It really doesn't matter what we label the next movement. What's important is His renewing presence. Rather than worshiping God around a monument to the past, let's find out where He's going and follow the glory cloud.

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