Strange Fire Redux, Part 2
Scripture: Ephesians 2:20
Code: B141015

Editor’s Note: To commemorate the one-year anniversary of the Strange Fire Conference, we are posting an article by John MacArthur which will appear in the next issue of the TMS Journal. For the purposes of this blog, the article will be posted in three parts throughout the week. Click here to read Part 1.

Cessationism through Church History

Looking back over the history of the Pentecostal and charismatic movements, it is significant to note that Pentecostalism’s distinctive teachings have always been outside the historic mainstream of Protestant and Reformed conviction. All the Reformers and their heirs were cessationists. They believed and taught emphatically that God is intimately involved and providentially in control of every detail of everything that happens in the universe. They also held the firm conviction that apostolic sign-gifts ceased when the apostolic era passed. They saw no conflict between those two articles of faith. Nor did any cessationist imagine a conflict there until three pernicious trends began to turn the tide of twentieth-century evangelicalism.

One was the rise of a utilitarian approach to church growth, paired with the false notion that numerical increase is the best gauge of God’s blessing. Evangelicals intentionally set doctrine aside in favor of pragmatic and populist ideals. Theology gave way to entertainment. Bible teaching was deemed insufficiently “seeker-sensitive,” and evangelicalism gradually moved further and further away from historic evangelical doctrine. Within a generation, evangelical churches were filled with people who were largely untaught, biblically illiterate, and unprepared to resist false teaching.

A second factor was the increasing aggressiveness with which charismatic phenomena are promoted in evangelical circles. Dennis Bennett’s Easter Sunday bombshell seemed incredibly bold at the time. Such an announcement would pass without much notice in the typical evangelical church today. Nowadays, what is unusual (to the point of seeming freakish) is anyone who openly challenges charismatic claims. The public backlash against the Strange Fire Conference demonstrated that.

A third trend (the most troubling of all) is the escalating outlandishness of charismatic exhibitionism. Around the late 1980s speaking in tongues was supplanted as the chief sign-gift. In some circles, tongues were no longer even deemed a necessary sign of Holy Spirit baptism. Instead, it seemed the whole charismatic world was suddenly touting private prophecies and being “slain in the Spirit.” That shift was soon followed by the so-called Toronto Blessing, which in turn gave way to unbridled orgies of ersatz drunkenness under the direction of Rodney Howard-Browne as the self-styled “Holy Ghost Bartender.” Charismatics today seem enthralled with activities like “grave sucking” (visiting the graves of early charismatic heroes in order to soak up an anointing); “toking the Ghost” (inhaling an imaginary reefer and pretending to be high on the Holy Spirit); and ridiculous experiments with walking on water, raising the dead, or even old-school occult phenomena. Meanwhile, prophecies,
false claims, and novel doctrines are steadily becoming more and more grotesque—but they are rarely challenged.

None of this comes out of our Protestant and Reformed heritage. Indeed, extrabiblical prophecies, fanciful claims about miracles, and other supernatural phenomena were features of medieval Roman Catholic superstition that the Reformers emphatically rejected. The only other doctrinaire continuationists in church history belonged to fringe groups, such as the Montanists in the second century and the Zwickau prophets (and other radicals) in the early sixteenth century. One of the main reasons the magisterial Reformers held Anabaptist groups in high suspicion was the prevalence of new revelations and other charismatic-style beliefs among the Radical Reformers. Moreover, those radical groups that placed the most emphasis on extrabiblical revelation were basically fruitless and short-lived. There is no clear line of continuity between the miraculous phenomena touted by the early Radical Reformers and the charismatic practices of the twentieth century.

In other words, continuationism is a contemporary (twentieth-century) phenomenon, and it embraces a point of view that until sometime after 1960 was universally rejected by the historic Protestant and evangelical mainstream.

**Cessationism from Scripture**

There is, however, a much stronger reason to reject charismatic teaching. In order to affirm the continuation of sign gifts, it is necessary to invent novel, fanciful, or whimsical interpretations of certain biblical texts. Passages that have never been in question must now be reinterpreted. For example, until the charismatic movement found it necessary to explain why modern glossolalia bears no relationship to any known language, no one ever suggested that the language spoken by angels might lack structure or sense. No credible commentator ever thought the “groanings which cannot be uttered” spoken of in Romans 8:26 can actually be uttered in repetitive nonsense syllables. No student of Scripture would ever have concluded that the known, translatable languages manifested at Pentecost would ultimately be superseded with unintelligible gibberish.

The tongues that were spoken on the Day of Pentecost, as well as the gift of tongues in the early church had a specific purpose. The phenomenon was a fulfillment of Isaiah 28:11-12. That prophecy is closely paraphrased by Paul in 1 Corinthians 14:21: “By men of strange tongues and by the lips of strangers I will speak to this people.” In other words, tongues were given to show Israel that God was turning his attention to the Gentiles. People from all nations would now be embraced under a New Covenant. The languages spoken at Pentecost are listed in Acts 2:9-11. Without exception, they were Gentile languages. Jews from all over the world were present in the city of Jerusalem. They had never heard God being praised in a Gentile language. The language of worship was Hebrew, exclusively. Even in the dispersion, praise to YHWH was always offered in the sacred language. So when the Apostles began speaking Gentile languages, the people of Jerusalem were hearing something completely new and shocking. The meaning was unmistakable: this was a declaration that God was turning from an apostate, Christ-rejecting nation to open the way of salvation for the wider world. Speaking in tongues signified that “the times of the Gentiles” (Luke 21:24) had begun.

What do the tongues of today signify? To what does this phenomenon point? There is no answer to that question. Modern tongues have no meaning, no significance. They are in every sense incomprehensible.
In short, the continuationist position requires a complete redefinition of the apostolic gifts. Modern charismatics depart from a biblical definition of the gifts in order to accommodate a far-fetched explanation for what we see happening today.

Continuationist claims are self-refuting for anyone who takes Scripture at face value. Consider, for example, the multitude of failed prophecies and words of knowledge spun out constantly by modern charismatics. Deuteronomy 18:22 and Jeremiah 29:8-9 clearly teach that if someone speaks in the Lord’s name and his prophecy does not come to pass, that person is not to be regarded as a true prophet. Modern charismatics who are honest will freely admit that all their prophets are more often wrong than right. In order to get around the Bible’s clear, emphatic instructions regarding false prophets, they have concocted a dogma, nowhere taught in the Bible, that the New Testament gift of prophecy is supposed to be fallible. New Testament Prophecy is a lesser form of revelation than Old Testament prophecy, they say. The standard has been lowered (or more precisely, eliminated) so even a long string of false prophecies would not necessarily make someone a false prophet.

The silliness of that idea and the dangers it invites ought to be obvious to anyone with common sense. What is the point of fallible prophecy? Is God mumbling? Why would God, who gave us a more sure word of prophecy, confuse His people by appending His revelation with something so indefinite? But modern charismatics build their whole case for modern prophecy on that foundation of sand. They simply have not met the burden of biblical proof.

The truth is that those who call themselves continuationists don’t really believe in the continuation of the gifts. The gifts they embrace are different, lesser-quality phenomena than the apostolic outpouring of miracles. Honest charismatics must face and own up to that fact.

The charismata were, after all, apostolic gifts. Paul expressly classifies signs, wonders, and mighty works as “the signs of a true apostle” (2 Corinthians 12:12). Every miracle, healing, and supernatural phenomenon ever manifested in the early church was done by someone closely related to an apostle. The apostles and prophets themselves served a foundational purpose (Ephesians 2:20). In other words, those roles pertained to the founding of the church, and once the church was fully established, the apostolic era began to draw to a close. Miracles play a diminishing role even in the biblical record of the early church. The church grew and spread while the New Testament was being written and circulated. Gradually and by God’s own design, biblical authority eclipsed apostolic authority, ultimately eliminating any need for either the apostolic office or further revelation. By the end of the first century, the apostles and prophets had fulfilled their foundational purpose and passed from the scene. Likewise the gifts and phenomena that served as “signs of a true apostle” faded from the record. Those are simple facts of history, starting with the biblical record of the early church.

So the scriptural basis for the cessation of the gifts as they were seen in the New Testament is robust. Without completely ignoring historic theology, reinterpreting passages of Scripture, and redefining the Pentecostal gift of tongues, there is no way to maintain a continuationist position.

**The Absence of Miracles**

One cannot honestly evaluate the modern charismatic movement without noticing the absence of any true miracles today. God *can* heal. He *does* answer our prayers. He is of course free to do
whatever He chooses. But it is a rather obvious fact (true by definition) that miracles are not the normal means by which He works. Paraplegics do not get out of wheelchairs and walk. Dead people are not being raised to life again at funerals. People in the final stages of terminal cancer don’t experience instant healing. Miracles are simply not normative, even in the most devoted charismatic communities. No one today, including the most revered charismatic celebrities, has the power to summon miracles by a simple command the way the apostles did in Acts 3:6 or 9:34.

For more information on Strange Fire, click here for all the conference media, as well as articles and book reviews.

Available online at: http://www.gty.org

COPYRIGHT (C) 2022 Grace to You
You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You’s Copyright Policy (https://www.gty.org/about#copyright).