

Drawing Lines

Scripture: 2 Timothy 4:2

Code: B140328

After providing three exegetical reasons for believing that the gift of prophecy continues beyond the apostolic era, John Piper set out to offer some critique of charismatic abuses. The *Ask Pastor John* podcast addressed doctrinal and emotional abuses in episode 216, and discernment and financial abuses in episode 217. Piper's constructive criticisms raised several issues that must be addressed.

Are Charismatic Errors/Abuses Linked to Charismatic Doctrine?

John begins by asserting, "Every charismatic abuse has its mirror image in non-charismatic abuses. Nothing I am going to say is unique to charismatics."^[1] He encourages charismatic listeners not to feel picked on because, as he says, "I know that in some of these cases the non-charismatic church is *more* guilty than the charismatic."^[2]

Now, by framing the issue that way, John (at least formally) dismisses any connection between (a) the abuses he goes on to address and (b) the theology that leads to and enables those abuses. If it's true that nothing he brings up is unique to charismatics, he is not really doing what the host asked him to do—to address *charismatic* abuses. It seems he doesn't really believe that those abuses arise from the particular theology embraced by charismatics.

But I, along with the other speakers at the Strange Fire conference, contend that nothing could be further from the truth. There *is* a clear line from charismatic theology to a myriad of doctrinal errors and practical abuses. When a movement is built upon the conviction that feelings or emotions, rather than truth aimed at the mind, are the surest guide to the knowledge of God,^[3] it is a movement ripened and ready for the abuses of aberrant theology. Experientialism, emotionalism, and subjectivism have proved defenseless against heresy and error.

And that is precisely what we observe. Of the roughly 500 million people worldwide who self-identify as charismatics, 120 million are Roman Catholic, 24 million are anti-Trinitarian Oneness Pentecostals, and hundreds of millions would mistake the prosperity gospel, preached by many on the Trinity Broadcasting Network, for the true gospel.^[4] What could possibly unite these groups who cannot agree on the most basic tenets of Christian conviction, such as the doctrine of justification and the Trinity? It is certainly not the objective truth of Scripture, but rather the shared mystical experiences of redefined spiritual gifts.

Further, the idea that God continues to speak through modern-day prophets encourages people to seek "fresh wind—fresh fire." After all, why depend on *old* revelation from God when you can get something new, something contemporary, something fresh? That temptation to prefer a new, immediate word from God and ignore the old and written Word is very strong. Sadly, charismatic churches encourage their people to yield to that temptation as a matter of normal Christian living. That throws the door wide open to every false teacher who wants to peddle aberrant theology in the name of God. Conrad Mbewe gave a clear picture of how terrifying that can be in other parts of the

world (see [here](#) and [here](#)). He has watched the shaman-like charlatans claim to receive ongoing, subjective revelation by the Holy Spirit; exalt themselves; and lord it over others as “the man of God” in order to extract money from poor, needy, and desperate people.

The point is, there is an organic theological link between the doctrines of the charismatic movement and the abuses that arise within it. And while no one would deny that there are doctrinal errors and emotional abuses in non-charismatic churches, one would be hard pressed to trace those errors and abuses back to cessationist theology, which is built upon the sufficiency and finality of the Scriptures.

Is Cessationism a Pathway to Liberalism?

In addition to softening the criticisms from charismatics, John shifted the focus to emotionless churches, which, he believes, are on the pathway to liberalism. He ended the episode saying, “lest I leave it unsaid, there are emotional abuses in the non-charismatic church, namely, the absence of emotion, which is probably more deadly than the excess.”^[5] That line of critique continued in episode 217:

I would say that non-charismatics taken as a whole—all the Christians who don’t practice the gifts—are far more guilty of [doctrinal and emotional abuses] than charismatics. Think of all doctrinal errors in the history of the church. Those weren’t charismatics, by and large. Think of all the dying mainline churches today, with all their moral and doctrinal aberrations. These aren’t charismatics. And think of the emotional deadness in thousands of non-charismatic evangelical and mainline churches. Those are *deadly* emotional abuses. And, we just need to remember that if we target the charismatic church because of things that are happening there, doctrinally and emotionally, let’s remember the mirror image—which are equally deadly—are happening among non-charismatic churches as well.^[6]

Now, first of all, it’s necessary to point out that the doctrinal errors we read about in church history cannot be laid at the feet of the charismatics *because charismatic theology is not a part of church history*. Protocharismatic movements, led by self-proclaimed prophets who advocated continuing revelation by the Spirit, cropped up at various points in church history.^[7] However, their prophecies were summarily dismissed by the church as arrogant, presumptuous, and false; their theology was condemned as aberrant or heretical.

Secondly, no one has argued that errors and abuses exist only within charismatic churches. That is not the issue at all. What we’re talking about here are *charismatic* errors and abuses, the aberrations of doctrine and practice that are taught, promoted, developed, and/or tolerated within charismatic circles. The *Ask Pastor John* podcast titles acknowledge the existence of such errors and abuses, even if the critique in those programs falls short of addressing the theology that produces the problems.

Thirdly, John refers to the emotional deadness of the mainline churches as evidence that emotional abuses exist in the cessationist camp as well, namely, the *lack* of emotion. However, mainline liberals are emotionally dead not because they are cessationists but because they deny fundamental doctrines of Scripture. By cutting themselves off from the gospel and the Savior, they forfeit the theology that gives life and brings joy. When mainline churches deny the inerrancy of Scripture, penal substitutionary atonement, and the deity of Christ, it’s no wonder they don’t have renewed spiritual affections—they are unregenerate. Their emotional deadness has nothing to do with their

cessationism. And though there are doctrinal, emotional, discernment, and financial abuses in all kinds of churches—charismatic and cessationist, liberal and conservative—you cannot draw a straight line from those problems to a theology that insists on the sole authority and absolute sufficiency of the Scripture (i.e., cessationism).

How Should We Deal with Charismatic Error and Abuse?

So, this debate isn't a matter of "my church does it better than your church;" nor is it about those who are more emotional or less emotional.^[8] This is a matter of truth and error. My pastoral duty is to call Christians to abandon all other forms of revelation, and to bind their consciences to the authority and sufficiency of Scripture alone. That not only keeps them away from error and within the safe boundaries of Scripture—it connects them with the transforming power of God's Word, which the Holy Spirit uses to conform Christians to the image of Christ. It's a ministry of love—passion for God and compassion for people.

John Piper prefers to take a more indirect approach to confronting charismatics. In his words:

I don't go on a warpath against charismatics. I go on a crusade to spread truth. I am spreading gospel-centered, Christ-exalting, Bible-saturated, Calvinistic truth everywhere, and I'm going to push it into the face of every charismatic I can find. Because what I believe is, if they embrace the biblical system of doctrine that's really there, it will bring all of their experiences into the right orbit around the sun of this truth.^[9]

That sounds great, and I wholeheartedly affirm the need for the positive preaching of the truth. Paul commands pastors to "preach the word; be ready in season and out of season." But there's a negative, corrective side to pastoral ministry as well: We are also to "reprove, rebuke, exhort with great patience and instruction" (2 Timothy 4:2).

You can preach a "truth crusade" to T.D. Jakes and Benny Hinn until you're blue in the face. They'll smile and call you "brother," all the way to the bank. Their theology and practice, which are consistent with one another, need to be confronted head on, and Christians need to be warned to stay away from them.

Conclusion

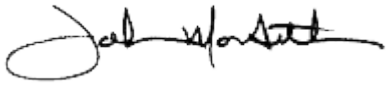
The abuses that have arisen in the charismatic movement are not merely incidental to their theology; they are organically linked to it. If charismatic and continuationist leaders ignore that direct link, any call to correct errors and abuses will prove to be ineffective—you can't deal with the fruit if you don't deal with the root.

The final chapter of *Strange Fire* is called "An Open Letter to My Continuationist Friends." John is one of those friends. The Lord has used him mightily over decades to strengthen and encourage the church and reach the world with the message of salvation. It would be very impactful if he were to speak definitively in condemning the errors and abuses that arise in the charismatic movement. As I wrote in *Strange Fire*:

I am convinced that the dangers inherent in the continuationist position are such that a clear warning

needs to be issued. There is too much at stake for my Reformed charismatic and evangelical continuationist friends to ignore the implications of their view. As leaders in the evangelical world, they wield a great deal of influence; the trajectory they set will determine the course for the next generation of young ministers and the future of evangelicalism. That is why a line in the sand needs to be drawn, and those who are willing to stand up and defend the Spirit's true work must do so.^[10]

John's willingness to confront aberrant theology and practices was encouraging to hear, but my hope is that he will excel still more. I know he will, as I will, as we pursue Christ together to our dying days. It's my greatest joy and pleasure to serve alongside him in all aspects of gospel ministry.



[1] *Ask Pastor John*, [episode 216](#), 0:27–0:40.

[2] *Ask Pastor John*, [episode 216](#), 0:21–0:55.

[3] “The common element in all these varieties of mysticism is that they all seek all (or most, or the normative, or at least a substantial part) of the knowledge of God in human feelings, which they look upon as the sole (or at least the most trustworthy, or the most direct) source of the knowledge of God” (Benjamin B. Warfield, “Mysticism and Christianity,” in *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield* [Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003], 9:653–54, lightly formatted).

[4] MacArthur, *Strange Fire*, 14.

[5] *Ask Pastor John*, [episode 216](#), 7:34–7:47.

[6] *Ask Pastor John*, [episode 217](#), 0:44–1:33.

[7] E.g., the Montanists, the Zwickau Prophets, the Quakers, and the Irvingites, to name a few.

[8] This is the subject of episode 239. While I would join John Piper in decrying the excesses of emotionalism as well as the anemia of so-called “dead orthodoxy,” it is imprudent to say that we prefer the excess of emotion to the absence of emotion. Scripture demands that we prefer neither and combat both.

[9] *Ask Pastor John*, [episode 216](#), 4:09–4:40.

[10] MacArthur, *Strange Fire*, p. 247.

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