

SCHOLAR'S CORNER

What do you think about the Charismatic Movement in the Episcopal Church and about Pentecostalism in general?

Sorry, but I don't have a simple answer for you about the charismatic movement.

In a nutshell, I think the basic charismatic religious experience is good and beneficial, but some of the theology found in charismatic circles is problematic and charismatic experience is not to be mistaken for the highest level of spirituality possible. So I recommend charismatic spirituality but warn people to proceed with caution because of a number of common pitfalls.

First the positives: It seems to me (and I speak from personal experience in the charismatic movement) that the basic religious experience of charismatic spirituality (the initial experience often called "the Baptism of the Holy Spirit" and the subsequent charismatic prayer life and worship experience) is basically about a sense of intimacy with God in which God is experienced as present and willing to bless. There is in charismatic worship an expectancy of God manifesting Himself, providing guidance and encouragement to the gathered worshipers, often through first-person messages from God in what

is called prophecy or in an interpretation of tongues. At its most basic level, charismatic spirituality is about openness to the presence of God right here and right now. In this style of spirituality, an openness to God and to God speaking to us and coming to us through others is valued.

I think this openness is a good thing for one's spiritual life. But – and here comes the first warning – the openness to God and God's action in your life can leave one vulnerable to being hurt – not by God, of course, but by human beings. You do not have to look far to find stories of people who were greatly harmed in various ways while involved in the charismatic movement. The most dramatic examples of being hurt are clearly cases like Jonestown, where a charismatic church's leader, Jim Jones, became the cult leader, eventually persuading his followers to commit suicide. But there are thousands of other stories of people hurt by charismatic churches because they were so open to the leadership of their church that they accepted and went along with things that were false, sick or crazy. Weird, bizarre beliefs sometimes

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originate spontaneously and proliferate wildly in the Pentecostal world, leading non-charismatic Evangelical Protestants to regard charismatics as prone to unbiblical, sometimes even heretical ideas.

As to my second caveat, there is a tendency for people involved in Pentecostalism to think that they have arrived and have become much closer to God and much more spiritual. And it is true that when people have the "Baptism of the Holy Spirit" experience, they often report that their religious experience has been transformed from dry and uninteresting to one of peace, love and joy.

But the charismatic experience alone does not bring with it wisdom and maturity. (Remember, Jim Jones and all his People's Temple congregation were Pentecostals.) If it did, there would not be some of the bizarre, off-the-wall beliefs and practices in the Pentecostal world,

such as snake handling.

By the way, I consider the charismatic movement to have some similarities with experience-oriented movements in other religious traditions. What I have in mind is the Hasidic Movement in Judaism and the Sufi Movement in Islam. All three, it seems to me, have the same positive elements and tendencies toward the same problems. All three place great importance on the inner life of prayer and seek to experience intimacy, even union, with God. All three are characterized by joy and exuberance and a sense of the Presence of God. This much is good about each movement, even if each is plagued by problems similar to those of charismatic Christianity, like putting leaders up on pedestals and other "cultic features," including gullibility and therefore a tendency to accept uncritically whatever is taught.

So do I recommend the charismatic movement? Yes, I do. But proceed with caution.

Questions about the Bible or other religious subjects may be sent to
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