



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

Missiology

Lesson 19 – The Charismatic Movement as a Threat to Christian Missions

Many of the fastest growing churches in the world today are churches that have been influenced by the charismatic movement. This is true especially of the Protestant churches that have developed in Central America and South America. But it is true of churches in other parts of the world as well.

The charismatic movement is characterized by what are considered special gifts of the Holy Spirit. We believe that the Holy Spirit works by means of the Gospel and the Gospel sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. But charismatic churches strive for additional gifts of the Spirit that, in their eyes, are more effective than the bare preaching of the Gospel and the use of the Sacraments.

There have been outbreaks of charismatic religion from time to time among Christians since the days of the apostles. The modern-day charismatic movement got its start in Arminian and Methodist groups that emphasized the importance of man's free will in making a decision for Christ. They developed various methods to bring about conversion to Christ, such as emotional appeals, a certain kind of music, and attempts to work up enthusiasm (feelings) in the assemblies.

So-called holiness churches began to emphasize that conversion from unbelief to faith in Christ was not enough. It was necessary to obtain a second blessing, in which the Holy Spirit would make you really holy. Some even claimed that through this second blessing they would become completely holy and without sin in their daily living.

In the last part of the nineteenth century some were not satisfied with the "first blessing" and the "second blessing". They taught that Christians should strive for a third blessing in which the Holy Spirit would enter into them and show Himself by strange body movements and the speaking in strange languages. They believed they were being baptized with the Holy Spirit and fire. One person described it in this way: "Those receiving the 'fire' would often shout, scream, speak in tongues, fall into trances, and even get the jerks." All these actions were supposedly caused by the Holy Spirit. It is the way a person could prove that he was truly a Spirit-filled Christian.

On December 31, 1900, one of these Holiness preachers in the state of Kansas in the United States laid his hands on the head of a female student, and she began to speak in a language that could not be understood by others. At first it was hoped that she was speaking a definite foreign language as the Christians did on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2), but they soon learned that what she was speaking was not a foreign language, but simply a language

of her own making. This tongue-speaking was imitated and promoted by many others, and soon Pentecostalism was spreading in the United States and many other countries in the world. Large Pentecostalist church bodies were formed, such as the Assemblies of God and The Church of God in Christ. These churches teach that speaking in tongues is a gift that every Christian should seek, and that it is the definite proof of the presence of the Holy Spirit.

The Pentecostalist churches have spread their version of Christianity throughout the world. The largest Protestant churches in South America are Pentecostalist churches. The Pentecostalists have used radio and television to spread their teaching everywhere. Among the well-known Pentecostalist preachers have been Oral Roberts, Jimmy Swaggart, and Jim Bakker. As is almost always the case with famous people, many of these popular preachers have been caught in scandals having to do with money or sex. They begin to think that because they have the Holy Spirit guiding them, they do not have to concern themselves with morality according to the Ten Commandments.

At first this tongue-speaking was prevalent only in Pentecostalist churches. But since 1960 preachers from other church bodies, such as Episcopalian, Methodist, Lutheran, and Roman Catholic churches, have begun to promote tongue-speaking and other so-called special gifts of the Holy Spirit. These churches and their leaders often lead members away from other churches because their worship is more exciting and emotional in an outward way. They claim to do miracles, heal the sick, and even receive direct messages from God. Their claim is that they are closer to the true apostolic church than other churches because they have the Holy Spirit and His special gifts just like the church in Corinth. But the fact is that the apostle Paul deemphasized the speaking in tongues which was occurring in Corinth, and urged instead speaking plainly in a language that everyone could understand. He also urged the Corinthians to act love toward others and worship in an orderly manner. In fact, Paul forbade the speaking in tongues in a church service if there was no one who could understand and translate what was being said. Read 1 Corinthians chapters 12-14.

What then are the dangers in Pentecostalism and the charismatic movement that threaten genuine Christian missions? Here is a short list:

- It emphasizes subjective religious experience over the teaching and study of the Holy Scriptures.
- It makes a distinction between ordinary Christians and tongue-speaking Christians.
- It is very doubtful that the speaking in tongues comes from the Holy Spirit since it generally promotes false teaching contrary to the Holy Spirit's authentic teaching in the Bible.
- It ignores doctrinal differences and practices fellowship among charismatics from different churches, regardless of their teachings.
- The Holy Spirit is given credit for all kinds of revelations that are man-made or even Satan-inspired.

Charismatic churches have attracted many followers, some of them from other Christian church bodies. These churches stress exciting worship: lifting hands, dancing, shouting, tongue-speaking, healing. Women often lead worship services contrary to Bible teaching. New antics are sometimes introduced to keep the excitement high. One example is so-called "holy laughter" and an emotionalism that is totally out of control. The apostle Paul wrote: **"In the church I would rather speak five words with my understanding that I may teach others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue"** (1 Corinthians 14:19). And again he wrote: **"If the whole church comes together in one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those who are uninformed or unbelievers, will they not say that you are out of your mind?"** (1 Corinthians 14:23). **"Let all things be done decently and in order"** (1 Corinthians 14:40).

The basic problem with the charismatic movement is that the Holy Spirit is separated from the means of grace which is the true means that the Holy Spirit uses. Charismatics believe that the Holy Spirit is working apart from the means of grace, but the Bible teaches that the Holy Spirit works through the means of grace: the Gospel in Word and Sacraments. **"It pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe"** (1 Corinthians 1:21).

In the days of Martin Luther there were many radical teachers who were claiming that the Holy Spirit gave them the words they spoke, but their teaching was either contrary to or went above and beyond what the Holy Spirit had already spoken in the Holy Scriptures. Luther called such teachers Enthusiasts, and he wrote the following in *The Smalcald Articles*: *"Enthusiasm clings to Adam and his children from the beginning to the end of the world - fed and spread among them as poison by the old dragon. It is the source, power, and might of all the heresies, even that of the papacy and Mohammed. Therefore we should and must insist that God does not want to deal with us human beings, except by means of His external Word and sacrament. Everything that boasts of being from the Spirit apart from such a Word and Sacrament is of the devil"* (Book of Concord, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 323). This is our confession still today.

Questions

1. What is meant by a charismatic church?
2. What is most likely the reason that charismatic churches are growing?
3. What is wrong with the Arminian emphasis on free will decisions?
4. What are some of the things that go on in charismatic churches?
5. What do these churches claim about the Holy Spirit?
6. What event took place on December 31, 1900, that marked a beginning?
7. How does the Holy Spirit truly do His work?
8. What are the things that the apostle Paul stressed in 1 Corinthians 14?
9. What does it mean that the Holy Spirit works only through the means of grace?
10. What evidence is there that charismatic churches ignore doctrine?
11. What is the source of many teachings attributed to the Holy Spirit?
12. If there are charismatic churches in your area, what are they like?
13. What did Luther mean when he talked about Enthusiasm and Enthusiasts?