

THE THREE WAVES OF CHARISMATIC CHRISTIANITY

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Introduction

Charismatic Christianity is a very significant religious movement in our day. One estimate of the number of renewalists, as Pentecostals, Charismatics and Neo-Charismatics are collectively called, in the world in the year 2000 was 523,767,400, over a half a billion people.¹ In other words, about one-twelfth of the planet's population in Y2K were Pentecostals or Charismatics or Neo-Charismatics. This is also widely reckoned to be the sector of Christendom that is growing at the fastest rate. One church historian even called Charismatic Christianity or renewalism “the fastest growing form of Christianity ever.”²

Moreover, and perhaps most disturbingly, there is also a changing perception of Charismatic Christianity and its views on the part of many Protestant, Calvinistic and Reformed people. They used to be called “Holy Rollers” who existed on the lunatic fringe of Christendom. But now, lo and behold, they are faithful brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ! “Yes,” many would say, “we have our differences with them but we can cooperate with Pentecostals, Charismatics and Neo-Charismatics, and we have a lot to learn from them.” This article deals with a very large and rapidly growing movement that is becoming more and more acceptable to many in our day.

What is at the heart of the Pentecostal, Charismatic and Neo-Charismatic movements? The answer is a peculiar *doctrine* of the Holy Spirit. They maintain that the supernatural gifts of the Spirit, especially tongues, miracles and on-going prophecy, are for today. Thus they are increasingly claiming that the Spirit is restoring the offices of prophet and even super-prophet, and apostle and even super-apostle. By these means and others, they reckon that the Spirit

¹ Stanley M. Burgess (ed.) and Eduard M. van der Maas (assoc. ed.), *The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, rev. 2002), p. 301.

² Stephen Tomkins, *John Wesley: A Biography* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), p. 199.

is empowering the individual renewalist and renewal churches to worship and evangelize with great gladness and power.

Pentecostals, Charismatics and Neo-Charismatics especially emphasize the *experience* of the Holy Spirit—a supernatural and extraordinary experience; an experience involving rapturous joy, glorious spontaneity and freedom before God—which is, of course, very appealing to many in our day. This, the renewalists believe, is genuine New Testament Christianity. This is getting back to the Book of Acts and apostolic church life. Furthermore, Pentecostals, Charismatics and Neo-Charismatics present their movements not only as a return to the apostolic past but also the way of the future. “God is doing a new thing in the earth; He is sending us a glorious end-time revival,” they claim. “We are dynamic and doing great things for the Lord. Look at the size of our movement and its growth in a little over a century. This is the way of future success and blessing for Christianity.”

Let us look at the history and origins of Pentecostalism, Charismaticism and Neo-Charismaticism, following the commonly adopted three waves classification of C. Peter Wagner.

1st Wave: Pentecostalism

Pentecostalism was the first wave of the Spirit which broke over the church. In 1906 in Los Angeles, California, a revival occurred at 312 Azusa Street, led by William J. Seymour, a black holiness preacher who believed in entire sanctification. On that occasion, people claimed to receive the baptism with the Holy Spirit and to speak in tongues. They said that this was another Pentecost like that recorded in Acts 2. Church historian Vinson Synan, who is favourable to the movement, describes the scene:

A visitor to Azusa Street during the three and a half years the revival continued would have met scenes that beggared description. Men and women would shout, weep, dance, fall into trances, speak and sing in tongues, and interpret their messages into English ... In the middle of it all was “Elder” Seymour, who rarely preached [!] and much of the time kept his head covered in an empty packing crate behind the pulpit. At times he would be seen walking through the crowds

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with five- and ten-dollar bills sticking out of his hip pockets that people had crammed there unnoticed by him. At other times he would “preach” by hurling challenges at anyone who did not accept his views or by encouraging seekers at the woodplank altars to “let the tongues come forth.” To others he would exclaim: “Be emphatic! Ask for salvation, [entire] sanctification, the baptism with the Holy Ghost, or divine healing.”³

What mayhem! People dancing, shouting and singing gibberish, with Seymour, head under a crate behind the pulpit or striding through the excited crowds with greenbacks poking out of his back pockets or hollering Pentecostal commands. This is not the work of God’s Holy Spirit (I Cor. 14:33, 40; II Tim. 1:7)! From Azusa Street, the Pentecostal revival spread throughout the United States and around the world, leading to the formation of separate Pentecostal denominations, like the Assemblies of God.

2nd Wave: Charismaticism

Some fifty years after the Azusa Street revival, the second wave broke: Charismaticism. Like Pentecostalism, Charismaticism began in California. On a Sunday morning in 1959, Dennis Bennett, an Episcopalian clergyman, announced to his congregation in Van Nuys, California, that he had been baptized with the Holy Spirit and had spoken in tongues.

Like Pentecostals, Charismatics believe in a baptism with the Holy Spirit subsequent to or after conversion, which is evidenced by tongue-speaking. But, unlike Pentecostals, Charismatics do not separate into separate denominations. Thus there are Charismatic Anglicans, Charismatic Lutherans, Charismatic Presbyterians, Charismatic Roman Catholics, Charismatic Methodists, etc. Like Pentecostalism, Charismaticism also spread around the globe.

3rd Wave: Neo-Charismaticism

Some twenty years after Rev. Dennis Bennett’s thunderbolt, the third wave

³ Vinson Synan, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, rev. 1997), pp. 98-99.

broke: Neo-Charismaticism. While the first two waves arose and crashed on the shores of sunny California, the third wave was merely named in California by C. Peter Wagner of Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena in the early 1980s.

Like Pentecostals and Charismatics, third wavers or Neo-Charismatics practise the pentecostal or charismatic gifts but, unlike Pentecostals and Charismatics, the Neo-Charismatics do not believe that baptism with the Holy Spirit as a second work of grace subsequent to the new birth is necessary in order to exercise spiritual gifts. Nor do they view tongues as the initial physical evidence of the baptism with the Holy Spirit. Third wavers tend to be less obtrusive and seek to be less divisive in practising their gifts.

Effects of the Three Waves

These waves began just over a century ago with Pentecostalism in 1906 and continued with Charismaticism in 1959 and its explosion through the 1960s, which was followed by the third wave of Neo-Charismaticism a couple of decades later. These tsunamis have “tossed” people “to and fro” with their false doctrine over the last hundred years (cf. Eph. 4:14). Thankfully, these three waves have left us high and dry!

Within this broad movement of Pentecostalism, Charismaticism and Neo-Charismaticism, also known as renewalism or Charismatic Christianity, there are various societies or groups, such as the Full Gospel Businessmen Fellowship International, the Latter Rain Movement and the Signs and Wonders Movement, which hold that, unless you are working miracles, your evangelistic labours lack real power (contra Rom. 1:16-17; I Cor. 1:22-24). During the Toronto Blessing, which began in 1994, people fell backwards and claimed to be slain in the Spirit. More recently, Canadian Todd Bentley of Fresh Fire Ministries of Florida asserted that he has raised people from the dead—one favourable report said over twenty and another reckoned over thirty.⁴ Even in N. Ireland, a disciple of the Fresh Fire Ministries claimed he had resurrected a young man in the Tiger’s Bay area of Belfast.

A century or more of Charismatic Christianity has left us with many unforgettable images, beginning with its founder with his head in a packing

⁴ Others have pointed out that not a single instance was medically verifiable.

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crate and including people being slain in the Spirit and doing “carpet time.” Some remember Rodney Howard-Browne blasphemously claiming to be the Holy Ghost bartender. Who can forget Benny Hinn taking off his jacket, waving it and blowing, so that people fall backwards? Into this mix, we must throw in the gibberish of tongues-speaking, animal noises, uncontrollable laughter and various other bizarre antics, both on-stage and in the crowd. On a sadder note, there are the pictures of sick and disabled people going home unhealed again after yet another big charismatic meeting. Many of us know people, including family members, who have been caught up and messed up by Charismatic Christianity. Some have taken years to recover, while others have never gotten over it.

Beloved, let us walk in the “old paths” of biblical, Reformed and creedal Christianity. This is the “good way” to the glory of the Triune God revealed in Jesus Christ. In covenant fellowship with our Father and by His Holy Spirit, we and our children find “rest” for our souls (Jer. 6:16).