

Grace to You :: Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time

Is There a Baby in the Charismatic Bathwater? (Phil Johnson)

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 5:21

Code: TM13-9

As you might expect, when we announced that we were holding a conference to coincide with the release of a new book about the charismatic movement, most of the feedback from our charismatic friends was sharply critical. Some of it was bitterly acrimonious. Criticisms came mostly in the form of blogposts, tweets, editorials in charismatic magazines, and other public slapdowns—all before anyone had even read the book!

But to my charismatic friends, I say: *Welcome to the discussion*. I am truly grateful for the feedback we have received, and we look forward to the wave of responses that we know are still yet to come.

One of the most widely-read critiques regarding the *Strange Fire* conference came from Michael Brown, who posted a series of articles online at the *Charisma Magazine* website. Michael was particularly distressed about John MacArthur's suggestion that certain charismatic hijinks are blasphemous.

John MacArthur is of course responding to the common charismatic complaint that any critique of charismatic phenomena runs a serious risk of blaspheming the Holy Spirit. One of the main points John makes in his book is this: *To attribute works of the flesh or works of the devil to the Holy Spirit actually denigrates the Spirit of God rather than exalting Him, and that is obviously a kind of blasphemy.*

Michael Brown thinks that assessment is much too harsh. Apparently, in Michael's view, every conceivable kind of blasphemy that involves the Holy Spirit is an unpardonable transgression. Here's a quote from Michael Brown: *"If [John MacArthur's] charges are true, this means that many leaders in the charismatic movement have committed the unpardonable sin and are therefore hell-bound."*

That, of course, is not what John MacArthur says, and it's not what we believe. Matthew 12:31 says, "Every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven." The definite article there is significant. We don't believe that every careless, ignorant, or accidental sin against the third member of the Trinity is automatically unforgivable. Jesus was responding to one specific kind of blasphemy so deliberate and hard-hearted that no one would ever repent from it anyway. Notice what our Lord actually says: "every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people"—except this one very specific sin. That's a lavish promise of full pardon and cleansing to anyone and everyone who repents. The singular exception is just one category of hard-hearted

haters of Christ. He was speaking about the pharisees who had just called him satanic. They *knew* who he was and tried to turn people away from him anyway. Their sin was a deliberate, final, whole-hearted, irreversible rejection of Christ, sealed with a blasphemy that was totally willful, from hearts that had already seen, understood, and known the truth about Christ and His glory—but spurned him anyway.

(I preached a 3-part series on the unpardonable sin, and you can download it for free online if you want to know our position on that.) But the point here is that it is indeed sinful—*blasphemous*—to invoke the Holy Spirit's name to justify foolish doctrines, fleshly behavior, or false prophecy.

In fact, we are sounding this alarm about charismatic chicanery precisely in order to call our charismatic friends to repent of the besetting sin of their movement—namely, the sin of attributing to the Holy Spirit words He has not spoken and things He has not done.

Now, it is obvious (or it *ought* to be) that the visible church today is overrun with people who are speaking messages in God's name that God has not authorized. They proclaim false prophecies. They claim divine authority for dreams and visions that God never gave. They bind burdens on people that God never intended. And they teach strange precepts and doctrines that have no basis whatsoever in Scripture.

The charismatic movement is a bottomless well of errors such as those. We would argue that *the primary conduit through which the vast majority of troublesome doctrines and practices are coming into the church today is the broad road of the pentecostal and charismatic movement.* (I think that fact is self-evident. If you doubt it, I invite you to try to offer statistical evidence to refute it.)

Back to Michael Brown. Like all honest charismatics, he freely acknowledges that the charismatic movement has spawned an over-abundance of charlatans, phonies, heretics, and crackpots. But he says, *"I am far more concerned about denying the true fire than I am about putting out every aberrant charismatic brush fire."*

He seems to think it is unreasonable for anyone to expect that he, a charismatic, should speak out and condemn the aberrations in his own movement. He asks, [quote] *"Why ... must Pentecostal and charismatic pastors renounce extremes in their movement to somehow prove their orthodoxy?"*

I'm happy to answer that question. In Titus 1:9, Paul says it is every pastor's duty not only to "hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine[, but] also to rebuke those who contradict it." Yet Michael Brown goes on to ask, *"If a [charismatic] pastor is shepherding his flock and feeding them God's Word, and his people are not guilty of these abuses or watching these TV preachers, why is it his responsibility to address these errors?"*

That, I fear, is an attitude that is all too typical of charismatics—even the best of them. There's this smothering fear that any critical evaluation of their movement risks blaspheming the Holy Spirit—even if it's a mild critique of the most outlandish charismatic monkey business. If you don't give at least a tacit credence to the whimsical claims and outlandish behavior of the latest charismatic fad, you'll be branded a skeptic. You'll be called a rationalist. You'll be told that you are perilously close to committing an unpardonable sin. If every hint of caution or discretion is seen as a close cousin of rank unbelief, they figure it's better to let the claims being made by the extreme element in their movement go unchallenged. So all kinds of carnal, melodramatic, and aberrant behavior are being attributed to the Holy Spirit, and almost no one inside the movement ever raises a peep of protest. That, frankly, is a shameful affront to the name and reputation of Christ. It is no exaggeration to call it *blasphemy*.

Meanwhile, here is Michael Brown's chief criticism of John MacArthur: "*[MacArthur] has made sweeping, critical statements, often throwing out the baby with the bathwater, not only rejecting the dangerous excesses and extremes in the charismatic movement but also labeling some genuine works of the Spirit as 'charismatic chaos.'*"

In a subsequent article, Michael Brown got specific about what he considers "genuine works of the Spirit." Frankly it is profoundly troubling when you understand what even a thoughtful charismatic like Michael Brown accepts as genuine. He defends several patently false prophets and prophetesses, including Cindy Jacobs and Mike Bickle, whom he describes as "godly." (If you don't know Mike Bickle, I'll introduce you to him before we are through.) But Michael Brown especially takes issue with John MacArthur's description of the famous charismatic Revival in Brownsville, Florida in the 1990s. John called it a "mindless, emotional orgy marked by irrational, sensual and fleshly behavior."

The Brownsville revival was a charismatic mecca from 1995 through 1999. Michael Brown was the leader of the "Brownsville Revival School of Ministry" until he was fired in 2000 as the movement was dying. When it was all over, the host church in Brownsville was in debt to the tune of more than \$11 million.

Lee J. Grady, editor of *Charisma* magazine, wrote about the demise of Brownsville. Grady is himself a charismatic—and to give him credit, he is one of the few who is sometimes candid about how dysfunctional the movement is. He wrote an article titled "What Happened to Brownsville's Fire?" Look it up on line and read it, and you can decide for yourself whether John MacArthur's description of Brownsville is correct. Here's a line from Lee Grady's article: "One night, in the midst of all the pandemonium near the stage, I ran over to where Hill was praying. He grabbed my head and screamed, 'Fire! Fire! More, Lord!'" Grady says, "I was one of the thousands who fell backward on that floor."

Near the end of the article, Grady says, "For those in Pensacola who were swept up in the ecstasy of those early years, and then endured splits, resignations, debts, and disappointments, the word 'revival' now has a hollow ring to it."

Anyway, when you understand what Michael Brown himself classifies as evidence of the Holy Spirit's genuine work, it is frankly pretty hard to sympathize with the indignation he aims at critics of the charismatic movement.

But since the baby-in-the-bathwater cliché is one of the charismatics' most common replies to their critics, I want to address it.

I did a quick Google search and easily found hundreds of places where charismatics complain that non-charismatics who critique charismatic aberrations are "throwing the baby out with the bathwater." They love that cliché.

So let's probe around in the murky bathwater and see if we can find a baby anywhere in there.

My first question for charismatics who truly care about the Bible's authority is this: "If you bristle at every critique of your movement, what is *your* proposal to keep from constantly accumulating filth in your bathtub?" Because it is an incontrovertible fact that the charismatic movement is a breeding-ground for charlatans, false prophets, greed-mongers, heretics, and wolves in sheep's clothing. All you have to do is turn on your television to see abundant evidence of that.

It's true that wolves hide out in *every* congregation and every denomination of the visible church—including the best evangelical churches. But the charismatic movement from its very inception has produced a relentless parade of scoundrels—far exceeding what you find in non-charismatic evangelical circles. For a movement that claims they are the only ones who get what it truly means to be spirit-filled, charismatics as a group suffer from a stunning, pathological scarcity of the fruits of genuine sanctification.

In little more than a century, the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements have spun off so many bad doctrines and bizarre characters that I have a thick dictionary in my office just to help me keep track of them all.

There are five or six religious channels on my satellite TV service, and all of them feature wall-to-wall frauds, phony faith-healers, and money-grubbing religious quacks. All of the religious rogues on TV are charismatics. I can't think of a single exception. (Joel Osteen hides it pretty well, but he's a charismatic. Look it up if you don't believe me.)

Every one of the fifteen best-known charismatic televangelists either preaches a false gospel, prophesies falsely, promotes heresy, lives lavishly with funds bilked mainly from poor people. Virtually all of them have failed morally or otherwise brought significant public dishonor on the name of Christ. All of them are disqualified from ministry on biblical grounds.

And let's be clear: the vast majority of the millions of charismatics worldwide are following the televangelists. Charismatics as a group are *not* taking their cues from the handful of Reformed charismatics who actually do preach the gospel. The Reformed charismatics are a small fringe at the outer edge of the larger movement. They are a negligible minority in terms of both numbers and influence. And the guys you see on TV with poofy hairdos and shiny suits are the true charismatic mainstream.

On what basis do I say that? Any statistic you can cite would prove that. Charismatic television is a multi-billion-dollar business. No one knows the exact figures, because most of the large charismatic ministries assiduously avoid any kind of accountability. But their reach is long and their combined viewership dwarfs even the most generous estimates of Reformed charismatics.

The Trinity Broadcasting Network alone draws some 100 million viewers worldwide. They have more than 18,000 affiliates and are in more than 100 countries. That is a massive vat of seriously contaminated bathwater—which brings me to a second question. And this is the main question I am interested in exploring:

Is there indeed a live baby in that toxic quagmire? Did the baby drown in that murky mess? Was there really a baby there in the first place? What, precisely, are we trying so hard to preserve? How many false teachers and evil doctrines does a movement have to spawn before men and women who claim to love the Word of God will write it off?

Remember Todd Bentley? He suddenly rose to fame in April of 2008, when he was invited to speak at a church in Lakeland, FL—and supposedly a revival broke out. For six months or so, Todd Bentley was the most famous and most influential charismatic leader in America.

Bentley was a Canadian-born tough-guy wannabe with hobnail biker boots and neck tattoos. He had a criminal past. At age 15 he had sexually assaulted a young boy. Bentley himself admits that he committed other sexual crimes for which he was never charged. (He told a reporter he was "involved in a sexual assault ring.") And he was a drug addict by age 17.

At 18, he professed conversion to Christ, and he began attending a charismatic small-group fellowship in an organization known as Fresh Fire Ministries. Bentley is a glib fast-talker, and when they asked him to give his testimony, he wowed the group with stories of his sordid past. Before long he took over leadership of the group. He soon was getting speaking gigs in charismatic churches

worldwide.

In 2008, he came to Lakeland, FL to lead a week-long series of meetings. It turned into a prolonged event, lasting almost 7 months—through October 2008. That summer, Bentley was the talk of the whole charismatic world. It was all live-streamed on the World Wide Web, so you could watch from anywhere. Millions did and were swept up in the delirium. One of the charismatic television networks (GOD TV) preempted their normal programming to broadcast live from Lakeland every night.

And it was utterly and completely grotesque from the beginning. Bentley loved violence. He frequently boasted about his unorthodox healing methods—which usually involved a punch to the stomach or a boot to the head. One man got a tooth knocked out. There is a Youtube video that shows Bentley kicking a man in the stomach hard enough to cause internal injuries. The man had stage-4 colon cancer, and Bentley said that's how the Holy Spirit told him to drive the demon of cancer out. He boasted about kicking an elderly woman in the face. And he would frequently drive his knee into the midsection of people who came forward for healing or some kind of spiritual anointing. In Norway he created a scandal by repeatedly slapping a young girl in the face. Bentley also boasted, by the way, that he had raised more than a dozen people from the dead.

Todd Bentley was an over-the-top narcissistic. He was a braggart, bombastic, often angry, profane, deliberately uncouth. I don't think it's unfair to say that his stage persona was utterly devoid of any hint of grace. In fact, the personality he deliberately projected was exactly antithetical to the true fruit of the spirit: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control."

And Bentley's teaching was devoid of any sound and solid *biblical* content. Never has the charismatic movement produced a more blatant or more carnal fraud.

A number of non-charismatic onlookers pointed out *all* of those things very early and warned people not to follow this man. Todd Friel, for example, repeatedly used to play sound and video clips straight from the Lakeland meetings and warn his listeners that Bentley was sinister. Almost any random clip of Bentley talking was enough to prove that his teaching and his methods were altogether unbiblical. Bentley's bluster and bravado were nauseating. But most charismatics scolded Todd Friel rather than Todd Bentley. A flashmob of angry charismatics called into Friel's radio program to accuse him of making hasty judgments. *This could legitimately be a "new move of the Spirit,"* they said. *"It's dangerous to speak against it."* I distinctly remember that several of them quoted Gamaliel from Acts 5:38-39: "I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!"

In those days, I was writing for the Pyromaniacs' blog. The Pyromaniacs often pointed out the dangers of aberrant doctrines and unorthodox movements (not just charismatics, but Emergents and

postmodernists, and pretty much anyone who didn't have a high view of Scripture). My blog-partner, Dan Phillips, wrote a couple of posts about the Lakeland revival, in which he simply pleaded for our readers to use an uncomplicated biblical standard to evaluate every popular movement and every person who claims to be Spirit-led. Here are some of the things Dan said [quote]:

! If it doesn't center on and exalt the person and work of Jesus Christ, it's not a true work of the Holy Spirit.

! If it wasn't produced by the preaching of the Word of God, it's not a work of the Holy Spirit.

! If it doesn't produce holy living, which includes godly behavior and specifically self-control, it isn't authentic revival.

! If the leaders aren't men well-known for the qualities listed in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:6-9, and specifically for being in subjection to the Word of God—and for soundly teaching the whole counsel of God, it's not a movement you should follow. [unquote]

Now, those seem like fairly obvious, sensible, biblical guidelines, right? Those principles are sound, sane, Scriptural, and equally applicable to charismatics and non-charismatics alike. But we immediately had a stampede of people commenting on our blog warning us to be careful lest we "be found fighting against God"—or blaspheming the Holy Spirit.

"Leave it alone," they said. *"If it's not of God it will come to nothing."* That seems to be the national anthem of open-but-cautious evangelicals. It belongs to the same species of argument as the baby-in-the-bathwater cliché. It is based on the unbiblical idea that the Spirit of God usually manifests Himself in ways that are strange and irrational. So ultimately, if we go by that way of thinking, we would have no foolproof sensible biblical measure by which to discern what is true and what is false. No wild claim or strange practice (no matter how preposterous) could ever be totally written off just because it is categorically silly, or contrary to the basic qualities of grace and self-control, or more like dementia than authentic spiritual fruit.

In fact, in recent years, charismatics have seemed enthralled with precisely those kinds of phenomena: silly, drunken, flamboyant laughter, barking noises, people falling into a trancelike narcosis. Being slain in the Spirit has been a charismatic staple for at least twenty years—even *though it lacks any biblical warrant.*

And now there's a group led by a man named John Crowder who pretends the Holy Spirit is a supernatural narcotic that will put you into a thick, inebriated stupor. Some of his stuff is the rankest blasphemy. He says he is "tokin' the Ghost," or "smoking Jehovah-juana." Sometimes he gets downright obscene, and if you have never seen him before you'll be tempted to think he is an

unbeliever doing a bad parody, but he is not. He claims the Holy Spirit *makes* him act this way.

Over at Rick Joyner's Morningstar Ministries, they do the "Holy Ghost Hokey Pokey." (If you haven't seen that, just look up the YouTube video.)

At Bethel Church in Redding, CA, they feature the fire-tunnel, which is a kind of gantlet for the laying on of hands—touching coeds while the girls experience uncontrollable spasms and giggling.

Are you familiar with Bethel Church in Redding, CA? Bill Johnson is the pastor there. It is the home of the mega-popular worship band known as "Jesus Culture." Bill Johnson's wife, Beni, talks about how she drives around the Southwest United States, stopping periodically to get out of her car and blow a shofar—then yell, "*Wakey, wakey!*" She believes she is waking up angels in preparation for a great revival. There's so much nonsense coming out of Redding that I frankly don't have time to catalogue it all for you, but the growing popularity of Jesus Culture among mainstream evangelicals is opening the door for all kinds of his nonsense to infiltrate *your* churches. Because many younger evangelicals in the generation now coming into adulthood absolutely love "Jesus Culture."

And of course, Todd Bentley managed to baptize crass violence as a kind of spiritual anointing. Supporters of this approach point out it's what Smith Wigglesworth did. Wigglesworth is an early-20th-century Pentecostal hero who called himself "The Apostle of Faith," and he likewise tried to heal people by punching them out.

By the way, World magazine reported that several people whom Todd Bentley claimed to heal from fatal diseases died in a very short time. One guy died within a week of being punched by Bentley. A non-Christian blogger wrote this about Bentley:

Todd Bentley is in a league of his own. I'm convinced that fringe lunatics are embarrassed by Todd Bentley. Somewhere in the shriveled lump that is his heart, [even] Fred Phelps is ashamed to be part of the same religion as Todd Bentley.

Now you might think the relatively sane and sober charismatics—the guys with some biblical scruples; the people who wish to preserve the baby while throwing out the dirty bathwater—you *might* think they would be the first and loudest voices to condemn these foolish blasphemous practices in their own movement. But you'd be wrong. We almost never hear the most respected Reformed Charismatic voices speak out against abuses in the charismatic movement, especially *while* some new weirdness is at the peak of popularity and influence. That's when careful discernment would be most helpful, but that's generally when all you hear from within the movement are crickets.

Sometimes the people you hope would be a voice of sanity actually *join* the aberrant movements and become part of them. Sam Storms lent his considerable credibility to the Kansas City Prophets for

years, even after it was perfectly clear that they were false prophets. Wayne Grudem likewise showed an undue tolerance of prophetic abuses as a member of the Vineyard movement throughout most of the 1990s, while the Vineyard was spinning out aberrations like the Kansas City Prophets and the Toronto Blessing. Grudem is *still* stoking the fires of prophetic abuse today. Without the weight of Grudem's scholarly credentials, the proliferation of places like the School of Supernatural Ministry in northern California (and dozens of other training centers pumping out false prophets today) would never have gotten any traction.

Then there's Jack Deere, former professor at Dallas Seminary, who renounced cessationism and within a few short years he virtually engineered the spiritual train wreck that culminated in the public disqualification of Paul Cain. Paul Cain was the principle prophet of the 1990s, and he turned out to be a secret drunkard and sodomite.

I think it's fair to point out that the track record on these issues ought to be an embarrassment to my Reformed charismatic brethren. And that's true even if we limit the discussion to the fruit of their most respected leaders.

These were the men who claimed the gift of prophecy is still operative today. Some if not all of them have claimed at one time or another that they possess prophetic abilities. Many of them believe there are authentic apostles in their midst. But they have repeatedly demonstrated an utter inability to identify phonies in the charismatic movement. They don't seem to recognize problems until some nuclear-level scandal breaks out. Worse, they and their followers *often* scold or shout down non-charismatics who try to warn the flock early. That's what was happening when Todd Bentley was at his peak.

I don't have the gift of prophecy, and frankly my football predictions have been wrong every week for the past ten football seasons. But from day one I tried to warn everyone who brought the subject up that Todd Bentley was headed for infamy and moral disgrace. The first time I met Paul Cain, I *knew* he was a phony. The first time I listened to a tape of the Kansas-City prophet Bob Jones, I told the person who gave me the tape that this man was a false prophet. How did I know? It's simple, really: Because the words and the actions of these men were extra-biblical, and yet they claimed what they said was direct revelation from God. Isaiah 8:20: "To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them." You don't need any clairvoyance to make the right judgment if you simply follow the Word of God.

Now if someone like me who lacks any sixth sense or psychic powers can see impending spiritual disaster, why can't the self-styled prophets and dreamers of dreams see it?

I should acknowledge that John Piper *did* finally warn us to be on guard against people like Todd Bentley. But Piper didn't make that statement until after it became known that Bentley was having an

extramarital affair. What Dr. Piper actually wrote was perfectly sound advice. He said, "*Our test for every [movement like this] that comes along should first be doctrinal and expositional. Is this awakening carried along by a 'love for the truth' and a passion to hear the whole counsel of God proclaimed?*"

That's absolutely true, but it would have been helpful to hear that from someone of John Piper's stature when Todd Bentley's influence was on the rise.

Dr. Piper has shown a pattern of hesitation and uncertainty on issues like this for decades. In 1990, he preached a message titled "Are Signs and Wonders for Today?" At the time, the charismatic movement was obsessed with the so-called "Third Wave" of charismatic phenomena. The gift of tongues was just beginning to be eclipsed by talk of other signs and wonders—especially the gift of prophecy. Wayne Grudem's book on the gift of prophecy was clearly a powerful influence on John Piper's thinking, and as Dr. Piper considered the latest trends in the charismatic movement, he said he was gripped by a "heart-wrenching *uncertainty*." Those are his exact words. "Heart-wrenching uncertainty." He said:

I sit at my desk with my head in my hands and plead with the Lord Here are two stacks of books by evangelical pastors and teachers. One stack argues that signs and wonders (like healings) were designed by God to help people recognize and believe in the Son of God and then to vindicate the authority of his apostles After the apostles died and their writings were gathered in the New Testament, the place of signs and wonders was past, and we should not seek them today. The other stack of books argues that signs and wonders should be sought and performed today in Jesus' name. The reason we don't see so many is because of how little expectancy there is in the church. ...

Piper says, "I read these two stacks of books. I comb the Scriptures. I pray. And I wind up again and again somewhere in the middle with a lot of uncertainty."

Twenty-one years later, in an interview with an Australian journal, Piper remembered that sermon. He told the interviewer how he "sent a busload of fifty people out to a Vineyard conference to listen." And John Piper himself also went to hear Wimber.

In the end, he says he was not persuaded by the cessationist argument—yet he was convinced that today's charismatic phenomena simply are not the same thing that was going on in the apostolic era. He couldn't be a cessationist, but he couldn't be a full-fledged Pentecostal, either. He was most comfortable in that sort of agnostic middle ground. And that's where he remains today—not really affirming and not actually sounding any clear alarm against whatever charismatic fad happens to be most popular at the moment.

When Todd Bentley first came on the scene, I thought Bentley was such an outrageous bad example that no one would ever take him seriously. He was self-refuting. But in virtually every public forum where evangelicals gather to talk, people were wondering whether this was a true anointing of the Holy Spirit or not. It was not particularly helpful for someone of John Piper's stature to hold off criticism until *after* Todd Bentley had already morally discredited himself.

And I don't mean to single out John Piper as if he were the only one with this tendency. I've often thought that most of those who describe themselves as "open but cautious" are "cautious" in exactly the wrong direction. A person exercising genuine biblical caution should have had no hesitation about condemning Todd Bentley, his tactics, and his teaching. Certainly if the gift of prophecy were truly operating among Reformed charismatics today, someone somewhere with an influential voice ought to have warned the rest of the movement about this guy long before he utterly made shipwreck of the faith.

But there's this carefully cultivated, non-committal spirit of indecision that permeates most of the Reformed charismatic and "open-but-cautious" segments of the evangelical community. It is a deliberate agnosticism with regard to discerning spirits.

So the extremists and the charlatans can make any claim or pull any stunt they like with near impunity. The handful of charismatics who have the most influence in conservative evangelical circles have basically settled into a comfortable indifference. (Remember the line I quoted from Michael Brown earlier? "Why [should] Pentecostal and charismatic pastors renounce extremes in their movement?") Supposedly "cautious" continuationists watch the procession of charismatic horseplay. They are curious, intrigued, generally nonplussed, but they refuse to make any judgment until *after* the wheels come totally off the latest bandwagon.

If someone looks into the turbid swamp of charismatic sludge, and thinks that attitude of non-judgmental passivity is the baby, forget it. That kind of smug, deliberate indecision has more in common with double-mindedness than with faith. There are times when staking out a middle position is simply the *wrong* thing to do. And it is never more wrong than when thousands of people are going around claiming to speak for God but prophesying falsely.

In fact, let's talk about the charismatic infatuation with so-called "fresh words of prophecy." I'll have more to say about this in my breakout session tomorrow, but it's probably the singular issue Reformed charismatics are most obsessed with.

And let me say something with emphasis before we go any further: I do have friends (good friends; *longtime* friends) who are charismatics. Relatives and neighbors and close acquaintances—people whom I dearly love—are part of the charismatic movement.

Furthermore, despite my criticisms and my frustration with their passivity, I do have warm affection and heartfelt respect for men like John Piper, Wayne Grudem, Sam Storms. I've greatly benefitted from their ministries—especially what they have published and preached from God's Word—and I regularly recommend resources from them that I have found helpful. Obviously, I disagree strongly with them about what to do with the rank heresies that arise so often in the charismatic community, but that doesn't diminish my respect and gratitude for the many ways they have ministered to me with regard to *other* issues.

Anyway, I think if we polled the charismatics I'm most closely related to, the gift of prophecy is probably what most of them would say is the precious baby in the charismatic bathwater.

But modern prophecy happens to be the singular issue that arouses my deepest concerns. That's because the most serious charismatic abuses are all rooted in this notion that God regularly speaks directly into the mind of each believer—that there is revealed truth available to us that supplements what God has given us in Scripture, and this newer revelation naturally supersedes Scripture in relevance and timeliness if not in importance.

I mentioned that prophecy seems to have eclipsed tongues as the principle gift the contemporary charismatic movement is interested in. That's *certainly* true among Reformed charismatics. Many do still speak in tongues, but they do it mostly in private, and not all Reformed charismatics even claim the gift of tongues.

John Piper, for example says he seeks but has not received the gift of tongues. In a video he posted online, he says, "I don't buy the pentecostal historical teaching that you must speak in tongues in order to signify that you are filled with the Spirit ... I don't believe that I have ever authentically spoken in tongues." He goes on to say that he prays for tongues from time to time. These the exact words with which he describes how he prays: "[Lord,] a lot of my brothers and sisters have this toy—this gift. Can I have it too?"

But the point Dr. Piper is making is that even in Scripture, the gift of tongues is not the best or most prominent of the New Testament gifts. (He's absolutely right about that, of course. That's what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12-14.) And I think that's a more or less typical viewpoint among Reformed charismatics nowadays. The gift of prophecy has moved into first position, and tongues have taken a back seat.

As I said, I'm concerned about that, because at the same time, the definition of prophecy has been downgraded from the biblical definition. Reformed charismatics don't see false prophecy as a significant problem. A word of knowledge or a prophetic pronouncement turns out to be patently false? No big deal. That's what they admit happens most of the time! As a result, a serious epidemic

of false prophecies is being thrust upon the church today. And Reformed charismatics continue to defend the practice.

Biblically, a prophet is someone who speaks the words of God. Deuteronomy 18:18 is one of the principle Old Testament texts about the coming Messiah. That's where Messiah is revealed as the chief prophet of all prophets. Listen to how God describes the prophetic task (Deuteronomy 18:18): "I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him."

When God called Moses, this was the role given to Aaron. He was Moses' prophet. He is expressly called that. Exodus 7:1. God tells Moses: "I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet." So what was Aaron's duty? Exodus 4:15-16: "You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth ... He shall speak for you to the people, and he shall be your mouth, and you shall be as God to him." So twice scripture says Moses is like God (in terms of spiritual authority over Pharaoh), and Aaron is the prophet, speaking words put in his mouth by Moses.

That's how prophecy works: the very words are put by God himself into the prophet's mouth, and when the prophet prophesies, he is speaking for God. He is God's own mouthpiece, delivering an authoritative and infallible message he gets from God. Nowhere between the Old and New Testaments is the definition of prophecy changed. A prophet is not someone who reports a hunch, or announces whatever spontaneously comes to mind. A genuine prophet doesn't speak half-truths blended with errors and ambiguities, nor is he someone who simply delivers an opinion that he feels strongly about. A true prophet speaks a word from the Lord. An authentic prophecy has inherent authority. It's not a "what-if." If it's a real prophecy and it contains a command, that command is binding. If it contains a rebuke, it's serious. If it contains a warning, you had better heed it. And the only way Scripture gives us to test whether someone is a true prophet or not is to check whether his prophecy is accurate or not.

And here's the problem with the modern prophets. This is the obvious giveaway that ought to signal anyone with common sense that charismatic prophets are not to be trusted: they have no track-record of accuracy. All of them admit that their prophecies often turn out to be wrong. They *have* to admit that, because it is patently obvious. All of them prophesy falsely.

Back in 1989, the senior Kansas City prophet, Bob Jones, fewer than two-thirds of his prophecies were true. Within two years he was completely discredited because he sexually abused women who came to him seeking prophetic counseling. Twenty years after that (in 2011), Mike Bickle, the pastor who originally shepherded the Kansas City Prophets, admitted that in the 40 years he has been personally involved in the charismatic movement, he thinks at least *eighty percent* of the miracles, prophecies, and other phenomena he has witnessed have been false. He makes that statement with a smile—no shame and no apology. He thinks charismatics should not be troubled by the mass of

false claims in their midst. But if he's right, that means 4 out of 5 prophecies are false, and he goes on to say that even the true prophecies get misinterpreted and therefore lead people astray.

Frankly, I think he's grossly underestimating the problem. But even giving Mike Bickle the benefit of the doubt, here is one of the leading advocates and self-styled experts in the world of charismatic prophecies, and he shamelessly admits that at least 4 out of 5 of their prophetic utterances are false.

That is not a fact that can be overlooked or brushed aside. It makes this whole point of view dangerous in the extreme, and it goes against everything Scripture teaches about true revelation from God. It perverts truth. And it misleads people about the proper way to discern God's will. Most of all, it seriously undermines the supremacy and significance of the sure word of prophecy God has given us in His word.

This is a critical issue, and reams of material have been written and published and disseminated by Reformed charismatics who argue that it is OK for "prophets" to speak falsely most of the time. That should not need to be refuted at all, but because it comes with impressive academic credentials, it has created a massive problem in the districts of evangelicalism most of us inhabit.

Here are some thoughts about prophecy to take with you. If you get nothing else from this session, please listen to this:

First, there is a monstrous potential for evil in blithely assuming that all your private imaginations are supernatural promptings that come to you as divine revelations from the Holy Spirit.

People who order their lives by whims and feelings because they think their own intuition has some kind of revelatory authority are foolish. Proverbs 28:26: "He who trusts in his own heart is a fool." It's willfully gullible and sinfully superstitious to think that way. It is hostile to the biblical concept of discernment.

Second, to claim God told you something when in fact He did not is a profoundly wicked presumption whose fruits are always evil. It was a capital crime to make such a claim under Moses' law. In my assessment, the very worst of all the sinister tendencies of the charismatic movement is this dangerous habit of claiming God said something he did not say.

I mentioned Paul Cain earlier. In the early '90s, he was being touted as the greatest of all charismatic prophets. He was supposedly able to do cold readings with supreme skill. He could meet you for the first time and tell uncanny details about your life and background. (There are entertainers and phony clairvoyants who do that as a parlor trick.) It's not really all that unusual. But Paul Cain parlayed it into a meal ticket with John Wimber. Then he latched onto Jack Deere and finally wormed his way into Westminster Chapel in London (the Church where D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones once pastored). That

church became charismatic after the Lloyd-Jones era, and they had an American pastor, R. T. Kendall, who hired Paul Cain for awhile as their resident prophet.

I met Paul Cain once. Jack Deere brought him to a meeting with John MacArthur in 1992. Lance Quinn and I sat in. It was instantly obvious to us that Paul Cain was not what he claimed. He appeared to be drunk. He was bleary-eyed and nearly incoherent. He pretended to speak a short prophecy, about John MacArthur—but he was wrong in every detail. When he saw he was getting it wrong, he stopped trying to "prophesy" and lapsed into sullen silence. Jack Deere later told us Cain's behavior was because he was under such a heavy anointing.

At the time it astonished me that so many intelligent people seemed to give Paul Cain any credence whatsoever. But MANY did, including most of the leading Reformed charismatics. He was openly endorsed *for years* by Wayne Grudem, Sam Storms, and John Piper.

Understand: Cain was not someone who ever should have been trusted. His only claim to credibility was this uncanny ability to do cold readings. His theological pedigree was tainted long before he found acceptance among Reformed charismatics. But he remained in positions of prominence until 2005, after almost 15 years of affiliation with the Reformed charismatics. Then it came to light that Cain had been living a double life all those years.

Here was a man surrounded by people who claimed to have prophetic gifts, and they saw this guy as a kind of mentor. We knew when we first met him that something was terribly wrong. Why couldn't the charismatic prophets detect rank hypocrisy for 15-plus years?

In fact, to this day, Cain's Reformed enablers have not fully renounced his "prophecies." In the same interview John Piper gave to that Australian Journal, he said this: "[Paul Cain] was a charlatan, I think. But he really prophesied."

That's *not* a legitimate baby in the charismatic bathwater. In fact, it summarizes pretty well why I think the whole mess needs to be thrown out altogether. Here are the very best theologians in the charismatic movement, and after all the spiritual disaster that has stemmed from this teaching, they continue to justify the practice of encouraging people to proclaim "prophecies" that are unverified and unverifiable—and which frequently prove to be dead wrong. That fosters sinful gullibility, and therefore it undermines true faith.

And confusion about whether God has really spoken or not is the most dangerous threat to faith I can imagine.

I do love my Reformed charismatic brethren, but when I look at the spiritual fruit they have borne and the truly edifying things I have learned from them, I have to say that none of the good, valid, healthy

fruit I see is rooted in their charismatic distinctives. The true, edifying fruit produced in their ministries stems from their devotion to Christ, their love of gospel, and their commitment to the authority, inerrancy, and sufficiency of Scripture. Their charismatic beliefs actually undermine and often conflict with what they say they believe about the sufficiency of Scripture, and that, in my view, is to the detriment of their ministries. The fruit of their charismatic teaching is confusion, chaos, or worse.

Hard as I look and no matter how long I sift, I don't believe there is a baby in the bathwater. I doubt a baby could survive in such a mess.

Listen: It is not just some kind of fantastic cosmic coincidence that has loaded the movement with an unusually high number of charlatans and heretics. The problem is in the movement's DNA. When you trace the charismatic movement back to its roots, it stems from a bramble bush, not a fruit tree. You'll be able to read all about that in *Strange Fire*.

The major reason the charismatic movement has produced so much bad teaching and aberrant behavior is because the distinctive doctrines of charismatic belief foster gullibility while constantly seeding the movement with all kinds of whimsy. This notion that it's normative for Spirit-filled Christians to receive extrabiblical divine revelation through various mystical means has opened the door for all kinds of mischief.

A couple of years ago Mark Driscoll posted a video claiming the Spirit of God had given a gift of discernment that allowed him to actually watch the sexual escapades of fornicators in his flock. It wasn't the fact that he would make such a claim that distressed and disappointed me. That seemed fairly typical for him. What troubled me was the large number of Young, Restless, Reformed charismatics who to this day stand by the view that pornographic clairvoyance might actually be a valid spiritual gift. And what disturbs me as much as that is the near-total silence from men who have the stature and influence to teach some of the younger men who might be tempted to experiment with that type of twisted soothsaying.

The issue of false prophecies should not be blithely swept aside, and those who are pointing out the problem should not be dismissed as cranks and naysayers. The rank superstition and counterfeit miracles being spawned out of charismatic circles are as great a blight on the church, and as great a danger to the well-being of believers, as the mysticism and false doctrine in the medieval church prior to the Protestant Reformation. It is as serious a threat to the cause of truth and the advance of the gospel as the gnosticism and home-brew heresies of the second and third centuries.

One of my favorite works on church history is a 19th-century work from Scotland—William Cunningham's *Historical Theology*. As Cunningham surveyed the various false doctrines that proliferated in the first hundred years of Christianity, he wrote this: "Many of the . . . heresies of the first and second centuries are very like the ravings of madmen who followed no definite standard,

whether natural or supernatural, whether reason or Scripture, but who gave full scope to their imaginations in the formation of their systems."

That is precisely what is happening in the charismatic movement today, and as it seeps further and further into the theological circles we inhabit, we need to be more bold to speak up and call a halt to it. Go ahead and throw out the bathwater. That's a century's worth of sludge in the bottom, not a baby. It's past time to clean the sink.

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

COPYRIGHT (C) 2013 Grace to You

You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (<http://www.gty.org/connect/copyright>).