

SHOULD THEOLOGY TODAY BE CHARISMATIC?

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Theology should reflect some mode of the way God chooses to appear in our time. In that case, can there, should there, be a charismatic theology today? To construct a theology always involves speaking about God, but this should be done in a technically adequate way. This means that the notion of God employed becomes the key in solving the problems the religious life of the day presents to theology. However, the theology that results must also be responsible to the tradition of the religious body from which it arises as well as to the ways in which God has been described in our common religious past. To be “charismatic” simply means to respond to the presence of the Holy Spirit. But, further, it means to receive and to try to express the Holy Spirit’s message in the present age.

Thus to be truly charismatic a theology would have to take its cue as much from an experience of the descent of the Holy Spirit as from Scripture or from tradition or from an understanding of the life of Jesus. Although a charismatic theology does not begin with a notion of God as Father or King but instead rises from below, it need not neglect Scripture or tradition or Jesus. To be a charismatic theology only requires that the experience of the presence and the movement of the Holy Spirit form the basis for the constructive theological effort. The experience of the Holy Spirit becomes the key upon which “God” and “Son” and “Church” are interpreted versus, say, taking the NT documents alone as in themselves the fundamental norm. A charismatic theology must be inspired by the enthusiasm of the Spirit. Otherwise theology comes at its task doomed to misunderstand God and sterile in its impact.

Should Christian theology be charismatic, whatever kinds of theologies or descriptions of God others might develop? Is there anything in the Christian experience that argues for this kind of theology as against another? At least two things stand out. First, the primitive Christian Church was formed at Pentecost (Acts 2:1) by the Holy Spirit’s descent, not by the individual power of the early disciples. They were sure of that. Thus a main branch of Christian theology stems from this event, if it is faithful to its community origins. The *charismata*—the favors, endowments, graces and offices bestowed by God’s action—first came to us, not directly from God or even from Jesus, but through the presence of the Holy Spirit in the early Church’s midst. No church, then, can be authentic without the Holy Spirit’s presence, nor does any group become the body of Christ except by the Spirit’s inspiration. In that sense, the death and resurrection of Jesus are not sufficient to establish a Christian community in separation from the Holy Spirit’s presence.

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However, the second justification for a charismatic theology is more important. "Jesus has risen," as the creeds report, but he has also ascended. Until the day of God's direct intervention into the world and human affairs, a time that is still indeterminate, the mode of God's presence with us is via the Holy Spirit. Since the day of Jesus' departure, we are not necessarily in the age of the death of God but we are at least in the time of God's indirect presence. If all that we affirm is that God was present in Jesus of Nazareth we may miss experiencing his presence today, unless we realize that God is no longer present with us in that form but only in the experience of the Holy Spirit. God chose a direct mode of presence to the Israelites in their exodus from Egypt, and God chose a visible presence in the form of the Son or the suffering servant in the time of Jesus. But since the close of those two ages, his form or presence is often less specific and usually more spiritual.

Most Christian theology has used one form of Greek or western philosophy in order to shape its technical doctrines. Does this mean that a charismatic theology could not be done in a rational form as western thought would recognize it? Would a charismatic theology somehow elude, or claim to be above, the analysis or grasp of reason and thus launch an irrationalism in theology? Would emotion, with all its vagaries and excesses, take over so that all hope of a critical appraisal of theology is set aside? Not necessarily. To seek inspiration by a divine spirit was alien neither to Plato nor to many Greek philosophers. Everything depends on how one conceives of the role of both emotion and inspiration and their relationship to rational comprehension and theological construction. At its base, movement and source for the structure of charismatic theology is the descent and movement of a divine spirit. But there is no reason that its appraisal, and the constructive effort built upon it, cannot still be a product of reason.

A charismatic theology would, however, have to start with the premise that the Spirit and his movements offer more direct access to God's nature than rationality as such. It would interpret Jesus' presence as the Spirit of God who has taken on human form. Thus God's nature must be such as to be compatible with the human spirit in order to be present to us in a concrete form. We may, then, use human concepts to interpret God because he first demonstrated to us his essential identification with human form by incarnating spirit in human flesh. This need not mean that we think God is capable of presenting the divine only in a human, male body. But if we take our clue from the mode of spirit, it does mean that we can use the human spirit as a means to understand God more fully, even if the physical form of the body might vary. Men and women reason; they are moved by emotions; they will. These aspects are a part of human nature and thus of God's—if our chief theological clues are the Holy Spirit's incarnation in Jesus and at Pentecost.

The gifts of the Holy Spirit are varied and are not equally distributed. Thus no theology can be universal—that is, equally valid for all. Nor can it exert the same force in every age and with every people. Even if the Holy Spirit is always with us, we are not always aware of this in similar ways, which means we must pass through dry spells whose duration we cannot predict. We also know that the power of any theology cannot lie in its literal word, even if it should be carefully constructed definitionally. Its real force will lie in the spirit

it manages to encapsulate and transmit to others. The performance of rituals is not banned, nor is the observance of sacraments of no avail. However, the power of God cannot be said to move in or through them unless the Holy Spirit descends—and this we cannot compel. Churches may be built and people assembled. Priests and ministers may be ordained and serve their people, if it suits human convenience. But God is not present unless the Holy Spirit chooses to descend.

Aristotle and Aquinas tend to see God's chief attributes as form and pure act, and this is one divine possibility. But a charismatic theology is more attuned to movement, time, change, contingency, and to the decisions of will that cannot be fixed in advance. Emotion is present, and we ignore it only at the risk of excluding the dynamics of spirit. This is one important aspect Descartes failed to see. However, to be emotionally moved is likewise no guarantee of the presence of the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, the descent of the spirit never occurs without corresponding emotional phenomena. In all of this, the function of reason is not excluded. It is enhanced by this psychological phenomenon, since it is reason's task to establish criteria to judge the genuine and authentic presence of God in any spiritual movement. Merely to feel moved spiritually is in itself no guarantee of divine origin. The Devil moves people too. However, God's presence is never without its disturbing side effects, all of which makes it difficult for us to distinguish God's genuine movements with any certainty.

In a charismatic theology, "power" rather than omniscience becomes our key concept for understanding God's nature. Plato ultimately decided to define "being" as "power" (cf. *The Sophist*), and charismatic theologies should follow his lead. What is real is what has power to move. All other divine perfections and attributes are subsidiary and can be present in God in a variety of arrangements. Such a divinity cares not so much for the fixity of its being as for maintaining its power to move creation and human creatures, psychologically as well as physically. Of course, Christians claim that this power in God is best understood in the form of outgoing love and compassion, even as we experience destruction in the present age. However, we need a faith in God's future actions if we are to affirm this, since power as it is our confidence in divine love and compassion manifest in our present natural order often evidences quite opposite qualities. We humans demonstrate no significant preference for manifesting our power in the form of self-sacrificing love. In fact creatures often show a predominance of, and a preference for, power in the form of aggression even to the point of destruction.

A God who would choose to express himself in charismatic phenomena will maintain form and order as second to power in the divine nature. Power can hold one selected order on its course versus other possible orders. Without power to sustain it and the strength of will to elect it, no order or natural process could continue long in existence. Our world and human minds have a rational form and can take on additional forms, but such forms hold no ultimacy in God's nature. Thus it is possible that an emotion such as love could move a divine being more than a form of rationality or a mode of justice (cf. Anselm's views on God's ultimate demand for justice in his *Cur Deus Homo*). God can operate with a variety of orders. However, divine will and emotions seek an outlet, and this requires a stability in nature for expression. A charismatically

expressible God can set structure aside, or he can elect to do so, in order to achieve emotional satisfaction. The descent of the Holy Spirit is unpredictable and uncontrollable by the human mind. As the Spirit's source, God must be also.

Those who experience the gifts of the Holy Spirit and their accompanying exaltation are often blinded to the fact that ultimately they may not care much for the God who is the source of these gifts. Most human beings prefer a God who is rationally confinable, one whose actions are fixed. Faced with such a secure divinity, we frail beings can be comfortable in the security that such necessity provides to an uncertain humanity. Blinded by the ecstasy of divine descent, we may fail to see that the God who enters human life in this mode does not have to give us any guarantees. It is not that divinity is not capable of holding to its word. God's power guarantees that to us. But to feel oneself possessed by an ecstatic spirit does not tell us in itself whether the uplift is divine or demonic, creative or destructive. We take risks in following such a God, whereas theologically deterministic views of foreordination offer us greater security. We are often fooled when we experience emotional upsurge, and so we need further tests other than ecstatic possession to be sure of divinity's presence.

Now the convinced Christian will ask: But has God not given us a promise and a glimpse of divinity's true intentions in the life of Jesus, and can we not trust this? God has indeed given us a sign, and those who believe in it do have a promise. But faith is needed if we are to hold on to such a promise, just because God's intention is not and cannot be obvious to all humanity. Thus the Christian stands not with nature and the course of history but against it. This is why he or she is called to lead a difficult and not a natural life. Only a little in the world around us justifies the Christian's hope. However, a God of the spirit who communicates by uncontrollable and uncertain charismatic gifts is also a God who might choose to work against the structures and the expectations implicit in the natural order as created. Reason would bind God to follow nature's present course, as philosophers have observed. The power of emotion could free divinity from a bondage to the natural order. But God's presence will be felt in strange, and sometimes even mistaken, signs.

Ronald Knox's *Enthusiasm*¹ is a classic if we want to study the effects of enthusiastic, or charismatic, movements. He points out that such groups are almost always at first denounced as "an innovation," and of course so they are. Yet from the point of view of any particular charismatic group they may claim to preserve the primitive discipline of the Church. Quite often the group will appeal to the effects they have seen a charismatic spirit have in transforming a broken human's life. They see it more as an affair of the heart and less as an intellectual approach to religion. Luther, for instance, did not begin as an enthusiast, but charismatic change burst forth once he had shaken off the pattern of European theology.

This fact is not strange, since theology simply takes religious experience and codifies its primitive expressions in a systematic form. Its task is to hold such experience in an intellectual framework and in so doing to rob it of its

¹New York: Oxford University, 1961.

explosive character. Thus religious emotions and responses cannot break out again until the rational framework that has controlled them and reduced them to an item of thought is broken so that spirit flows formless once again. For a hundred and fifty years after Luther, the search for a new theological form became the preoccupation of the best religious minds, just as the keenest religious spirits were caught up in experiencing every possible form of response to the Holy Spirit's new movements.

False experiences are bound to creep in, and some would distinguish between "inspiration" as a real feeling of the divine presence and label "enthusiasm" as a false one. However, just like the attempt to distinguish "cult" from "religion" in order to label one false and the other true, no such definition is quite obvious. In his *Treatise on Religious Affection*, Jonathan Edwards tried to outline the criteria for distinguishing true from false religious emotion. This is the theologian's task, but we need to remember two things: (1) No definition or set of criteria can be definitive or settle all controversy; and (2) the job needs doing again in any age in which charismatic gifts move large numbers of people.

No set of criteria or rational reconstruction can hope to define what a "charismatic" theology is unless it admits the legitimacy of ecstatic experience. Neither emotion nor ecstatic experience can be excluded from our definition of "knowledge." Using an exclusively rationalist base for epistemology will rule out the crucial features of charismatic theology. This is the chief issue we face today, since the majority of our inherited theologies are products of the age of rationalism. An empiricism need not exclude emotion, but that will depend on how it defines the "experience" it uses as its touchstone. Charismatic theology challenges us philosophically, since we must reappraise our fundamental assumptions and philosophical first principles before the constructive theological task can begin without distortion.