

That I might make thee know the certainty of
the words of truth...

Proverbs 22:21

**Words
of Truth
8**

**Lessons from
the Charismatic
Movement**

John P. Thackway

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LESSONS FROM THE CHARISMATIC MOVEMENT

J.P.Thackway

Any assessment of how evangelical churches have changed in the last sixty years must include the part the charismatic movement has played. In his survey of trends that have undermined “Authentic Evangelicalism,”¹ Pastor FJ. Harris lists four: the rise of Neo-evangelicalism, the shift in Anglican evangelism from 1967, the charismatic movement, and New Covenant Theology. This is a perceptive and correct view, the more compelling because the author has lived through these changes and bravely stood against them throughout his ministry.

A narrower way of “understanding the times” (1 Chronicles 12:32) is to concentrate on the sea change within evangelical Anglicanism. The Keele Conference of 1967 was an astonishing capitulation by men who until then were the evangelical wing of the Church of England. The policy of the leaders such as John Stott² and J.I. Packer at Keele effectively surrendered to the Roman Catholic, Anglo-Catholic and ecumenical agenda, while claiming to capture ground for the gospel. Iain Murray in his book *Evangelicalism Divided*³ follows the course of this disastrous compromise.

Another approach is to trace the way ecumenism has affected

¹ *Stand Fast for Authentic Evangelicalism*, FJ. Harris, Words of Truth 7, Bible League. We warmly recommend this booklet to our readers; it can be ordered on our web site for just £1.00.

² The extent to which Stott moved in other areas of orthodoxy is alarming. Dr. E.S. Williams, in his book *Holistic Mission Weighed in the Balances*, shows the pivotal part Stott played in this liberal heresy.

³ *Evangelicalism Divided: A Record of Crucial Change in the Years 1950 to 2000*, Banner of Truth, 2000.

evangelicalism. While avoiding the liberalism and Romeward drive of the World Council of Churches, nonetheless segments of evangelicalism are now wider and more willing to co-operate with doctrinally-mixed churches. The Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches has moved from the vision of its founder, E.J. Poole-Connor in 1922. Back then it was an unashamedly separatist group of churches, standing apart from ecumenism but embracing all who would “come out from among them” for the gospel’s sake.⁴ Further evidence of FIEC’s drift can be seen in its enthusiastic participation in *Affinity*.⁵ More evidence appears in the *Gospel Partnerships* that have sprung up around the UK.⁶

It is correct to see different factors in what has happened to God’s church, for the enemy’s assaults are always many-sided. However, the charismatic movement is larger, guiltier, and farther-reaching than many would admit. A case can even be made for saying that it has been *the main force* the devil has used in trying to weaken and destroy the church during the last two generations.

Charismaticism has seduced multitudes, changed the face of evangelical and reformed churches, brought the world into the church, and even spawned the adjective “charismatic,” meaning a magnetic individual having influence or authority over people. Ironically, this is often how it appears: drawing attention to men rather than to the Lord (2 Corinthians 4:5).

⁴ See *E.J. Poole-Connor (1872-1962) Contender for the Faith*, David Fountain, H.E. Walter, 1966. In that year, David Fountain, and later others, left the FIEC because of the changes that were happening even then. See also Poole-Connor’s masterly and illuminating *Evangelicalism in England*, Walter, 1951, revised 1966. This is required reading for all who wish to understand the cause of the gospel in Great Britain, and the factors that have shaped things until mid-way through the 20th century.

⁵ See the review of *They have Forgotten* in BLQ October-December 2012, and *Today’s FIEC and E.J. Poole-Connor* in BLQ July-September 2001, and *Affinity* in BLQ April-June 2005.

⁶ See my assessment in BLQ October-December 2015. See the Bible League web site for some of these articles: <http://www.bibleleaguetrust.org/>

But is it correct to say that this movement is the main culprit in the war against the church in recent times? I believe it is. However, there is a strange reluctance to consider this. Pastor Chris Hand tellingly says,

(T)here has been no specific treatment, as far as I am aware, of the impact of the charismatic movement on the reformed churches in the UK. This absence is in itself interesting. It may actually show us there are “no-go areas” where unacknowledged codes of “political correctness” are operating. Perhaps the subject is too divisive to consider.⁷

This is more telling because Pastor Hand was once a charismatic himself and became convinced of its unbiblical character and the legacy it has left. And like him, we believe that *scriptural* correctness, and not political correctness, must govern our approach to this subject. What, then, does the phenomenon of the charismatic movement teach us?

⁷ The Legacy Of The Charismatic Movement, a paper given at the North West England God's Glory our Joy Conference in 2009. A transcript of the full address is at: http://ggoj.org.uk/2009/2009-sermons?sermon_id=67
See also *The Charismatic Illusion*. Expanded Revision of *The Charismatic Phenomenon* with Answers to Questions. Peter Masters and John C. Whitcomb. The Wakeman Trust, London, £3.95.

1. ITS HISTORY IS ONE OF DEVIATION AND DAMAGE.

The charismatic movement is not new. A mid-2nd century forerunner was Montanism, named after its founder Montanus. Before his professed conversion to Christianity, he was a priest of the ecstatic cult of Cybele, the mother goddess of fertility. According to the church historian Eusebius, Montanus in c. 172 AD experienced ecstasies and began prophesying in Phrygia (now central Turkey). He became leader of a group called “the Enlightened,” whose behaviour included seizures and speaking in tongues. The group was condemned as heretical and eventually disappeared.

Another early manifestation was in Luther’s time and the “Zwickau Prophets.” Nicholas Storch, Tomas Drechsel and Marcus Stübner taught the direct influence of the Spirit, special revelation through visions and dreams and the imminent return of Christ. In an interview with the reformer, in which they demanded, “The Spirit! Dr. Luther, the Spirit!” Luther discerningly replied, “I slap your spirit on the snout!”

“French Prophets” emerged in Dauphiny and Vivarais around 1688. These men and women claimed to be prophets of the Holy Spirit. They were characterised by having fits, tremblings and faintings which made them stagger and fall (like the modern “Toronto sickness”). One writer says, “The story of the French Prophets has gone down as one of the greatest examples of religious enthusiasm in English religious history. It began in 1706 with the arrival in London of three inspired Camisards from Southern France and ended with the foundation of the Shakers in 1747.”⁸

⁸ A Cultural History of Religious Enthusiasm in Post Toleration England (1689-1730) by Mr Lionel Patrice Fabien Laborie. Ph.D. thesis University of East Anglia School of History, March 2010. See also the author’s book, *Enlightening Enthusiasm*, Prophecy and religious Experience in early eighteenth-century England, Manchester University Press, 2015, pages 5,6.

A prominent 19th century charismatic forerunner was the Scottish Presbyterian Edward Irving (1792-1834). He tragically fell into unscriptural views of prophecy and speaking in tongues, and even heresy regarding the sinlessness of our Lord. His church services began to be characterised by wild behaviour, again reminiscent of the Toronto phenomena. He ended up deposed from the Church of Scotland and became a deacon in the emerging Catholic Apostolic Church. Before Irving's deviations, Robert Murray M'Cheyne used to meet with him and others for prayer and the word. Hearing of Irving's early death, he wrote in his journal,

A holy man, in spite of all his delusions and errors. He is now with his God and Saviour, whom he wronged so much, yet, I am persuaded, loved so sincerely. How we should lean for wisdom, not on ourselves, but on the God of all grace!⁹

This charitable tribute reminds us that many in the charismatic movement are sincere Christians. We are evaluating this *as a movement* rather than judging all the individuals who belong to it.

The 20th century saw the birth of the Pentecostal movement. Historians show clear links with some of the excesses of the 1904,05 Welsh Revival, then to Frank Bartleman and the Azusa Street "revival" in Los Angeles, then to Charles Parham and Bethel Bible College in Topeka, Kansas. In that college, Agnes Ozman spoke in tongues on January 1, 1901 – the first woman in North America to do so. Parham, who afterwards experienced the same, is reckoned the founder of the Pentecostal movement.

The charismatic movement as we know it today came in the

⁹ *Memoir and Remains*, Bonar, Banner of Truth, page 27.

1960s, although outbreaks were happening sooner than this. An early leader was Dennis J. Bennett, an Episcopal priest in Van Nuys, California. On April 3, 1960, he told his congregation that he had received a Baptism with the Spirit. His autobiography *Nine o'clock in the Morning* sold more than 500,000 copies, and has been translated into 16 languages. Another of the main founders of the charismatic movement was the South African-born Pentecostal minister David du Plessis (1905-1987).

In Great Britain, Michael Harper – curate with John Stott at All Souls in London – founded The Fountain Trust to further his claim that the apostolic, miraculous gifts of the Spirit had been restored. Baptism in the Spirit, with speaking in tongues as evidence, was the thrust of its teaching. David Watson, another evangelical Anglican, was a younger exponent of this in St. Cuthbert's, York.

It rapidly spread throughout most church denominations, including Anglican, nonconformist and even Brethren assemblies. Over the decades, charismaticism has divided many times, and multiplied into different factions. Today there is scarcely a church in the UK that has not in some way been threatened, influenced, infiltrated, or taken over by this movement.

2. ITS CLAIMS REGARDING THE HOLY SPIRIT ARE FALSE AND DELUSIONARY

To listen to charismatic leaders, one would think that the church was almost bereft of the Holy Spirit until their teaching and claims appeared. Yet before them, and since, the Bible's teaching concerning the Person and work of the Holy Spirit has been well-understood and experientially-known. We have as much of heart religion and holiness as the Holy Spirit has wrought in us. And a "great cloud of witnesses" in church history is testimony enough to the presence and power of the Spirit, not to mention all the genuine revivals since the day of Pentecost.

A summary of the Bible League's position on the Charismatic Movement is on our web site.¹⁰ In quoting this, we also define the historic, biblical understanding of the Holy Spirit and His gracious operations,

The Charismatic Movement advocates a post-conversion baptism in the Spirit, evidenced in the miraculous gifts of tongues-speaking and prophecy; and it also lays claim to the extraordinary offices of Apostles and Prophets. (However) according to God's Word, all believers are baptized in the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:13; Titus 3:4-7). The miraculous gifts, conferred for the confirmation of the Apostles' testimony, passed out of the life of the church shortly after the completion of the New Testament canon (Acts 2:32,33; 8:14-19; Romans 15:18,19; 2 Corinthians 12:11,12; Hebrews 2:3,4).

The extraordinary Apostolic and Prophetic offices were

¹⁰ <http://www.bibleleaguetrust.org/about/statement-of-faith/> Written by our Chairman, Rev. M.H. Watts.

established for the special and temporary purpose of founding the Christian Church and those occupying these offices were divinely inspired and miraculously endowed infallibly to declare God's revealed Truth. That purpose accomplished, these extraordinary offices ceased (1 Corinthians 9:1; 13:2; Ephesians 2:20; 3:1-5; Revelation 22:18).

While in the strict sense, therefore, spiritual baptism should be viewed as an initial experience, known and felt at the time of a person's salvation, this should not be understood to mean that the Lord may not at subsequent times grant mighty outpourings of the Spirit whereby His people – individually or corporately – are totally overwhelmed and wonderfully refreshed (Isaiah 44:3; Luke 11:13; Acts 4:31; Ephesians 1:15-23). Similarly, although some special manifestations of the Holy Spirit's presence were intended only for the early church in the times of the Apostles, this is not to deny that in times of Holy Spirit revival there may be extraordinary evidences and singular experiences of the Spirit's active ministry, which will be to the wonder of men and to the everlasting praise of God (Psalm 77:14; 1 Corinthians 2:3-5; 1 Thessalonians 1:5; 1 Peter 1:12).

A correct understanding of these scriptures shows the true ministry of the third Person of the Godhead as against charismatic belief. Tragically, that movement has gone adrift upon the seething waves of subjective experience and false claims. In its by-passing scripture, its error and delusion has done terrible harm to God's people and their churches. In its divisive and destructive effects, it has shown itself to be at best of the flesh and at worst of the devil.

3. IT'S CATCHING ANOTHER SPIRIT THAN THE HOLY SPIRIT

During the 1960s British society and other western countries underwent a revolution that has changed us beyond recognition. Before then it was accepted that our laws and values stem from Britain's Christian past. However, the 1960s challenged this and wanted to sweep it away. Through the emergence of Rock 'n Roll bands,¹¹ the cult of the teenager, the liberal broadcasting media and the liberalising government of the day – which the effete established church did little to challenge – “The permissive society” and the “Swinging Sixties” came upon us.

The decade was characterised by a false notion of freedom. It was heady rebellion against moral restraints, respect for authority, sanctity of life, marriage, and the family. In tune with this, laws against drug abuse, divorce, drunkenness, gambling, depraved behaviour, satire, and blasphemy were relaxed or repealed, and these gradually became the norms from that generation to this.

It is no coincidence that this social and moral revolution happened around the same time as the spiritual revolution that was the charismatic movement. Have they no connection? It is significant that this movement, too, demanded freedom from “stultifying” biblical worship, sermons, strict adherence to scripture in daily life, the “Quiet Time,” separation from the world, etc. The connection between charismaticism and the 1960s revolution is obvious. The sweeping effects of the former were not a new day of Pentecost but a new accommodation to the world.

¹¹ David Samuel, commenting on this period, wrote: “Popular music was no longer simply a medium of light relief, but a battering ram for moral and social change.”

While we speak generally, and acknowledge that there are many individual exceptions to this, nonetheless the link is clear. If the church does not resist the world it becomes conformed to it. What the permissive society did for lifestyle outside the church, the charismatic movement did for life inside the church. “The Swinging Sixties” in the land became the swinging worship in the church. This spiritual revolution was no more biblical than the social revolution that ignited it. It led one writer to make the inevitable comparison: “... exuberant singing – the charismatic equivalent of clubbing.”¹² Far from being the Holy Spirit, it was simply the spirit of the age.

The charismatic movement mirrored the age in which it happened, which was characterised by a rebellion against authority – now in this case, *divine* authority. Whether consciously or unconsciously, deliberately, or unwittingly, thousands of Christians – young and old – have gone the way of the world, thinking they have gone the way of the Spirit.

¹² *Reinventing English Evangelicalism* (1966–2001), Rob Warner, Paternoster, 2007, page 84.

4. IT HAS CORRUPTED BIBLICAL AND SPIRITUAL WORSHIP

With its own style of worship and evangelism, the charismatic movement insidiously and speedily changed how the church saw itself before God. With its worship leaders, contemporary songs, multiple musical instruments, and sensuousness, the new worship was revolutionary. It broke free from being biblically-regulated and reverent. It proclaimed that anything else was “old fashioned” and needed “liberating.” Man-centred and experience-centred celebration now took over. One source for this was the American “Jesus people,” modelled on the hippies, with their soft rock music and lyrics.¹³

An exponent of this contemporary worship is Stuart Townend, of Church of Christ the King in Brighton, a charismatic Newfrontiers church. His songs are in the *Praise!* hymnbook and the new *Christian Hymns*, and are sung endlessly by many. Revealing the worldly source of such worship, Townend cites influences upon his music that include David Bowie, The Beatles, Bob Dylan, and Stevie Wonder. Asked in a YouTube interview what music Jesus would like if He were here, he suggested thrash metal or hip-hop or some similar thing that would shock us.¹⁴ What shocks *us* is that a professing Christian with such an enormous influence could ever say such a thing!

To begin with, only churches that became charismatic had their distinctive worship styles. Others tended to continue in their biblical and reverent way. But then, over time, we began to see worship styles changing in other churches too – even reformed

¹³ See my *Is Contemporary Worship Music Defensible?* BLQ April-June 1999 and on the Bible League website.

¹⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OCW0oAAa7c>

ones. And this accommodation was not because of fuller light from scripture but because they had capitulated to charismatic assumptions concerning worship. Older men who should have known better, and church members who did not exercise discernment, simply gave in to the pressure.

As Chris Hand put it,

The pressures to imitate, borrow and in some measure befriend the charismatic movement are considerable in the reformed churches. The pressures have only increased as our churches have struggled to grow. There is probably a widespread disappointment that so few have come to hear sound preaching and expositional teaching, or to engage in reverent worship. Ministers have sought to maintain an evangelistic ministry and a work among the young but have struggled with a declining church membership and an ageing church membership. Visitors to the church and prospective members may appreciate the preaching but find the formal services off-putting ... Some might be exiting the charismatic movement because of its excesses but might still desire the worship of the churches they are leaving behind. Young people are more likely to arrive with a taste for this kind of music. They hear it at college. They hear it when they visit friends' churches. They feel more at home with the contemporary sound and we can sense their disappointment, even if they do not voice it, that there is no drum kit, no band and no Stuart Townend available.¹⁵ So to hold on to these young

¹⁵ This illustrates the tragedy and guilt of the charismatic movement. It has produced a generation of young people who have known nothing but this kind of "worship" and who are strangers to biblical, reverent praise – and the godliness it produces. It is a generation robbed and spoiled – ED.

people, the pressure is on the minister and elders to make an accommodation to these things. It can all be very pragmatic. The minister may not like the new songs and be highly suspicious of the new song writers and what they stand for but feel powerless to resist. Various considerations can chip away at previously held convictions.”

Gradually, reformed churches, while not embracing the doctrine of the charismatic movement, nonetheless caved in to the *worship and thinking* of that movement. However, has it occurred to our friends that if the doctrine is wrong, *the practice* must be also? And if early exponents of it have made shipwreck, exactly what *are* they allowing into God’s church?¹⁶

We now see a strange dichotomy between preaching and worship. The preacher does his reformed thing in the pulpit – if one is still there – and the people do their charismatic-like thing in worship. And people stay, because “the preaching is good.” But how can this be called reformed at all? How can it be faithful, reforming preaching that leaves what happens in the pew untouched by the word of God?¹⁷

¹⁶ We have noted Edward Irving. But other warnings exist. Michael Harper ended up a Greek orthodox arch-priest. David du Plessis was Pentecostal representative at the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). And David Watson confidently asserted: “In many ways, the Reformation was one of the greatest tragedies that ever happened to the church.” So much for the Spirit of Truth!

¹⁷ Leviticus 5:15 warns us about committing “a trespass, and sin through ignorance, in the holy things of the LORD,” because worship must be offered “according to the manner” (verse 10). Given it is so easy to offend a holy God in this sacred activity, it is astonishing that charismatics should be so confident in their supposed liberty and latitude in worship! See also Ecclesiastes 5:1

5. IT TEACHES US TO MAINTAIN WHAT IS SCRIPTURAL AND REFORMED

What I have outlined is a spiritual problem – and it can only be cured by a spiritual answer. And this means the authentic doctrine of the person and work of the Holy Spirit. The best way to counter the false is to cleave to the true. In His covenant role, the Holy Spirit is the One who formed the manhood of our Lord in the virgin’s womb (Hebrews 10:5; Luke 1:35). He serviced the Mediator for His work in redeeming us (Matthew 3:17; Luke 4:1,18; Hebrews 9:14; Romans 1:4). He gives the new birth (John 3:8), teaches us (John 16:14), sanctifies us (2 Thessalonians 2:13), comforts us (John 14:16–18; Acts 9:31), refreshes us (John 7:38,39), empowers us (Romans 15:13), reveals Christ to us (John 15:26) and is our foretaste of heaven (Ephesians 1:14).

If the charismatic movement drives us back to scripture to re-examine the things it has turned into a flux, it will have done us good. And if it moves our hearts to seek a genuine visitation from heaven by the Holy Spirit, it will have done us the most good of all. We cannot turn the clock back to better times. But we must ensure that we do not move with our decadent times, but learn from them, resist them, and seek their reformation according to God’s word. Spurgeon reminds us of our duty: “We shall not adjust our Bible to the age; but before we have done with it, by God’s grace, we shall adjust the age to the Bible.”

And gospel ministers must answer to the Master at the last Day: “as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief” (Hebrews 13:17). Albert Barnes’ comments on this verse are solemn:

The ministers of religion must give account to God for their fidelity, for all that they teach, and for every measure

which they adopt – for these they must soon be called into judgment. Therefore, for their best security, under the influence of this solemn truth, they will pursue only that course which will be for your good.

How can any face the Judgement with composure who have allowed charismatic things to corrupt God’s worship?¹⁸ On the other hand, faithfulness that may consign us to the margins for a while, will have a blessed reward when the Lord owns our “gold, silver and precious stones” (1 Corinthians 3:11-15).

We stand for a cause that is greater and longer-lasting than the agendas of this fallen world – and of charismatic modernisers. On the side of the Lord’s truth, we serve “a kingdom which shall never be destroyed ... and it shall stand for ever” (Daniel 2:44). Whether appreciated or not, we shall do the most good in this world by maintaining and contending for obedience to God, doing God’s work in God’s way. God will then bless us, and make us a blessing to our generation, and for the generations to come.¹⁹

Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear: For our God is a consuming fire. (Hebrews 12:28,29).

¹⁸ There are some very pertinent comments on this from J.C. Ryle in Iain Murray’s excellent biography, *Prepared to Stand Alone*, pages 225-227.

¹⁹ The Lord has, and is, bringing some out of the charismatic movement and into the knowledge of the truth. A recent example is a young man who wrote the following to me: “I’m out of the Charismatic world for about 18 months, God has graciously pulled me out of that and into the Reformed Faith, it’s like a new world, a wonderful new world.”

NOTES

Words of Truth

8

The Charismatic Movement has been with us for more than fifty years. The sweeping changes it has made in our churches is there for all to see. Many think this is evidence of divine blessing. Others, while not endorsing its beliefs, nonetheless accept its contemporary worship style as necessary if churches are to appeal to outsiders these days.

Few Christians seem to want to discern what this movement really is: whether it is of God – or of the flesh or the devil. Perhaps there is the fear of grieving the Spirit, or of being thought “a troubler of Israel” by others. Sadly, for many it does not seem to matter.

However, Scripture tells us: “Prove all things; hold fast that which is good” (1 Thessalonians 5:21). In this booklet, John Thackway offers an examination of the movement from history and Scripture. His conclusions challenge us and our churches to make a stand concerning this phenomenon, and learn the lessons it teaches so that we can serve our own generation by the will of God (Acts 13:36).

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