

FIVE POSITIONS ON THE MIRACULOUS GIFTS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

The evangelical world is divided into five camps regarding their views of the operation of miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit in the church today. Dr. Wayne Grudem, professor of theology at Trinity Evangelical Seminary, Deerfield, Illinois, summarizes the five views as follows, concluding with this statement, "I THINK WHAT PEOPLE REALLY WANT IS TO BE IN THE PRESENCE OF GOD." (*Are Miraculous Gifts for Today*, p. 347)

1. The **CESSATIONIST** Position:

The cessationist position argues that there are no miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit today. Gifts such as prophecy, tongues, and healing were confined to the first century, and were used at the time the apostles were establishing the churches and the New Testament was not yet complete. This is a well-defined and often-defended position within evangelical scholarship.

There are cessationists within both the Reformed and the dispensational segments of evangelicalism. Reformed cessationism is represented by many of the faculty at Westminster Seminary, especially Richard Gaffin. Dispensational cessationists hold similar positions on this question but are in different institutions; they are represented by institutions such as Dallas Seminary and The Master's Seminary. Within the Lutheran tradition, conservative groups such as the Missouri Synod also hold mostly to a cessationist position.

Standing in clear opposition to the cessationist position are three groups that encourage the use of all spiritual gifts today: *Pentecostals*, *charismatics*, and the *Third Wave*. Although sometimes people have used the terms "Pentecostal" and "charismatic" indiscriminately to refer to all of these groups, the terms are more accurately understood in the following way:

2. The **PENTECOSTAL** Position:

Pentecostal refers to any denomination or group that traces its historical origin back to the Pentecostal revival that began in the United States in 1901, and that holds the following doctrines: (1) All the gifts of the Holy Spirit mentioned in the New Testament are intended for today; (2) baptism in the Holy Spirit is an empowering experience subsequent to conversion and should be sought by Christians today; and (3) when baptism in the Holy Spirit occurs, people will speak in tongues as a "sign" that they have received this experience. Pentecostal groups usually have their own distinct denominational structures, among which are the Assemblies of God, the Church of God in Christ, and many others.

3. The **CHARISMATIC** Position:

Charismatic, on the other hand, refers to any groups (or people) that trace their historical origin to the charismatic renewal movement of the 1960s and 1970s and that seek to practice all the spiritual gifts mentioned in the New

Testament (including prophecy, healing, miracles, tongues, interpretation, and distinguishing between spirits). Among charismatics there are differing viewpoints on whether baptism in the Holy Spirit is subsequent to conversion and whether speaking in tongues is a sign of baptism in the Spirit. Charismatics by and large have refrained from forming their own denominations, but view themselves as a force for renewal within existing Protestant and Roman Catholic churches. There is no representative charismatic denomination in the United States today, but the most prominent charismatic spokesman is probably Pat Robertson with his Christian Broadcasting Network, the television program “The 700 Club,” and Regent University (formerly CBN University).

4. The **THIRD WAVE** Position:

In the 1980s a third renewal movement arose, a movement called The Third Wave by missions professor C. Peter Wagner at Fuller Seminary (he referred to the Pentecostal renewal as the first wave of the Holy Spirit’s renewing work in the modern church, and the charismatic movement as the second wave). Third Wave people encourage the equipping of all believers to use New Testament spiritual gifts today and say that the proclamation of the gospel should ordinarily be accompanied by “signs, wonders, and miracles,” according to the New Testament pattern. They teach, however, that baptism in the Holy Spirit happens to all Christians at conversion and that subsequent experiences are better called “fillings” or “empowerings” with the Holy Spirit. Though they believe the gift of tongues exists today, they do not emphasize it to the extent that Pentecostals and charismatics do. The most prominent representative of the “Third Wave” is John Wimber, a pastor of the Vineyard Christian Fellowship in Anaheim, California, and leader of the Association of Vineyard Churches.

5. The **OPEN BUT CAUTIOUS** Position:

There is yet another position, held by a vast number of evangelicals who think of themselves as belonging to none of these groups. These people have not been convinced by the cessationist arguments that relegate certain gifts to the first century, but they are not really convinced by the doctrine or practice of those who emphasize such gifts today either. They are open to the possibility of miraculous gifts today, but they are concerned about the possibility of abuses that they have seen in groups that practice these gifts. They do not think speaking in tongues is ruled out by Scripture, but they see many modern examples as not conforming to scriptural guidelines; some also are concerned that it often leads to divisiveness and negative results in churches today. They think churches should emphasize evangelism, Bible study, and faithful obedience as keys to personal and church growth, rather than miraculous gifts. Yet they appreciate some of the benefits that Pentecostal, charismatic, and Third Wave churches have brought to the evangelical world, especially a refreshing contemporary tone in worship and a challenge to renewal in faith and prayer. The “Open but Cautious Position” is the one held by the majority of evangelicals today.

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The renewal of interest in the gifts of the Holy Spirit is perhaps the most encouraging development of our time. Why? Because it says that God's people are tired of religion without reality and hunger for the reality of the living God in their lives. I agree with Dr. Grudem, "What people really want is to be in the presence of God." Brother Pastors, you and I must see to it that this hunger of our people is met through our ministry to them. If we do so, the church faces its most glorious future. If not, churches by the thousand face their demise. You and I hold the answer.

How does all this affect our personal ministries?

1. The Local Church - Each pastor should search the New Testament and decide his position on the miraculous gifts. Then he should fully explain his position to his people and specify in writing the policy he would follow in the church. For instance—how he would handle speaking in tongues, words of prophecy, etc.
2. Inter-denominational (ecumenical) meetings - In such meetings essentials which unify must be stressed, not the matters about which there are disagreements. All evangelicals agree on the authority of the Word, the deity of Jesus, salvation by grace, etc., but not on such matters as tongues, words of prophecy, the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's supper, church government, details of the second coming, etc. The rule has long been stated "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty, and in all things charity."

I preside over a city wide inter-denominational prayer group which meets every Tuesday, 6 AM – 7 AM. This prayer group began meeting in April 1999 and has continued to the present time. I suspect that all five views have been represented in our meetings—the Cessationists, Pentecostals, Charismatics, Third Wave and Open-but-Cautious. Great unity has marked our fellowship because we have stressed our likenesses, not our differences.

Bill Bennett