

Co-operation with Charismatics

To what extent should 'Evangelicals' and 'Charismatics' co-operate in evangelism? Should we put our differences aside and work together to further the Kingdom?

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The best and worst thing about Charismatics is that they don't believe what they believe. I had occasion to rediscover this when a group approached us recently about being involved in a joint evangelistic mission. To me was given the unenviable task of pointing out the significant doctrinal differences between us, and suggesting that these would cause great problems for co-operation.

This particular group happened to believe that the normal experience of Christians is that at some point after conversion they will experience something known as 'baptism in the Spirit' evidenced by the phenomenon of speaking in tongues.

Not a particularly remarkable belief in today's climate, but one that does hold problems for anyone who doesn't happen to agree with it! For if such an experience of the Spirit—however loosely we may care to define it—is

meant to be for every Christian, then anyone who refuses it is missing out in a big way. Worse still: if such an experience is taught in Scripture (and any self-respecting Charismatic will claim that it is), anyone who teaches against it is denying God, and liable to his judgement. Such a teacher is in the same category as one who claims that obedience is an optional extra in the Christian life.

For the Charismatic, there is no difference between this and one who says, "Baptism in the Spirit for all, after conversion, is not taught in Scripture." In the Charismatic's eyes, such a person is not only denying the essential blessing of God for himself, he is denying it to others as well. To co-operate with such a false teacher in an evangelistic enterprise, inevitably involving the follow up of young Christians, would (for the Charismatic) be a betrayal of basic principles.

If that was all, the issue would be clear cut. Either the Charismatic or the Evangelical is misrepresenting God's will for the life of the believer. Either the Charismatic or the Evangelical will find themselves under judgement

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for their false teaching. Certainly, no co-operation between Charismatics and Evangelicals is possible given such a situation. All need to go back to the relevant passages in John, Acts, Romans, 1 Corinthians and Galatians to resolve their dispute.

However, when this issue has been clarified, we come to the startling realization that Charismatics don't believe what they say they believe! In my discussions with the Charismatics, I pointed out the difficulties I had with their doctrinal statement when it said that a second experience of the Spirit and speaking in tongues were to be expected for every believer. They replied "Oh, we don't really believe that! Many people do receive a second blessing and the gift of tongues, but we wouldn't want to say that it happens to everyone!"

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For a brief instant I had a vision of attempting to hammer a nail-shaped sponge through a jelly fish. "But that's not what your doctrinal statement says."

"Yes, we know, but for the purposes of an evangelistic mission we're happy to ignore it."

So, again the question: to co-operate or not to co-operate? In Melbourne, sad to say, the keenest and most enthusiastic evangelists are the Charismatics. Many who call themselves Evangelical are often preoccupied with side-track issues and don't seem to find time for telling the Gospel. Many who acknowledge Jesus as Lord would hesitate to call themselves Evangelical. The pressure to co-operate with any keen evangelists is therefore very strong.

We continued our discussion. If the experience of second blessing and speaking in tongues is not essential, what is it? Is it useful? Is it important for Christian maturity? Is it necessary not for maturity, but for effectiveness in Christian ministry?

It is here that confusion between Charismatics becomes apparent. Some say, "Necessary for maturity". Others say, "Necessary for effective Christian ministry". Others say, "Both". What does the Bible say?

John 3:5 and Romans 8:9 make it clear that without the Holy Spirit not only is maturity and effective ministry impossible, but so too is the very act of becoming a Christian.

No-one can become God's child without the work of the Spirit.

What of Christian maturity? Galatians 5:16-26 speaks of the Spirit's work in producing the fruit of Christian living, although no mention is made of a distinct second experience of the Spirit after conversion. Rather, Paul portrays a continual experience of God's working to bring maturity—so too in Romans 8:12-17.

What then of effectiveness in ministry? Will a second blessing of God's Spirit, accompanied by tongues, result in more people won for the Gospel? Charismatics claim that this is apparent in the original Pentecost experience recorded in Acts 2. But apart from the more obvious differences (the people in the audience were Jews steeped in knowledge of the Old Testament and the languages were understood by the hearers), we must also ask whether there is any evidence that the Acts 2 account was meant to be normative for all believers. Paul certainly did not think so. He suggested in 1 Corinthians 12 that, although the Spirit gave each one something for the common good, not all would receive the same gift (12:14-20, 29-30). Neither did he believe that only some received the Spirit's manifestation, but that "each one" received a gift (12:7). So the charismatic distinction between those who have received some form of 'second blessing', and those who have not, is not upheld here unless we are to believe that some have received gifts that are not effective for ministry!

Thus, the Bible leads us to insist to our Charismatic friends that a second blessing of the Spirit, evidenced by speaking in tongues, is neither necessary, nor important, nor even to be expected. It is possible to be both mature and effective in ministry without such an experience. Those passages in Acts which seem to speak of a 'second blessing' do not appear to tell us anything about what we should expect to happen today.

This becomes even clearer when we consider what happens when we become Christians. Paul says in Ephesians 1:3 that Christians have been blessed "with every spiritual blessing in Christ". For we have "redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding" (v6). If we have every blessing,

what remains? Tongues?

Again, in Colossians 2:1-3, Paul prays for his readers that they will have "the full riches of complete understanding in order that they may know the mystery of God, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge". If in Christ are hidden all treasures of wisdom and knowledge, then what more does the Christian need? The work of the Spirit is not to add new gifts and blessings to the work of Christ. Rather, he shows us what we have already received in Jesus.

Thus, for the non-Charismatic Christian, Circle 1 (see diagram) represents where all believers stand—on the Gospel of salvation,

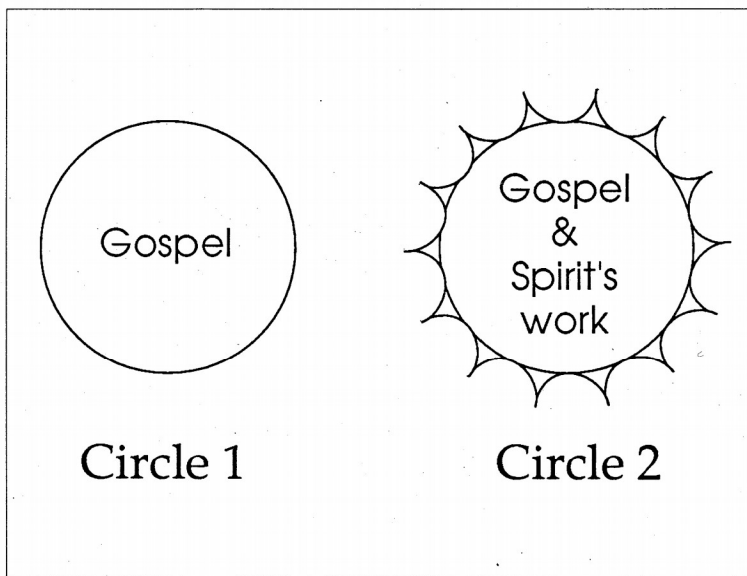
the already complete Gospel. It is the 'gospel plus', and will lead people away from salvation rather than towards it.

Back to our discussions. Did we agree to bury our differences with the Charismatics for the sake of the Gospel? In the end, no, because we found that those differences concerned the Gospel. We weren't going to bury the baby with the bath water (to mix a metaphor). And although, from a Charismatic viewpoint, such a response looks nitpicking and cold, our concern was pastoral in its implications (as all important theological questions are). For what happens to a new

Christian who joins a church that teaches the Bible? Full of joy he comes to realize that he has received new life in Christ, and that every heavenly blessing is his (Eph 1:3). But then a Charismatic says to him, "Congratulations! You believe in Jesus! Now let me tell you about the really great blessings that will come when you receive the full ministry of the Spirit".

That new Christian ought to run a country mile! For the effect of believing such teaching will be to move him away

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through the work of Jesus. Nothing more or less is needed, for the Christian life is not about progressing beyond the Gospel, but standing firm and growing where we are (Phil 1:27; Col. 2:6-7).

Circle 2 represents where the Charismatic Christian thinks all believers should stand. For him, it is an enhancement of Circle 1, and he will naturally seek to persuade people to move from Circle 1 to Circle 2.

The Evangelical, however, is persuaded by Scripture that there is nothing in the Christian life beyond Circle 1, for the full blessing of the Spirit has already been received in the Gospel. Thus, Circle 2 does not enhance, but detracts from Circle 1 because it involves an addition to

from Jesus and cause him to think that what he had at conversion was somehow lacking. Further, it will cause him to doubt the effectiveness of the Gospel in bringing people back to God (cf. Romans 1:16, 10:17), for the Spirit is suddenly now seen to operate independently of God's word in bringing people to faith. And if he really takes Charismatic teaching seriously (which, as I have observed, most charismatics thankfully do not), he will be in mortal danger of losing his own salvation: for anything in addition to the Gospel, no matter how spiritual it may seem, will end by distorting the Gospel it seeks to enhance. ■