

# The Continuance of the Charismata

by Stuart Fowler

*One of the valued services rendered us by our editorial correspondents is that they look out for suitable material for our pages and guide it in our direction. We have to thank the Rev. Robert Swanton of Melbourne for encouraging the author of this paper, who is Minister of the Baptist Reformed Church in Macleod, Victoria, to send it to THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY.*

A GOOD deal of attention is currently being focused on the charismata that were a feature of the Church in the days of the Apostles. These charismata were special gifts of the Spirit given to the Church to equip it for effective service.

In saying that they were given to the Church we do not overlook the fact that they were given to, and exercised by, individuals. We wish only to stress that they were given to these persons, not as isolated individuals, but as the members of a body, to be used within the context of that body, and for the sole benefit of the body. (See I Corinthians 12.)

In discussing this question it is important to note that these charismata did not appear for the first time at Pentecost. They had been present in the Church of the Old Testament also. Most discussions of the subject have not given sufficient weight to this fact.

We find examples of the charismata in the Old Testament tradition in the gift of wisdom to Bezaleel, and those who worked with him in the construction of the tabernacle (Ex. 31: 1-6); in the gift of government granted to such as Moses, Joshua, David, Solomon (Num. 11: 16, 17; Deut. 34: 9; I Sam. 16: 13; I Kings 3: 5-14); in the gift of strength possessed by Samson (Judges 14: 19); in the gift of working miracles and healing exercised by Elijah and Elisha (II Kings 2: 9, 10).

Then, of course, there is the prophetic charisma which pervades the Old Testament record. It seems also apparent that what is called "prophesying" involved, on occasions, a type of ecstatic utterance along the lines of the New Testament glossolalia (I Sam. 10: 10-13; 18: 10; 19: 23, 24).

Indeed, the whole character of the Old Testament tradition is shaped by the presence of the charismata. Remove the charismata and you alter the whole character of the Old Testament.

It is fundamental to the Old Testament tradition that God is present with saving power in human history. He exercises this power through men whom he has chosen and endowed with his Spirit. The exploits of these men are possible only because of these special endowments of the Spirit of God.

The Old Testament Church is a charismatic Church. Not only is the Holy Spirit present in regenerative and sanctifying power, but he is also active through the charismata.

It is a mistake, therefore, to think of the charismata that appeared at Pentecost as a new development in themselves. Here, as everywhere, we must view the New Testament, not as the antithesis, but as the fulfilment of the Old.

It is very doubtful if we are even entitled to speak of the charismata appearing in new forms at Pentecost. There is good reason to believe that all the varied array of charismata which appeared in the Church of the New Testament were also present at various times in the Old Testament Church.

In most respects, there is a close similarity between the charismata as they appear in the Old and New Testaments. There is no necessary connection, in the Old Testament tradition, between the charismata and personal holiness. Indeed, we may go further, and say that a person who is unregenerate may possess the charismata. Thus we find such men as Balaam and Saul engaged in charismatic activity.

It may be further remarked that, not only is there no connection between the charismata and personal holiness, but there is no necessary relation to the holiness of the community as a whole. The charismata are not always present in times of revival and absent in times of apostasy.

There is no notable presence of charismatic activity at the time of the reformation of Ezra and Nehemiah, yet there is a most notable period of charismatic activity in the highly apostate times of Ahab.

Yet, there are limits, and the charismata are never exercised by the openly profane, or against the interests of the community of faith. Balaam found it impossible to use his prophetic charisma against Israel. Saul's charisma of government was withdrawn from him when he apostatized openly, and, for the same reason, Samson's charismatic strength was taken away, though later briefly restored (I Sam. 16: 14; Judges 16: 20).

As to the manner in which the charismata were received, the only firm conclusion we can draw is that the Spirit is not tied to any pattern in the matter. He gives as he wills.

On occasion the charisma might come through the laying on of hands (Deut. 34: 9). At other times it was given in answer to prayer (I Kings 3: 4-15, and, possibly, II Kings 2: 9, 10). More usually, the charisma appears to have been given immediately, without any form of mediation. However, it is not possible to state any rule.

A significant feature of the Old Testament tradition is the spasmodic nature of the charismata. They do not appear in an historically uniform manner. At times they appear with considerable prominence, while, at other times, they recede so much into the background as to give the superficial impression that they have disappeared altogether.

Yet, in spite of this superficial appearance, a closer examination leads to the conclusion that, however obscured, they were never wholly withdrawn.

At the beginning of the New Testament era they had receded perhaps as far into the background as at any time. The rigid institutionalization of the official life of the Church left little room for charismatic activity. Yet, even here, we find that there were such as Simeon and Anna, who were possessed of the prophetic charisma (Luke 2: 25-27, 36, 37).

One sort of charismatic activity is specially noticeable by its spasmodic character in the Old Testament tradition. This is the exercise of what may be conveniently called the sensational charismata. By these we mean those that are more immediately apparent to the physical senses, and whose main appeal is to those senses, as the working of miracles and healing. They serve as visible signs of the Spirit's presence.

Charismata of this type appear, at least in any marked way, only occasionally. In fact, there are just two periods in which they appear in a marked fashion in the Old Testament tradition. The first is the period of the Exodus, and the other is the period of Elijah and Elisha.

It is important, at this point, to establish clearly the distinction between the charismata and miracles in general. Not every miracle, and not every act of divine healing, is the result of charismatic activity. God may work a miracle or heal a sickness apart from the exercise of the charisma by men. Our present concern is not with miracles as such, but with the charismata, of which the power to work miracles is one, and the gift of healing another.

Now, we cannot overlook the significance of the unusual appearance of these sensational charismata in just these two periods of the Old Testament tradition. In looking for the significance of this

fact we look for some factor common to both these periods, but not common to other periods of Old Testament history.

Approached in this way, we see that these unusual eruptions of sensational charismatic activity mark the two great epochs of Old Testament revelation. The period of the Exodus includes the revelation from Sinai, while the period of Elijah and Elisha marks the beginning of the great era of the prophets.

We conclude, therefore, that there is a direct connection between the appearance of these sensational charismata and the activity of revelation. This is confirmed when we see that any appearances outside these two periods are always intimately connected with revelational activity. The charismata are either an adjunct of prophetic activity, or, as in the case of Samson, they are the direct result of special revelation.

It seems impossible, therefore, to escape the conclusion that, in the Old Testament tradition, these sensational charismata are connected, in the most intimate way, with the activity of special revelation, so that the one is inseparable from the other.

Before proceeding further, it will be useful to summarize the Old Testament data on the charismata.

1. The charismata were the essential equipment of the Church in the Old Testament.
2. The distribution of the charismata is entirely in the hands of the Spirit, and cannot be in any way manipulated by man.
3. There is no necessary connection between the charismata and holiness, either in the individual or in the community.
4. The Holy Spirit retains full control, not permitting the charismata to be used against the interests of the community of faith.
5. The distribution of the charismata is spasmodic and limited. It is neither historically uniform nor is it widely dispersed through the community.
6. Certain charismata, characterized by their sensational nature, are intimately associated with the activity of revelation.

As we enter the New Testament we find the Apostles of the Lord leading a movement that breaks radically with the institutions of religious Judaism. In this situation, with the rigid institutional mould of Judaism cast off, and the new institutions not having taken definite shape, it is not surprising to find a new surge of charismatic activity in the infant Christian community.

Neither is it surprising to find this activity subside as the new institutional form of the Church is crystallized.

There is only one aspect in which this charismatic activity in the infant Christian community differs from that of the Old Testament. In every other respect it conforms to all that we have said of the charismata in the Old Testament tradition.

The charismata are the essential equipment for the Church (Eph. 4: 12); their distribution is entirely in the hands of the Spirit who distributes as he wills (I Cor. 12: 11, 18; Heb. 2: 4); there is no necessary connection between the charismata and holiness, either in the individual or in the community (I Cor. 5; 12-14); the charismata can be used only in the interests of the community of faith (Acts 8: 18-21).

The one apparent difference is in the extent of the distribution of the charismata. No longer are the charismata restricted to a limited few but are distributed to every member of the community of faith (I Cor. 12: 4-11; Eph. 4: 7; I Pet. 10).

The Old Testament has prepared us for this development so that Peter, at Pentecost, is able to appeal to Joel: "It shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions" (Joel 2: 28). It is not the pouring out of the Spirit, as such, that is significant in this prophecy. He has been poured out before. It is as a result of his being poured out on Joel that this prophecy comes to us. The significant words are "upon all flesh". Whereas, under the Old Testament, the distribution of the Spirit's gifts was limited, in the coming age of fulfilment, of which Joel speaks, it is to be unlimited. Then, it will be co-extensive with the community of faith.

This does not mean that there is, under the New Testament, no connection between office and charisma. Men are to be chosen for office who exhibit the charisma suited to that office. Thus we find the Church instructed, in the election of the Seven, to choose men "full of the Spirit and of wisdom" (Acts 6: 3). And, when we are told that bishops must be "apt to teach", we are surely intended to look for something more than a mere natural teaching aptitude. (See I Tim. 3: 2.)

While it is possible so to exalt the office that the charismata are left no room, it is also possible so to exalt the charismata as to reduce the office to a meaningless name, a mere formality. This was the Corinthian danger. At Corinth the charismata were wrongly used as justification for ignoring official authority, with the consequent threatened overthrow of order in the Church.

Yet, while there is a very real connection between office and charisma, and charismatic activity must respect the framework of the institutional Church, the charismata are not tied exclusively to

the office. Every believer is endowed with one or more charisma. This is the distinctive development of the New Testament.

There is no reason to suppose that this universal distribution of the charismata was to be confined to the apostolic age. The New Testament everywhere speaks as though it was to be a normal continuing situation. It was an epochal change that is as lasting as the changes that took place at that time in the structure of the Church itself.

It has been the major fault of the mainstream of Reformed theology, in dealing with the charismata, that it has failed to do justice to the epochal nature of this change from limited to universal distribution. The tendency has been to limit the presence of the charismata, beyond the apostolic age, to the official ministry. This is unfortunate, to say the least.

Doubtless it has been a factor in giving impetus to the movement for charismatic renewal, or a restoration of the New Testament pattern of the universal charismata. So far as this is a reaction against the tendency to limit the charismata to equipment for the official ministry it is a valid and healthy reaction.

But, does it follow from this that all the charismata of the apostolic age are to continue throughout the life of the Church? Are we really faced with an all-or-nothing situation in which we must expect all the apostolic charismata or none at all? On the surface, at least, there seems no reason why particular charismata might not cease without any way affecting the continued universal distribution of the charismata in general.

There is fairly general agreement that, in some form, the charismata have continued. Even B. B. Warfield, who went further than most in arguing for the limitation of charismata to the apostolic age, acknowledged that certain charismata, which he called "the ordinary gifts of the Spirit", continued beyond the apostles to the present. While we do not accept Warfield's distinction, it is significant that even he was not prepared to argue for the total cessation of charismatic activity. The impression he sometimes gives to the contrary is due to his rather special use of the term "charismata".

On the other hand, there is also wide agreement that not all the charismata continue. In Reformed circles, and quite widely also elsewhere, it is agreed that, the apostolic office being unique, not being continued beyond the first apostles commissioned by Christ himself, so the charisma of an apostle ceased with the last of the apostles.

Anyone who goes this far must concede at least the possibility that other charismata have also ceased along with the apostolic

charisma. He cannot take an all-or-nothing position, unless he is to argue, against all the evidence, for a total cessation of all charismata.

What is the charisma of an apostle? How is it distinguished from the other charismata? This is a question which, in most discussion, is not openly faced.

The ministry, calling, and authority of the apostles is discussed at length. The existence of a distinctive apostolic charisma is acknowledged. Yet, all the time, there remains in the background the important, unanswered question: What is this apostolic charisma? Just as the prophetic charisma, the teaching charisma, the charisma of tongues, of healing, and of miracles, had their distinctive individual qualities that marked them off from every other charisma, so the apostolic charisma must have had a distinctive quality not found elsewhere.

We can hardly find this distinctive charismatic quality in the revelations received by the apostles. Though these were possibly unique in their comprehensiveness, in character they were no different to the revelations of the prophetic charisma. Neither could it be in the remarkable apostolic power to heal, for this also was shared with many others in the Christian community.

We cannot look for the distinctive quality of the apostolic charisma in the authority of government and discipline. This was unique, but it was official rather than charismatic.

We must look further afield. We must look for some quality in the apostolic ministry that is both charismatic and unique.

In looking for an answer, our attention is drawn first to Acts 8. Here is recorded a remarkable evangelistic ministry by Philip, one of the Seven. Many are converted and baptized, but, under the ministry of Philip, none "received the Spirit".

Here is a remarkable situation, that cannot be without significance. Here is a man, mightily used of God in a major work of evangelism, yet, under his ministry none of the converts "receives the Spirit".

It was not until the apostles came from Jerusalem, and laid their hands on these converts, that they "received the Spirit".

It is apparent that this receiving of the Spirit had nothing to do with regeneration and sanctification. Already there was evidence of this work of the Spirit in the lives of these converts for them to be accepted by Philip as believers. It can only refer to the work of the Spirit in imparting the charismata.

Further, it is apparent that the charismata in question were of the sensational type, for, when the apostles laid hands on them it was at once apparent to all that they had received the Spirit. This

could only be so the presence of charismata whose presence was immediately discernible to the senses.

Undoubtedly then, we have here a situation in which sensational charismata are given through the apostles. Apparently they could not be received in any other way.

Attempts have been made to make this an exceptional event, but there is nothing at all in the tradition to suggest anything exceptional. All such attempts to explain it have had to rely on conjectures without solid scriptural foundation.

On the other hand, not only is there nothing to suggest that this was an exceptional occasion, but there is independent evidence to suggest that it was not exceptional.

In writing to the Romans, Paul expresses his desire to visit them "that I may impart unto you some spiritual gift" (Romans 1: 11). Though it has been argued that this is not a reference to the charismata, the evidence points most strongly in this direction. Paul combines the two expressions (*charisma pneumatikon*) which elsewhere he has independently used to denote the charismata. If he wished to indicate here nothing but some general gift, outside the charismatic gifts, we would expect him to use *charisma* alone, as he does elsewhere in such a situation. His qualifying of *charisma* with *pneumatikon* seems plainly designed to specify the gift in mind as one of the charismata. Further, we must remember that this was written after the epistle to the Corinthians where Paul has already established both *charisma* and *pneumatikon* as terms for the charismata.

It is true that there is an indefiniteness about the expression—"some spiritual gift"—but this is natural. There are several charismata that may be imparted by Paul's coming to Rome. He cannot tell which they may be, but he does know that, by his coming, some charismata will be imparted, as the Spirit will decide. Charismata are imparted through the laying on of the apostles' hands, but the apostles cannot determine which charisma will be given in each case. The Spirit distributes as he wills.

Another indication that charismata were imparted through the apostles is given in Acts 19: 6. Here the Holy Spirit came on the believers through the laying on of Paul's hands. This coming of the Spirit can be nothing but his coming with charismatic manifestations, which, in this case, were notably tongues and prophecy.

How can we escape the conclusion that, through the ministry of the apostles, charismata were imparted to others? Is there not also quite sufficient evidence for us to go a step further and say that some charismata, those of the more sensational nature, were not imparted in any other way?

If we have not here the whole of the distinctive charisma of the apostle, at least we have an important element in it. It was the charisma of an apostle that, through him, other charismata were imparted to others. Such a charisma is fitting for the unique and exalted office of the apostles. It set them off most distinctly from all others by a charisma that was entirely unique. It is reminiscent of Moses, whose ministry was so much like that of the apostles in other ways (Deut. 34: 9).

This identification of the apostolic charisma also enables us to understand the otherwise slightly mysterious reference Paul makes once to "the signs of an apostle" (II Cor. 12: 12). He immediately connects these signs directly with "signs, wonders, and mighty deeds."

It being the nature of a sign to mark out and distinguish one thing from others, it is evident that these signs of an apostle must have been visible, or audible, manifestations which exclusively accompanied the apostolic ministry. They must not accompany the ministry of any others at all, or they would lose all value as signs.

The mere power to work "signs, wonders, and mighty deeds" cannot be what constituted the signs of an apostle. We know that many beside the apostles had this power at that time.

What none but the apostles had was the charisma by which others might receive the ability to work "signs, wonder, and mighty deeds". Where the apostles had not ministered, these charismata were absent from the Church, but as soon as the apostles came and laid their hands on the believers, there was a widespread eruption of sensational charismatic activity "in signs, and wonders, and mighty deeds".

In this situation the cessation of the apostolic office must mean the cessation of more than the apostolic charisma. It must also mean the cessation of those charismata which were made dependent on the apostolic charisma. These dependent charismata would still be present in those who, having received the charisma from the apostles, outlived them, but would henceforth cease to be given, and so would gradually disappear from the Church.

It remains only to enquire which of the charismata present in the apostolic period belonged to this dependent group that ceased with the apostolic charisma.

While it is true that Paul's listing of the charismata is unsystematic, it does not follow that all differentiation is impossible. The possibility of differentiation is admitted as soon as we isolate the apostolic charisma.

If we examine carefully Paul's classic passage in I Corinthians 12-14 we find further differentiation is possible. Here Paul speaks of the "greater gifts". He urges his readers to zeal for these greater gifts (I Cor. 12: 31). They can hardly be zealous for just these gifts if they have no way of distinguishing them from the others.

There are two ways in which Paul could have enabled us to distinguish the greater gifts. He could have simply given us an exhaustive list, or he could have given us the criterion by which we may make the necessary distinction ourselves. He has chosen the latter procedure, in harmony with his usual style.

He selects prophecy as a typical sample of the greater gifts, and tongues as a contrasting sample of the rest. He distinguishes these two by telling us that it is the primary nature of prophecy to edify the Church, while it is the primary nature of tongues to serve as a sign (I Cor. 14: 2-4, 22). Tongues, too, may be used in a way that edifies, but this is not their primary function. First and foremost they are a sign.

With this simple criterion it is possible to divide the charismata into two groups. There are those that inherently edify and those that are inherently a sign. Whatever further differentiation is possible, this much at least is clear from the criterion Paul has given us to work with.

Taking the list given in I Corinthians 12: 8, 9, we may say that the greater gifts, which, in their own nature, edify, are: wisdom, knowledge, prophecy, discerning of spirits, interpretation. The sign gifts are healing, faith, working of miracles, and tongues.

Now, these sign gifts are of just that sensational character that satisfies the requirements for the charismata that depended on the apostolic charisma. These are the charismata that produce "signs, wonders, and mighty deeds".

So, while we may admit that there is no proof text that says, in effect, "the following charismata will cease with the apostles", scripture does furnish us with all the necessary evidence for the firm conclusion that those charismata which may be called "sign gifts" ceased to be given when the apostolic charisma ceased. They ceased to be given because their impartation to others than the apostles had been made to depend on the apostolic charisma. As this was what constituted the signs of an apostle, it would destroy the value of the signs for them to continue beyond the apostles.

The prevalence of these charismata in the apostolic period, and their cessation after that period, is just what the Old Testament leads us to expect. These "sign gifts" are just those charismata which, in the Old Testament tradition, are tied inseparably to revelation, and

appear prominently only at great revelational epochs. In the Old Testament they were exercised only by the prophets and charismatic leaders. In keeping with the distinctive character of the New Testament dispensation they are now exercised widely throughout the community of believers.

But, just as their appearance at this time is consistent with the Old Testament pattern, so is their cessation when the apostolic period of revelation has drawn to its close. With revelation completed, it is to be expected that those charismata that have always appeared only in direct connection with revelational activity, will cease. We are led to expect a change under the new dispensation from limited to universal charismatic distribution, but there is nothing to lead us to expect any break in the connection between the sensational charismata and revelational activity.

It is beside our present purpose to consider the various claims to a renewed appearance of these charismata, from Montanus onwards. We would only point out that, not only is it possible, but certain, that these sensational charismata will be counterfeited in this present age (II Thess. 2: 7-9; Rev. 13: 11ff.; 16: 14). Even if we were to set aside the evidence for the discontinuance of these particular charismata, it would be foolish to accept every claim to their possession at face value.

The cessation of the sensational charismata, or "sign gifts", however, does not mean the cessation of charismatic activity. The scriptural tradition never presents the charismata to us as an all-or-nothing package deal.

On the contrary, there may be powerful charismatic activity where the "sign gifts" are wholly lacking. We have an example of this in the ministry of John the Baptist, of whom it is expressly said that he did no signs (John 10: 41). Yet, his was a charismatic ministry of exceptional power; he was "filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb", so that he exhibited, in a marked way, the prophetic charisma, and much more (Luke 1: 13-17; 7: 26).

We are now able to summarize our conclusions in the following way:-

1. The charismata are the essential equipment of the Church in every age to the end of the world.
2. Their distribution, and exercise, is subject to the sovereign will of the Spirit, and may vary, as he alone sees fit, from time to time.
3. There is no necessary connection between the charismata and holiness, either in the individual or in the community.

4. The Spirit will not permit the charismata to be used by an open apostate, or in any other way that is against the interests of the community of faith.
5. Under the Old Testament the distribution of the charismata was limited. Under the New Testament it is universal, so that every believer should be eager for a suitable charisma.
6. Though the charismata are to be expected till the end of the world, not all the charismata of the apostolic period are to be expected today. Both the apostolic charisma, and those sensational charismata, or "sign gifts", which were dependent on the apostolic charisma, ceased with the apostles.

It is evident, of course, that the charisma of interpretation, though not in itself a "sign gift", ceased when the "sign gift" of tongues ceased, since there was then no further use for it. Whether, for different reasons, others of the charismata of the apostolic period also ceased, is beyond the scope of our present inquiry.

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