

The Nature and Use of the Charismata

Some Theses, Questions, and a Conclusion

Lutheran Theological Journal 23/1 (1989): 32-36

JOHN W KLEINIG

1. General Approach

- a. Since new movements in the church often arise from some deficiency in current teaching or practice, we need to exercise a balanced judgment in our assessment of the charismatic movement, so that we will be enriched by what is worthwhile in it, and reject what is not.
- b. While we do need to test all spiritual phenomena to distinguish what is divine from what is merely human, and sometimes even diabolic, we should also guard against quenching the Holy Spirit for fear of possible abuses (1 Thess 5:19-22).
- c. While it is essential to maintain the good order and well-being of the Christian community in the face of individualism and subjectivism, we must also not prohibit any genuine spiritual gifts (1 Cor 14:39, 40).

2. The Nature of the Charismata

- a. The variety in the listings of the charismata shows that they are descriptive rather than prescriptive in character.
- b. There are various interpretations of the charismata in the New Testament:
 - (1) 1 Peter 4:11 distinguishes between **gifts of speech** and **gifts of service**.
 - (2) In Ephesians 4:11, St Paul regards the different **leaders** in the church, such as apostles, prophets, teachers, pastors and evangelists, as people given in **grace** by the risen Lord to his church. They use the charismata as they exercise their ministry.
 - (3) In Romans 12:6-8 and 1 Corinthians 12:8-10, 28-30, St Paul uses the term 'charismata' to describe both the **tasks** of the congregation and the **ability** to perform those tasks.
 - (4) While the New Testament does at times distinguish between **office gifts** such as apostleship and **ability gifts** such as the power to speak effectively, it always presupposes that any gift is given for the performance of a particular task within the congregation.

c. In 1 Corinthians 12:4-7 and Ephesians 4:4-7, St Paul shows that, since the so-called spiritual gifts originate in the Triune God, they need to be understood theologically within a Trinitarian framework rather than just in connection with the Holy Spirit.

(1) As gifts of grace, they are given by the Holy Spirit, as he wills, in and for the church.

(2) As ministries, they depend on the ministry of Christ, and lead to service with him.

(3) In them as empowerments, God the Father, who is the origin, agent, and goal of everything, is at work.

d. While most of the controversy in the last decades has stemmed from the concentration by the pentecostal movement on the more '**spectacular**' **gifts** such as speaking in tongues (1 Cor 12:10, 28, 30), prophecy (Rom 12:6; 1 Cor 12:10, 28; Eph 4:11), healing (1 Cor 12:9, 28, 30f), exorcism (see miracles in 1 Cor. 12:10, 28f), and the discernment of the spirits (1 Cor 12:10), equal and perhaps even greater emphasis should be placed on the **gifts for leadership** such as wise speech (1 Cor 12:8) discerning counsel (1 Cor 12:8), capacity for encouragement (Rom 12:8), skill in administration (1 Cor 12:28; Rom 12:8) and ability in social welfare (Rom 12:7), as well as the **qualities for service** such as confidence (1 Cor 12:9), generosity (Rom 12:8), helpfulness (1 Cor 12:28), compassion (Rom 12:8), and sexual chastity (1 Cor 7:7).

e. Since some gifts such as healing, prophecy, and tongues are spiritually ambiguous in that they may be divine, or psychic, or demonic manifestations, they need to be tested in the following ways.

- The full confession of Christ (1 Cor 12:1-3; 1 John 4:1-3; Rev 19:10)
- The attestation and acceptance of the congregation (1 Cor 14:29; 1 John 4:6)
- The morality of the recipient (Matt 7:15-23)
- The discernment of the spirits (1 Cor 12:10)

f. Since the charismata are apportioned variously by the Holy Spirit as he wills (1 Cor 12:11; Heb 2:4), they vary from person to person with different vocations and the Father's varied operation in different people according to their personal characteristics (1 Cor 12:4, 5).

g. Not only are different gifts given to different Christians (1 Cor 12:7), but different people and different congregations have different combinations of gifts in accord with their ministry. It is therefore improper to criticise a person or a congregation for the apparent lack of a gift.

h. The charismata which are characterised by their diversity should therefore be distinguished from the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22, 23) and the

higher gifts of faith, hope, and love (1 Cor 12:31ff) which are equally available to all Christians.

i. Where the charismata are recognised and used as gifts of grace (*charis*), they will result in thanksgiving (*eucharistia*) rather than self-promotion and envy.

3. The Corporate Purpose of the Charismata

a. The discussion of spiritual gifts in the New Testament is always coupled with assertions about the corporate character of the Christian life (Rom 12:1-8; 1 Cor 12-14; Eph 4; 1 Pet 4:8-11).

b. Through the distribution of the charismata, God administers his varied grace through all the members of the congregation (1 Pet 4:10, 11).

c. By them the risen Lord equips and empowers people for ministry within the body of Christ (Eph 4:11, 12; 1 Cor 12:4-7).

d. As manifestation of the Spirit for the common good (1 Cor 12:7), they are given for the **building up** of the whole body of Christ, so that the whole community becomes corporately mature in Christ (1 Cor 14:12; Eph 4:12, 13, 15, 16).

e. They are meant to confirm the faith of the whole congregation (Heb 2:4; cf. Mark 16:16-18).

f. By their reception and use, they are meant to result in the glorification of God the Father through Jesus Christ in the church (1 Pet 4:11).

g. Since the charismata are given through the body for the body (1 Cor 12-14), they therefore belong to the body and serve its head (Eph 4:7-16).

4. Affirmations and Negations about the Charismata

a. We affirm the Following Propositions.

(1) Christ continues his ministry of reconciliation through the proclamation of the Word and administration of the Sacraments.

(2) There is only one baptism by water and the Holy Spirit.

(3) We distinguish between being baptised by water and the Holy Spirit, and being filled with the Holy Spirit.

(a) While the former occurs only once in a person's life, the latter is a subjective experience which recurs at different times in different ways with different manifestations for different purposes.

(b) While the former has to do with the objective gift of God's **grace**, the latter has to do with its ongoing, subjective appropriation through **faith**.

(c) While the Holy Spirit is totally given in the sacrament of baptism, he is never possessed, but always received as a gift by believers through the hearing of the Word (Gal 3:2,4) and through the exercise of faith in prayer (Luke 11:13; Acts 5:32), as the Spirit takes possession of them (Eph 5:18) and mortifies the old nature (Rom 8:9-13).

(4) As long as the old sinful nature remains, we, though holy in Christ, are not completely filled with the Holy Spirit and so do not reach the full perfection of Christ.

(5) As gifts of God's grace, the charismata are manifestations of the Spirit's presence and activity in the ministry of people within their congregation (1 Cor 12:7).

(6) Where and when he wills, the Holy Spirit gives the charismata to the church today, just as freely as he did in the apostolic age (1 Cor 12:11; Heb 2:4).

(7) While both prophecy, properly authorised and tested, and healing, subordinated to and derived from the means of grace, can be included in our regular public worship, speaking in tongues is normally a private matter given for personal edification (1 Cor 14:4).

(8) All baptised believers are charismatics who depend totally on God's grace for their ministry, and so need to pray constantly for empowerment by the Holy Spirit.

(9) The mark of a true charismatic is love for all fellow Christians (1 Cor 13), and a desire for the building up of the church rather than self-promotion (1 Cor 14:12).

b. We Deny the Following Propositions.

(1) Christ continues his incarnational ministry through the charismata apart from Word and Sacrament.

(2) 'Baptism in the Holy Spirit' by Christ is separate from, and superior to, baptism in water by the church.

(3) Speaking in tongues, or any other spiritual manifestation, proves that a person has been filled with the Holy Spirit (cf. Matt 7:21-23).

(4) Since we can be completely filled and totally sanctified by the Holy Spirit already in this life, we can also no longer sin and therefore no longer need forgiveness from God.

(5) 'Spirit-filled charismatics' are superior to ordinary Christians who have not yet experienced a 'baptism in the Holy Spirit'.

(6) All Christians can and should seek the same experience of 'baptism in the Spirit' by the laying on of hands and prayer for the gift of tongues.

(7) All the gifts of the Spirit as listed in Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12 should be manifest in every congregation.

(8) Only those who have spoken in tongues are charismatics.

(9) Christians have a right to exercise their spiritual gifts and by them their ministry in a congregation.

5. Matters for Discussion

- a. Is there any essential difference between natural talents and charismata, or is the difference only in empowerment and purpose?
- b. How do the charismata in the New Testament resemble and yet differ from empowerment by God's Spirit in the Old Testament?
- c. Do the charismata need to be proclaimed and prayed for, if they are to be manifest in the church?
- d. Since the Holy Spirit gives the charismata as he wills, is it right to desire and seek a particular gift such as speaking in tongues?

(1) May people seek it for themselves? If so, how?

(2) Should they seek it in prayer for the congregation?

- e. Is it right to seek to identify charismata in oneself or in others apart from a consideration of a call to ministry within the body of Christ?
- f. What is the gift of prophecy, and how should we foster its proper use in our church?
- g. Should we encourage a charismatic ministry of healing in our circles?
- h. How can we prevent Satan from sabotaging the work of the Holy Spirit in our circles?
- i. How can we prevent polarisation from fear of abuse and defensiveness in the face of unfair criticism?
- j. Is there any need to limit or control the movement for charismatic renewal in our church?
- k. What can we gain from the charismatic movement in our midst?

6. Conclusion

Here are the prophetic words of a confessional Lutheran theologian of the last century which are now more than a hundred years old and were spoken long before the pentecostal movement began. They come from volume two of the *Dogmatics* of A F C Vilmar published in Gütersloh by Bertelsmann in 1874, 190f. What follows is my own translation from the German:

“Christians can ‘eagerly desire’ these charismata (1 Cor.12:31; 14:39); those who once had such a charisma can ‘rekindle’ it (2 Tim. 1:6); they should not ‘carelessly neglect’ it (1 Tim. 4:14). Those who have these gifts do not possess them only for themselves, but for the edification and well-being of the congregation (1 Cor. 14:12) ... We must assert that, where and when the charismata which belong to the arrangement of members in Christ’s body have been lost, they have been lost only through the neglect of their possessors. We must also assert that it is possible to rekindle the charismata. Just as the power of Holy Baptism can be rekindled in a person, so the Holy Spirit, who is just as present and available personally today, as in the apostolic age, can revive his full range of powers in the church, if we but open ourselves to believe wholeheartedly and only in the real presence of the Holy Spirit among us...

In contrast to Chrysostom we must assert: Wherever faith is truly strong, there the charismata will be available and active. According to the Acts of the Apostles, they did not serve to awaken faith, but were the outcome of full faith in the risen Lord Jesus. They are, however, means for the growth of members in the body of Christ. As faith in the church is rekindled, faith in the charismata and the charismata themselves will undoubtedly also be rekindled.”