

EXPLORING CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

Part 3: Learning from the Charismatic Tradition

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The Charismatic Tradition

- The charismatic tradition is deeply centered on *experience*. Consequently, this tradition has not tended to stress theological teaching (although there are world-class theologians from this tradition, such as New Testament scholar Gordon Fee) as much as exuberant experience. This is seen both in public worship and in private prayer.
- Charismatics have stressed that worship should not be merely going through the motions but rather a coming into the presence of the living God.
 1. There is a stress on praying for the anointing of the Holy Spirit as we worship.
 2. There is an emphasis on praise and adoration—especially in prayer & music. This would include the use of the body, especially raising hands in prayer & praise.
 3. There is an expectation that, since worship is coming into his presence, God will be at work in our lives!
 4. *All of us* would do well to approach worship—and to prepare ourselves for worship—in these ways.
- In private prayer, the charismatic tradition has likewise focused on spiritual experience. I want to focus on two practices here:
- Praying in Tongues
 1. This has been one of the hallmarks of charismatic spirituality. In the early Pentecostal and charismatic movements, speaking in tongues was often seen as the evidence that a Christian was not only born again but had received the “second blessing” of being baptized with the Holy Spirit. Now, most modern charismatics agree with the historic Christian teaching that all believers have received the Spirit’s baptism (part of the meaning of the sacrament of baptism) and that not all Christians will or should experience speaking in tongues.
 2. What is “speaking in tongues,” or to call it by its technical term, *glossolalia*? Opinions differ. Some would say it is the ability to speak in a heavenly or angelic language; others would say that it is simply ecstatic utterance, though not a language in the strict sense. J.I. Packer says that it may be similar to scat singing in jazz—and he means that as a compliment, for Packer is a jazz clarinetist and huge fan of Ella Fitzgerald. (In the NT, it is sometimes the ability to proclaim a message from God in a human language that the speaker does not naturally speak. Here, however, we are talking more about praying in tongues, sometimes called a “private prayer language.”)
 3. Whatever the precise definition, *millions* of Christians have experienced praying in tongues. And yes, this includes quite a few Presbyterians!

4. If you have never experienced this, don't worry about it. It is not universal.
 5. If this is a part of your spiritual experience, thank God for it! Of course, you should avoid both spiritual elitism and confusing this with direct, verbal, authoritative revelation from God. But for many believers—especially those whose prayer life has often been cold and formal—this has been a great blessing! I've never prayed in tongues myself, but I wouldn't mind at all if God provided this blessing in my life.
- Prayer as Spiritual Warfare
 1. The charismatic tradition has been marked by an intentional awareness that we live in a spiritual combat zone and that there is more to this warfare than we can see with our natural eyes.
 2. Yes, at times this can be simplistic and naïve. However, might it not equally be the case that non-charismatic Christians are the ones who are naïve? Presbyterian theologian John Frame has argued that sometimes Reformed Christians act like deists!¹
 3. In your prayers, do you thank God for the protective presence of the holy angels? Are you aware that there are demonic forces seeking to destroy human lives—not just in personal temptations, but in more structural forms? Talk to one of our missionaries, Presbyterian pastor Marcus Toole, about his experiences in ministry among the Native peoples of North America.
 4. We would all do well to remember as we pray the reality of spiritual warfare. This is an important practice to learn from the charismatic tradition.
 - Putting It Into Practice
 1. What do you need to learn from the charismatic tradition? Is worship something you attend once a week or is it something you do throughout the week? Is worship a *verb*? Do you worship with exuberance? With spontaneity? Do you worship—corporately and privately—expecting God to work in your life?
 2. How can you more effectively be aware of spiritual warfare in your prayers? Do you need the Spirit to open your eyes to more of the real world?
 3. Do you pray in tongues? Are you open to doing so? Do you need God to help you experience spirituality “outside the box?”

¹ This would also apply to another common part of charismatic life—praying for physical healing. Praying for the sick—and having ministers anoint them with oil, a practice common in both charismatic and liturgical circles—is common throughout the church, but charismatic Christians tend to pray, well, like they believe in it! While we recognize that God does not heal everyone in this life, are we *surprised* when he does? O we of little faith!