

CONTROVERSIAL CHARISMATIC GIFTS AND THE CHURCH IN KENYA TODAY

Joseph K. Koech

Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, School Of Arts and Social Sciences, Moi
University

ABSTRACT: *There has been a resurgence of Pentecostalism and charismatism throughout the world with the emphasis on the supernatural especially healing, prophesy and speaking in tongues. This has resulted in great controversy in the church. The rise of African Independent Churches has led to the highlighting of these spiritual gifts in the African context. The traditional African Worldview due to its openness to the spirit world with a bent towards healing, prophesy and supernatural utterances has helped to fuel the spread of Pentecostalism and charismatism. The communities throughout Africa though they vary socially and religiously have gifted persons such as witch-doctors and mediums with supernatural powers to predict the future and heal the sick. In view of this the supernatural gifts taught and practiced by the Pentecostals and charismatics find quick acceptance among many Africans. It is noteworthy that the emphasis on the miraculous gifts of healing, prophecy and speaking in tongues has led to challenges in the Christian church today some questioning their legitimacy. In Kenya the media especially Television frequently air pronouncements of healings, personal prophesy and even national prophesy by some televangelists and even self-styled prophets. There have also existed fraudsters who promise healing with purchase of special oil by the suffering. Others even plant people whom they have coached in crowds or congregations so as to pretend to have been healed through the prayers of the 'man of God' or 'woman of God'. Scripture has in some cases been abused to support a particular belief or practice. Extra biblical revelation especially in the case of prophesies have been propagated. The prophetic words by the man or woman of God has even taken primacy or replaced scripture in some cases. The concern of this paper is to examine the various views concerning the continuation or cessation of supernatural gifts today, to evaluate biblical testimony concerning these phenomena and assess the relevance of the gifts in the African context today. The aim is to propose a more biblical position that would lessen confusion on the supernatural gifts.*

KEYWORDS: Prophesy, Healing, Speaking in tongues, Cessation

INTRODUCTION

The 20th century witnessed the emergence and phenomenal growth of the Pentecostal, charismatic, and neocharismatic movements which has continued to the present. In Kenya the percentages are impressive for instances in the year 2000 Pentecostals were 2,077,689 (25%), Charismatics 1,730,553 (21%) and Neocharismatics 4,541,758 (54%) totaling to 8,350,000 (Burgess, Stanley M., 2003).

These movements of Pentecostalism have been dubbed first wave, second wave and third wave respectively. These Christian renewals have impacted every segment of the church in virtually all countries of the world with new vitality and fervor. The characteristics of this renewal is enthusiastic worship, evangelism, and emphasis on the supernatural such as spiritual gifts, believe in miracles, signs, and wonders.

Various views towards spiritual gifts can be classified as cessationists, Pentecostal, charismatic, 'Third Wave' (neocharismatic). But these hardly represent the entire evangelical world. In this paper the African perspective is also examined.

Debate over the gifts

The belief in the supernatural especially healing, speaking in tongues and prophecy have elicited various reactions from the church and scholarly world at large. Theologians have been sharply divided concerning the legitimacy or illegitimacy of these gifts. Roughly four camps can be identified on the basis of their views on these gifts. They comprise Pentecostal/charismatic, cessationists, open but cautious, and neocharismatics (Grudem, Wayne ed, 1996). This paper begins with the examination of those that support the continuation of the spiritual gifts. These are represented by the Pentecostals and charismatics.

Pentecostal/charismatic phenomenon

Pentecostal/charismatic movement has been categorized into three main waves though all believe in the continuation of the gifts today. They are discussed here under the titles Pentecostals (first wave), charismatics (second wave) and neocharismatics (third wave).

Pentecostals

Pentecostalism is a very broad and variegated phenomenon. Pentecostals are Christians who are members of the major, explicitly Pentecostal denominations in Pentecostalism or the Pentecostal Movement or the Pentecostal Renewal. Baptism in the Spirit is expected by its adherence to be accompanied by speaking in tongues seen as the initial sign. The supernatural especially healing including the gifts of the Holy Spirit listed in 1 Cor. 12: 8-10 are to be received and experienced by believers.

Historically Pentecostalism is usually held to have begun in the U.S. in 1901 (some have suggested 1886). Initially it was an interdenominational movement within the existing churches, without beginning a new denomination. But from 1909 onward its members were increasingly ejected from all mainline bodies and so were forced to begin new organized denominations. 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.

From 1906 onward, the hallmark of explicitly Pentecostal denominations, which sets it apart from other denominations was tongue-speaking. Its main emphasis is speaking with other tongues as the 'initial evidence' of one's having received the baptism of the Holy Ghost (or Holy Spirit), whether or not one subsequently regularly continues to practice speaking in tongues. Most Pentecostal denominations teach that tongues-speaking is mandatory for all members, but in reality not all do it.

Pentecostal denominations proclaim a 'full' or 'fourfold' or 'fivefold' gospel of Christ i.e. as Savior, Sanctifier, Baptizer with the Holy Spirit, Healer, and Returning King. They are also popularly referred to as Classical Pentecostals. These denominations were founded before 1940. They are distinguished from the subsequent "Neo-Pentecostals" or 'Charismatics' which were formed latter.

Charismatics

These are defined as Christians affiliated with non-Pentecostal denominations including Anglican, Protestant, Catholic (Kevin and Dorothy Ranaghan, 1969), and Orthodox among others who receive the experiences of the baptism of the Holy Spirit similar to the Pentecostals. Their roots go back to 1907 and 1918 but their rapid expansion took place from 1950. This movement was dubbed the Charismatic Renewal. Charismatics usually describe themselves as having been renewed in the Spirit and are like Pentecostal in their beliefs and practices. However, they remain within their older mainline, non-pentecostal denominations rather than leaving to join Pentecostal denominations or form their own denominations. They form organized renewal groups within their present denominations.

Neocharismatics (Third Wave)

Since 1945 thousands of factional or other independent charismatic churches have come out of the Charismatic Movement. These independents started in the 1900 and has continued to the present. The numbers have been more than the first two waves put together. They consist of evangelicals and other Christians who are not related to the Pentecostal or Charismatic Renewals though they claim to have experience the infilling of the Spirit. Other experience include: empowerment or energizing by the Spirit; individual or corporate experience of the Spirit's supernatural and miraculous ministry. The baptism in the Spirit is not seen to be separate from conversion. They exercise gifts of the Spirit, teach about signs and wonders, supernatural miracles, and power encounters. Speaking in tongues is downplayed which is treaded as either optional or even unnecessary. These Neo-charismatics leave their mainline, non-Pentecostal denominations yet do not identify themselves as either Pentecostals or charismatics. In a number of countries, they exhibit Pentecostal and charismatic phenomena. These believers are increasingly being identified by their leadership as Independent, Post-denominationalist, Restorationist, Radical, Neo-Apostolic, or the "Third Wave" of the 20th-century Renewal.

Cessationist view

Generally cessationists state that the gifts of the Spirit (cf. Acts 2:22; 2 Cor. 12:12; Heb. 2:3-4) are no longer operational in the church today. The death of the apostles and the completion of the New Testament canon marked the end of the supernatural gifts. The gifts such as prophecy, tongues, and healing were only present in 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.

One of the arguments is that some of the miraculous gifts such as prophecy, tongues plus interpretation, and perhaps healing and exorcism were given only during the time of the apostles, as "signs" to authenticate the apostles during the early preaching of the gospel. They state that these gifts are no longer needed as signs today, and that they ceased at the end of the apostolic age, probably at the end of the first century or beginning of the second century.

Cessationists also use 1 Corinthians 13:8-13 where Paul seems to suggest that spiritual gifts would cease. The text reads:

Love never ends; as for prophecies, they will pass away; *as for tongues, they will cease*; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect; but *when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away*. When I was a

child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became a man, I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood. So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love (*italics added*).

The following are further arguments presented by cessationists in their rejection of the continuation of miraculous today:

- 1) Certain Scripture passages specifically associate the miraculous gifts of the Spirit with the work of the apostles (see Romans 15:15-19; Hebrews 2: 3-4). This means that not every believer is expected to possess the gifts. To cessationists the primary purpose of miracles in the New Testament was to authenticate the apostles as trustworthy authors of Holy Scripture. This implies that after the apostles had written the New Testament, miracles would have fulfilled their purpose. Now that the miraculously attested written Word of God is available the miracles are no longer needed.
- 2) The way Paul treats glossolalia in I Corinthians 12 to 14 suggests that this gift is no longer urgently needed in the church. Paul seems to downplay speaking in tongues in these texts. To him if speaking tongues is to be practiced it must be interpreted. Paul's concern is that the congregation must be edified. He did not discourage the practice of speaking in tongues in private but in public. His advice was the need to translate if practiced in public for the benefit of the hearers.
- 3) Speaking in tongues is never mentioned in any other Epistle in the New Testament other than 1 Corinthians. The only other place where tongues is mentioned in the New Testament is Mark (Mark 16: 9-20) and Acts of the Apostles (Acts 2: 1-4; 10: 44-46; 19: 6-7). Gordon Fee (1982, p. 100) and Joseph Koech (2005, pp.55-58) have pointed out that evidence in Acts of the Apostles do not necessarily support the view that speaking in tongues is for all. Mark's text may not have been originally Markan due to textual and internal inconsistencies and thus it may have been an interpolation. To cessationists the conclusion is that this may suggest that this gift and others were not intended to remain in the church. It is not even mentioned among the qualifications for church leaders in 1 Timothy 3:1-13 and Titus 1:5-9
- 4) Some gifts of the Spirit according to Paul were temporary. If the gifts of predictive prophecy and apostle among others are still there then the canon of Scripture is not yet closed. Paul clearly stated that speaking in tongues would cease (1 Cor. 13:8). The cessationists holds that the gift of prophecy in New Testament churches always had Scripture-quality authority, that it had no errors, contained only the very words of God, and therefore ceased to exist in the church around the end of the first century, when the canon of the New Testament was completed. Any claim of prophecy today would therefore be regarded as spurious. Another argument is that scripture is all-sufficient and thus prophecy is no longer required. This position casts doubt on the claims of existence of prophets and prophecy today. The main argument against this view is that it is not specifically stated when the gifts would cease.
- 5) The phenomenon of speaking in tongues is almost absent in the history of the church from A.D. 100 to 1900. This could point to the view that God may not have intended this gift to remain or continue in the church. However, it has been argued that experience

cannot be used to support or disprove the existence or cessation of gifts (Deere, Jack, 1993, p. 99).

Open but cautious view

This is the position held by a vast number of evangelicals who think of themselves as belonging to neither cessationist nor Pentecostal/charismatic groups. They are not convinced by the cessationist arguments that certain gifts belonged only to the first century. Also they are not fully convinced by the teachings and practices of those who emphasize such gifts today. They are open to the likelihood of miraculous gifts today, but are cautious about the possibility of abuses witnessed in groups that practice these gifts. To them scripture does not rule out for instance speaking in tongues, prophecy and healing. However, they point out that some modern practices in Pentecostal/charismatic circles do not conform to scriptural guidelines. The problem of divisiveness and negative results in churches today can be linked to the belief and practice of these gifts. Instead of highlighting the gifts the churches should rather emphasize evangelism, Bible study, and faithful obedience as keys to personal and church growth. Like Paul's suggestion (1 Cor. 12-14) the fruit of the Holy Spirit particularly love should be stressed. Diversity of the gifts of the Spirit is part of Paul's recommendation for the church.

Another point of disagreement with Pentecostal/charismatic position is that of reception of the Spirit as subsequent to salvation. This group argues that the reception of the Spirit happens at the time of salvation. Richard Gaffin (1996, p. 65) states "The coming of the Spirit at Pentecost was *the* gift of the Spirit in fulfillment of the new covenant promise and as such is part and parcel of new covenant salvation, not a second blessing that some believers never attain." The main purpose of the Spirit is to provide sanctification in the life of the individual Christian and not necessarily give charismata.

There are those Christians who are neither "charismatic" nor "cessationist". They are undecided on the gift of prophecy and the other unusual gifts. The gift of prophecy is not presently functioning in their local churches. They are wary of the excesses they have seen in the charismatic and Pentecostal churches. However, they are unsure on what to think about spiritual gifts.

Pentecostal/charismatic and Third Wave churches are not without positive contributions to the church in general. Their focus on fervency in worship, serious focus on faith and prayer are some of the contributions.

Biblical Evaluation of spiritual gifts

The New Testament mentions miracles of healing and others in the life and mission of Jesus and the apostles. Jesus as recorded in the Gospels performed many miracles (Dunn, James D.G., 1975). The apostles also healed the sick and performed other miracles recorded in the Acts of the Apostles. However, there is no explicit statement concerning their cessation or continuation.

Theologically many views exist on the matter of miracles. Rudolf Bultmann (Guthrie, Donald, 1990). for instance dismissed miracles as not factual. He argued for a mythological character of the New Testament. To him the language of the New Testament is mythological in character. The healings and miracles performed by Jesus belong to the category of myth. Material found in the gospels are all creation of the early Christian community. This position has received challenges from many theologians especially evangelicals who view the Bible as the inspired

word of God and thus must be taken as historically accurate (Bruce, F.F., 1981). Among the gifts probably the most contentious is speaking in tongues which is discussed below.

Only three books of the New Testament mention in one way or at least allude to speaking in tongues: these are the gospel of Mark (Mark 16: 15-18), Acts of the Apostles (Acts 2: 1-4; 10: 44-46; 19: 6-7), and 1 Corinthians (1 Cor. 12:7-10; 14). The examination of each of the books is important in helping in the understanding of this phenomenon in the church today.

The section of Mark's gospel where the phenomenon is mentioned is problematic. Scholars are unanimous that the ending of Mark is debatable. Mark 16: 15-18 where the word 'new tongues' is mentioned belongs to a section known as the longer ending of Mark (Guthrie, 1990, pp. 89-93). The passage suggests that Jesus promised all those who would believe in Him the ability to speak in tongues. However, as noted above, the authenticity of the passage is disputed. Textual criticism has shown that the passage does not exist in the earliest and most reliable manuscripts as well as in other early witnesses. The other synoptic gospels do not have parallel passages of the same. The conclusion is that Jesus never promised that new believers would practice speaking in tongues (Koech, 2005, p.56). Acts of the Apostles in relation to speaking in tongues has peculiarities.

Luke is the author of both the Gospel of Luke and Acts of the Apostles. In Acts, Luke mentions that in three out of the five-recorded incidences of Holy Spirit reception, glossolalia followed (See Acts 2: 1-4; 10: 44-46; 19: 6-7; twice not mentioned i.e. in Acts 9: 17-19 and 8: 14-19). Some Pentecostal and charismatic Christians suggest that even where glossolalia is not mentioned one may still assume that glossolalia was practiced. One of the rules of interpretation is that silence cannot be used to build a doctrine (Gordon Fee, 1981 p. 41). Paul in the Corinthian correspondence claims that he spoke in tongues more than Corinthians (1 Cor. 14: 18). But this does not necessarily mean that he spoke in other tongues immediately Ananias laid hands on him for the reception of the Holy Spirit (Acts 9:17-18). Those who support the view that Paul must have spoken in tongues use the above text (1 Cor. 14:18).

The reception of the Spirit by the Samaritans (Acts 8:17-19) is not accompanied by speaking in tongues. It is clear what Simon the sorcerer noted as a particular evidence on the reception of the Spirit. But what is clear is that it was so spectacular the he offered money to Peter for the ability to impart the Spirit. Some have suggested healing, speaking in tongues or prophecy (Hoekema, Anthony, 1966).

One can only conclude that it must have been more spectacular than what he had earlier witnessed. But what the evidence was is inconclusive from the context.

According to Fee (1982, p. 100) in Acts "There is [are] no... specific charismatic phenomena that are to be in evidence when one receives the Spirit". He argues that there is no evidence in Acts as to continuation or cessation of the gifts. We now turn to Paul's view as found in 1 Corinthians.

Some have interpreted 1 Cor. 14: 21-22 in connection with Isaiah 28:1 to support the view that speaking is a sign of spirit baptism (J. P.M. Sweet, 1967 p.241). However, a closer scrutiny of the context seems to indicate otherwise. The Corinthian Christians may have used it as the only sign of Spirit Baptism. The full passage (1 Cor.14: 21-22) reads:

In the law it is written: "with men of other tongues and other lips will I speak to these people, and yet, for all that they will not hear me," says the Lord.

Therefore, tongues are for a sign not to those who believe but to unbelievers, but prophesying is not for unbelievers but for those who believe (New King James Version).

When interpreted in connection with Isaiah 28:11, other tongues was an indication of judgment (Sweet, p.323). The prophet Isaiah was predicting captivity for the Israelites under people with a strange tongue. What Paul is saying is that glossolalia was a kind of judgment to unbelievers because they would not understand what was being said. That is why he asked them that in their public worship they should refrain from tongues unless interpreted.

The Corinthians may have highlighted speaking in tongues because a phenomenon similar to glossolalia was present in pagan religions from where most of the Corinthian converts came (H. Wayne House, 1983 p. 142). Paul encouraged the Corinthians to practice love (1 Cor. 13) rather than highlight speaking in tongues or any other spiritual gift especially in public worship.

The church is facing a challenge today from those who have exalted speaking in tongues above all other spiritual gifts (E.A.Obeng, 1986, p. 121). To George W. Marston Paul was telling those practicing speaking in tongues that they were not the only Christians with spiritual gifts (George W. Marston, 1983 p. 31). Other equally and possibly more edifying spiritual gifts were present. Paul mentions prophecy and interpretation to be superior particularly in public worship.

The Pauline position is that there are diversities of spiritual gifts including speaking in tongues, prophecy, healing among others. His advice to the Corinthians which can be heeded by the church today is the need to seek the most edifying gifts and practice love.

Gifts and the African context

As already noted the emphasis on the spiritual gifts such as prophecy, healing and speaking in tongues has been fueled by the rise of the African Independent Churches (AICs) (David Barrett, 1968). Most of these churches came into existence due to the need to domesticate the Christian message in the African context. Africans need a religion that meets their needs spiritually, psychologically, socially and physically (Joseph Koech, 2008, p. 64). Traditional African Worldview which is at the base of the AICs, presents an attitude that is open to the supernatural. Among other things there is the belief in the Supreme Being, ancestors and other spirit agencies who impact the everyday life of the people. Special persons such as witchdoctors, mediums, priests and rainmakers mediate the power to the people. Generally the Africans not only believe in the supernatural impacting their lives but they actually expect it.

Though many factors can be adduced for the rise and spread of AICs in Africa (Barrett, 64ff), Anderson's suggestion is very relevant for the current discussion:

The greatest attraction of the so-called independent churches lies in their open invitation to the Africans to bring their fears and anxieties about witches, sorcerer, bad luck, poverty illness and all kinds of misfortune to the church leadership (Alan Anderson, 1992, p. 32).

Part of the attraction is due to Spirit empowered church leadership which can preach powerfully, work miracles, heal the sick, exorcise evil spirits, and give prophetic utterances. The hallmark of the Pentecostal and charismatic movements is the power of the Holy Spirit depicted in the practice of speaking in tongues, prophecy and healing. Presently, Kenyans have

witnessed an increase in the so called prophets/prophetesses who claim to possess the ability to predict future events. Like in Kimbanguism such prophets/prophetesses promise healing and other miracles to the sick (Marie-Louise Martin, 1964).

It is noteworthy that the African Christians are more open to the activities of the Spirit. The outcome on the debate concerning the cessation or continuation of the gifts of the Spirit is already determined due to their traditional worldview. The balance leans more towards continuation of the Gifts of the Spirit. It is possibly only among the educated that the debate rages. The ordinary Christians even in the mainline churches believe in and welcome the supernatural. In the absence of the belief in the supernatural, African Christians seek traditional means to deal with perplexing challenges. According to Richard Gehman (1989, p. 99f) many professing Christians in mainline churches turn to African Traditional Religion during times of crises. Another alternative is to attend Pentecostal or charismatic meetings where speaking in tongues, prophecy and healing are practiced while still maintaining allegiance to their churches. Another outcome has been the mass exodus to join the AICs or form new ones.

The major question within the African context may not necessarily be the cessation or continuation of the speaking in tongues, prophecy and healing but the spurious nature as practiced by some. There have existence charlatans, and excesses regarding the said gifts.

CONCLUSION

The discussion has highlighted the position held causing controversy over spiritual gifts of speaking in tongues, prophecy and healing. Cessationists have presented various reasons why the gifts are no longer valid today, including completion of the New Testament canon, the death of the Apostles and experience. Those who support continuation of the gifts state that the end of the gifts is not clearly stated in the New Testament. Experience cannot be used to support or deny the validity or invalidity of the gifts today. Evaluation of the relevant passages in Mark, Acts of the Apostles and 1 Corinthians are inconclusive regarding the gifts for today. The African context seems to support the practice of the spiritual gifts for today. Two factors make the gifts of the Spirit attractive in the African context. The first is the traditional African worldview which is open to the supernatural. The second one is based on the need for a practical religion by Africans. Africans embrace a religion that addresses their needs. It is recommended in this paper that there should be openness by the cessationists concerning the spiritual gifts, while those who support their continuation look seriously at the arguments raised by cessationists.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, Alan (1992). *Moya: The Holy Spirit in an African Context*. Pretoria: University of South Africa.
- Barrett, David (1968). *Schism and Renewal in Africa*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Bruce, F.F. (1981). *New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* 6th edition. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Burgess, Stanley M., ed. (2003). *The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, Revised and Expanded Edition. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- Deere, Jack (1993). *Surprised by the Power of the Spirit*. Eastbourne: Kingsway Publications.

Fee, Gordon and Douglas Stuart (1982). *How to Read the Bible for All it's Worth*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

Fee, Gordon (1983). *New Testament Exegesis*. Philadelphia: the Westminster Press.

Gehman, Richard (1989). *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective*. Kijabe: Kesho Publications.

Grudem, Wayne, ed. (1996). *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today? Four Views*. Leicester: Intervarsity.

Guthrie, Donald (1990). *New Testament Introduction*, 4th ed. Leicester: Apollos.

Hoekema, Antony (1966). *What about Tongue-Speaking?* Exeter: Paternoster Press.

House, H. Wayne (1983). Tongues and the Mystery Religions of Corinth. *Bibliotheca Sacra* 140, No. 558 (April-June): 134-150.

Koech, Joseph (2005). Glossolalia: the Measure of Pneumatic Status? *Maarifa: A Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* vol. 1 no. 1: 55-58.

_____ (2008). *The Holy Spirit as Liberator: a study of Luke 4: 14-30 in the African Context*. Eldoret: Zapf Chancery.

Marston, George W. (1983). *Tongues Then and Now*. Phillisburg: Presbyterian & Reformed.

Martin, Marie-Louise (1964). *Kimbangu: An African Prophet and the Church*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Obeng, E.A. (1986). Speaking in Tongues: The Only Sign of Reception of the Holy Ghost? *Africa Theological Journal* 15, No. 2:119-126.

Ranaghan, Kevin and Dorothy (1969). *Catholic Pentecostals*. Paramus, N. J.: Paulist Press.

Sweet, J. P. M. (1967). A Sign for Unbelievers: Paul's Attitude to Glossolalia. *New Testament Studies* 13, No.3 (April): 240-257.