
Charismatic Experiences in the Seventh-day Adventist Church: Present and Future

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Experiences and Warnings in the Past

As we approach the end of earth's history and look forward to the soon return of Jesus, there is a growing interest among the people of God in the role of the Holy Spirit. By speaking of an early and a latter rain, Bible writers have given us the assurance that the Holy Spirit will be actively involved in the closing events of history (Hosea 6:3; Zech. 10:1; James 5:7). Seventh-day Adventists see the prophecies concerning the former and latter rains as applying to the history of the Christian church, and to the experience of God's people. Historically, the prophecies dealing with the former rain were fulfilled in the power given at Pentecost, which propelled the early church into its world mission, but a greater display of Holy Spirit power, the latter rain, will accompany the completion of the gospel commission. The prophetic symbolism that depicts the giving of the latter rain is seen in the work of the augmenting angel of Rev. 18:1.

The prophecies dealing with the early and latter rains are also fulfilled in the individual life. As the early rain fell upon the newly planted seed in the Middle East causing the seed to sprout and enabling the plant to grow, so the Holy Spirit guides the repentant sinner into the new birth ex-

perience and a growing relationship with Jesus. As the latter rain prepared the grain for harvest, so the final infusion of the Spirit's power just prior to the return of Jesus will complete the work of redemption within the hearts of God's waiting people, and enable them to stand prepared for translation.

Many Seventh-day Adventists have asked, Are ecstatic experiences and free demonstrations of emotions evidence of the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and will these experiences accompany the giving of the latter rain? Early demonstrations among the Millerites, which included swooning, shouting, and praising God with a loud voice, carried over after 1844 into the experience of those who established the Seventh-day Adventist Church, along with at least four documented experiences of speaking in tongues. Does the absence of these experiences indicate that the church has grown cold and formal, devoid of the Spirit's power, and are we to look for the lively experiences of earlier years to be revived as the power of the latter rain descends upon the church?

An excellent document can be found at the Ellen G. White Estate that reviews and evaluates the experiences that occurred among early believers in

the Seventh-day Adventist message. This document, “Charismatic Experiences in Early Seventh-day Adventist History,” consists of a series of 12 articles that were prepared for the *Review and Herald* in 1972 and 1973 by Arthur L. White, then secretary of the Ellen G. White Estate. The historic details that Arthur White reports need not be repeated here. A summary of his series will be helpful, however, in understanding the counsel Ellen White gives the church as we anticipate the falling of the latter rain. The reader who is interested in these early charismatic experiences is encouraged to study this document for himself.

Ecstatic religious experiences are reported in the early writings of both James and Ellen White, with reports of tongues-speaking in 1847, 1848, 1849, and 1851 (“Tongues in Early SDA History,” *Review and Herald*, March 15, 1973). Arthur White summarized his study of tongues-speaking in our early experience by saying: “There is no record of Ellen White’s giving explicit support to, or placing her endorsement upon, these ecstatic experiences with unknown tongues, although she was an eyewitness to three of the four. . . . She was later shown that a person’s thinking and his feelings have a large influence on such experiences” (“Bible Study Versus Ecstatic Experiences,” *Review and Herald*, March 22, 1973).

Arthur White also noted: “It is interesting to observe that Ellen White, with the many, many visions given her down through the years, and facing many, many experiences, felt unable to declare unequivocally that there would be an ecstatic experience, such as speaking in unknown tongues, in connection with the outpouring of the Spirit of God. In fact, at no time did she link the evidences of the outpouring of the Spirit—sometimes spoken of as the baptism of the Holy Spirit—with ecstatic experiences”

(“The Gift of Tongues at Portland, Maine,” *Review and Herald*, April 5, 1973).

With reference to the fanatical excitement, which included tongues-speaking, that attended one group of people who set the time of Jesus’ coming at 1854, Ellen White wrote: “Some of these persons have exercises which they call gifts and say that the Lord has placed them in the church. They have an unmeaning gibberish which they call the unknown tongue, which is unknown not only to man but by the Lord and all heaven. Such gifts are manufactured by men and women, aided by the great deceiver. Fanaticism, false excitement, false talking in tongues, and noisy exercises have been considered gifts which God has placed in the church. . . . But the influence of such meetings is not beneficial. When the happy flight of feeling is gone, they sink lower than before the meeting because their happiness did not come from the right source” (*Testimony for the Church*, vol. 1, p. 412).

As early as 1850, Ellen White was shown the order that existed in heaven and among the angels of God. She was then warned about “the exercises,” and was told that they were “in great danger of being adulterated, . . . therefore implicit confidence could not be placed in these exercises.” She then said, “I saw that we should strive at all times to be free from unhealthy and unnecessary excitement. I saw that there was great danger of leaving the Word of God and resting down and trusting in exercises. I saw that God had moved by His Spirit upon your company in some of their exercises and their promptings; but I saw danger ahead” (Ms 11, 1850, see *Manuscript Releases*, vol. 5, pp. 226, 227).

What was the danger that the prophet saw casting its shadow across the path of God's people? Could it be that she realized Satan would introduce ecstatic experiences into our worship services with the intent of leading people away from God's Word as the judge of one's religious experience to emotional exercises as the criterion of a genuine experience? One thing is clear, as Ellen White's understanding deepened, and God revealed to her the methods Satan would use to gain control of Christian churches at the conclusion of the great controversy, her words of caution became clearer and stronger as she moved the church farther away from ecstatic, emotional experiences.

Warnings Relating To Present and Future Experiences

Seventh-day Adventists have known for decades that just before the outpouring of the promised latter-rain power Satan would make a tactical move in an attempt to blunt the impact of the power of the Spirit upon the Christian world. Ellen White predicted: "Before the final visitation of God's judgments upon the earth there will be among the people of the Lord such a revival of primitive godliness as has not been witnessed since apostolic times. The Spirit and power of God will be poured out upon His children. At that time many will separate themselves from those churches in which the love of this world has supplanted love for God and His Word. Many, both of ministers and people, will gladly accept those great truths which God has caused to be proclaimed at this time to prepare a people for the Lord's second coming. The enemy of souls desires to hinder this work; and before the time for such a movement shall come, he will endeavor to prevent it by introducing a counterfeit. In those churches which he can bring under his deceptive power he will

make it appear that God's special blessing is poured out; there will be manifest what is thought to be great religious interest. Multitudes will exult that God is working marvelously for them, when the work is that of another spirit. Under a religious guise, Satan will seek to extend his influence over the Christian world" (*The Great Controversy*, p. 464).

In the charismatic movement, Seventh-day Adventists have witnessed at least a partial fulfillment of this prophecy. The emotional exercises involved in charismatic worship services are seen as the workings of the Holy Spirit and evidence of the presence and blessing of God. Christians who are caught up in these ecstatic experiences accept the feelings of happiness and the emotional highs generated in charismatic meetings as the criterion for spiritual truth. If biblical teachings are not directly associated with the charismatic experience and the teachings of those who direct the charismatic services, these biblical teachings are questioned as representing truth and rejected outright by many.

This raises a question that must be faced by Seventh-day Adventists today, Is it possible for the same thing to happen within our church? On the basis of our past history, Ellen White not only believes that it is possible, but states emphatically that Satan will introduce a counterfeit to the latter rain experience in an attempt to either prevent it from coming or bring about a failure to recognize and receive it when it does come. The following counsel will guard God's people from accepting a "charismatic" experience in the place of the genuine experience which will exist under the latter rain.

Healthy Enthusiasm: Our worship services are not to be cold and lifeless. Ellen White says there is such a thing as healthy enthusiasm, but what is a healthy enthusiasm? “The Holy Spirit of God alone can create a healthy enthusiasm. Let God work, and let the human agent walk softly before Him, watching, waiting, praying, looking unto Jesus every moment, led and controlled by the precious Spirit, which is light and life” (2SM, pp. 16, 17). A healthy enthusiasm is a holy joy that results from beholding the workings of God. This joy is expressed in praise and worship as the human walks softly and reverently in the presence of the great Creator and Redeemer.

Spiritual Experience to Be Built on the Word: We must be on guard that our spiritual experience is founded on God’s Word rather than on ecstatic experiences. Strong cautions are given to those who seek an emotional high through a “spiritual experience.” The Word of God is to be the solid foundation upon which we are to build our experience. Anything else will eventually prove to be a foundation of sand. Notice the stress placed upon the Word as the basis for our spiritual lives.

“The Lord desires His servants today to preach the old gospel doctrine, sorrow for sin, repentance, and confession. We want old-fashioned sermons, old-fashioned customs, old-fashioned fathers and mothers in Israel. The sinner must be labored for, perseveringly, earnestly, wisely, until he shall see that he is a transgressor of God’s law, and shall exercise repentance toward God, and faith toward the Lord Jesus Christ” (2SM, p. 19).

“It is through the Word—not feeling, not excitement—that we want to influence the people to obey the truth. On the platform of God’s Word we can stand with safety” (3SM, p. 375).

“They [nominal Christians] flatter themselves that they are in conformity to the will of God because they feel happy; but when they are tested, when the Word of God is brought to bear upon their experience, they stop their ears from hearing the truth, saying, ‘I am sanctified,’ and that puts an end to the controversy. They will have nothing to do with searching the Scriptures to know what is truth, and prove that they are fearfully self-deceived. Sanctification means very much more than a flight of feeling.

“Excitement is not sanctification. Entire conformity to the will of our Father which is in heaven is alone sanctification, and the will of God is expressed in His holy law. The keeping of all the commandments of God is sanctification. Proving yourselves obedient children to God’s Word is sanctification. The Word of God is to be our guide, not the opinions or ideas of men” (3SM, p. 204).

Holy Spirit Not Present in Bedlam and Noise: The following statement is not only helpful in the caution it gives, but instructive as to what we may expect just prior to the close of probation: “The things you have described as taking place in Indiana, the Lord has shown me would take place just before the close of probation. Every uncouth thing will be demonstrated. There will be shouting, with drums, music, and dancing. The senses of rational beings will become so confused that they cannot be trusted to make right decisions. And this is called the moving of the Holy Spirit.

“The Holy Spirit never reveals itself in such methods, in such a bedlam of noise. This is an invention of Satan to cover up his ingenious methods for making of none effect the pure, sincere,

elevating, ennobling, sanctifying truth for this time” (2SM, p. 36).

Ellen White was addressing the fanatical errors of the holy flesh movement that swept through the ranks of Adventists living in Indiana during the early years of the 1900s. Worship services were marked by all types of emotional demonstrations accompanied by loud, pulsating music of all kinds of instruments. These demonstrations were called the working of the Holy Spirit.

Time and time again the church received words of caution against fanaticism that revealed itself in emotional demonstrations during worship. For example, in 1909 Ellen White wrote, “True religion does not demand great bodily demonstrations. . . . These are no evidence of the presence of the Spirit of God” (2SM, p. 26). In 1908 she reviewed the early experience of Advent believers and said, “During those trying days some of our most precious believers were led into fanaticism. I said further that before the end we would see strange manifestations by those who professed to be led by the Holy Spirit. There are those who will treat as something of great importance these peculiar manifestations, which are not of God, but which are calculated to divert the minds of many away from the teaching of the Word” (2SM, p. 41).

And again, “No greater harm could be done to the work of God at this time than for us to allow a spirit of fanaticism to come into our churches, accompanied by strange workings which are incorrectly supposed to be operations of the Spirit of God” (2SM, p. 42). “Fearful waves of fanaticism will come. But God will deliver the people who will earnestly seek the Lord and consecrate themselves to His service” (2SM, p. 47).

Music to Be a Snare: As with the holy flesh movement, music will again be used

by Satan in an attempt to lead God’s people into experiences that will blunt the true workings of the Holy Spirit. “Those things which have been in the past will be in the future. Satan will make music a snare by the way in which it is conducted” (2SM, p. 38).

An increase in decibels does not indicate the presence of the Spirit, nor does it lead to true worship. Ellen White had a few choice words for a person who thought that “loud” was holy: “Any oddity or peculiarity cultivated attracts the attention of the people and destroys the serious, solemn impression which should be the result of sacred music. Anything strange and eccentric in singing detracts from the seriousness and sacredness of religious service.

“Bodily exercise profiteth little. Everything that is connected in any way with religious worship should be dignified, solemn, and impressive. God is not pleased when ministers professing to be Christ’s representatives so misrepresent Christ as to throw the body into acting attitudes, making undignified and coarse gestures, unrefined, coarse gesticulations. All this amuses, and will excite the curiosity of those who wish to see strange, odd, and exciting things, but these things will not elevate the minds and hearts of those who witness them.

“The very same may be said of singing. You assume undignified attitudes. You put in all the power and volume of the voice you can. You drown the finer strains and notes of voices more musical than your own. This bodily exercise and the harsh, loud voice make no melody to those who hear on earth and those who listen in heaven. This singing is defective and not acceptable to God as perfect, softened, sweet strains of music. There are no such exhibitions among the angels as

I have sometimes seen in our meetings. Such harsh notes and gesticulations are not exhibited among the angel choir. Their singing does not grate upon the ear. It is soft and melodious and comes without this great effort I have witnessed. It is not forced and strained, requiring physical exercise" (3SM, p. 333).

Spirit's Presence is Calmness: How do we know when the Spirit of God is in our presence and blessing our worship services? Ellen White says, "Let us give no place to strange exercisings, which really take the mind away from the deep movings of the Holy Spirit. God's work is ever characterized by calmness and dignity" (2SM, p. 42).

"We must go to the people with the solid Word of God; and when they receive that Word, the Holy Spirit may come, but it always comes, as I have stated before, in a way that commends itself to the judgment of the people. In our speaking, our singing, and in all our spiritual exercises, we are to reveal that calmness and dignity and godly fear that actuates every true child of God" (2SM, p. 43).

"In God's dealings with His people, all is quiet; with those who trust in Him, all is calm and unpretending" (2SM, p. 97).

Ellen White's understanding of the working of the Holy Spirit among God's people as they assemble together may be summarized best by the following statement: "The most profitable meetings for spiritual advancement are those which are characterized with solemnity and deep searching of heart; each seeking to know himself, and earnestly, and in deep humility, seeking to learn of Christ" (*Testimony for the Church*, vol. 1, p. 412)

Ellen G. White Estate
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