

Suggested criteria for assessing charismatic phenomena

This paper was written to address concerns about certain behaviour associated with the “Toronto Blessing” in the 1990s, but the guidelines have on-going relevance wherever what appears to be bizarre behaviour is manifested in connection with spiritual experience. Sometimes such “bizarre” experience, though unusual and disturbing, can be genuine and helpful to the individual. Sometimes it is not. This paper addresses the distinction.

We rejoice in every clear evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit today, for example, testimonies of Christians being led into repentance, a new love for Christ, a new desire to witness, reconciliation, etc.

However, we are concerned at a number of factors sometimes mixed with these blessings and we offer the following criteria to help Christians distinguish between that which is the work of the Holy Spirit and that which is not.

1. What are the merely psychological factors involved?

a. Are there hypnotic aspects, for example:

- pressure to discontinue the use of the critical faculties of the mind, as opposed to loving God with a mind transformed by the Holy Spirit.
- pressure to yield to a powerful personality, resulting in evidence of a transformed state of consciousness through the influence (directly or indirectly) of that personality. An example of this includes the continuing inducement of such a transformed state of consciousness as a result of words which seem to be trigger phrases.
- manifesting bizarre behaviour in this transformed state of consciousness.
- such states may also be induced through extended experience of group excitement, or of repetitive music or musical beat.

b. How much is the worship experience spiritual and how much is it aesthetic (purely an experience of beauty), nostalgic and mood-inducing?

All music has these elements. They are not wrong in themselves. But worship songs can easily become a sing-along: an end in themselves inducing a mood of heightened excitement and enthusiasm which is not in itself spiritual. In excess it can induce an altered state of consciousness.

True spiritual worship may or may not be aesthetically satisfying and emotional but it will include a heightened consciousness of and response to the Lord.

c. Are there telepathic/clairvoyant influences in operation?

We believe in the gifts of the Spirit, including prophecy, the word of wisdom and the word of knowledge (the latter two being supernatural wisdom and knowledge). They are often experienced in the church today.

But that is not to say all experiences of super-normal knowledge in Christian circles are from the Holy Spirit, however accurate and spectacular they may be. It is not the way of the Holy Spirit to convey information which lacks spiritual significance. The gifts of the Spirit are given to achieve spiritual change, not to entertain the saints. It is also not the way of the Spirit to convey publicly information which is inappropriate or embarrassing. Nor is it the way of the Spirit to draw attention to those conveying the super-normal information (or any other super-normal abilities) as if they were entertainers.

d. How much peer pressure is there within the group, congregation, audience to conform in behaviour?

Every such gathering will inevitably exert some influence over the behaviour of the individual. But this should be minimal and should not amount to extended or excessive pressure to conform to unusual behaviour.

Are there experiences and manifestations which are status symbols for those who belong to the "in-group"? Is there any threat to those who do not join the "in-group" or question or express disapproval of the manifestations or behaviour in the "in-group"?

2. Are biblical criteria being strictly applied?

a. Is there explicit biblical backing for the experiences or manifestations?

b. If not, are they clearly in harmony with biblical principles?

For example:

The principle that God will not humiliate human beings (except in judgment). Therefore animal noises and involuntary bizarre behaviour are not the work of God. Some behaviour is truly human and therefore acceptable, eg. weeping, trembling, groaning, prostration, laughing.

The principle that God will not lead people into behaviour which is beyond their control. It is evident from 1 Corinthians 14 that, whereas the words come from God, the speaker in tongues or the prophet is entirely in control of when and how he speaks. "The spirits of the prophets are subject to the control of the prophets." (1 Cor. 14:32).

We are aware that a person might legitimately for a limited time be moved, say, to uncontrollable sobbing in repentance. But it is not the way of God for people to continue for days and weeks in bizarre, uncontrollable and spiritually pointless manifestations.

3. Is scripture being interpreted according to proper, objective criteria? Or is any interpretation merely a superficial association of ideas based upon current experience?

The passage should be understood normally, literally, historically and grammatically taking the natural meaning of the original Greek or Hebrew, whilst making allowances for figurative language. It should be understood in the context of the surrounding passage, the historical situation of the book concerned and the teaching of the rest of Scripture.

One current example of fanciful interpretation is relating the experience of roaring some Christians have manifested to the Lion of Judah. Another is justifying extremely bizarre behaviour by reference to the alleged drunkenness of the apostles in Acts 2. On the Day of Pentecost some cynics made fun of the apostles. The cause appears to be their bold speaking out in tongues. There is no evidence whatsoever of other bizarre behaviour.

4. Is there a strong emphasis on the ministry of the Word in the group concerned?

This would show the priority of those ministering is biblical teaching. It is also the normal method used by the Holy Spirit to reveal spiritual truths from scripture, which then leads to a response in the hearers.

5. Does the meeting focus on the person and work of Jesus?

Jesus should always be central to and glorified by the worship.

6. Do you have any lack of ease in your spirit about aspects of the phenomena? If so, are you taking this seriously and checking it out?

It is, of course, possible for Christians to fear a genuine work of God. But, on the other hand, sometimes we can ignore a lack of ease which is actually spiritual discernment that something is wrong.

7. Remember that the fact that God blesses individuals in a particular context does not necessarily justify all that is going on in that context

God blesses unbelievers, rebels, and disobedient Christians. But that does not justify unbelief, rebellion or disobedience. He blesses people in contexts which are based on theological and spiritual error. For example, it appears that people have experienced genuine spiritual renewal at Medjugore, the site of supposed appearance of the virgin Mary. So God in his overflowing grace and mercy blesses people in contexts which may be theologically or spiritually alien to scripture or where techniques are fleshly.

He will in particular bless those who, from the basis of what they know in scripture, seek the Jesus of revelation, not imagination with all their hearts. However, Christian leaders should not encourage methods which are alien to God's Word and character.

© Tony Higton: *see conditions for copying on the [Home Page](#)*