

The Charismatic Renewal at Midlife

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Abstract: This article presents a snapshot of the North American Charismatic movement in the mid-1990s just prior to the onset of renewal at Toronto Airport Christian Fellowship, Brownsville Assembly of God and countless other places. Comparing the plight of the renewal to that of Gideon, I reflect here on what went wrong with the movement and what it would take to put things back on track.

"I have some bombshells for you." With those words, my friend Mike began a litany of personal tragedies among our mutual friends. There were so many I had to take notes. The man who brought both of us into the ministry had contracted a terrifying neurological disease, a dear friend was preparing to divorce his wife, another colleague had fallen into adultery, a parishioner had broken her neck in a freak auto accident.

In the early days of the Charismatic Movement, I did not get calls like Mike's. I was too busy flitting from one prayer meeting to another seeking out my next experience in God. Along with thousands of other new Christians, I fed my soul on Derek Prince tapes and the *Jesus Person Pocket Promise Book*. Renewal was the order of the day, and the sky was the limit.

But something has changed. The denominational church where I received the Holy Spirit has now turned its back on the experience. Nationally, those pockets of revival that still smolders stand out because they are so unusual. An evangelist lamented to me that he had to pray for hundreds to see dozens genuinely touched. This despite a life given to prayer and fasting.

One Pastor summarized things this way: "we used to get together, sing three choruses and God would show up..." Today, we seem to need a concert quality worship band, sermons that fix people in 20 minutes and a staff psychologist. Even then, the flood of the Spirit we knew at the birth of the renewal now seems more like a lake. What is going on around here?

Like so many of its members, the Charismatic Movement has reached mid-life. We joined up to live the book of Acts, and somehow ended up living the book of Ecclesiastes. The optimism of youth has evolved into the soul-searching of the middle years. We are looking for answers that we did not even know we needed a decade ago.

Perhaps the best Biblical analogy is the story of Gideon's call to deliver Israel from the Midianites. When approached by the angel, he responded with two troubling questions: "if the LORD is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all his wonders that our fathers told us about...?" [Judges 6:13 NIV]

Where indeed? Some find these questions threatening, perhaps because so many of us are asking them. However, it is more productive to see them as symptoms of a normal stage of development: *mid-life*. By applying Gideon's questions to ourselves we can understand how we got here and what God is trying to do.

- *"Why Then Has All This Happened To Us?"*

1. *We got older.* Movements are just as subject to age as people. In our salad days a typical front-line charismatic was a nineteen-year-old with shoulder-length hair who was learning to play choruses on his new guitar. Another prototype was a young couple, turned off by formal worship services, who are filled with the Holy Spirit at a neighborhood Bible study. Our movement was built out of thousands of stories like these.

Much of our early activity, then, was a subset of the 1960's "youth culture." They had Woodstock. We went to Jesus '71. Most of the larger churches in my area were built by pastors who had the wisdom to respond to this trend. They opened their doors to hippies, drug addicts and marginal churchgoers (like me) who were thirsty for the Spirit. Those who accepted young people, hair and all, flourished.

But then the years went by. The social upheaval that catalyzed our movement gradually receded. And we changed too. At one time our burning question was, "where is God?" Now, it is "where is the remote?"

Growing older has changed our priorities. The demands of education and family can distract even the most zealous person. Those kids who were passing tracts at the mall on weekends in the 70s are now working overtime to pay the mortgage and keep their own kids in Christian school.

Another factor is that over 50% of women with children under a year old are now in the work force. One result has been that mid-lifers are hitting physical limits they never anticipated. A Presbyterian study of those formerly active in their churches asked why people stopped coming. The reason: exhaustion. They were looking for smaller ministries were less would be expected. Those all-night prayer

meetings and Saturday door-to-door campaigns that used to thrill us now seem like impossible demands on our over-committed schedules.

Reactions to this uncomfortable reality can be rather harsh. Some Classical Pentecostals, for example, are lambasting their people for a lack of commitment. Others are pleading with us to do the things we used to do--only harder. The former message reaches only those who do not need it, the latter is like washing your car to make it rain. It ignores cultural and personal changes that simply cannot be reversed. We are not evil people. We are different people living in a very different world. There is no going back.

2. Life got tougher. As a young, newly Charismatic Lutheran Christian, I was taught not to expect "mountaintop" experiences in God every day. There would be some valleys along the way and I must resist the temptation to feel that God had abandoned me at those times. He was simply preparing me for the next breakthrough.

Now, as a middle-aged, still-Charismatic Christian I encounter peers who are wondering if there will ever be another mountaintop. The churches in which I minister seem filled with "valley people," good-hearted souls battling with intractable problems. To them, perseverance seems like the only fruit of the Spirit being grown these days. One pastor friend told me that years ago he would have 2 or 3 families in crisis at a time. Lately, he has the whole congregation in crisis with 2 or 3 families doing well.

These conditions have brought a profound change in our felt needs. In the 1960s our cry was, "teach us!" Our question was "is it true?" These days, our cry is, "fix us!" And our question is, "does it work?" Like Gideon, we are asking tougher questions than ever before, and we demand practical answers.

On the individual level, Christians are coming into contact with their emotional wounds for the first time. The phrase, "dysfunctional family" was unknown in our ranks during the formative stage of the movement. Today, we speak of little else. Highly publicized divorces and other traumas among prominent Christians have proven that no one is immune from pain.

Only now do we realize how much baggage each of us has brought into the Kingdom. We are a broken generation struggling to find wholeness. We turned to God because we were told salvation would deliver us from our pain. It helped. But decades later Charismatics can still be grappling with the same sins and bleeding from the same wounds. Like Gideon hiding in his winepress, they often conceal the struggle from others.

Some cope with the demands of the 90s by simply bailing out. Several friends have left marriages, sometimes destroying ministries in the process. Those in better shape are hedging their bets. They are turning to new careers, such as

network marketing, to give their lives the momentum once supplied by the renewal. But our woundedness will simply not go away.

During a recent service, a pastor friend invited all those who were hurting to come forward. To his surprise, the altar area was flooded by a large percentage of his congregation, tearfully calling upon the Lord for healing. Those remaining in the pews were taken aback. Should we really have this many people suffering? Shouldn't they be "over it by now?" Some of those at the altars probably had the same thoughts.

We come to grips with this crisis in some creative ways. While we Classical Pentecostals tend to get our wagons in a circle, our independent Charismatic brothers take another tack. For them, God is always preparing a righteous remnant to do a new work in the earth.

I admire their vision and I agree that more is coming. But there is a hitch: God's "new thing" is always scheduled to start next week. To beleaguered Christians it never quite seems to get here. And until it does, like Gideon's countrymen hiding in their caves, their lives and their faith itself will be under siege.

These conditions may not affect the majority. But they are prevalent enough to change the dynamics of the movement. Once, we felt poised to conquer the world. Now we must invest that energy tending the wounded. Life has caught up with us.

3. *We made mistakes.* The nascent Charismatic movement seemed like a no-lose proposition. Any problems paled in comparison to the joy of life in the Spirit. Churches were growing, parachurch ministries flourished and morale was high. If all went well, it looked as if international television would bring the gospel to all the nations shortly, preparing the way for Jesus' imminent return.

But all did not go well. During the 1980s, scandal struck down one world-class ministry after another. A round of journalistic investigations in the 1990s put many of those who remained under a cloud of suspicion. In the public mind, these failures were associated largely with Charismatic personalities.

On a local level, pastoral leaders have been charged with everything from fraud to child molesting. While few in total number, those accused have gotten enormous media exposure. Suddenly, no one is talking about reaching the world through TV any more.

Comedian Steve Martin summed up this mess with his portrayal of evangelist Jonas Nightingale in the film, "Leap of Faith." His mockery of charismatic ministry is not far from the attitude of the public in general. As Rick Joyner has written, "Today preachers are one of the least respected classes of

professionals, in some surveys falling to the level of politicians and lawyers in the people's trust."

The fallout from the scandals is a shortage of trust. After watching a docudrama on the life of Jim Jones, one of my most faithful people confessed, "it made me wonder what *you* were up to." This kind of credibility deficit is extremely difficult to reverse. An affluent believer admitted to me recently that four preachers had bilked him out of thousands of dollars over the years. All of them were from my organization. No wonder trust is such a rare commodity.

Cal Thomas points out that none of this happened because we were *too* righteous. Disobedience costs us before God and before others. When character fails, money and technology cannot save us. Our movement, raised up to be an offensive force, has been put on the defensive by plain, old-fashioned sin. The shock was unnerving. We have not fully recovered.

- *"Where Are All His Miracles?"*

As with the mid-life person, a crisis may be one of the best things that ever happened to us if we can take hold of what God is accomplishing in it. Gideon wanted to know, "where are all his miracles?" So do many of us. Here are three "miracles" that our middle years can bring us:

1. *God can bring maturity to our theology.* Much like the early church, we early Charismatics did not have a lot of theology. Our beliefs were based on experience and what we read in the Bible last night. Our doctrine had a six-day shelf life; it lasted until we heard next Sunday's guest speaker. In fact, we did not even like the word "doctrine" because it reminded us of the places we used to go to church, and it implied we might need to learn something.

In a way, this was a wonderful time. We traveled light. Unencumbered by heavy theological baggage we were open to any new experience God had for us. This was one of the things that made God seem so real for the first time. He did things even among those who knew next to nothing! That certainly described us during those years.

Wanting God's best, our beliefs often drifted toward attractive extremes. Teachings on faith, healing, curses, positive confession, etc. drew many supporters looking for that next level of victory. We could summarize these doctrines as *promise theology*: the idea that God's highest priority is the release of His blessings through my faith. As a young believer I lived from one promise verse to the next. The stuff in between just seemed a lot less important.

This theology did the church much good. It brought new hope, new respect for the Word and a generally positive attitude that was in very short supply. The

downside, however, was an inability to cope with negative events that did not yield to the verse I happened to be claiming at the moment.

Fixated on the promises, my generation built up expectations that were never going to be fulfilled in the real (fallen) world. There was a price: Christians felt failed or cheated when their lives fell short of what the Bible seemed to guarantee. A diabetic friend who refused her insulin on the assurance that *by faith* she was "healed" paid with her life. We simply knew no better.

A mid-life season may be just the learning experience we need. To capitalize on this time we must broaden our understanding of God to include His sovereignty and our own frail humanity. He must increase and we must decrease. In this way our weakness can be the site of His strength. Gideon learned this lesson in the defeat of the Midianites: God delivered a nation through the least of the least. [Judges 6:15]

There are some reasons to be optimistic about our theology. Charismatic teaching includes more breadth and balance today than it ever has. We are also beginning to sensitizing ourselves to issues ranging from racism to emotional health. The response of full gospel churches to the Los Angeles riots is a case in point. Time may erode the idealism of youth, but it can leave wisdom in its place.

The promises of God are no less true than they were at the outset of our experience. If we can learn to add the rest of God's nature to them, our theology will be ready to minister to the whole person and the whole world. If not, instead of getting better, we will just get older.

2. *God can bring integrity to our lives.* Before calling Gideon as a leader, God sent a prophet to Israel to explain their enslavement by the Midianites. The reason was simple: idolatry. [Judges 6:10] Apparently the message had no effect, for Gideon was told by the angel to tear down the altar of Baal that remained at his own father's home. In its place he was to erect an altar of sacrifice to the Lord. God is giving us a similar opportunity today.

Victory was in the air during the opening years of the renewal. People and dollars flowed into our midst in quantities we never dreamed possible. Spiritual leadership became a thing to be coveted because so many were willing to follow. However, we found that the only thing more dangerous than failure is success.

In his book, *Integrity*, Richard Dortsch details his ensnarement in the PTL disaster. Gradually blinded by power and misplaced priorities, this highly respected denominational official traded his executive suite for a cell in a federal prison. His story is tragic, not because it is unusual, but because it is so common. He just got caught.

Study after study indicates that believers are living no differently than unbelievers. It is simply impossible to tell us apart most of the time. Under the

pressure of the 1990s, the world is squeezing us into its mold. As one disgruntled ex-charismatic told me, "everyone talks about the gifts, but no one has any character." Peter was right: "it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God." [1 Peter 4:17 NIV]

We cannot afford to pretend that worldliness is confined to multi-million dollar ministries, or that hypocrisy is a fiction invented by the media. The reporters who have exposed high profile sin may have been instruments in God's hand to chasten us all, to shock us back into reality. If He could use the Midianites in Gideon's day, why not *60 Minutes* in our own?

We have a precious gift in our hands, a chance for all of us to accept responsibility for our failures and come to a place of repentance. "For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged." [1 Corinthians 11:31] God will respond by cleansing us, and cultivating integrity in our hearts.

There are hopeful signs in this regard. The Assemblies of God recently called a nationwide Sacred Assembly to confess our sins and seek God's mercy for our fellowship and nation. Churches and groups in many areas are practicing these solemn events, once unknown in our ranks. Like a man in mid-life crisis, we are confronting the temptations that could destroy us and renewing the commitments that can save us.

If we run from the pressure, we will go into the next decade primed to repeat all our previous mistakes. In that event, could God really trust us with another renewal? If we will face the truth, however, Jesus will make us what we need to be--earthen vessels carrying the treasure of the gospel.

3. *God can bring humility to our lives.* Gideon did not have to take on the Midianites barehanded. He had an army of 32,000 men at his disposal. However, after God thinned the ranks, only 300 remained. The reason was not strategic, but spiritual: "In order that Israel may not boast against me that her own strength has saved her." [Judges 7:2 NIV] God will not share His glory.

We had a hard time catching on to this principle in the early days. Living on the spiritual adrenaline, we felt we had the answers to pretty much everything. If we did not, there was a tape that did. Just come to church Sunday night, speak in tongues, tithe, and you have it made!

Our attitude seemed very reasonable--to us. By comparison with the "dead" churches we had come from, our encounter with the Holy Spirit was a bottomless pit of blessing. The only requirement was the time necessary to find out more great stuff. It felt like mining gold in Fort Knox.

Then reality arrived. The renewal filled our pews with thousands of hurting people. One expert estimates that, of every 12 church members, 4 are in the grip

of a life-controlling problem. (drugs, pornography, rage, etc.) With the advent of Christian psychology, these issues could be discussed openly for the first time. Instead of a hospital for sinners, then, the local congregation was becoming a hospital for the saints.

It is easier to cast the nets than to clean the fish. Faced with problems that seemed to take a lifetime of healing, our easy answers faltered. Some of us began quietly backpedaling from the promises of God to relieve this tension between what is and what ought to be. Others closed their eyes, wanting to force these issues back into the closet or give them spiritual labels to make them less threatening.

Through it all, God has pulled us up short. He is showing us that we do not know all the answers, or even most of them. He is reminding us that salvation and Spirit baptism are only beginnings, that even Christian psychology is powerless apart from the Holy Spirit.

Our mid-life crisis is a call to humility. God is commanding us to give up our arrogance, whether it is spiritual or psychological. He is piercing our pride and deflating our ego. The answer is that we do not have all the answers. God's desire is for us to humble ourselves so that He can exalt us. [James 4:6]

Once again, there are hopeful signs. In recent years an interdenominational prayer movement has been gaining momentum by pulling Christians of all persuasions together for corporate intercession. Concerts of prayer, citywide crusades and other events require us to put aside our superior attitudes and join hands with believers who are different. The growing participation in these campaigns is heartening.

If we seize these opportunities, there is no limit to what God can do among us. A humbled Gideon and his paltry army destroyed a vastly superior enemy. If we will bow the knee to God and one another, imagine the enemies that could be defeated in our land. The task is too big to be done in isolation. We need each other desperately. But only the humble will ever admit that.

The charismatic renewal is not over. It is simply going through a normal and necessary phase. Among those I talk to, this stage seems like a lot less fun than some of the others we have experienced. That probably makes it all the more important. In any event, going back is not an option.

Instead of getting defensive or cynical we must embrace this time for all it is worth. The questions that surface must be confronted honestly for these years to yield a season of miracles. If we allow Him, God will do a work of maturity, integrity, and humility that will empower us for the 21st century.