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For the Seminar: The Holy Spirit and the Charismatic Gifts in the Early Church
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Who, having come into contact with modern spiritual manifestations, has not wondered what became of the charismatic gifts in the early church? The New Testament depicts the primitive church as deeply immersed in powerful displays of God’s power and presence. But did the gifts continue after the first century? Ronald A. N. Kydd, now professor at Eastern Pentecostal Bible College of Peterborough Ontario, aims at answering this question through an examination of relevant Christian literature up to AD 313.

But this investigation is clearly not done in a vacuum. One of Kydd’s purposes, which he makes no attempt to hide, is polemical: he wishes to prove the continued existence of the spiritual gifts in the early church beyond the apostolic age, in the face of B. B. Warfield’s *Counterfeit Miracles* (see p. 88, n. 4). Warfield argues that the charismata ceased with the death of the apostles and their associates. Kydd concludes that the charismatic gifts continued until the third century, a thesis which in his opinion is “diametrically opposed” to B. B. Warfield’s position. However, one must question whether this thesis is really unlike Warfield’s, since Kydd also holds to the cessation of the charismata, but for him the end of the spiritual gifts occurs two centuries later!

The book originated as part of Kydd’s University of St. Andrew’s doctoral dissertation (p. ix), but in its present form it is not for an academic readership. He has evidently tried to expand its audience. Kydd uses a familiar tone throughout, even drawing an example from his own garden (p. 5). He no doubt intends the book for popular consumption, as a primer for the layperson.

One problem in treating this immense subject is finding a way to organize the diverse texts relating to the charismatic gifts in the early church. To do this, Kydd uses three guiding principles: chronology, theology, and geography.

Kydd treats the following material from the first half of the second century in a roughly chronological fashion. The first chapter, “From the Emerging Church”, covers the earliest material outside the NT, the *Didache* and *1 Clement*. Ignatius of Antioch and the *Shepherd of
Hermas occupy the second chapter, From the Shadows. The elusive document, the Odes of Solomon, and Justin Martyr appear in next in the chapter, “From Spirit and Mind”. Kydd assigns each of these documents a date and provenance which fit largely into the mainstream of scholarship.

As the material after ca. 150 expands, so also must Kydd’s categories. Now he begins to treat the literature according to theology. First he examines activity “From the Church Fringe” (ch. 4). Kydd’s interprets texts dealing with Montanism to suggest that the Montanists practised both tongues (see below) and prophecy, and the form of their prophecy differed little from that of the orthodox. Next, Kydd cites Celsus (apud Origen, Against Celsus 9.7), a pagan detractor of Christianity, who in ca. 180 had apparently observed Christians who spoke in an ecstatic manner and in tongues. Against Celsus 9.7 is a more convincing witness of speaking in tongues in the late second century than the Montanist sources, but Kydd appears a bit too anxious to find tongues wherever he can.

The next theological category is from the heart of the church, “From Bishops” (ch. 5). Here Kydd treats Irenaeus of Lyon and Eusebius of Caesarea. Passages from Irenaeus are brought forward to show that certain charismata still existed in the second century, but in agreement with Warfield, perhaps not the raising of the dead (which Irenaeus mentions only in the past tense). Eusebius’ place in this chapter is dubious, since he is a fourth century bishop whose testimony (h.e. 5.3.4) Kydd uses to support the case of the existence of the charismata in the late second century. Kydd goes into an unnecessary discussion of whether Eusebius is merely guessing or whether he has concrete evidence for this assertion. It is clear from Eusebius’ own citation of sources where he might have gotten this notion, and so his testimony is secondary.¹

Next, Kydd deals with gnosticism and apocryphal Acts of the Apostles (AAA) in the sixth chapter, “From Heresy and Superstition” (ch. 6). The Excerpts of Theodotus suggest that charismatic gifts existed amongst the Valentinian heretics; but Kydd maintains that this is the only gnostic text where the charismata are present (a claim which requires verification). Next, Kydd examines the AAA, evidently as coming from “superstition”. This category is misleading. The Acts of Paul, while legendary, is no more superstitious than the canonical acts; the author, a presbyter of the second century, had strong theological purposes for writing, and he was squarely orthodox in his doctrine and faith. Kydd creates another doubtful distinction: the “little people,

¹See h.e. 5.7.3, where Eusebius cites Irenaeus’ testimony of the gifts [see p. 44]; see also h.e. 5.12.4.
the nameless, faceless masses of Christianity, the ‘John Does’ of the Church,” those Christians, who produced and read the AAA, as opposed to the thinking elite of the church who produced the other early Christian literature. Some parts of the AAA, such as the “Hymn of the Pearl” in the *Acts of Thomas*, are outstanding pieces of literature in their own right; furthermore, authors of the AAA are often capable of significant theological reflexion. Kydd also views the AAA as supplements to the canonical Acts, a likewise dubious conclusion, since the evidence indicates that the author of the *Acts of Paul*, for one, probably did not know Luke’s Acts. Kydd falls into the trap of making misleading and erroneous statements when working outside of his own area, a common problem faced by scholars. Nevertheless, in chs. 1-6, Kydd succeeds in showing that charismatic gifts were prevalent and widespread in the second-century church.

As we enter the third century, Kydd divides the material into three chapters according to geographical areas: Rome, Carthage, and the Greek East. He begins to try to prove his thesis of cessation. While Hippolytus and Novation, both of Rome, and Tertullian of Carthage show that the charismata continued to their time, Kydd finds that Cyprian of Carthage, who himself was a prophet, recognized that Christians had become skeptical of certain gifts (*Ep. 66.10*). This is Kydd’s first evidence of the cooling down of the spiritual activity of the early church (see pp. 74; 85; 87); but it is slim indeed. Finally, Kydd turns to the Greek East, where he cites Origen, Dionysius and Firmilian as evidence of the last vestiges of charismatic activity in the church. In a concluding chapter, he claims that the charismatic gifts became less and less prominent in the Christian literature until their practical disappearance in ca. 260. How should one assess Kydd’s exploration of the charismatic gifts in the early Church?

Kydd’s interpretations are sometimes overly speculative. While every scholar has the right to make guesses, he or she should always build them on a base of plausibility. Kydd says for example, that a person in the ancient world who speaks loudly in a religious context was understood to be speaking on behalf of the divine. But he then says (p. 16), “When you spoke

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3Since the AAA is my area of specialty, we will discuss the *Acts of Paul* at length in a later session. Kydd does correctly point out that the AAA often show what their authors and readers thought could happen (p. 52), and so Kydd is to be commended for not overlooking these very important texts in his investigation.
under the control of some god or other, you did so at the top of your lungs!” Without showing his readers the evidence for his assertion, how can they see this as more than mere speculation? At another point, he uses an etymological interpretation of the hapaxlegomenon, *ametrophonous*, in the anonymous anti-Montanist source (*apud* Eusebius 5.16.12). Here he paraphrases a possible interpretation this word, “who speak in an indefinite number of sounds like languages”, and suggests that the word refers to the gift of tongues. Having looked up the parts of the word in the Greek lexica (LSJM; Lampe), it seems to me that Kydd is trying to find the gift of tongues where it is not, just as he warned he might do in his preface on account of his Pentecostal presuppositions (p. ix).

While it is useful to have a brief survey of the subject, at times Kydd’s broad brush strokes in describing Christian history are open to criticism. For example, he describes the Western church of the first half of the third century as having “weathered the threats of Montanism and the Gnostics” (p. 56). In the same period, Hippolytus wrote his *Refutation of all Heresies* and Tertullian of Carthage wrote five books *Against Marcion*, which would have been hardly necessary if the gnostics and Marcionites were no longer significant threats. Furthermore, during that time, Tertullian according to most scholars made his famous conversion to Montanism (but see Kydd’s downplaying of this, p. 66f.). Evidently, Montanism was alive and well in the West in the first half of the second century. In chapter 5, He describes Eusebius as inaccurate and depending on memory for his citations of documents but gives no examples; at least here he refers to secondary literature which perhaps backs his statement (see p. 94, n. 7). My own experience has shown the opposite to be true in the few cases I have compared Eusebius with his sources, and other scholars maintain that while Eusebius was not a great thinker, he was a meticulous scholar.  

It is thus necessary with Kydd, as it is with all scholars, to check his claims against the primary sources and against what other scholars have said about a subject.

Along with Kydd’s broad brush strokes in his description of the Christian church are his judgments regarding the character of the Church Fathers. Only Dionysius comes out favourably. Tertullian was “l’enfant terrible” of the Early Church (p. 66); Origin’s piety was tainted with “fanaticism” (p. 76); Eusebius had “hang-ups” and was a “prejudiced man”; Hippolytus displayed the “sad capacity to hate with a vengeance” (p. 58); Firmilian was “harsh and sarcastic” (p. 83).

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4One should notice, however, that the text does not say that these skeptics were Christians (see p. 72).
Kydd’s moral commentaries, while possibly fair, do not add much to the theme of the book, except to undermine the accuracy of certain statements by these writers (esp. in the case of Firmilian). A more magnanimous treatment of these ancient Christians, one which took into consideration the problems they were facing and the cultural conventions of their day, would in my opinion be more effective.

Kydd asks his readers to determine whether he succeeds at looking at the evidence fairly despite his presuppositions (p. ix). He says with regard to Hippolytus’ mention of anyone who is healed by a “revelation”, that this word “revelation” may refer to the same thing as Paul’s word of knowledge in 1 Cor 12.8 (p. 59; cf. p. 26). In Pentecostal circles, a word of knowledge is often understood to refer to a special knowledge given by the Spirit to one person about another’s ailments; this word of knowledge then becomes instrumental in that person’s healing. Thus, Kydd apparently reads into Paul his own Pentecostal understanding without any explanation or exegetical comment. G. D. Fee points out that given the use of the words *sophia* (wisdom) and *gnosis* (knowledge) by Corinthian Christians, it is unlikely that Paul has a *Pentecostal* understanding of the “word of wisdom” and the “word of knowledge”. This is a good of example of how presuppositions can skew interpretation. Kydd also reveals the weakness of his presuppositions in his belief that the charismata were “spontaneous” (p. 64). Pentecostals like to think that their worship is without liturgy - the word “liturgy” is pejorative; spontaneous prayer and exercise of gifts have historically been a mark of Pentecostal worship, though they have more “liturgy” than they are willing to admit. Spontaneity, however, is not necessarily a consistent characteristic of the charismata in the early Church– indeed St. Paul himself formulates a structure (see 1 Cor 14) in which the prophetic gifts must operate, as Kydd duly points out. The assumption that the charismata must be spontaneous is similar to the notion of some modern scholars that charismatic authority and official authority were dialectical, a notion which Kydd rightly opposes (p. 9). This assumption of spontaneity may explain why Kydd sees no distinction between the Montanist and the orthodox manner of prophesying: the former seems more ecstatic and spontaneous, while the latter occurs in a structure which put limits upon prophetic activity.

Likewise, in proving his thesis that the charismata continued to the third century and then ceased, Kydd reveals the presuppositions of the Protestantism from which Pentecostalism stems. In this respect, Kydd and Warfield remain in the same camp. The charismata only ceased from a

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*The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT, 592, n. 48.
standpoint which denies the validity of monasticism. The *Life of Antony* is an extremely important witness to this transition: Here we see the charismata, healing, prophecy, and exorcism, active in the first great monk. Antony lived from ca. 251-356\(^8\) and so arrived on the scene before Kydd’s date of termination (ca. AD 260; p. 87). The gifts continued as the early church ascribed greater and greater spiritual power to an ascetic elite.

Since Kydd aims at determining the time when the charismata disappeared, it often seems to him sufficient to point out the existence of genuine gifts in the texts. The book is therefore inconsistent in its discussion of the form, content, and function of the charismata. As a result, he fails to outline the following crucial trends: (1) the link between martyrdom and the gifts of prophecy and visions; (2) the development of the exercise of the spiritual gifts amongst women; (3) the link between asceticism and the charismata. For example, Kydd scarcely mentions ancient martyrdom accounts\(^9\) as important evidence of the charismata in the early church; this could explain why he misses the transition, which occurred around the end of the general persecution of the Church in AD 313, from the martyrs to the monks as the most prominent charismatics.

Thus, Kydd fails to mention texts relevant to his subject. The omission is particularly startling with respect to texts concerning the place of women.\(^10\) In addition, M. Green\(^11\) also points out a text from Melito of Bishop of Sardis during the late second century, which came to light in a recently discovered papyrus.\(^12\) Is this an example of non-Montanist prophecy stemming from the second-half of the second century, which Kydd says is lacking in our sources (p. 34)?

The book is very useful for our purposes, because it introduces us to some of the issues and important texts for our study. It is, however, disappointing in other ways. But it is always an exciting discovery to find inadequacies in the study of a subject—it means that there is still more research to be done and the scholarly task of examining the literature of the ancient church must continue.

\(^7\)See in this regard, M. Green, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, 210.
\(^11\)*I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, 212.