

By Pastor Merv Thompson

---

"Grace and peace to you from the God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

"Charisma." There is a biblical word that seems to be getting an inordinate amount of attention lately.

"Charisma." Pastor Mike preached on this several months ago, and now it is all over the secular press. Maybe there is a connection. To ask Martin Luther's question, "What does this mean?" What is the meaning of the word "charisma?" Is "charisma" something that you and I have been given?

First of all, as Pastor Mike mentioned, the Greek word "charisma" can be translated into English with the word "gifts." To have charisma is to have certain gifts. These gifts have been given to us by the Holy Spirit; everyone born of the Spirit is given certain "charisms." To amplify the point, a charismatic is one who has been given gifts from God, although there tends to be argument about which gifts qualify. What Pastor Mike affirmed was that all of the gifts of the Spirit make one a charismatic.

So what are some of these gifts the Scriptures describe? Paul writes about them in I Corinthians 12 - *Some are gifted to be apostles, some teachers, some miracle workers and healers, some administrators, some to speak in tongues.* This list is not exhaustive, only illustrative. In fact, in the very next chapter Paul goes on to say that none of the gifts he has already listed are at the top of the list, rather he says, *So faith, hope, love abide, these three, but the greatest of these is love.*

Paul seems to be rather guarded about "charisma." He sees both the possibilities and also the pitfalls. He has already seen some preening going on among the flock with certain people being all puffed up because they perceive that their gifts are a bit better than anyone else's. So Paul begins his immortal chapter 13 with the words, *I may speak in the tongues of angels, in other words, I may have "charisma" beyond measure, but if I have not love, I am nothing.* Paul wants to make sure that any charisma, any gifts, which are used to "lord it over others" or to practice "one-upmanship" is contrary to the intentions of God.

Thus a charismatic, by definition, is anyone who has been given gifts from the Holy Spirit. Thus to describe just certain Christians as charismatic is misplaced. All of us are charismatic. As Pastor Mike preached, the Greek word behind "charisma" is the word "charis" which means grace. It is because of the surpassing grace of God that we are given "charisma" gifts. Because of the grace of God in Jesus Christ, who died and rose again, we have these amazing gifts.

Secular culture has quite a different take on charisma, which we hear much about today. A person with charisma is described as someone with special gifts, although the secular interpretation is that these gifts came mostly from "nature or nurture" leaning more on the side of "nature." Webster's Dictionary says that a person with "charisma" is one who "has a personal magic of leadership arousing special popular loyalty or enthusiasm."

Recent articles examining the phenomenon of "charisma" have tended to emulate Webster's definition, "the magic of leadership arouses special popular loyalty or enthusiasm." In this description, certain leaders have it and certain leaders do not. If what we need in America is charismatic leaders, then perhaps we should identify them as a certain age and put them in an intensive training regimen. Or maybe if they are charismatic enough, they need nothing extra; they already have the magic.

This reminds me of the time a few years ago when I was a pastor of a church in the Twin Cities. A professor from Luther Seminary sent out students from one of his classes to observe the "leadership styles" of several senior pastors from large churches. Some of them, unknown to me, came to observe me. In their reports, the students unanimously concluded that Pastor Thompson had a "noticeable lack of charisma." Yet for some reason the congregations seemed to be thriving. Go figure.

Maybe this in part explains why so many of our larger congregations today in Lutheranism, and I am sure in other denominations as well, are taking two years or

more to find new senior pastors. They seem to be looking for the most charismatic, the magical leaders, the savior riding in on a white horse. They seem to be looking for someone who can thrill them with oratory, awe them with theological prowess, inspire them with surpassing visions and in their spare time, find a cure for cancer. Needless to say, "buyer's remorse" often follows when the new senior pastor shows up.

Today we are also having this discussion about presidential leadership. Must a president have "charisma?" Should we look for the most "charismatic" person we can find—who has the magic of leadership that arouses popular loyalty or enthusiasm? Many point backward to such presidents as John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan as those high on the "charisma" scale. Today Barack Obama and Mike Huckabee certainly have been described as filled with "charisma."

So the question remains, does a nation need a charismatic leader? One aside from my own observations. I have always been rather ambiguous about "highly-charged" leaders oozing with charisma. Maybe this is because I tend to lead with my head instead of my heart. Also I have noticed that very few charismatic leaders often generate just as much heat as they provide light. Very few people seem to be neutral about "magic" leaders; they generate great adoration and also surprising hostility. Maybe this is one of the secrets of my own longevity as a senior pastor, with little charisma most people were neutral about me. So instead they focused on the Gospel and the vision of the church rather than me.

Edwin Friedman, who has written one of the best books on leadership entitled "Generation to Generation", adds a dimension to "charismatic" leadership. After extensive research, he suggests that there are two predominate models of leadership in the pastoral ranks, charismatic and consensus. Pastors either follow the charismatic or the consensus model of leadership.

Charismatic leaders are those which lead by the force of their personality or by a compelling vision. Consensus leaders lead by working behind the scenes, building teams, building relationships. He says that charismatic leaders are more public, usually seen as more effective, more dynamic. Consensus leaders are less visible, sometimes seen as less effective, more private. But then he drops his bombshell. He says that

both of these are the wrong model. Both of them have two endemic problems.

Both charismatic and consensus leaders tend to "give too much power to dependent people and tend to over-function." In other words, both of these leadership styles give too much credence, too much time and energy, too much emotional capital to negative and destructive voices, and in order to do so they "get up earlier and stay later." A pastor will preach a sermon and get ninety-nine affirmations and one condemnation. Guess which one churns around the pastor's stomach for the next week. Given Friedman's description, I am not sure that being a "charismatic" leader is such a great thing.

Friedman has some recommendations on how to move beyond "charisma" as he defines it, but since that is not our topic in this Update, we will have to revisit it another time. So the use of the word "charisma" is complicated and confusing, even within the church.

The key biblical teaching is that when we are born of God, when we are born of the Holy Spirit, we are given "charisma." We are given gifts. It is not magic, it is not the force of personality, it is not a way to spiritual pride. Our task is to discover which gifts we have been given and then to use them for the glory of God. There are not gradations of gifts, some in the first rank and others secondary, except that faith, hope and love are above all else. We do not begrudge others their gifts; we give thanks for our own gifts and do not hide them under a bushel. We realize that these gifts have been given to us only by the grace of God.

Charisma. What a gift! It is a gift that keeps on giving. It is a gift that should be used to build up the body of Christ. Lutheran Church of Hope is a perfect example of what can happen when all of the gifts of all of the people are committed to God to be used in the way God wants them to be used.