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DONALD BRIDGE

Pastoral Problems in the Local Church

It would be very unfortunate if the title of this paper were to give a purely negative impression, as if the only contribution made to church life by the Charismatic Movement is the creation of problems. The existence, exercise, and control of spiritual gifts within the local church is not treated in the New Testament as an embarrassing topic reluctantly tackled by the apostles, but as a vital topic fraught with possibilities "for the equipment of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the building up of the body of Christ" (Eph. 4: 11-13). Admittedly it did not work out quite that way at Corinth; that fact should neither surprise us nor discourage us. Any human activity will create problems. Any divine activity which co-operates with frail and fallible human beings will create problems too.

A friend of mine whose church is "going charismatic" was warned that the process is a dangerous one. His reply was, "Perhaps so, but at least we have come alive. A dead church is more dangerous than a dangerous one."

Amongst "Open Brethren" we are all familiar with the gauntlet run by a church with the minimum of human control and organisational structure and the maximum of openness to God. The running battle with exclusivism, the nuisance of enthusiasts with some off-beat interpretation of prophecy, the occasional embarrassing scenes at the Breaking of Bread; these are problems which go with the system. But "Brethren" consider it worth the risk. The question posed by the Charismatic Movement is, "Can we accept these *extra* dangers and problems as worth the risk too?"

My own answer is a qualified and cautious "Yes". Michael Green has written, "During the last fifteen years I have had the privilege of living in a Christian community where charismatic and non-charismatic Christians have lived together in a high degree of mutual love and trust. It cannot be denied that the Charismatic Movement has in places brought division and suspicion. It is my conviction that this need not be so." (*I believe in the Holy Spirit*—Michael Green—Hodder & Stoughton, 1975) From experience in the pastorate of three successive churches I share that conviction. But you have to work at it.

The Theological Problem

The introduction of hitherto unfamiliar charismata into a church raises three types of problems; the theological, the emotional and the

administrational. *The theological issue* is discussed by John Balchin with whose judgement I thoroughly concur. It poses two basic questions, and they should be dealt with separately. First, can we encourage a “second-blessing” approach? Surely not. A theology which divides Christians into two categories is never faithful to the whole tenor of Scripture, always mutes the fundamental importance of the New Birth, always displaces the centrality of Christ, and always denies the essential unity of the Church. That may not be the intention, but it is the inevitable result.

Secondly, can we encourage a welcome to spiritual gifts in all their rich diversity? This is not the same question in a different form, even though classic Pentecostalism insists that it is. The simple fact of contemporary experience is that the exercise of charismata today is *not* confined to those people who claim a “Baptism of the Spirit” as a distinct second work of grace. The older Pentecostal denominations linked the two inseparably because they sprang from the “Holiness Movement” which in turn was a development of Methodism. In the newer Charismatic Movement there has been at first a natural tendency to adopt the same theology, but the link is not such an exclusive one. Often the term “Baptism of the Spirit” is simply convenient short-hand for “starting to speak in tongues” or “becoming more intensely aware of God” or “coming to expect and experience more in the service of God”. The question of the scriptural nature (or otherwise) of the actual gifts exercised, is a separate and distinct one. Certainly there is no scripture which specifically states that the charismata were a temporary gift granted until the canon of scripture was complete. It is a theory with a respectable and indeed honourable history, but it cannot match the facts. Nowhere in the New Testament are we led to expect that the Body is to have missing limbs after the first few years. On the contrary, we have abiding instructions on the right exercise of those limbs. That is not to say that every phenomenon hailed today as a spiritual gift is really genuine. But it is to say that we cannot start with an *a priori* assumption that the gifts do not and cannot exist.

The Emotional Problem

We move now from the theological to the emotional problem. I use the word advisedly. Nothing is more likely to send the blood-pressure up, the nerves quivering, the adrenalin flowing and the abuse flying, than the introduction of this whole topic into a normal mixed group of Christians. The subject is plagued with examples of excess and eccentricity.

On the whole, English Christianity has denigrated the emotions. The average Englishman at his devotions seems to find strong feeling an embarrassment, and almost equates reverence with

frigidity. Anglican liturgy keeps religion safe within the bounds of sonorous phraseology. Nonconformists, inheriting a misunderstanding of Puritanism, conceive the height and climax of worship to be sitting in rows listening to a monologue. Brethrenism made a dash for freedom and informality but quickly settled to an emphasis on teaching and tradition (witness the remarkable collection of folk-lore as to what is and is not "suitable for the morning meeting"). In all three cases, the *cerebral* is to the fore; the emotional gets little regard.

I believe that the Charismatic Movement has done the Church a great service by bringing release and exercise and acceptance to *emotion*, once chained and suppressed and suspected. Simple things like singing 'Hail thou once-despised Jesus' with hands and faces uplifted; simple acts like singing 'Blest be the tie that binds' and then exchanging hand-clasps and a whispered 'peace be unto you'; these customs and others like them have brought a new depth of worship to many people who have suffered from a formalism which claimed to be saying 'God is to be worshipped in spirit and in truth', but was often really saying 'God is only to be worshipped with the intellect. The whole being cannot enter in'. The rare occasions when I have witnessed (and joined in) a congregation 'singing in the Spirit' have been amongst some of my profoundest spiritual experiences, to be compared with a Communion Service at its very best, the hearing of a powerful exposition, the sharing of personal prayer with someone seeking the Saviour.

However, there is a danger. Emotional release for the unemotional can mean emotional excess for the already emotional. By its very nature, pentecostalism is likely to attract the unbalanced, the disturbed, the exhibitionist, and the inadequate. A religious journal recently listed those characteristics all too often found amongst charismatic enthusiasts. The list included absurd and irrational interpretations of Scripture, an undue emphasis on the unusual and the sensational, and the confusion of sentimentality and immaturity with spirituality. The criticism may sound harsh, but it is not unjust. My own experience—that of someone very sympathetic to many of the aims of the movement—is full of anecdotes illustrating the bigotry, imbalance and sheer eccentricity of so many whose very naivety and innocence tempts me to despair of their ever learning from their mistakes. Most numerous and troublesome are the arrogant and pushing types who *need* to be always right, who *need* to belong to a minority with an extra secret not shared by others, who *need* to have an excuse for drifting around seeking and never finding a 'live church' (because they could never accept the responsibility and realism of an actual church as opposed to a dream church). Add to this emotive phrases like 'only a few in this church are

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Spirit-filled', 'our assembly has no liberty and joy', 'I'm praying that the elders will see the truth'—and you have most of the ingredients necessary for division and bad feeling.

But that is not all. Non-charismatics have their emotional problems too. There is the hysterical reaction against any suggestion of the supernatural and the unusual. 'If anyone prophesies at the prayer-meeting, I'll never come again', says one. 'If someone in my family spoke in tongues, I would run out of the house', says another. Some of us have temperamental inadequacies which make us unable to look at anything new; we are frightened to admit any unfamiliar experience; incapable of accepting that there might have been some truth or insight which we had never noticed. Some of us are terrified of treading outside formal phraseology, and need to take shelter in safe familiar shibboleths. To quote Michael Green again, 'We are in danger of forgetting that it is God we are talking about. He can and does break into human life through the violent, the unexpected, the alien. He pioneered the evangelism of the Early Church often in the most bizarre, unexpected and unorthodox ways' (p. 20).

These emotional problems are a major challenge to the pastoral care of our churches. Elders, pastors and teachers cannot avoid them and should not try to. *What advice, then, can those in pastoral office give to people troubled, excited, confused or experimenting with charismata?*

1. Help them to set their new-found gifts within the context of *all* the charismata. There are not only nine of them! (I Cor. 12: 4-11, I Cor. 12: 27-31, Eph. 4: 11-13, Romans 12: 4-8) Ask a new enthusiast if he gladly recognises the other gifts already granted to his church, especially those of the teacher, the pastor, the elder, the exhorter. Show him gently that a fair test of the reality of his new gift is his willingness and ability to integrate its exercise with those of the others. The Holy Spirit is consistent with himself. The advice and counsel of his appointed teachers and pastors are needed and must be welcomed.
2. Advise Christians to seek the best gifts (1 Cor. 12: 31) which Paul defines clearly as *those most likely to edify the whole church* rather than thrill the individual (I Cor. 14: 1-5 and 18-19).
3. Underline the supreme importance of *love*. The thirteenth chapter of 1st Corinthians is put where it is to emphasize the absolute necessity that the exercise of gifts be guided by the question: 'Is this according to love?' That consideration alone, if taken seriously, would solve many of the problems and defuse many of the explosive situations.
4. Explain carefully that spiritual gifts are *neither self-authenticating nor infallible*. The mere fact that something *happens* is no guarantee

that it is from God! Notice how Paul teaches the necessity of testing the gifts, not unthinkingly accepting them. (I Cor. 14: 29: 'Let two or three prophets speak and let the others weigh what is said. cf. I John 4: 1-3.)

5. Insist that the genuine exercise of a gift will never be compulsive and uncontrollable. (I Cor. 14: 32: 'The spirits of the prophets are subject to prophets'.) If someone performs an action which in a certain context is bound to embarrass and distress fellow-Christians, it is no good saying, 'I was bursting to say it' or 'I felt I just *had* to'. Such an excuse makes nonsense of Paul's whole instruction in this chapter: his readers *could* control themselves, otherwise why instruct them how to? It is the occult power, the psychiatric disturbance or the stubborn will which compels. The Holy Spirit invites co-operation.

6. Finally, warn of the complementary dangers of boasting and of jealousy, so wittily exposed in I Corinthians 12: 14-21. Imagine a foot getting depressed because it can't hold things! Imagine an eye being conceited because it is able to see better than a hand! Learn how *the body* works. So says Paul with an insight and wisdom often sadly lacking today on both sides of the 'charismatic divide'.

Administrative Problems

We come now to the administrative problems raised by charismata. The term may seem out of place in such a discussion, but the New Testament sees no contradiction between freedom and structure, spontaneity and order. If anything, the Pastoral Epistles come down more heavily on the need for structure and order.

The pressing question posed by Pentecostalism is, '*What room can we make for it in our churches?*' A number of different answers are given.

One possibility is to reject the whole thing, root and branch. A statement is made by the elders that this is something false and therefore not permitted within this particular church. Perhaps a series of addresses are given to underline the reasons. An internationally-known American church has recently done this, listing its reasons in its monthly magazine. It must be conceded that if the elders are convinced that they face serious error, then they have a right (perhaps an obligation) to say so, and to their Master they are responsible. 'They keep watch over your souls, as men who will have to give account' (Heb. 13-17).

A second possibility is for the church to acknowledge that some of its members have had a controversial but valid experience, to ask them not to exercise unfamiliar gifts in the main activities of the church where they would cause distress and dissension, and to provide opportunities where they *may* be exercised. To this I will return.

A third possibility is to accept charismatic and non-charismatic on equal terms, and somehow make room for unfamiliar gifts to be incorporated within the structure of the church *without destroying that structure*. When this is done successfully, the church tends to 'hit the headlines'. Honoured and beloved brethren like David Watson and David Pawson would claim that their churches have not ceased to be Anglican and Baptist respectively. Other Anglicans and Baptists might want to put it differently. Certainly there are many well-established churches and fellowships in which such a course would inevitably bring division and tragedy. Then the headlines are rather different.

The fourth possibility is for the church to become totally Pentecostal, or for a group within it to leave and do so. In that case presumably the problems will be of a different nature from those we are considering.

Now it seems to me that if we are to avoid the danger of rejecting sincere Christians with a pentecostal experience on the one hand, and the danger of grieving and bewildering more traditional Christians on the other, we must settle for the second option. Whilst insisting firmly that the familiar services should not be disrupted, we should supply optional extras (if and when needed) at which all of the gifts may be exercised.

'Revolution in worship, abandoning long-accepted forms and replacing them with prophecies, tongues and the like, might only do more harm than good and bring . . . gifts . . . into disrepute. At the present time—the house-meeting would seem to provide a particularly appropriate environment for charismatic worship' (*Spiritual Gifts and the Church* by D. Bridge and D. Phipps: IVP, 1973 p. 154). It may be objected that this establishes a 'holy huddle' of specially-gifted Christians meeting in a sectarian fashion. It need not be so, if the activities are openly announced and the motives well understood. After all, there are plenty of precedents for organising meetings which have a special purpose, only appeal to some, and would be out of place as part of the Sunday worship. Women's missionary sewing-class—Youth Club—Elders' meeting—do they not all do this? One is tempted to suggest that the church prayer-meeting is a special interest-group, judging by the attendance! It may also be objected that a compromise is being arranged. Compromises are not always bad; they are unjustified only if they compromise between right and wrong. The decision of the Council at Jerusalem was essentially a good compromise (Acts 15)—so presumably was Paul's circumcision of Timothy but refusal to circumcise Titus (Acts 16: 3, Galatians 2: 3-6).

Needless to say, such an optional extra meeting should be supervised by responsible and acknowledged leaders, and the quite clear instructions of I Cor. 14 should be observed. Also, needless to say, this course of action will raise a number of issues and problems which will spill over into the wider circle of the whole church, its witness and worship.

Prominent among these is the whole topic of sickness and healing. I can see no scriptural precedent for the public, advertised, mass-healing meeting, and there are positively unbiblical implications in the attitude which often accompanies such meetings, with their sole emphasis on human faith and credulity, their denial of the sovereignty of God, their rejection of the role of suffering in the divine purpose, and their derision of the prayer 'Thy will be done'. But to say that is not to deny any place for the ministry of healing. The visit of elders to a sick member when requested (James 5: 13-16) to give anointing and prayer in a context of sins confessed and relationships restored, seems to be wholly biblical, and has been known to be effective. The wider implications of the Gospel, expounded and applied in personal counselling, can bring striking demonstrations of physical and emotional healing. Our public prayer for sick friends, often rather formally and dutifully included in public worship, could well afford to be injected with a feeling of expectation that something really will happen: when that is so, some splendid things do tend to happen.

The other area of difficulty is that of spiritual evil, possession, and exorcism. Our missionaries never imagined that the problem had gone away, but it is only the increasing paganism of this country which has brought it back to our doorstep. There has been a great upsurge of interest in spiritualism and the occult. The average Englishman is more likely to consult a medium than a minister, and more likely to read the stars than the scriptures. There are some frightful resulting problems, including obsessive behaviour, irrational fears, repetitive nightmares, frightening experiences, spiritual oppression, and (in a few cases) outright possession. The Charismatic Movement has served a double role in both providing impressive and valuable guidelines, and (at times) encouraging silly, irresponsible and harmfully simplistic behaviour. The principles suggested by the present Archbishop of Canterbury are wise and helpful. Our attempts to help people in these circumstances should be in an atmosphere of quiet trust, not of noise—and in private rather than in public. The context should be the Word and the Sacraments, and the basic approach should be one of confidence in the exalted Christ. Medically qualified help should be sought, and the church fellowship should provide continuing support and strength.

These, then, are some of the considerations to be borne in mind as we find ourselves facing perhaps the biggest pastoral challenge of our time. Perhaps we can let Paul have the last word (I Thess. 5: 19-22): 'Do not quench the Spirit, do not despise prophesying, but test everything; hold fast what is good, abstain from every form of evil.'