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Psychological Aspects of the Charismatic Movement

Discussing the psychological aspects of charismatic developments is a difficult task because it means looking objectively, indeed critically and scientifically, at something which to many is associated with new power, joy and a new dimension in their lives as Christians. How can these people be critical, scientific, and detached when approaching this subject? They are bound to view the attempt with some wariness, if not hostility. On the other hand, there are others for whom the so-called charismatic movement is itself the object of suspicion, if not hostility; for them the new Pentecostals are wrong theologically, powerful pastorally, and muddled psychologically. Failure to confirm such views would invite an accusation of being insufficiently critical and detached. Quite clearly, there is a wide variety of experience of the Faith among Christians, even among evangelical Christians, and for that matter even among those who would be considered to be 'in' the charismatic movement.

Experience and Doctrine

In this paper, I do not propose to discuss the reality and the validity of particular experiences, but to comment upon the expectation of experience and the differing status given to it in the lives of Christians. So often, our experience as Christians influences our doctrine; then the doctrine influences our expectation of Christian experience; and then in turn that experience re-inforces our belief—the whole tendency sometimes resulting in exclusiveness and controversy. This is the area which interests the psychologist and the sociologist. Now it is quite right for them to be thus interested; but the fact that they have identified the psychological and sociological processes does not entail that only psychological factors are involved. An analogy may make things clearer. The physician may diagnose pneumonia; he may isolate a virus or germ which causes this infection, but that does not mean that that virus in itself explains the pneumonia. This individual may have been exposed to the virus for weeks before. Other individuals may have been spreading the same virus and feeling marvellous, thank you. Other factors are involved. The general health, the resistance, the immunity, the age, the social conditions, also influence whether the person exposed to the virus remains healthy, has bronchitis or a rip-roaring pneumonia. Over

and above all that, God himself may have something very special to say to that person in his illness.

Likewise, when God the Holy Spirit works in our lives he is working within the individualness (I can think of no better word) of our personalities. These personalities are themselves the results of the complex interaction of our genetics, our family influence, our training and our culture, which puts a very special stamp upon each one of us, which produces the habitual behaviour which we show, which even if we don't recognise it, our spouses and our friends recognise. It is this which so often accounts for the very varying personalities in Christian biography. Compare the rather remote and logical Calvin with the warm and tempestuous Luther. Compare the fastidious, over-organised Wesley, the son of a parsonage, with the coarser Whitfield, the son of a publican, who refused to organise his converts. And God used them all mightily in identical ways; and who would dare to rate them spiritually? Theologically they stood in absolute agreement regarding Christ and pardon for sinners, but their experience of God's dealings with them personally differs enormously, and in particular the doctrinal systems which they originated or subscribed to also differed widely, and their followers frequently came to blows as a result.

Now whatever may be the understanding regarding the biblical passages considered in John Balchin's paper the problem in terms of division, in terms of the perplexity which Christians experience, occurs in this area of personality and experience and the extrapolation of doctrine from that. The following phrases have been used over the past three hundred years, and at some time or another they indicated really burning issues among Christians: Conversion experience. . .Sense of assurance. . .The higher life. . .Entire sanctification. . .The experience of the fulness of the Spirit. . .Calvary experience. . .The experience of brokenness. . .The experience of tongues. . .Sinless perfection. . .Charismatic movement. . .and so on. These phrases all contain biblical words, and to ignore any one of these words would be to ignore Scripture. But it's when extra words, such as 'the experience of' or 'movement' or 'sinless', 'entire' and 'higher' come alongside the biblical words that there is division among Christians, and opposing ranks have been drawn up. As one looks at the history of these phrases, they all seem to arise out of the deep dissatisfaction of groups of Christians contrasting the apparent poverty of their *experience* as Christians with the content what they *believed* as Christians. Then, in most instances, there followed a new joy and faith and devotion to Christ, a new love for fellow-Christians, a new understanding of the Gospel and Scripture. In each case the sequel was a tendency to systematize and then reproduce the actual circumstances of the experience in others. In some instances, there

followed a third stage where they sought refuge in their common experience and used the experience as a means of identifying each other and as a token of admission to closer fellowship. As a consequence, whatever truth there was became obscured by party strife and by external trappings.

The experience of conversion here supplies a useful illustration. A study of theological students included Baptists, and evangelical Anglicans, and Anglo-catholics. Of the Baptists 97% had had a conscious conversion experience, generally a sudden one. Of the evangelical Anglicans, 93% had had a conversion experience, but for 50% only was this sudden. What of the Anglo-catholics? 50% of them had a conscious conversion experience but in no case a sudden one. Many Christians with a Brethren or evangelical free church affiliation are unaware of how intense was the battle over experience of conversion between our seventeenth century forebears. Other Christians, including evangelicals, with the same theology of regeneration and new birth may have a very different kind of conversion experience.

We turn now to the charismatic movement, and in particular to the experience of tongues, not that tongues is necessarily the most important component of the movement, but because tongues is the particular experience most commonly shared by Christians within the movement. As one Roman Catholic charismatic commented: 'Since it is the lowest of the charismata it should not be a matter of surprise that it is so common.' Another reason for singling it out is that most psychological studies have focused upon tongues, which is a more readily identified phenomenon than some of the other experiences which we have talked about. It is not unfair to select tongues in this way, in view of the prominence given to this experience in the writings of the leaders (or at least the propagandists) of the movement. Further, although tongues may be taken as the starting point, the deeper and the personal issues will still emerge.

Not exclusively Christian

Speaking in tongues is not exclusively a Christian phenomenon. It is to be found among Sufi Moslems, which is one of the mystical Islamic sects. In fact, one theological student from Saudi Arabia was kept from the Gospel for some time because his mother and his aunt used to speak in tongues and used this as proof of the closeness of Allah and the truth of Islam. Doctor Sargent, in his book, *The Mind Possessed*, shows how an experience of speaking tongues can be inculcated in pagan sects and cults. In *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* Michael Green refers to a man who went to a meeting of the Irvingites (one of the 19th century tongue speaking groups). Himself a sceptic, he went to criticise but found himself quite unexpectedly speaking in

tongues, so he gave up his Hegelian philosophy and became a Zoroastrian instead! Nearer our own times, the Mormons are probably the most striking para-Christian group who have shown this phenomenon. As they trekked through the desert, persecuted, harried, going they knew not where, they had this experience of tongues which they interpreted as God's special sign of his presence and a token of his blessing. Apparently tongues can be induced psychologically by suggestion, by mystical practices; it is valued (although regarded as eccentric) in other religions, and is looked upon as a mark of God's presence in other religious groups.

Tongues in history

Surprisingly little is written about tongues in church history, and again there is considerable controversy as to how much value we can put upon reputed occurrences. However, the following are incontrovertible. Since the Reformation there have been several movements, the first among the seventeenth century Huguenots, the Camisards in battle in the Cevennes where God seemed to have left his very elect who had battled for his cause, persecuted, dwindling, harried he seemed to have abandoned them. Suddenly they burst forth into tongues and they perceived this as a token of God's love and of his continuing presence, despite their adversity. This resembles the experience of the Mormons two hundred years later, but neither the Huguenots, nor the descendants of the Huguenots, nor of the Mormons today, lay any great stress on it now, and it seems to belong to the day of their trials and tribulations.

If we move into the 1830's we see the foundation of the Catholic Apostolic Church or the Irvingites, as they were known. Here we have the first clear occurrence of tongues in this country. It was a time of great intellectual and spiritual ferment following the French Revolution; the old guide lines were lost and challenged, there was a time of deep searching for spiritual identity, and in particular men were looking for the marks of the authentic and primitive church, the Apostolic Church, and the signs of the Lord's return. This was the period of the Powerscourt Conferences on prophecy, and it is interesting to note what happened to three men who attended those conferences. One was E. B. Pusey who became associated with the Oxford movement and the Anglo-Catholic movement and saw the marks of the primitive church in apostolic continuity. J. N. Darby who became one of the initiators of Brethren Movement, saw the marks of the primitive church in apostolic simplicity. Edward Irving, founder of the Irvingites and Catholic Apostolic church, saw the marks of the apostolic church in the apostolic gifts and tongues regarding them as unmistakable evidence of the Spirit of Pentecost. This is not the place to comment on the eventual demise or otherwise of those particular groups, but there may be a lesson here as well.

The holiness movements of the later twentieth century were offshoots of Methodism, where the proof of the full measure of the Holy Spirit was holiness. But how could one be certain that one was truly and entirely sanctified? The doctrine of entire sanctification still left some room for doubt in honest people, and so the 'unmistakable sign' of tongues again appeared in this setting, giving rise to the modern Pentecostal denominations. The so-called neo-Pentecostal movement has rather different origins, though it is in the same stream. One significant factor is the number of clergy and ministers affected in the earlier days of neo-Pentecostalism (and still affected today). This is very different from the Pentecostal movement at the turn of the century, or indeed from the Irvingites, or the Huguenots. It is also remarkable how little impact neo-Pentecostalism has made upon non-clerical (or apparently non-clerical) denominations, such as the Brethren. By contrast its main impact has been within the so-called mainstream denominations, American Episcopacy, Anglicanism, American Lutherism, Roman Catholicism, and to a lesser extent, Presbyterianism and the Church of Scotland. Certainly it is not an exclusively evangelical movement, nor even perhaps a predominantly evangelical movement, as this word has been traditionally used. Once again, I think, there is a situation of stress and perplexity. Men challenged by diminished authority within their own ministries became anxious, frustrated, questioning. As they pleaded before God to know what he was doing, tongues became for many of them a special divine token of approval and of his seal upon their calling. However the neo-charismatic movement has progressed beyond this. I think this is how it began.

Psychological and Sociological Studies

One of the earliest studies of tongues was a Ph.D. thesis by Vivier who came from a Pentecostal background; a further study was made by a Pentecostalist named Woods. They sought to examine whether tongue speakers had special personality difficulties, or whether speaking in tongues was due to a religious dynamism. They tested and examined three groups of people, people who spoke in tongues, Pentecostalists who did not speak in tongues, and non-Pentecostalists. They found that the tongue speakers more often came from disturbed and broken homes. They tended to be more sensitive, problem-orientated people, seeking global solutions to life's problems. Furthermore, the more anxious and tense individuals were the more frequently did they resort to speaking in tongues. These workers concluded that a sense of insecurity and a tendency to seek signs were found to a greater degree among those who spoke in tongues.

A more recent study is that by Kildahl (1973), published as a paperback called *The Psychology of Speaking in Tongues*. Although

this may fairly be described as somewhat biased, this criticism does not negate the material presented. Kildahl himself was a psychotherapist, part of a team of experts setting out to examine and evaluate the phenomenon of tongues as it occurred in the American Lutheran Church. They concluded, first, that tongues speakers were more submissive, suggestible and dependent than control groups, and on certain psychological rating scales they showed quite different results from the control in that they had higher dependency scores and lower autonomy or independence scores. Secondly, the team found that all tongue speakers had positive feelings towards their group leader and a persisting relationship of trust appeared vital for the practice to continue, and of importance in the life of the individual. Thirdly, tongue speakers tended to be less depressed and discouraged than the control Christians. On follow up a year later this was confirmed. They claimed to be changed, sensitive as people, more loving, with better marital and sexual relationships, with a sense of the presence of God their Creator, with a sense of his love, and of being surrounded by helping fellow believers. Fourthly, the tongues themselves were not found to display the criteria of language. In addition, recordings played back to various leaders who felt they had a gift of interpretation never gave rise to the same divine interpretation.

We may refer also to the World Council of Churches report on the Chilean Pentecostal movement, *Haven of the Masses*, a document much more sympathetic and very exhaustive. The Chilean Pentecostal movement has achieved remarkable growth. It began as a break away from Episcopal Methodism, and had among its members predominantly lower and deprived classes, as compared with the other Protestant groups, which were middle class and foreign influenced. They included rejects, the outcasts, those with no privileges in society. Interestingly, to speak in tongues was not essential for inclusion in the fellowship (not even the pastors had to speak in tongues) but dancing and other spontaneous manifestations of emotion in worship were acceptable. In addition, Chilean charismatics were implacably opposed to the present social order, being strongly determined to change society. The study suggests that this tremendous growth of Chilean Pentecostalism happened because it was meeting the real need of the people in a way which the other denominations were not. It appealed to, and could contain, the rejected, the despised, the inhibited, the under-privileged, in addition to offering certainty of salvation in Christ. It offered the security of a loving fellowship in community, and the sharing in a common task, which enabled them to achieve free and uninhibited expression in their Christian life. It both liberated their feelings and gave them a hope of liberation in society too. It is important to notice that tongue speaking was not the hallmark of the Spirit's presence and

was not a condition of entering into fellowship, although it was accepted within that fellowship rather as John Balchin's paper describes.

There have also been studies on the mechanisms of tongue speaking offering a variety of theories, from hypnotic suggestion, brain-washing and excessive psychological pressure, to hysterical dissociation. It is known that tension and psychological illness can induce speech disturbance: a person in a high state of elation can produce a flow of language and a flight of idea which would be impossible apart from this abnormal mental state. We know that tension can produce, or aggravate, stammering, spoonerisms, slips of the tongue—but how often in a tense situation we say not what we meant to say, but what we really meant! Tension also produces breakdown of speech and frank babbling: not infrequently elderly people under some tension cannot remember the name of some object or person but five minutes later they say 'I remember. . . it was so and so.' The effects of tension are well established.

But Carl Gustav Jung saw tongue speaking in different terms. For him, tongue speaking was the eruption of unconscious conflicts into the conscious associated with an experience of release and a feeling of well-being. It is interesting that writers in the charismatic movement are now speaking of 'release in the Spirit', which is a psychological term, and calls for careful examination. Certainly, there is a psychological phenomenon here, which very able observers have defined, and which leaders of the charismatic movement have themselves taken over. Julius Nefal, one of the most distinguished of psycho-linguistic experts in the States and one who has no axe to grind puts it this way: 'Tongues brings close to consciousness what the individual cannot put into words, the shame, the guilt, the despair that might be present and avoided, while the person feels that he has expressed the ineffable. The idea of divine inspiration furthers the feeling that he is not in the grip of ordinary conflicts and needs which characterize all of us and about which we have the most guilt and anxiety.' In other words, those situations which would cause us great guilt, shame and despair, which we cannot put into words or allow to re-enter the outside of our minds, as it were, can nevertheless be expressed in this other way without feelings of guilt shame and despair; we can bring them before God and seek his help, his forgiveness, and the power of the Spirit in dealing with them at a sub-conscious level. Many denominational Pentecostals would reject these psychological assessments outright. The neo-Pentecostals, however, tend to welcome such observations. They welcome the emphasis on the ability to express feelings without ambivalence, and the confirmation that the experience has healing value.

Although tongue speaking attracts and occurs in certain people with certain psychological needs and backgrounds, it is important to recognise that it is not limited to such people. In so far as we understand the psychological mechanism and see its appropriateness, any experience which habitually by-passes mind leads to loss of integration and failure to mature. In this context, tongues may be seen as not dissimilar to the use of drugs, such as cannabis and L.S.D. in order to achieve a sense of well-being. Indeed such use has been recently advocated by a writer who suggests that the Christian Church should use these drugs to by-pass the rigours and the disciplines of mystical techniques, in order to achieve a sense of well being and a sense of the presence of God, which the mystics have sought and claimed to have achieved throughout the centuries.

Some Conclusions

It must be emphasised that all these psychological and sociological studies can offer only part of the truth. They can report only on the psychological or sociological aspects, and thus fail to give a full account. I cannot subscribe (for example) to the view that this is nothing but a psychological phenomenon. And while the historical and sociological studies are suggestive and consistent, the psychological studies have tended to be rather biased, though not necessarily to be discounted for that. Summarising, however, there are three points worth making.

The first is that tongue speakers tend to have strong dependency traits in their characters: each psychological study seems to point to this, and some of the earliest writers commented upon the high proportion of people from broken homes and disturbed backgrounds. There are no 'loners' among tongue speakers; they seem to seek authority figures and situations for security and support; they seem to reproduce characteristics of their original leaders and speakers and they tend to speak in the styles of du Plessis or Bennett. When they fall out with their leader there tends to be a cessation of tongues, or a loss of sense of well-being and the experience seems to lose its power. It is possible however that charismatic groups are better able to meet the needs of people who have dependency traits than are other fellowships and church life in general. The members may also be people who both recognise and openly declare their own dependence on others and on God, while being more ready to accept others' dependence on them; their very lack of a sense of self-sufficiency making them prepared to accept and commit themselves to others in a supportive way. It is possible that their high dependency rate is linked to their openness and ability to receive the unloved, the weak, the helpless, the widows and orphans, and the modern orphans from broken homes and to demonstrate the love of Christ within the

fellowship. This may explain why tongues speaking is more prevalent in the highly individualistic formal denominations and less prevalent in the tighter, closer and sometimes exclusive denominations, such as the Brethren.

Secondly, tongue speakers experience a time of anxiety and crisis prior to the phenomenon appearing, and studies have shown that 85% of tongue speakers had a clear anxiety crisis beforehand. By comparison, only 30% of Christians who did not speak in tongues had a similar crisis experience in their lives. Historical studies support this, citing the Huguenots, the Mormons, the Irvingites and so on. Psychological studies also show that the more anxious the individual is the more he tends to use tongues as a constant reassurance. The more integrated the personality, the more modest are the claims for the experience. The less integrated the personality, the less open the person is to discuss his experience and the more he tends to be rather rabid and closed in pressing the claims of the experience. It is also noticeable that the more settled a person becomes in life, in marriage, and society, the less do tongues feature in their experience. On the other hand, it may be argued that the experience of speaking in tongues is characteristic of people more actively appraising their lives before God and unwilling to accept a status quo. Perhaps tongues speakers have a higher representation of those who are aware of and are troubled by the discrepancy between what they say they believe and the fruitlessness of their lives, with their lack of victory, purpose and effective outreach and witness; accordingly they not only say but genuinely expect the Holy Spirit to be the Spirit of power to change and renew.

Thirdly, the charismatic group—that is the group who meet together to share the charismatic gifts—does seem to provide a pattern of behaviour and group identity. Once a person speaks in tongues he has an entry into a group and the power of this group identity is shown by charismatic ecumenism. Where conservative evangelicals can happily hobnob with Roman Catholics and neo-Orthodox, the group identity transcends background culture and theology and centuries of hostility; it is amazing to see the children of Babylon and the scarlet woman (the evangelical swear word for R.C.s) having fellowship with vile enthusiasts (which is the Roman Catholic swear word for evangelicals). But such fellowship occurs only in the setting of charismatic conferences, not yet in evangelism and in the sacraments. The importance of group identity is seen also in a considerable pressure to conform and replicate the experience accompanied by instructions in technique. Dennis Bennett's first work is said to tell people to let their lips hang loose and 'la la' and so on. In his second book, *The Holy Spirit in You*, he says, 'You must

begin to speak in other languages, not your own language or languages as the Spirit gives the utterance or the form of words to you and He will' (p. 70). Again, 'Do not back off at this point as some of you do and say I guess God does not want me to have it. It's you who are holding back' (p. 72). 'One thing is sure, if you don't accept the experience as real you won't be aware of its reality' (p. 73). Yet however contrived may be the tokens of entry, there is within such groups a belonging, a warmth, a sharing, a structure for new relationships, there is 'body life,' to use a current paraphrase for the Greek *Koinonia*. In *Cinderella with Amnesia* Michael Griffiths refers to 'that warm fellowship of Christian with Christian which the New Testament calls *Koinonia*'. In the early Church a kind of rhythm of life was evident in which Christians would gather in homes to instruct one another, study and pray together, and share the ministry of spiritual gifts. They then would go out into the world again to let the warmth and glow of their love-filled lives overflow into a spontaneous Christian witness that drew love-starved pagans, like a candy store draws little children.' How many of our fellowships and churches provide that? For many, the charismatic group does so. In a society where structure and continuity are breaking down at all ages, in childhood, in marriage, in old age, how vital that the fellowship within which the Holy Spirit is going to renew and change broken and maimed lives is warm, loving, a place where one can belong. Today in some of the ordinary primary schools of residential areas in Southern England something up to 30% of the children are from broken or disturbed homes. How do our church and our fellowship structures give the new patterns, new support, sense of belonging, loving fellowship, which are going to be essential for this generation to mature as Christians?

Luther speaks of the experience of being freed from experience, and experience is a dangerous mentor and guide. Certainly the experience of tongues is not exclusively Christian. It can be learned. It can cause division, and does cause division. It can be a Christianised 'trip', but the charismatic movement, within which it has a recognised place, does allow expression of the whole being and worship and acceptance of the strange, the weak, and the odd. The charismatic movement does expect the Holy Spirit to be powerful and active today. The charismatic movement provides fellowships with a strong sense of belonging, love, where each member truly complements the other and give themselves to one another in a costly way. That is the work of the Holy Spirit. Where that is happening, there the Holy Spirit is working, whether there are tongues or whether there are not tongues. To deny his presence because of the presence of an experience we do not share is dangerous. To claim his presence because of the presence of an experience, whatever that experience, is likewise dangerous. 'Rabbi' Duncan, who died about a century

ago, was a man whom God used in one of the most remarkable missions among the Jews in Central Europe and Budapest. Alfred Edersheim, Adolph Saphir and various others were converted through his ministry. He was a man who owed much to people like Malan and the experientialists of the day, though he took issue with them very strongly, calling himself a pernickety theologian. He was a meticulous theologian. His words seem remarkably relevant: 'There are innumerable moulds in God's world. Why do we coop up divine grace within narrow man-made channels and say this is the way God has worked it and will work? His greatness is no way displayed more illustriously than in the spreading out of his gifts in a thousand different ways. There is a manifoldness in his operation that surely pertains to the beauty of his holiness'. . . 'Some persons preach only doctrine; that makes people all head, which is a monster. Some people preach only experience; that makes people all heart, which is a monster too. Others preach only practice; that makes people all hands and feet, which is likewise a monster, but if you preach doctrine and experience and practice by the blessing of God, you will have head and hearts and hand and feet, a perfect man in Christ Jesus.'