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Gospel and Spirit: The Anglican Joint Statement

One of the most remarkable features of the 1977 Nottingham Evangelical Anglican Congress was the number of participants who were charismatic, if one could judge by the raising of arms in worship. Using this rough and ready test, it appeared that up to one third of the 2,000 at Nottingham were charismatic. In view of this substantial charismatic presence within the evangelical wing of the Church of England and since the movement extends to churches which have not been regarded as evangelical, including the Roman Catholic church, it is not surprising that a number of Anglicans have met to produce a joint statement sponsored both by the (charismatic) Fountain Trust and the Church of England Evangelical Council (*Gospel and Spirit* price 20p from Fountain Trust, 3a, High Street, Esher, Surrey, KT10 9RT).

Before considering this statement, we may pause to ask ourselves why it is that the charismatic movement has had so little effect on 'Brethren' local churches. One possible reason is the dispensational theology that has for so many years dominated Brethrenism. At this point, the far right of the Reformed Churches unite with dispensationalists whose doctrines they normally detest to affirm that charismatic manifestations were for the Church in the first century and that where they occur today they are signs of either human emotionalism or the work of evil spirits. It is not surprising that charismatically influenced Christians should leave the 'assembly' or the 'Wee Free' kirk where they are told that they are either up an emotional blind alley or dominated by Satan! This is a short way with dissent and well calculated to keep a local church free of both the blessing and the curses that have been associated with the charismatic movement.

A second possible reason may be the traditional emphasis in Brethrenism (again resembling that of the Reformed Churches) on the once-for-allness of salvation. 'Keswick' doctrines have made little appeal within the Brethren movement, Methodist views on total sanctification have been opposed, and there has been a strong tendency to say that "we received it all when we trusted Christ". (It is not unfair to ask as Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones does in one of his commentaries: 'If you received it all then, what has happened to it since?')

A third reason may be that within the 'assemblies' there was already a strong emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration and in Christian service. As one reads the testimonies of some neo-Pentecostals, including clergymen, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the experiences they describe are very often 'simple' conversion experiences for which they were totally unprepared because they did not believe in that sort of thing! In the same way, the discovery that all believers receive gifts from the Spirit, to be exercised within the local church, is, in theory at least, a commonplace to Christians in the 'assemblies' although the extent to which this belief has been acted upon has varied widely from place to place.

All the same, the relative freedom from neo-Pentecostal tensions which characterises 'assemblies' today, may be a sign of weakness rather than strength. Absence of conflict is characteristic not only of the healthily functioning human body but also of a corpse and it is greatly to be feared that the 'peace' that characterises many 'assemblies' is a sign of death not life. It is not necessarily a matter for self-congratulation that the most remarkable spiritual phenomenon (for better and worse) of the latter part of the twentieth century appears to have by-passed the Brethren.

Gospel and Spirit, although brief (twelve pages), will be of great help to Christian everywhere who genuinely wish to co-exist and to enjoy Christian fellowship with fellow-believers from whom they differ on the charismatic issue. In other words, it will be of no use at all to those who are one-sided in one way or another about this question. Thus, it will be quite irrelevant to the senior *Echoes* missionary who evicted a fellow worker, also on the *Echoes* list, because the latter would not undertake never to speak in tongues in his personal devotions. Nor will it be welcomed by people who disregard the authority of official leaders in the local church unless they too have undergone the experience of being 'baptised in the Spirit'. But it will be of tremendous value to everybody who is genuinely seeking a *modus vivendi* in the belief that a local church should have room for a diversity of views and attitudes.

The statement affirms that since every spiritual blessing is given in Christ, therefore every Christian is in principle complete so that the ministry of the Spirit can give nothing more wonderful than the Saviour or anything apart from him. While recognising that incorporation into Christ is a unitary work of God, the statement sees it as having many facets and agrees on the need to avoid stereotyping Christian experience into a one, two or three-stage pattern. In other words, neither the 'you receive it all at conversion' school nor the 'wait for a second blessing' school is allowed to claim its own pattern as normative. In this context, there is a salutary warning

against the dangers of either presenting the work of the Spirit in separation from the work of the Son or of preaching an incomplete gospel which does not do justice to the blessing offered to all who believe in Christ.

A substantial portion of the report deals with the term 'baptism in the Spirit'. It appears to recognise that the normal charismatic use of the term is unbiblical but confesses 'that it may be hard to change a usage which has become very widespread although we all agree in recognising its dangers.' However, 'it must not be employed in a way in which would question the reality of the work of the Spirit in regeneration and the real difference that this brings in experience from the outset. On that we are unanimous.' There is no attempt however, to disguise the fact that the meaning of 'baptism in the Spirit' is a source of disagreement even to those who see it as a post-conversion experience.

Since this is basically an eirenic statement it is not surprising that the importance of intellect and emotions are both stressed and the dangers pointed out both of 'a dead, rigid and barren orthodoxy' and of 'an uncontrolled, unstable and fanatical emotionalism.' But it is interesting to see the value of a charismatic style of worship being recognised even within the liturgically orientated Church of England. Christians in the 'assemblies' may think that the warnings against one-man ministry and rigid patterns of worship do not apply to them but it would be hard to deny that Brethren as well as Anglican might benefit from more spontaneity, a greater readiness to listen to God in silent meditation and 'the gentle, loving wonder and praise of some renewal songs'. There is also a salutary warning (by implication) about the danger of splitting churches. The only way to maintain unity is "the old one of shared truth and mutual love, humility, tolerance and respect'.

References to Roman Catholic neo-Pentecostalism are positive but cautious—as they surely should be! Acknowledgement of the forces within the Roman Catholic church working for renewal and reformation goes along with recognition that time is needed to see whether such forces effect changes in official formulations and interpretations of doctrine where these are necessary.

The section on spiritual gifts contains an excellent definition: 'A spiritual gift is a God-given capacity to serve others by His grace in a manner that edifies them in some way by the showing forth of Christ and His love'. As we have already seen, the statement as a whole seems to recognise the validity of the charismatic movement but at this point it seems so conditional that it might be subscribed to by thoroughgoing opponents of neo-Pentecostalism if full weight

be given to the words italicised in the following (although not in the original): 'We declare our openness to receiving any spiritual gifts *that are consonant with the New Testament* and see no reason why such gifts should not be given and exercised today.'

There are some wise remarks about the use, regulation and oversight of gifts in the church and helpful notes on some gifts which have given rise to controversy. Apostleship today can do no more than 'in certain respects parallel apostolic functions' since the ministry of the original apostles was unique. Similarly, although the gift of prophecy may not be identified with that of teaching, yet prophecy today must be tested by Scripture and cannot add materially to the basic biblical revelation. Nor do prophecies in the first person singular have greater authority than others! With respect to miracles, the statement seems to offer substantial agreement but closer reading suggests that there may have been a good deal of diversity. Although 'we all believe miracles can occur today' and there is agreement that "we are never in a position to demand a miracle" and that 'over-concentration upon the miraculous can blind people to the manifold and wonderful every day working of God in the world'—the section ends with the significant statement 'On the precise degree of expectation of miracles which is appropriate today we are not, however, completely agreed.' Yet this is, after all, largely what divides Christians on this subject since it makes all the difference in the world whether or not one lives in daily expectation of miracles or regards them as very rare but in principle not at all impossible! Healing, on the other hand, seems to have aroused little disagreement although it would be interesting to know how much discussion preceded final agreement about the statement here. While the validity of Christian ministries and gifts of healing is recognised, so too is medical practice and there is a warning against the distorted teaching about 'divine healing' that has gained so much currency in charismatic circles. Similarly, the remarks about exorcism are judicious and biblical and recognise the value, not only of exorcism as such but also of the 'regular ministry of word and sacrament' as liberating people from satanic bondage.

It is clear that there was substantial disagreement about speaking in tongues. How far does modern glossolalia correspond with the New Testament phenomenon? Most, but not all, of the group recognise that some modern glossolalia is divinely given and has spiritual and psychological value, but it is agreed that occult or demonic influence may give rise to similar manifestations. There is also disagreement about the value of the gift to the individual and to the church. Happily the group managed agreement about a general attitude in conformity to 1 Corinthians 14, neither exalting nor

despising the gift but always testing it by its edifying effects and regulating its use scripturally.

It is sad to see how many leaders in local churches are apparently petrified with fear at the thought that any charismatic manifestation might occur within their fellowship. Although the consequences of such manifestation has too often been devastating and destructive, yet it is hard to believe that the only reason for such fear is concern lest the flock be scattered. Fear of the unknown, reluctance to examine presuppositions, fear of disagreement among elders and possibly reluctance to admit the need for renewal, are all factors which may be important. In the background there is often the thought, sometimes unspoken but occasionally even put into words: 'Let's hope it doesn't happen here!' It would be a very good thing if elders who feel like this were to work through *Gospel and Spirit* together so that they might prayerfully face the issues it raises.