

The Charismatic Experience and Church Membership

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THE CHARISMATIC MOVEMENT, which first began in America in the nineteen-sixties and has been gaining momentum in other countries of the world, has not been welcomed with unqualified enthusiasm by all Christians. While some are seeing it as a new movement of the Spirit comparable with the Wesleyan revival, others are viewing it with great suspicion because of its emphasis on religious experience, viz. 'baptism in the Spirit' and in particular its spectacular manifestation of 'speaking in tongues'. Some are totally opposed to it. The reasons for these reactions are many and varied and arise partly from the fact that, along with its real awakening desire for a truly spiritual Christianity, there is its tendency to cause divisions within congregations. This article seeks to examine the attitudes to church membership of people who claim to have received gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Among the leaders of the movement there is an apparent desire and determination to remain within the churches in which they have been nourished after receiving their 'renewal' or 'baptism in the Spirit' and to encourage their followers to do the same. A leading Roman Catholic, Kevin Ranaghan, writes:

Catholic men and women involved in the Charismatic movement are thoroughly Catholic, firmly rooted in Scripture, the liturgy, spirituality, and the teaching of the Church. What we are seeking is the empowering of the Holy Spirit of the risen Lord. We are seeking it, of course, as the people we are, as Catholic people, as products of the Catholic Christian tradition and culture. It would therefore be a grave mistake, a serious error, to think that in receiving the baptism in the Spirit one had or ought to seek to import Classical Pentecostal Culture into the Charismatic Renewal in the Roman Catholic Church.¹

It is not however a hardened attitude, impervious to other influence, as is well expressed by the Dominican Simon Tugwell when he says:

Whatever we learn, whatever practices we adopt, then, from Pentecostalism (or anyone else) must be situated in terms of our own tradition as

to our grasp of its wholeness and completeness. And we must let ourselves be shattered in any such encounter; prone as we are to reduce the gospel to an ideology or a movement, we need to be constantly shaken up in this way. Here we have no abiding city, and all our theological, ecclesiological and spiritual syntheses can be no more than provisional.²

The movement in the Anglican Church manifests this same tendency. Michael Harper, an Anglican priest, and founder of the Fountain Trust (an interdenominational movement for Charismatic renewal), writes:

The Fountain Trust has sought to strengthen local churches, and to do nothing calculated to weaken them. Our meetings and conferences are designed to equip Christians with the spiritual power which should then find expression in their local churches. To guard against anyone attaching themselves more strongly to us than to their local churches, we have no membership.³

Writing in a booklet entitled *Charismatic Renewal* the Rev. Dick Wallace, a minister of the Church of England in Australia, says,

There is no reason why any believer who accepts pentecostal teaching and the exercise of the charismata should leave his denominational church. If wisely and prudently, he demonstrates in his life the witness of the Spirit, he can be of great blessing within his local church.⁴

Leaders in Nonconformist churches also strive to maintain this policy. Donald Bridge, a Baptist minister, and David Phipers, head of the Department of Social Studies in a high school, believe that

individually-endowed believers should act and react together like the variously-endowed limbs of a human body. When members of a local congregation recognise their mutual interdependence they are drawn closer in fellowship and love.⁵

But what is the attitude of ordinary church members who have had Charismatic experiences? The following observations are based upon the accounts sent in to the Religious Experience Research Unit by people who have had such experiences. The answers suggest that some are happy within their own congregations; some maintain a nominal contact and seek fellowship with other Christians in interdenominational groups, while others leave and remain unattached to any particular group or church.

It would seem that the quality of the fellowship in the congregation is one of the most important factors in determining whether people remain and enjoy a vital relationship with others who have not had similar experiences. One of our correspondents says:

I am an Anglican. I was an Anglican several years before I was baptised in the Spirit. I am 'at home' with the members of my own church family i.e. the whole congregation. My own church where I am known and loved and whose members I know and love are obviously those with whom I have deepest fellowship. Clearly my church has helped me to understand and evaluate my experience enormously. (3134)

The opportunity to meet Christians from other denominations is

another influential factor. The same correspondent writes:

Our church gets many visitors of all denominations (Roman Catholic, Baptist, Evangelical, etc.) with whom I also feel 'at home'. (3134)

The kind of denominational church which Charismatic Christians are in sometimes influences their attitudes. Although they do not find everything to their satisfaction, several Roman Catholics who have written show no desire to leave the Roman Catholic Church:

However, I do see the need to be in a community where the gifts of the Spirit are free to operate. (5207)

Certainly I am especially comfortable with post-Vatican II Catholics. There are signs of greater encouragement and support by the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. (5204)

The majority of those within the Pentecostal churches find themselves in a happier position in that these churches teach and encourage their members to seek for the 'Baptism in the Spirit'. Two of our correspondents write:

I belong to the Elim Pentecostal (church). Our church does encourage new believers to be baptised in the Spirit. (5227)

I attend Pentecostal meetings mainly—having begun my Christian experience in one of these churches. I do feel 'at home' in such assemblies. (3617)

For some the Charismatic experience has meant a deepening appreciation of their own particular traditions and therefore the need to leave their own congregations does not seem to arise. A minister writes,

I think I can say that the renewal in the Spirit has generally helped me to appreciate so much more the life and movements of the Church (Church of England) rather than the opposite. (5214)

Another says,

I am a Lutheran missionary. I am more a Lutheran than ever! I feel a bit awkward with 'classical Pentecostals'. (5224)

It may be significant that these two correspondents are ministers. But an ordinary member of a congregation says,

I belong to the Methodist Church. It (my experience) has not changed my affiliation but rather strengthened it. (453)

Individual preference and temperament enter this sphere also. For example, someone writes,

I have continued my Lutheran membership. Most comfortable in liturgical churches. (5231)

Another says,

I have felt that there was a safety (from abuse of the spiritual gifts) in the sacramental life of the church and it is here that the renewed awareness of the indwelling spirit has the most meaning for me. Church attendance, which was usually a pleasure has become a joy as an opportunity of praise and worship. I do feel particularly 'at home' in the local church's fellow-

ship and have in that fellowship had help and guidance in the life of the Spirit. (457)

Included among those who remain within their own congregations are those for whom their experience is one which separates them from fellow Christians and drives them into lonely isolation. A member of the Church of England writes,

I was C. of E. born and bred, but one becomes a loner in many ways as few people in or out of the church understand the ways of the Spirit. (1193)

The desire to share spiritual experiences with other Christians is very real. One Roman Catholic, a member of the Dominican Order, writes,

I do feel 'at home' in the Catholic community. Other members who have experienced the same thing have helped me to understand and evaluate my experience. However, it was difficult a few years ago when I found so few to share with. (5234)

Then there are the ones who stay reluctantly:

We work for the Methodist Church. The main leaders of the Charismatic movement plead with every one not to break away from their own church though it seems pleasant to worship in small groups of like-minded people. (190)

As its name implies, the Charismatic Movement is characterised by the receiving of spiritual gifts, and people's views of the use of these gifts help them to relate meaningfully to their own congregations and avoid misuse of the gifts. Those who hold the view that the gifts are primarily for the church and not for individuals only are inclined to maintain a positive relationship. A Roman Catholic in a religious community writes,

If the gifts are authentic, they will be used for building up the Kingdom, for the praise of Jesus as Lord. If they are a delusion, I trust the Christian community will be able to discern this. In other words, what builds the community is of the Spirit; what tears it apart cannot be. (5204)

Another who has remained in her own congregation writes,

I think the Gifts should be manifest in all churches as a Body ministry. I believe they were given to each church to build up the members. (5227)

Yet another says,

They are given to build up the Body of Christ in a particular place and also the individual members, not to hoard like a collector. For example, the gifts of healing are to be transmitted, a gift of knowledge can be kept as a treasure or even bruted about, instead of being prayed about and wisdom to use that knowledge being asked for. (3134)

The desire to remain within their own congregations presents some difficulties for those whose churches or pastors do not teach or accept the doctrine that there is an experience such as 'Baptism in the Spirit' subsequent to conversion and water baptism. A Baptist writes,

I am a member of a Baptist Church where I believe Christ wants me. I

am 'at home' with Christians who have received the Baptism because the fellowship through His Spirit is wonderful, especially in worship. In my church the Baptism is not accepted as a separate experience from rebirth, but, in love, my hopes and those of my brethren is that a revival will come to our church and many others; that many will receive the power of God to perfect His church, before His return. (5221)

The experience of a member of the Brethren Assembly is also interesting. He says,

The Open Brethren preach quite strongly against the charismatic or pentecostal manifestations. I saw many flaws in that line of preaching and investigated the subject thoroughly from a biblical point of view. At University I came across live pentecostals for the first time, and heard 'speaking in tongues' and other gifts used. However my investigation of scripture led me to the conclusion that speaking in tongues was not the 'necessary and sufficient condition' of the Baptism in the Holy Spirit, and knowing no one with similar views I felt very isolated.

Eventually I saw from Scripture that the Baptism in the Holy Spirit was correct, and somehow I knew that for me it would involve speaking in tongues, though not necessarily for everyone. I also knew somehow that the time was not right yet, and waited. One day, I knew the time was right; a neo-pentecostal from one of the established churches preached, and this somehow triggered this knowledge.

By this stage I had a regular time of devotions morning and evening by myself. That evening I was baptised in the spirit in the middle of that time.

The Open Brethren pattern of worship is free; in theory anyone led by the Spirit can stand and contribute. I had experienced in such meetings the urging of the Spirit many times. (3612)

Since it would be difficult to find any congregation in which all the members are agreed on every doctrinal issue and practice this is not a unique or insuperable difficulty, but the very manifestations of the Charismatic experience serve to exaggerate these differences.

Where such Christians have remained within their own congregations the charge of divisiveness is almost invariably levelled against them and, of course, the whole Charismatic Movement. While this may reflect to a large extent the prejudice of those who have not had the Charismatic experience rather than those who have, it is not without some foundation. A movement which is characterised by the gifts of prophecy, wisdom, knowledge, etc., may easily lead the possessor of these gifts to think he or she has superior knowledge. The result is often the formation of little cliques within congregations for seeking and exercising these gifts and is probably one of the most divisive aspects of the movement. The following extracts from one of our correspondents illustrate this clearly. She writes,

After receiving the Baptism of the Spirit I used to go to meetings and hear people prophesy and I also wanted to receive this gift, so a friend and myself used to meet sometimes in her home and just the two of us. We decided to speak out whatever thoughts came to us.

She believed she received the gift of prophecy, first with her friend, and then on her own. One of her prophecies,

Be still before me
In my name you will cast out demons and heal the sick,
Plentiful will be my supply for you,

led her to approach a woman whom she believed possessed an evil spirit with the intention of casting it out. She claimed she was told,

Begin with the Spiritual,
The forces of evil must be removed.
In my name they will come out
Then my child you must obey me.

Later she said that 'After further discussion she (the possessed woman) finally told us what the real problem was and we were able to sort it out. . . . We agreed to do this (i.e. cast out the spirit) one Sunday morning instead of going to Church'. After receiving the prophecy

The spiritual things belong to me
The counterfeits of Satan are no part of me
In my name you must cast out
The fear and the depression (562)

the attempt to cast out the spirit was made and the woman received the Baptism of the Holy Spirit and spoke in tongues.

This is one example which reflects the kind of individualism and use of spiritual gifts so often condemned, as the results can be disastrous and bring discredit to the Charismatic movement.

The above examples all represent people who, having had Charismatic experiences, have remained within their own congregations and have sought to incorporate their new experiences into the mainstream of life within the church. These attempts have had varying degrees of success. Where there exists a warm fellowship, and doctrinal teaching which actually encourages the seeking of a 'Baptism in the Spirit', the question of dividing a congregation or desiring to move out of it is not a vital issue. However, this is by no means the experience of all those who have had Charismatic experiences.

It would seem that the great majority of such people (with Charismatic experiences) who retain their membership of their own congregations seek fellowship in inter-denominational meetings and prayer groups. Quite a number of these groups have sprung up over the past few years. Someone writes,

I was brought up as a Roman Catholic, but have been having fellowship and attending services and Bible studies at the . . . church where I received the Baptism in the Holy Spirit. This is due in part to my change in beliefs and in part to my feeling the love of this group for me. (5203)

Another says,

I go to Church but largely from a sense of duty in this village and because I feel that it is faithless not to see that God can make dead bones live. Our

House group is an oasis in a dry and thirsty land. And where I lived before there was a Church that was a joy to go to because *we were* the Body of Christ and so worship made sense. Also I think God sends His Spirit to the Body as he did at Pentecost and He works through His body. When the Body doesn't exist His work is hampered and there isn't an outpouring of the Spirit. (871)

The question of worship adds another dimension to the problem of maintaining a real and lively relationship with a particular congregation. Those who seek fellowship elsewhere find justification in their view that worship should be in 'Spirit and in Truth' and this they say is unattainable if people are divided and suspicious of each other. Unity at the expense of true worship should not be valued above all else. Yet another says,

My own church has not accepted the 'baptism in the Holy Spirit' so I still only attend once on Sundays, but I have a Prayer Group at my own home and attend other meetings and conferences. (5218)

There are some who not only attach themselves to one fellowship group outside their own congregations but to several as is illustrated by one correspondent who says,

I belong to the Anglican church . . . and I try to go to the Parish Communion at 9.30. I go to the Assemblies of God church in the evening. I am what is called a 'silent witness' in my parish church, using opportunities to speak to people about a fuller life with Christ, when God puts them in my path. I feel very much 'at home' in prayer groups. I go to . . . (a prayer group) once a week, once to a Bible study group and to Divine Healing and Christian renewal meeting at the . . . once a fortnight—7 times in all not counting Sundays. (5215)

This is the kind of activity which accounts for the reservations some Christians have towards the movement. That there is an unquestionable zeal for religious experience and fellowship is obvious but the expression of it raises doubts as to their true value, and leads to the raising of such questions as: Do such fellowship groups with their emphasis on one kind of fellowship only, really lead to a deepening of the spiritual life, to a greater propagation of the Gospel, or to a heightening of social concern? Do they provide systematic teaching? Critics of the movement would say that they simply feed the emotions and not the mind. There is some evidence that doctrinal teaching means less to Christians in the Charismatic Movement. Of course, this is not a new charge as the same has been made against classical Pentecostalism (a movement with its distinctive teaching about baptism in the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues, which began at the turn of the century), but since the Charismatic Movement is taking place within the historic churches, the charge is a serious one. There seems good reason for believing this in view of such statements as this:

I belong to an Anglican community for convenience, managing not to be worried by the narrowness of outlook which still exists. I feel 'at home'

with people who look upon God as capable of being found by all men and women without attaching too much importance to theological dogma. (703)

Along with this attitude may go the conclusion that denominations are irrelevant as is demonstrated by the following statements:

I find denominations have no relevance at all when Spirit-filled Christians meet. (5201)

After being baptised in the Spirit, I was more open to the opinions of other Christians. It made me think more about my own Christian life and witness and to worship only in a Methodist Church which I had previously done no longer seemed important. It certainly broke down the barriers of denomination for me. Denominations is something which doesn't bother me at all these days. I only continue to attend this particular church because I believe that I should be attached to one for my own good and the good of others. (1674)

Another writes,

I believe that as a real Christian is one who has been 'born again' of God's spirit by repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, he or she shares in the bond of the Holy Spirit with others of the same experience, and denomination does not matter. (3617)

From such an attitude it is not surprising that some leave their own churches altogether. As one correspondent says,

Until 18 months ago I was a member of a Pentecostal church. I now know that denominations are divisive, and completely unscriptural and an abomination to God. I resigned my membership 18 months ago and I now refuse to be called anything but just a Christian, but I still worship with Pentecostals (no denomination)—people who love the Lord and we just meet together to worship Him. I prefer to meet with those who know the fullness and liberty of the Holy Spirit and where His gifts are operated. (946)

Another writes,

I was raised in a Presbyterian church. Now I am not a member of any denomination but I am a called-out Christian, belonging to the Church that God is calling out. (179)

Again,

I have left the orthodox Anglican Church to worship in the Fellowship. I retired at 61 on reduced pension to give my whole time to the Lord's work in the fellowship as an elder. (2161)

It is interesting to see what motivates these Christians to remain free from the restraints which they think denominations impose upon them. Someone writes,

I don't belong to any denomination. After I was baptised in the Spirit, I reached a point (about 5-6 months later) where I had to make a decision. This was to stay on in my Boys' Brigade company, and become an 'Officer' which would have obliged me to have become an active and committed member of the local evangelical C. of E. (which I was not at the time), or

whether to leave, and just go to the 'House' (the Fellowship) all the time, the Fellowship being a 'church' of about 100-150 'members', meetings on Sundays and in the week—not just a once-weekly bible study with 5 or 6 people. This I felt at the time to be the only real 'church' I'd ever seen, i.e. the only one with 'something real'. I knew I'd benefit tremendously from going there—though I still felt something of a spiritual 'shrimp' compared to all the other people there, whom I considered as absolute 'Paragons' because of what they had, the love and joy and peace which flowed out of them, which was just the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and the obvious (to my eyes at that time) 'rightness' of all the procedures etc. it being free from any formation whatsoever. And I knew that I was loved there, and that love flowed freely. My elder sister one day, who had herself, unlike me, been an active committed member of that church before leaving to go as a nurse to London, during which time she was baptised in the Spirit, said to me, 'Well, you know where you'll learn the most' or something like that, and that just about 'clinched' it for me. Now I have left the B.B. and become a committed member of the fellowship; there are no forms signed or anything, or entry by water-baptism—you're a member simply if you regard yourself as a member. The question of 'church loyalty' or 'why don't you stay and pass on to others what you've got' didn't enter into my considerations. (5213)

Once attachment to a particular congregation with the need for discipline and submission to one another, together with interpretations of the Charismatic experience in specifically Christian terms, is severed, there is no limit to the kinds of interpretation of Charismatic-like experiences which can be advanced. The line between a specifically Christian experience of the Spirit of God and a 'spiritual' experience is blurred as for example, is the case of one correspondent who writes,

Being an Astral traveller as far back as I can remember the Power of the Spirit was *within me*. We went to bed as usual, I to sleep. However, in my sleep I knew I was talking in a foreign language. When I woke up, I was still talking aloud. My husband was awake and I said to him, 'Whatever am I talking about?' His reply was, 'You have been talking aloud all night in a strange language, I have tried to fathom what language it was but could not recognise it at all.' My husband spoke several languages and had a smattering of far East ones but could not place the one I had been speaking. However, reading Acts 2 at the day of Pentecost, the Apostles were filled with the Holy Ghost and began to speak with other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.

Another who claims to be filled with the Spirit says,

Neither Bible or Church means anything to me. Mine is a private religion. The Church does not represent a down-to-earth awareness of what God is. Far too academic and pious. Mine is a simple religion for ordinary people. I am a member of the Fellowship of Meditation. (1297)

A member of the Baha'i faith writes,

The power of the Spirit is there for the asking. I was brought up as a Baptist. I became conscious of the power in faith, and since then I have begun to understand more about religious beliefs and I am even more

conscious of the power of the Holy Spirit. I think I have received many gifts of the Spirit.

Since becoming a Bahāi I have realised the importance of reading all Scriptures. I have understood the Bible much better than I did before. I have become less biased and now I realise that there is only one God. All the basic teachings that have been given to man are the same—it's only man that has put his own ideas around the faith that has made them different. (5232)

It is true, of course, that remaining within a particular congregation or church is no guarantee against having views which are inconsistent with one's outward profession. Someone who belongs to an Anglican community and regards church attendance as necessary and rewarding holds views which would be considered to be definitely syncretistic. She says,

I have received the 'laying on of hands'. This experience involved more a consciousness of external reality. It was like an electric charge, as though my nerves were the wires which received this charge; I remained thus 'charged', and as though vibrating, for an hour. I can still consciously repeat this feeling. Basically, my belief is that God is manifested in many religions. My particular leanings towards God seemed to be amplified considerably by a study of Yoga and the Hindu-Christian way of thought as exemplified by Paramanansa Yogananda. My Christianity has been strengthened, but I am not an 'exclusive' Christian. I once prayed fervently in tongues when in despair. Since then I sometimes pray in tongues in joy, adoration and wonder. My study of Self-Realization Fellowship lessons over the past ten years have led me to try to cultivate a state of mind known as 'Christ Consciousness'. It seems to me that this state, and that of being 'in the Spirit' are one and the same. Some of the Bible is a deepening source of inspiration, as also is the Bhagavad Gita (but I still think the Bible, being compiled by fallible human beings, has its 'fallible' parts. Development of Spiritual intuition seems to enable a person to recognize what is the word of God in the Scriptures). (703)

Such ideas could not however be said to be typical of people who have had Charismatic experiences and remained within their congregations, and should not obscure the real possibility of consistent teaching which can be available.

The Charismatic movement is an essentially Christian phenomenon, and for it to remain so the necessity for Christians who have had Charismatic experiences to remain firmly rooted in some strongly Christian tradition is crucial. The need for sharing Charismatic experiences is very real and fellowship groups seem to be meeting it, but it must be seen that the resultant fellowship is at one level only, and despite the tensions created in congregations these would seem to be the place where this need can be satisfied at a much deeper level. Further, the possibilities for constructive witnessing are opened up as in the case described by one who writes,

My family and I live in community (not communally) where all our

money is paid into the general fund and whatever we need we ask for. This enables us to support 7 full-time workers in the parish in addition to our clergy. We are a big congregation with many problems in our parish and we need many people to help with these. Of course many members of the Body work in the parish in their spare time or perhaps I should say they work in the parish and do their housework in their spare time in the case of housewives, and that the men who work only do so that we may live, and that their work for the Lord goes on in their places of work and also when they come home. Caring for one's own family is also considered to be a large part of the Lord's work to husbands and wives. (3134)

The leaders of the Charismatic Movement seem to recognise this; hence their exhortation to Christians to remain in their congregations. Their attitude is based upon the fact that they see the movement mainly as a unifying rather than a divisive one. Kevin Ranaghan writes,

I was flooded again by the realisation that through the charismatic renewal which we are experiencing, God is healing breaches and wounds in the body of Christ where they have never been healed before. Walls of separation long dividing people equally loved by Christ and truly dedicated to him are beginning now by the action of the Spirit to crumble.⁴

Michael Harper says,

But I believe the bold claim can be made, and sustained by the facts, that this particular movement is characteristically *unifying* rather than divisive, sometimes dramatically so. In fact, it is no exaggeration to claim that this movement is the most unifying in Christendom today.⁷

Or again by Dennis Bennet who writes,

The Holy Spirit today is reaching into the structures that man has set up, ignoring our labels, and touching and empowering those who are receptive.⁸

Though these views may represent an exaggeration of the present situation, time alone will tell whether their claims are prophetic.

¹ Kevin Ranaghan, *As the Spirit Leads Us*, pp. 128-129.

² Simon Tugwell, *Did you receive the Spirit*, p. 100.

³ Michael Harper, *None Can Guess*, p. 146.

⁴ Dick Wallace, *Charismatic Renewal No. IV*.

⁵ Donald Bridge and David Phipers, *Spiritual Gifts and the Church*, p. 153.

⁶ Kevin Ranaghan, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

⁷ Michael Harper, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

⁸ Dennis Bennet, *Nine o'clock in the Morning*, p. 203.