
The Charismatic Movement

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The last few years have witnessed the rise and extension of a Pentecostal-type movement of spiritual renewal whose magnitude perhaps exceeds that of any other movement of this nature in the history of the church since the first century. It differs considerably from traditional Pentecostalism in regard to its historical background. It has appeared in some of the old historic denominations and, instead of forming a separate denomination, usually participates in the "ecumenism" associated with these denominations. It does not have an established theology, but emphasizes the baptism and the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

It is oriented rather toward the practical side of the Christian life; its primary function is the promotion of a profound sense of the presence of God in a person's life and the possession of supernatural gifts for the edification of the church.

To those who form part of this movement, it is nothing less than a return to primitive Christianity, an awakening of the people of God by means of which God is preparing them for the return of Christ in these "last days," a reformation of the church at a time in which she is being choked by institutionalism. To others, it is a psychological phenomenon easily explicable in the light of the tensions under which man lives in the modern world. To still others it is a work of satanic origin which ought to be dug out at the roots before it attains larger proportions. The purpose of this paper is not to pass judgment on this "charismatic movement" as such. It is, rather, to suggest certain points that merit the consideration of every thinking Christian in the face of the problem created by "charismatic" teaching and experience.

THE SPIRIT AND THE WORD

An initial consideration is that *God is sovereign*. His Spirit, like the wind, "blows where it wills" (John 3:7). We cannot therefore, decide *a priori* that the "charismatic experiences" to which some brethren testify cannot be of God. The idea that these experiences cannot occur in our day because they were given exclusively for the apostolic era is based on a false interpretation of I Corinthians 13:8. Paul refers here to the cessation of "tongues" and other gifts "when the perfect comes" (v. 10), that is, at the end of time, when Christ returns. We have to recognize at least the possibility that

God is working in an unusual way in the lives of some of his children. To attack them because we see in them a threat to our doctrinal or ecclesiastical systems is to expose ourselves to the danger of fighting against God or even committing the "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit" to which Jesus referred (Matt. 12:31-32). The least we can do is to adopt the attitude of Gamaliel expressed to those who were persecuting the Christians: "Keep away from these men and let them alone; for if this plan or this undertaking is of men, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!" (Acts 5:38-39).

On the other hand, *the Word of God, and not our personal spiritual experiences, ought to be our criterion for distinguishing between truth and error.* Even though it is true that experience illuminates our understanding of the Scripture, we are not free from making mistakes. For this reason we have to subject ourselves to the judgment of the Word of God. The importance of an objective basis is seen essentially in considering various factors.

In the first place, charismatic phenomena, such as tongues, do not occur exclusively within a Christian context, but also appear in connection with certain pagan cults. Already in the first century they were present in the Hellenistic mystery religions, especially in the cult of Pythis of Delphos and in the Sibylline cult.² It was for this reason that the Apostle Paul dedicated several chapters in his letters (cf. 1 Corinthians 12 to 14) to deal with the subject and to establish certain basic principles that would enable Christians to distinguish between that which was genuine and that which was not, and which would prevent them from placing the most spectacular gift, tongues, above the other gifts or above

love. In our days there is a "charismatic" revival in various religions (e.g., in spiritism, among the Mormons, in the "Jamaica cult"). There is, then, a basis for the conclusion that charismatic manifestations are not *necessarily* the work of the Holy Spirit.

Furthermore, it is always possible to manipulate a person by means of human techniques to produce in him a psychological phenomenon that appears supernatural, even to the person who undergoes the experience. Unfortunately, there are people in the charismatic movement who are developing techniques to achieve the experience of "tongues" by means of the conscious repetition of meaningless phrases. There is no evidence that the Christians in the primitive church had to resort to such methods. Such an experience, induced by man, has no more value than that of a simple physical exercise, with the tremendous disadvantage that it will be interpreted as the work of the Spirit.

Finally, in many cases the end product of this charismatic emphasis has been harmful to the church, because spiritual pride has entered and the church has forgotten the "more excellent way," that of love (1 Cor. 12:31, 13:13). We must remember that tongues and other gifts are not the sign of spiritual maturity; the Corinthians possessed all the gifts (1 Cor. 1:7), but they were "carnal" (1 Cor. 3:3) and very much divided (1 Cor. 3:4 ff.).

These observations, however, must not serve as a basis to *deny* the genuineness of all "charismatic" experiences. In the face of this experience, at most we may *ask* ourselves if it is of God and evaluate it in the light of his Word. The New Testament exhortation is that we should "test the spirits to see whether they are of God," taking as our starting point the apostolic teaching (1 John 4:1). The

reference here is to different teachings concerning Jesus Christ, but the principle of examining everything in the light of the teaching of the apostles is applicable to other areas of Christian doctrine and experience. The Christian attitude toward brethren who have had a "charismatic" experience should be neither that of open rejection, based on our prejudices, nor that of blind acceptance. If, in spite of all the possible falsifications and apparently harmful consequences, the charismatic movement is really the work of God, we ought to participate in it. If it is not, we ought to help other Christians who have been confused by it. If there exists a wrong emphasis from the biblical point of view, we must correct it in love, taking into account that, as John Wesley wrote, "the shadow is no disparagement of the substance, nor the counterfeit of the real diamond."

THE BAPTISM OF THE SPIRIT

The Christian life is impossible apart from the action of the Holy Spirit. He is the one who convinces us of our need of God (John 16:8-11) and leads us to confess Jesus Christ as Lord (1 Cor. 12:3). Those who do not have the Spirit are not sons of God (Rom. 8:9, 14). In the New Testament it is taken for granted that the Spirit of God is in *all* believers (Rom. 5:5; 1 Thess. 4:8; 2 Cor. 1:22, 5:5; 1 John 2:20, 27, 3:24, 4:13, etc.). This is said even of Christians who left much to be desired in regard to Christian living, such as the Corinthians (1 Cor. 3:16; cf. 6:19). It is for this reason that the apostles never exhorted believers to *be baptized* in the Holy Spirit, but rather not to grieve him (Eph. 4:30-31), nor to quench him (1 Thess. 5:19); to be *continually filled* with him (Eph. 5:18—

the present tense of the verb indicates that this is considered as a process) and to live according to his dictates (Gal. 5:16).

The believer receives the Holy Spirit by faith, when he begins the Christian life (Gal. 3:2, 14). This faith, alone, establishes a new relation between man and God (John 3:16,36; Acts 16:31; Rom. 3:21-31, 4:1-2; Eph. 2:8, etc.); but in the New Testament this faith is closely linked with baptism (Acts 2:38; Gal. 3:26f).³ It is for this reason that the Apostle Paul refers to Christians' entering into the church as baptism "by one Spirit" (better "with one Spirit" or "in one Spirit") by means of which *all* believers are made members of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13). The expression "baptized by one Spirit" indicates an initiatory act, concomitant with conversion and regeneration, performed by God in the life of the man who puts his confidence in Jesus Christ. The Spirit is the element *in* (or *with*) which every believer, without exception, is baptized. This is what gives significance to *Christian* baptism, the baptism of the new age; it is what distinguishes it from the "baptism of John," which went before: "I baptize you with water; but he who is mightier than I is coming . . . He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Luke 3:16). Without this baptism in the Spirit, no one is a member of the body of Christ. This is the act by means of which believers have been united to form one body (*eis en soma*). Consequently, we cannot classify believers as *Christians-who-have-been-baptized-by-the-Holy-Spirit* and *Christian-who-have-not-been-baptized-by-the-Spirit* and continue to consider them all equally members of the body of Christ. The "one body" (*en soma*), as the preposition *eis* indicates, is the result of the baptism of the Spirit, in which all members share.⁴

The “charismatic” theologian Howard M. Ervin⁵ maintains that the expression “all were made to drink of one Spirit” in 1 Cor. 12:13b should be interpreted in the sense of an operation distinct from that referred to in the preceding phrase (“by one Spirit we were all baptized”). According to him, Paul used the expression “baptized in the Spirit” to refer to the new birth, but this ought not to lead us to hold that “therefore, every believer’s experience of he ‘new birth’ is tantamount to a Pentecostal endowment with the Spirit” (p. 47). This endowment, Ervin says, is an experience subsequent to the new birth, and it is to this experience that the Apostle refers when he writes of “drinking of one Spirit”; to this experience likewise Luke refers in Acts 2:1-4, 8:4ff., 10:44 and 19:1-6. The answer is that, even if it is admitted that 1 Cor. 12:13 describes two distinct operations (which is probable), there is no basis for saying that the two are separable in Christian experience. Both “by one Spirit we were all baptized” (*en pneumatibaptisthemen*) and “all were made to drink of one Spirit” (*en pneuma epotisthemen*) mark the beginning of the Christian life. The first phrase places emphasis on the Spirit as the element in which believers have been immersed; the second, on the Spirit as the element that has filled believers. And the repetition of “all” (*pantes*) leaves no room to doubt that according to the Apostle *both operations include all believers*. There is absolutely no basis for the theory that the first phrase refers to an experience of all believers while the second refers to another subsequent experience, true only of a select group. The whole twelfth chapter of 1 Corinthians places emphasis on the fact that, in spite of differences of function among believers in the church, they all form just one body, the

body of Christ, because all have been the object of the work of the same Spirit. Any interpretation that presents the idea of a hierarchy of believers on the basis of spiritual experience does violence to the teaching of the Apostle.

The interpretation of the baptism of the Holy Spirit according to which it is always an *initiatory act* concomitant (although not identical) with conversion and regeneration is the one that best does justice to the pertinent texts.⁶ Likewise, it is in accord with the meaning of baptism as a rite of initiation, not only for Christians but also for John the Baptist and official Judaism of New Testament times.⁷ It demands, at least, that we not dogmatize on the baptism of the Holy Spirit as a subsequent experience, necessary for a Christian life that is fuller than would be possible without this experience. It should be added, however, that even though the term “baptism of the Spirit” is not accepted for a certain “charismatic experience,” this in itself does not mean that the experience itself is necessarily invalid.

One thing that cannot be proved from the Bible is that tongues or some other similar charismatic manifestation should be the indispensable sign of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Although it is true that on three occasions in the history of the primitive church the baptism of the Spirit was accompanied by this type of signs (Acts 2:1-13, 10:44-48, 19:1-7, to which Acts 8:12-17 could be added, although here nothing is explicitly stated concerning such signs), we cannot deduce from this that God necessarily has always acted or will always act in this way. In the New Testament nothing is said about this type of manifestation in relation to the baptism of Jesus Christ (Luke 3:21-22), to mention only one important example in which there is a specific reference to the Holy Spirit. In

effect, there is no evidence that Jesus Christ ever spoke in tongues. We can be in agreement with the “charismatic Christians” (described thus by one of themselves) that “it is axiomatic . . . that *the baptism in the Holy Spirit* did not stop with Pentecost nor even at the end of the apostolic era” and that “it is the birthright of every Christian, and represents the biblical standard of the Spirit-filled life.”⁸ But the biblical data do not give us a basis to conclude that only those who have had a “charismatic experience” have been really baptized in the Spirit.

Whether or not we admit that the baptism of the Holy Spirit is concomitant with conversion and regeneration, we must understand that the *Christian life does not depend on one experience that we may have at a certain moment, once for all, but on a continual appropriation of all that God has bestowed on us in Jesus Christ*. In the New Testament we are not exhorted to be baptized in the Spirit, but we are exhorted to remain united to Jesus Christ (John 15:4). “If any one thirst,” invites the Lord, “let him come to me and drink.” The present tense of these verbs indicates that there is a continual thirsting, a continual coming and a continual drinking. And the promise is “he who believes in me, as the scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.’” The Gospel writer clarifies that “this he said about the Spirit, which those who believed in him were to receive” (John 7: 38-39). Here again, it is a continual believing—a faith by means of which the followers of Jesus Christ take possession of the gift of the Spirit and are transformed into springs of blessing in a world that is thirsting for God. This is all the “secret” of the Christian life—a continual desire for God, a continual coming to Jesus Christ in whom God has

given us all things, a continual drinking of his Spirit, a continual receiving of his fullness which transforms us into a river of life. In this way we fulfill Paul’s exhortation, “Be continually filled with the Spirit.” The present imperative of the verb (*plerousthe*) indicates that this is not a once-for-all experience, but rather a process through which the Holy Spirit increasingly permeates the personality of the Christian. “The practical implication is that the Christian is to leave his life open to be filled constantly and repeatedly by the divine Spirit.”⁹

THE GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT

Paul says that “to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Cor. 12:7).

There is no doubt left as to who takes the initiative so that the church is fully provided with the abilities necessary to carry out her ministry: it is God who gives. Although the original does not explicitly mention the subject of the verb, it may well be provided on the basis of Paul’s emphasis that all gifts, in spite of their variety, originate in the same God (1 Cor. 12:4-6). God is sovereign and through his Spirit he distributes the different gifts “to each one individually as he wills” (1 Cor. 12:11). Consequently, no one can boast that he has this or that gift. All pride disappears when we admit that all that we have we have received from God. Paul’s exhortation in another context is appropriate here: “For who sees anything different in you? What have you that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?” (1 Cor. 4:7).

From the standpoint of the Bible, *every believer* is “charismatic,” not be-

cause he may have had a certain experience subsequent to regeneration, but because he has received some ability with which he can serve the Lord. We can, therefore, speak of a *universality* of gifts, of a general distribution of charismatic gifts that does not exclude even the most insignificant (humanly speaking) of the members of the body of Christ.

The gifts are as varied as the action of the Spirit. Not all the gifts are of a mystic variety, extraordinary. As the Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner observes, "That which is charismatic in the church and her history does not mean, or means only very occasionally, something which from the point of view of secular history would be singled out by big headlines."¹⁰ Evidently, it was because the Corinthians were bent on searching for the spectacular that the Apostle Paul made a hierarchy of the gifts and placed "strange tongues" and their interpretation at the bottom of the list (1 Cor. 12:8-10, 27-30). Far from expecting that all should speak in tongues, he holds that this is a gift of very secondary value, inferior, for example, to those of teaching, helps or administration. He does not deny their possibility nor prohibit their use; furthermore, he states that he himself speaks in tongues more than his readers (1 Cor. 14:18). Nevertheless, he appeals to his apostolic authority in order to limit the use of tongues in the congregation (1 Cor. 14:37). "God is not a God of confusion but of peace" (1 Cor. 14:33). Therefore, all confusion is excluded; in the meetings, if there is speaking in tongues, not more than two or three should be permitted to participate, and this in order and only if there is someone who interprets (1 Cor. 14:27). If there is no one to interpret, there is no place for the use of tongues in the

church; it is preferable to speak five words that can be understood than ten thousand that are not understood (1 Cor. 14:19). Under these conditions tongues benefit the person who speaks—they serve for his edification (1 Cor. 14:4). For the assembly, though, they are unintelligible, like an instrument that gives a confused sound (1 Cor. 14:1-14). The one who insists on speaking in tongues in public without an interpreter shows by this his spiritual immaturity (1 Cor. 14:20); he ought to keep silent in the assembly and speak "to himself and to God" (1 Cor. 14:28). Within the limits outlined by the Apostle in order to maintain "decency and order" (1 Cor. 14:40), those who have received the gift of tongues ought not be kept from using it in meetings for the edification of all the congregation (1 Cor. 14:39). That which is fitting to the worship of God is neither capricious enthusiasm that destroys all order nor legalism that fossilizes the work of the Spirit, but rather order within the freedom of the Spirit.

In the light of Paul's thorough-going denial that all believers possess all the gifts (1 Cor. 12:29-30) it is difficult to see on what those in the charismatic movement who hold that speaking in tongues is the "external and irrefutable proof" of the baptism of the Spirit base their concept.¹¹ To do this they usually differentiate between tongues *as a sign* ("Pentecostal tongues") and tongues *as a gift*. This, however, is an arbitrary distinction. In fact, it is not even accepted by all within the movement.

One word serves to define the purpose of the gifts—*sumpheron* (benefit). Paul does not oppose believers' desiring the possession of gifts. On the contrary, he exhorts them to seek to receive the better spiritual gifts, "especially that of giving messages (prophecy)" from God

(1 Cor. 12:31, 14:1). But he warns them that this must be for "the growth of the church" (1 Cor. 14:12; cf. 14:26). This must be the determining factor in the search for and the exercise of the abilities that God gives to every one according to his will. Commenting on this, one representative of the "charismatic movement" writes: "Everything we are given must be accepted with this understanding if we are to avoid forming little cliques or 'elite' who see themselves as separate from the rest of the church. The church's weakness and her strengths are ours: ours and hers."¹²

THE MORE EXCELLENT WAY

Whatever may be our attitude in regard to the baptism and the gifts of the Spirit, the biblical perspective demands that we place love above every charismatic experience. *This* is the "still more excellent way" in an absolute sense (1 Cor. 12:31-14:13). Compared with it, says the Apostle Paul, even the most spectacular gifts have no value. The life of the church is manifested in faith, hope and love, and of all these manifestations of the presence of the Spirit, the greatest is love. This, and none of the gifts mentioned in 1 Cor. 12, however valid it may be, is the indispensable mark of the Christian. "By *this* it may be seen who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not do right is not of God, nor he who does not love his brother. For this is the message which you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another... We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love remains in death" (1 John 3:10, 11, 14). This holds true even though a person may speak in tongues or be able to tes-

tify to some other charismatic manifestation. Jesus Christ said, "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). To say that *the* mark of the disciple of Jesus Christ is speaking in "strange tongues" is to twist the Lord's teaching and promote the reproduction of the situation that led the Corinthians to seek the more spectacular gifts and abandon the more excellent way. From all that we know from his writings, we can state without fear of being mistaken that if Paul today were questioned as to how it is possible to know if a person has been baptized by the Spirit his answer would agree with what he wrote in Galatians 5:22-23: "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, self-control."

Where there is love, there is respect for the spiritual experience of another Christian. We accept him as he is, without considering him less spiritual if he has not had the same experience we have had. We respect the wise counsel of a man of God, Oswald Chambers, who says, "Never turn your experience into a principle; let God be as original with others as he is with you." This is the basis for mutual understanding between brethren in the faith—accepting one another in the liberty with which Christ has set us free.

FOOTNOTES

¹ On this topic we recommend the article by Bernard Ramm, "Hand in Hand," *HIS*, November 1965.

² Cf. bibliography in Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. I (Grand Rapids, 1964), p. 719.

³ "Baptism and faith are but the outside and the inside of the same thing," says James Denney in *The Death of Christ*, 4th, ed. (London, 1903), p. 185. Cf. G.R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism Today and Tomorrow* (London, 1966), pp. 13ff.

⁴ On 1 Cor. 12:13, Beasley-Murray writes: "The saying is of double interest, in that it implies that to be baptized in water is to be baptized in the Spirit; it is to share in the outpouring of the Spirit that the church knew at Pentecost, and to be so baptized is to be incorporated into that church." (op. cit., pp. 29f.)

⁵ *These Are Not Drunken as Ye Suppose* (Plainfield, 1968), pp. 40ff.

⁶ Cf. John Stott, *The Baptism and Fullness of the Spirit* (London, 1965), for a discussion of the Acts texts.

⁷ Cf. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. I, pp. 535ff.

⁸ Howard M. Ervin, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

⁹ Francis Foulkes, *The Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians* (London, 1963), p. 152. Cf. Stott, *op. cit.*, for an excellent exegesis of Eph. 5:18.

¹⁰ *Lo Dinámico en la Iglesia* (Barcelona, 1963), p. 69.

¹¹ Ervin, *op. cit.*, pp. 105 *et passim*.

¹² John L. Sherrill, *They Speak with Other Tongues* (New Jersey: Old Tappan, 1964), p. 136.

