

## THE CHARISMATIC MOVEMENT (1974)

### 1. Terms of reference

'In view of the great interest throughout the Church in the Charismatic Movement, Conference asks the Faith and Order Committee for guidance regarding the experiences and insights involved, in the light of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit'

(Conference 1973 *Daily Record* pp. 32, 68).

### 2. Limitations

The task set by Conference is a difficult one. The Charismatic Movement itself spreads across all the major Christian denominations, though with variations in each. It is not classical Pentecostalism and yet it has much in common with it. Those who claim the 'charismatic experience' do not as a result abandon more generally held traditional beliefs about the Holy Spirit, nor do they seek a different church structure or denominational allegiance. They readily admit that the experience itself has the character of a pilgrimage and is therefore not easily definable in a static way. In any case the attempt to discover the boundaries and the exact nature of a personal experience is in itself a difficult task.

Two further difficulties must be noted at this point. The first is that a full scale examination of the biblical bases of the 'charismatic experience' would require much more time and a much fuller report than is possible here. The Committee has therefore limited itself to a few of the more obvious topics in this connection. The other difficulty is that the charismatic experience and teaching exist along-side more usual Christian experience and teaching, but also draw into their orbit certain aspects of the latter which the 'charismatic experience' highlights differently for different people. Thus some descriptions are close to 'second blessing' teaching, others to 'assurance' and so on. Discovering with exactness what is the precise differentia of the Charismatic Movement is perhaps the most difficult task of all because of this.

In facing this task the Committee has been greatly assisted by leaders of the Charismatic Movement in Methodism, whose co-operativeness, frankness and concern to avoid divisiveness were most helpful.

### 3. Positive Contributions

(a) One striking characteristic of this Movement is the way in which genuine Christian qualities are sought and enjoyed – qualities such as joyful engagement in living, inner peacefulness of personality, a sense of being empowered to obey God's will. And such experience is characterised not as 'a grim striving to achieve', but 'a patient acceptance of the Spirit's influence.' Arising from this is the significant factor that the Movement focuses attention on the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, not in order to complete a specific theological system, but out of necessity to formulate a theological framework adequate to the experienced reality of Christian faith.

(b) Closely linked to this is the concept of rediscovering the extraordinary gifts of the Spirit – such as speaking with tongues, interpretation and prophecy – and learning to treat them as ordinary, or at least normal, within the Christian community. At best this is more than 'gift seeking' for it enlarges one's vision to see that all of life

is gift. We were glad to have charismatic leaders affirming that their list of gifts did not have any fixed order of priority, and that gifts like ministry, celibacy, martyrdom were also included. The stress upon what are viewed as extraordinary gifts is attributed to their previous neglect by the church at large.

(c) In particular the Movement is leading to renewed interest, and encouraging a new confidence, in the areas of healing and personal devotional life. Against a cultural background that includes excessive rationalism, secularism and scepticism the charismatic emphasis has enabled many to discover hope and liberation in these elements of Christian living.

(d) The nature of the Spirit's giving of gifts includes a double view within the Movement. On the one side the actual *giving* of gifts is envisaged, the receipt by the believer of abilities hitherto not possessed. But on the other side there is concentration upon the Spirit *releasing* and directing gifts already possessed but virtually unused. Here again there is a welcome emphasis upon the potential of the whole of one's life under the Spirit's control.

(e) Nor is this a purely individualistic experience. There is a strong corporate sense which finds expression in group fellowship and in worship. In the former there is emphasis upon the ministry exercised within the group to its members. In the latter there is the inter-dependence of those with various gifts; the speaker in tongues and the interpreter for example, or the prophet and the group testing the prophecy. There is also a freedom and spontaneity which enables full congregational participation; the involvement of the whole man; the evolution of spontaneous group preaching and the removal of unhealthy rigidity in distinguishing between laity and ordained ministry. And there is a new experience in ecumenism afforded by this Movement, a joyous unity in the Spirit and in shared experience.

(f) A positive attitude to those outside the Church is also observable. Many in the Charismatic Movement testify to a new-found freedom to speak about their faith, partly because their love and concern for others has been deepened by their spiritual experience. And there is evidence of a broader concept of responsibility to the world as the gifts of the Spirit for service outside the Church are increasingly recognised and exercised.

(g) Perhaps most striking of all is the repeated emphasis upon the Movement as essentially a 'Jesus' movement. Although there is stress upon the work of the Spirit, in both the individual and the group, His supreme role is seen as 'glorifying Jesus'. A greater love for and obedience to Christ figures constantly in charismatic testimonies. The primacy of intimate personal experience of the Lord, with evidences, is seen as central to the Holy Spirit's work in the believer, and much of the liberation and growth experienced within the Movement is based upon this single foundation.

#### **4. Causes for Concern**

We were (mercifully) not called upon to pass judgement upon the Movement. It seems right, however, that part of the 'guidance' called for by Conference should include some comment about aspects of the Movement which require further clarification or safeguards against abuse.

(a) It is doubtful whether 'Baptism in the Spirit' is the most appropriate phrase to describe the charismatic experience. In its favour there is the impression of a decisive and powerful happening, which is what the charismatic wishes to communicate by the phrase. Also, in the true verbal form 'baptize in the Holy Spirit', it occurs in the New

Testament. The debate, however, revolves around the exact application of these New Testament passages, which have normally been taken to refer to the initial entry into Christianity. The use of the phrase 'Baptism in the Spirit' to describe a later Christian experience thus causes confusion in many minds about its relationship to the liturgical act of water-baptism and the psychological experiences of conversion. An expression like 'the fulness of the Spirit' might be more accurate, so long as there was a proper balance between the context of *an event* in Acts, and *a process* in Pauline teaching about the Spirit in the believer. Here we note that various forms of theological interpretation of the work of the Holy Spirit are present alongside each other in the New Testament.

(b) There is constant danger that a movement emphasising the more exhilarating gifts of the Spirit might unintentionally create a devaluation of more ordinary gifts, such as 'administration', or lay too much stress upon any particular gift, such as 'tongues'. In fairness it must be noted that the leaders interviewed were aware of both dangers and sought to guard against them. Ministers who filled in a recent questionnaire also showed great balance in this matter. Nevertheless, the danger is inherent in this kind of emphasis and ought at least to be noted. In particular we would stress the importance of the use of the gift, rather than the emotional experience of receiving it.

(c) There is need of further study of the sociological and psychological factors involved in the experience, factors which operate in other 'charismatic' experiences both Christian and non-Christian; so that the precise differentia of the Movement, and the distinctiveness claimed for the 'baptism in the Spirit', may be more clearly identified.

(d) Where a person feels that a gift, previously exercised, has been lost, we advise caution about teaching or pastoral care which suggests that God has removed it.

(e) It should be made clear that this one Christian experience is not the clue to the solution of all problems in the Christian life. Some Christians face difficulties with psychological and sociological roots, requiring more than a spiritual experience for their resolving. It should also be emphasised that some Christians find other routes to an equally mature, satisfying and spiritual Christian experience, manifesting gifts of the Spirit without being able to testify to the particular pattern outlined within the Movement. Again, leaders were quick to take these points. Our plea is for the spread of such teaching throughout the Movement.

(f) While it is true – and the Charismatic Movement has underlined the fact – that Christianity is greatly impoverished when the rational element is stressed at the expense of the emotional and the volitional; it is equally important to guard against any danger of irrationality, with the consequent devaluing of the mind in Christian experience, since for many Christians reason is the supreme tool for discerning the Spirit. Such safeguards are particularly necessary in a Movement in which the extraordinary and the unusual receive emphasis.

At times, it must be repeated, some of those deeply involved in the Movement – including those we interviewed – have expressed their concern about some of these matters. They are listed here as part of the attempt to establish a balanced view of the total phenomenon and to show proper care for those who benefit from the 'charismatic experience'.

## 5. Guidance

(a) We recommend that this Movement be allowed the freedom to be itself within the life of our Church, and to continue to share its insights with those who wish to receive them. We offer the comments above as guidelines to be noted, not rules to be obeyed.

(b) We welcome the renewed emphasis upon the individual and corporate experience of the Holy Spirit, including those aspects of the experience highlighted by the Charismatic Movement, so long as they are not held to be universally obligatory, exclusive of or superior to other Christian insights.

(c) We wish to encourage those involved in the Charismatic Movement as they continue to explore the theological and biblical – as well as the psychological and sociological – bases of their experience and teaching. We would presume to advise, however, that they avoid the snare of stultifying the joyful experience they know in the interests of a watertight apologia for their position.

(d) We urge that all Methodists, whatever their experience of the Holy Spirit, show tolerance in seeking to understand the claims and experiences of others. In particular we would hope to avoid the splitting of societies over this issue, or the creating of a 'second-class Christian' outlook *in either direction*.

The Spirit blows where He wills. We express the hope that none of us will oppose His doing so, and equally that none will claim a monopoly of His presence.

*(Agenda 1974, pp. 267-71)*