

# THE CHARISMATIC EXPERIENCE

By PETER HOCKEN

VIGOROUS PRAISE of God, proclamation of the Lordship of Jesus Christ, praying with confident faith for the healing of the sick, preaching with power, being corrected by a brother in the Lord, speaking in tongues, arranging chairs for a prayer meeting, regular reading of the scriptures, confessing sin, accepting the Lord's forgiveness, speaking to others of what Jesus has done in your life, hearing God's word in prophecy, regular prayer with Christians of other Churches . . . all these and more are part of the charismatic experience.

This refusal to classify the charismatic experience as a distinctive type of euphoric religious occurrence, whether ephemeral or recurring in its incidence, is not an evasion of the topic but a necessary preliminary to any responsible discussion of what is being experienced today in the charismatic renewal. Whilst there are features and phenomena which are regarded as distinctive of this renewal, there is no single experience which can be selected from the lives of charismatics<sup>1</sup> and labelled 'the charismatic experience'. Only a perspective which takes seriously their whole experience as disciples of Jesus can do justice to the corporate experience in prayer groups and covenant communities that is evidently a significant element in the contemporary charismatic movement.

## *Elements within charismatic experience*

This analysis begins with the experience of God, for I believe that all movements of real spiritual renewal see the experience of God as the basis for renewal in all other aspects of christian living. Testimonies to conversion and spiritual renewal combine details of how Jesus is being experienced as Lord and as Saviour with accounts of deep changes in the lives of the witnesses – changes of motivation, of life-direction, of attitude, in self-image and in

---

<sup>1</sup> I am not fond of this term in its noun-form (it is more justifiable as an adjective), but I use it, sparingly I hope, to minimize clumsy circumlocutions.

relationships – resulting from their encounter with Jesus the Lord.<sup>2</sup> A number of elements recur in these testimonies:

Experience of salvation and deliverance through calling on Jesus as Saviour: e.g., being freed from sin and sinful habit patterns to experience freedom from previously dominant inner urges and from a powerlessness in the face of temptation, praise of God, a simple rejoicing in God and in his mighty works, often a flow of worship released within, echoing the experience of the psalmist, who cried, 'I will praise the Lord as long as I live' (Ps 146, 2)

being prompted to pray, to read scripture, to speak to particular people, with the resulting blessings increasing faith in the leading of the Holy Spirit

awareness of acceptance by a loving Father, bringing a new and positive self-image of being a son of God and a temple of the Holy Spirit

desire to read the scriptures, leading to the word of God becoming a vital part of personal spiritual nourishment, new power in preaching, and an awareness of God's initiative in ministry

wholeness of response to God, not just activity of the mind or naked acts of will, but the submission and yielding of the whole person to the Lord Jesus, expressed in worship, 'all that is within me, bless his holy name' (Ps 103, 1)

discovery of God's particular will – for me and for others – that can be recognized and discerned as we seek out his voice.

Common to all these features is a major heightening in faith-expectation, which vastly expands what is personally understood by saying 'Jesus is Lord'. Proclaimed in preaching, socially supported and mediated in charismatic gatherings, this faith in Jesus as living Lord today is absolutely central to the charismatic renewal, so that Jesus is experienced as the one who works, heals, saves, changes lives today.<sup>3</sup> The obverse element in this experience is to know ourselves as instruments, as those who save in a limited and derivative sense, cannot heal, save, change lives.

Those Christians who, for whatever reason, are not sympathetic to the charismatic renewal, often dismiss the charismatic experience as mere emotionalism, and regard charismatic gatherings as occasions geared to exploitation of the emotionally immature. For

<sup>2</sup> Cf among recent collections of testimonies: *New wine, new skins* (ed Ralph Martin, New York, 1976); *Come and See* (ed James Manney and Louise Bourassa, Ann Arbor, 1976).

<sup>3</sup> This is a dimension of Jesus Christ that is barely discernible in Hans Küng's *On being a Christian* (London/New York, 1976).

this reason it is important to emphasize that the experiences mentioned are not 'merely emotional', though they have an emotional component – as do negative reactions to the charismatic renewal. There is a wide range of emotional tone and mood in charismatic testimonies, and none of the features listed are tied to any one pattern of emotional response or mood. There is a danger that inexperienced people simply equate their feelings of the moment with the leading of the Holy Spirit; but this can only happen when God is believed to be at work. And it is within the movement that some of the most helpful (certainly the most sympathetic) teaching can be found on the need for subordination of feelings and moods to objective spiritual principles.<sup>4</sup>

### *Being baptized in the Spirit*

Despite occasional objections, baptism in the Spirit clearly remains the preferred terminology for this inner experience of the Holy Spirit bearing witness that one is a child of God and that one has died and risen to new life in Jesus Christ. This article is not the place for a theological analysis of this concept;<sup>5</sup> but it is appropriate to indicate some pastoral reasons why baptism in the Spirit seems to express the contemporary experience more comprehensively than the suggested alternatives, such as release of the Spirit, being filled with the Spirit, *effusion de l'Esprit*.

This baptismal terminology is important for conveying both the fundamental and the total character of this experience. Any experience of the Spirit is in God's plan intended to be the basis for life-long commitment to Jesus as Lord; the meaning of this experience must then be sought, this search being a continuing appropriation of the initial experience. Those who say with conviction, 'I was baptized in the Spirit in April 1972', have almost invariably appropriated the experience more firmly than those who merely recall being richly blessed by the Lord a few years past. Some naming of fundamental experience is essential, both in advance as

<sup>4</sup> E.g., in classical pentecostalism: Donald Gee, *Now that you've been baptized in the Spirit* (Springfield, Mo., 1972); *Fruitful or barren?* (Springfield, 1961); from an evangelical background with considerable influence within the charismatic renewal: Watchman Nee, *The spiritual man*, 3 vols (New York, 1968); from within the catholic renewal: Stephen B. Clark, *Growing in faith* (Notre Dame, 1972); cassettes on *Basic christian maturity* (a course from Ann Arbor designed to follow the *Life in the Spirit* seminars).

<sup>5</sup> Additions to this literature include Piet Schoonenberg, S.J., 'Baptism in (Holy) Spirit', in *Concilium* (November-December 1974), pp 20-37, and René Laurentin, *Catholic Pentecostalism* (New York, 1977), pp 26-47.

preparation for a decisive change, and afterwards as the foundation for lasting discipleship. Likewise the term *baptism* has a total character; in the original sense of immersion, the whole person goes under, and the whole person rises up from the waters. Here the baptismal terminology does justice to the total character of opening spirit, mind and body to the cleansing, renewing flow of the Spirit of God.

### *Gifts of the Spirit*

Testimonies within the charismatic renewal regularly mention help and inspiration from other charismatics: e.g., by their prayers, teaching, prophecy, witness or example, more so probably than in other testimonial literature. The importance of fellow-believers in experience of renewal is indicated in the exercise of gifts of the Holy Spirit. With the exception of tongues as prayer of praise, these gifts, listed in 1 Corinthians 12, 8-10, are forms of ministry to others: some are spoken or word gifts (e.g., prophecy, interpretation of tongues, words of wisdom and knowledge), whilst others are action gifts (e.g., healing, works of power). These gifts are part of charismatic experience, both the experience of exercising them and that of benefitting from their exercise; their exercise is clearly intended to be an experience of building up the Body of Christ (cf the context of Paul's exposition in 1 Corinthians 12).

It is difficult to convey to an 'outsider' the significance of these gifts within the charismatic experience. Of course, sane charismatics (probably a similar percentage of the whole to sane Christians, sane priests, sane Jesuits, etc.) do not regard these gifts as the be-all and end-all of renewal. But equally the vast majority know in their bones that somehow these gifts are extremely important; without them, you will hardly find the level of faith-expectation that characterizes this renewal. The initial exercise of a spiritual gift is invariably a stepping-out in faith, often a cautious reluctant stepping-out in response to a powerful urge or clear command within. This leap in faith, then, has a profound faith-enhancing effect on all one's other activities.

Experience of ministry in the Spirit is experience of the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Often excluded from analyses of religious experience, ministering to others in a way that the minister experiences himself as an instrument of the all-powerful Lord should be an integral part of the minister's personal knowledge of the working of God in his life. Changes in others and awareness of spiritual power at

work are not of course themselves infallible evidence that Jesus and the Spirit are present and working. Other criteria, immediate and consequent, are necessary that this judgment can be made with certainty; but these criteria are not wholly *a priori* and simply applied to experience from outside.

*Developments within the charismatic renewal*

It is more accurate to see the charismatic renewal as strongly experimental than as highly emotional. It is a movement in which much of the teaching, the methods and the structures have been pragmatically established: this works in practice, but that does not.<sup>6</sup> Maybe it is in God's Providence that this renewal began in the most pragmatic of countries, the United States of America.

The catholic charismatic renewal provides many examples of learning from earlier experience. From the outset, catholic charismatics seem to have been more pastorally concerned about leakage, amongst those baptized in the Spirit, than most from other Churches. No doubt this reflects the stronger denominational sense of Catholics, and is a charismatic version of traditional catholic concern for the lapsed. This concern is evident from the wide-spread reluctance to continue the earlier practice of praying over any interested enquirer for baptism in the Spirit, and a consequent awareness of the need for various forms of preparatory formation and instruction. Hence the elaboration and world-wide use of *Life in the Spirit* seminars,<sup>7</sup> not because God is any more generous on the fifth week of the seminars, when people are normally prayed over to receive baptism in the Spirit, but because the recipient's capacity to receive, understand and then live out the gift have by then significantly increased. Pastoral reflection has indicated:

The danger of talking about the Spirit when people have never known Jesus (at worst this can lead to experience of spirit that is not experience of Jesus);

---

<sup>6</sup> To understand patterns and emphases in the catholic charismatic renewal, it is useful to consult the experience of the larger communities (e.g. the Word of God at Ann Arbor, Michigan, and the People of Praise at South Bend, Indiana) and of individual leaders (cf the account of Steve Clark's experience and background in James B. Manney, 'Before Duquesne: Sources of the renewal', in *The Spirit and the Church* (ed Ralph Martin, New York, 1976), pp 26-30.

<sup>7</sup> The seminars issued from Ann Arbor comprise a Team Manual, for use by leaders, and a booklet, *Finding new life in the Spirit*, for use by each participant. Some communities and prayer groups have worked out their own pattern of seminars, more or less influenced by Ann Arbor.

problems caused by praying over people to be baptized in the Spirit when they have not been asked, urged or helped to confess and renounce all the major sin in their lives;  
the close link between perseverance and commitment among Christians who have had a similar experience.

This has led to seminars in which the Lordship of Jesus Christ is preached, the need for repentance and salvation is clearly proclaimed, and a framework for ongoing commitment and support is provided.

Another lapsation experience, with important lessons for continuing support, is the reversion to earlier patterns of dependency (whether on drugs, in sexual promiscuity or in relationship problems) of some who have enjoyed a period of real relief following prayer for healing. Sometimes taken as evidence of the inauthenticity of the healing, it is more likely that reversion occurs when spirits are low and stress is high, and that it indicates first a lack of social support (no people with whom to share feelings, and with whom to pray for strength and perseverance),<sup>8</sup> and secondly, a possible lack in teaching (e.g., the person not understanding that healings by faith have to be actively claimed and maintained in faith, the lack of preparation for desolation experiences which are then wrongly interpreted as signs of divine displeasure and personal failure).

The strong emphasis placed by leaders in the charismatic renewal on commitment between the members as a prerequisite for building anything solid in a prayer group is another truth learned as much from experience as from study of the scriptures.<sup>9</sup> In practice there is a direct correlation between rate of spiritual growth and commitment with mutual sharing between brothers and sisters in the Lord.<sup>10</sup>

The fullest form of such sharing and commitment, not reached in one leap from a weekly prayer group, is the covenant community,<sup>11</sup> in which, submitting to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, mem-

<sup>8</sup> The organization of Alcoholics Anonymous provided a well-known example of a group aware from experience that perseverance in sobriety is generally dependent on developing supportive relationships and an alternative social milieu.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Cassette series on *Basic christian maturity* (see note 4 above).

<sup>10</sup> Wesleyan class meetings evidently recognized this, though their emphasis seems to have been more on supervision and the need for the leader to know the state of soul of each member than on brother-to-brother commitment.

<sup>11</sup> Intermediate steps between prayer group and community are described in the July 1977 issue of *Pastoral Renewal* (from 617 East Huron, P.O. Box 617, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48107).

bers commit themselves to work for the Kingdom by a pattern of daily living and sharing under commonly accepted pastoral leadership. Such communities are mostly co-ordinated networks of households, combining the potential of small primary groupings (regular face-to-face sharing, deeper personal relationships, focus on implementation of teaching) with that of the larger body (greater resources, diversity of ministries and functions, including giving of teaching, evaluation and discernment of community policy).

Charismatic communities see baptism in the Spirit as the basic opening-up to life in the Spirit (hence as a *sine qua non* for community commitment), and the support, encouragement and correction of brethren, making the same commitment and sharing the same faith-experience, as essential for steady spiritual growth and translation of the initial baptismal experience into a life-time of discipleship. It is particularly within these communities that some emphases prominent in traditional catholic spiritual teaching have reappeared: e.g., the need for discipline, the necessity of effort, the centrality of the Cross and the importance of understanding.

Initial experience of the Spirit often leads to depreciation of these elements in the christian life. Baptism in the Spirit may be experienced as a liberation following years of laborious effort, as an inflow of spiritual energy brought about by petition and surrender rather than by study and thinking it out. Discipline is readily equated with a religion of works and of self-justification, and so as incompatible with the freedom of the Spirit. However, no community can exist without discipline, and it is not hard to see that opposing the Spirit to discipline regularly leads to unrestrained individualism and a weak sense, at best, of the constant need for inner purification and sanctification.<sup>12</sup>

To accept the need for discipline is to realize the need for human effort in living out the Gospel of Jesus Christ. After years of 'sweat-and-toil' religion, in which it was barely recognized that God does anything, charismatic neophytes may need for a while to assert that God does it all (which is true), in order to arrive at a new balance in which it is also recognized that the believer must make decisions in faith and make efforts sustained by faith in order that

<sup>12</sup> The question of submission to a spiritual guide or teacher has been debated at top level in the charismatic movement. Meetings between leaders on the 'discipling issue' have been reported in *New wine* (May 1976), pp 20-22, and in *New covenant* (June 1976), pp 24-25, and a forum involving leading protestant proponents of discipleship in the March 1976 issues of *New wine* and *Logos Journal*.

God's working reaches full human enfleshment. This human perseverance in faith has quite a different feel from the more common perseverance motivated by faith but lacking the experience of God's activity and leading.

Emphasis on effort subsequent to baptism in the Spirit can be found in typical charismatic teachings on changing habit-patterns and the importance of energetic praise. Most of the lay leaders, in contrast to some religious in the renewal, stress the need for activity in prayer, giving oneself to vigorous praise of God, whether in private or in corporate worship with others.<sup>13</sup> This is, I believe, the charismatics' recognition of the traditional teaching that beginners must be active, occupying and engaging their minds and their wills in prayer. The contrast here between many charismatic religious and lay leaders is not between those for and against contemplation, but rather upon how quickly contemplative forms of prayer are reached.<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, initial charismatic fervour often includes the excitement of finding that God does not intend us to accept, let alone welcome, every bug, disease and obstacle that comes our way. Rather we find how large a place healing played in the ministry of Jesus, and that New Testament references to suffering in the christian life refer primarily to experiences of suffering for the name of Jesus through persecution and martyrdom.<sup>15</sup> But re-discovery of the importance of discipline, decision and effort faces the charismatic with the realization that there is an inner suffering that is an essential element in spiritual struggle, in that war between the flesh and the spirit that made Paul cry out, 'wretched man that I am' (Rom 7, 24).

The experience of struggle in the lives of charismatic Christians includes awareness of the existence of evil spirits and of the wiles of Satan. Contrary to a widespread assumption, recognition of evil spirits does not require that explicit exorcism become a daily occurrence in the christian life. But any acquaintance with the saints shows how increased sensitivity to God and to the workings

<sup>13</sup> The widespread practice of simultaneous vocal praise in which each worshipper praises God in his own words is sometimes called 'a word of praise'.

<sup>14</sup> Cf my comments on 'sequence', *infra*, p 54.

<sup>15</sup> Cf for example 1 Cor 4, 11-13; 2 Cor 1, 3-10; 4, 7-12; 6, 4-10; 11, 23-29; 12, 10; Phil 1, 7. 13-20; 2, 17; Col 1, 24; 1 Thess 2, 1-5. 7; 3, 8-10; 2Tim 1, 8. 12; 2, 3. 9-10; 3, 11; 4, 6. 16-18; Heb 10, 32-36; 12, 3-4; 1 Pet 1, 6-7; 2, 20-24; 3, 16-18; 5, 10; Apoc 2, 2-11.



of the Holy Spirit goes hand in hand with awareness of the work of the enemy and of his stratagems.

Leading charismatic teachers are far from despising understanding and from recommending a mindless enthusiasm. Whilst there is truth in the complaint that leading charismatics do not evince great enthusiasm for contemporary theological scholarship,<sup>16</sup> it is not the case that they are anti-intellectual in their practical teaching on living out the Gospel. Rather there is a stress among many on the importance of understanding baptism in the Spirit and all God's workings as an intrinsic element in the appropriation of that experience. Through such understanding, which must be actively sought from God in prayer, there is a lasting change in one's self-understanding: the discovery of oneself as part of the 'new creation' born of the Spirit. The widespread teaching on changing mental attitudes and old ways of thinking is a development of New Testament passages which treat of renewal of the mind.<sup>17</sup>

The short history of the charismatic renewal manifests something similar to the process found in the New Testament between the thrust of the Acts of the Apostles and that of the later pauline epistles: a move from description of the mighty works of the Lord and the power of the Spirit to concern for building up the Body of Christ. This shift increases appreciation for the Pastoral Epistles, much used in the charismatic renewal; far from being a falling away from the exalted teaching of Romans and Ephesians, these letters grapple with the practical issues of discipleship (also profound) that must follow on acceptance of the message of the earlier epistles.

#### *Charismatic experience and christian experience*

Most if not all readers of this article will have been asking themselves, and rightly: Is not much of what is here described as 'the charismatic experience' in fact christian experience, the inheritance of the whole people of God, and not the privilege of an enthusiastic elite?

If we take as the charismatic experience what charismatics are experiencing (and anything less than this will be a falsification), then it will be a combination of what is thought to be distinctively

<sup>16</sup> On this point, raised by Edmund Colledge, OSA, 'Enthusiasm in 1976', in *The Way*, (April 1977), pp 95-103, see P. Hocken, 'The Significance and Potential of Pentecostalism', in *New Heaven? New Earth?* (London, 1976), pp 36-40.

<sup>17</sup> Cf Rom 12, 2; Eph 4, 23.

pentecostal-charismatic (e.g., speaking in tongues, prophecy, simultaneous vocal praise, healing) and what everybody acknowledges as simply christian (the Lordship of Jesus, life-giving Holy Spirit, praise, love, everything as gift of God, Church as community, etc.). Indeed the latter elements will almost always be stressed as the most basic, not least by charismatics.

If it is true that the greatest part of charismatic experience is readily recognized as simply christian, then more must be said about the relationship between the distinctively charismatic-pentecostal, about normal christian life today and the need for an identifiable movement of renewal:

1. What is readily affirmed to be the pattern of christian life (experience of God as loving Father, redeeming Son, sanctifying and empowering Spirit, of repentance, of conversion, of praise and of the Body of Christ) is not in fact a living experience for most of the baptized.<sup>18</sup> Most believers are so familiar with the words that it may be hard to admit that they do not mediate much reality.

2. In the charismatic experience, the features seen as distinctively charismatic-pentecostal have an essential link with 'the basically christian'. They are being experienced today as God's way of re-establishing normal Christianity. Experience in this renewal shows that spiritual gifts are accompanied by a dramatic rise in faith-expectation that exposes a major weakness in contemporary christianity, *viz.*, loss of belief in the supernatural, lack of faith that God speaks to individuals, that he heals people, that he has a particular will for each person.

3. Thus 'the charismatic experience' is only a new experience in regard to those features that were not commonly experienced prior to the advent of charismatic renewal, and even then it is only relatively new, for such gifts have always been known in the lives of Saints and exceptional people.<sup>19</sup> But it is this area of the relatively new that is related to wider renewal, to the wider occurrence of 'basic christian experience'.

4. Hence we should expect to find (and my impression is that we will find) among charismatics the full range of experience traditionally existing among Christians. Patterns of experience noticeable in the lives of Saints and mystics can be found among

<sup>18</sup> This point is clearly recognized by Laurentin, *Catholic Pentecostalism*, p 41.

<sup>19</sup> The affinity between the charismatic renewal and the experience of the Saints is the unifying theme in Judy Tydings's *Gathering a people* (Plainfield, 1977).

charismatics, as can traits associated with recent conversion and christian adolescence. The difference I would see in the areas of 'thrust' and 'sequence'. By thrust, I mean that the experience of the Holy Spirit imparts a vigorous dynamism to the christian life, and that charismatics are marked by such a thrust. More importantly, a different sequence to that outlined in many manuals of ascetical theology can be observed. In the charismatic renewal, the leading of God and his Spirit comes at the beginning, and is not seen as a later development: e.g., in the experience of illumination following purification, or in infused prayer following years of active meditation. This is far from denying the need for purification, but is saying that in the charismatic experience it follows conscious reception of the Spirit.<sup>20</sup>

5. The formation of consciously charismatic groupings within the Church is in no way a sectarian form of behaviour as long as the distinctiveness is based neither on exclusiveness nor on self-sufficiency.<sup>21</sup> Thorough appropriation of baptism in the Spirit, both personally and in its social potential, requires contexts in which there is common acceptance of baptism in the Spirit, of the proper exercise of gifts of the Spirit, of heightened expectation of the Lord's working, and an acceptance of God having a will for each person and situation. Nor is it sectarian to make claims for such groups; every true movement of renewal must make some claims if it is to have any significance and to be true to its vocation. The key question is not sectarianism, for catholic charismatics in general are not indifferent to the Church and its tradition, but rather *how* the charismatic renewal relates to the wider Church (including the relating of 'charismatic experience' and 'christian experience').<sup>22</sup> A degree of distinctiveness is necessary for there to be a spiritual renewal of any significance; but a renewal which is not renewal of

<sup>20</sup> All the classical teaching on purification, on the stripping of the imagination, the intellect and the will, applies to charismatics, but as a consequence of having tested the first fruits.

<sup>21</sup> Though my focus has been on charismatic renewal within the catholic Church, it should be remembered that the charismatic movement has spread through all the main christian traditions and is an ecumenical phenomenon of the first importance. Relationship to the Church should be seen in the context of God's summons to unity, and not in any static sense. Cf P. Hocken, *art.cit.*, in *New Heaven? New Earth?*, pp 48-53.

<sup>22</sup> There is not space here to discuss what in the charismatic renewal is for all christians and what is merely one valid option among many. It will be clear that I do not accept an accommodation within the Church that treats the whole movement as optional.

the Church is hardly worthy of the name.<sup>23</sup> Relationship to the wider Church includes an understanding of the future as well as of the past and the present; whilst some milieux within the charismatic movement show signs of believing the Parousia to be imminent (the movement certainly raises 'end-time consciousness'), the catholic charismatic renewal is more characterized, particularly since 1975, by convictions that hard times are coming for the Church, and that the formation of identifiable charismatic groupings is at least part of the Lord's preparation of the Church before the advancing darkness.<sup>24</sup>

In arguing for a 'related distinctiveness' for the charismatic renewal, I have not attempted to spell out the forms this can or should take. But as this renewal is increasingly accepted within the Churches, what is commonly regarded as basic Christianity will more and more include what is now seen as distinctively charismatic.

The third part of Fr Joseph Laishley's survey on the Theology of Liberation is unavoidably held over until our April issue.

<sup>23</sup> The choice of the term 'renewal' itself indicates a consciousness of being for and of the Church.

<sup>24</sup> Cf the prophecies given in St Peter's, Rome, at Pentecost 1975, during the 1975 International Conference. Extracts are printed in *New Covenant* (July 1975), p 26.