

NEO-PENTECOSTALS AND HEALING

A Phenomenological Approach to the Spiritual Gifts

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SINCE THE advent of the Pentecostal Churches on New Year's Day 1900, in San Francisco, California, social scientists have eagerly scrutinized their behaviour as instances of intense religious experience. Studies have crowded the literature both because of the phenomenal growth of the movement, and the inherent interest in the activities and behaviour of the membership. Glossolalia especially has been researched; but speaking in tongues is only one of the 'spiritual gifts' claimed by members of the pentecostal, neo-pentecostal, and charismatic religious groups. Other such gifts include faith-healing, prophecy, and deliverance from the influence of evil spirits, phenomena which have not as yet merited as much attention as has tongues-speech.¹

Just what are these 'gifts?' When requested to name them, modern charismatics give lists of varying length. Many simply refer to a passage in Paul as containing the basis of their belief.²

According to participants within the Renewal, such gifts are the natural consequences of living the full gospel. Like similar renewal movements in the past, such as those treated by Ronald Knox,³

¹ The present paper grows out of five years of participant-observation among members of the largest catholic charismatic community in North America, an ecumenical group located in a midwestern university town. Not quite ten years old, the group has expanded from its original four founders to include over sixteen hundred persons, and is internationally regarded as a leading force in the Charismatic Renewal, especially because of its publications and acknowledged world-wide leadership. Its influence is exercised through a monthly magazine whose circulation is over sixty thousand, and through tapes and other publications. For example, one of the latter, the *Charismatic Renewal Services' Team Manual*, an initiation handbook, has sold seventy thousand copies, and has been translated into Korean, Chinese, French, Dutch, Spanish, Italian and Sotho, a Bantu language spoken in South Africa.

Sociologists, journalists and religious professionals have commented upon the extraordinary popularity of the Renewal in an era when God had just been declared dead. This study, however, attempts a psychological analysis of the inner life of those members who have experienced the spiritual gifts.

² 1 Cor 12, 4-11.

³ *Enthusiasm: a chapter in the history of Religion* (London, 1950).

charismatic renewal is marked by an attempted return to the practices and spirit of the earliest christian communities described in the New Testament, most often the Jerusalem of Acts and the Corinth of Paul's First Letter. Christians in these communities of renewal have been distinguished by their declared attempts to live more fully and more strictly according to biblical teachings than do their less enthusiastic neighbours. Members of the community which has been mentioned above live in common, strive to base their lives on a strongly committed biblical faith, and claim to experience all of the spiritual gifts listed by St Paul. Whether in college dormitory, rented apartments, or ageing town-house, community members, in an obedience relationship, submit their lives and often their earnings to a 'head'. Married couples with children, and young single adults of both sexes, share food, fellowship, finances in communal households in an effort to reproduce the life-style, attitudes and patterns of first-century Christianity. The gifts are experienced and practised within these households, but most especially at the two weekly public prayer meetings, the focal communal activity of the group.

While the account given here concentrates somewhat heavily on the spectacular, in fairness to the community-members interviewed, and indeed to the spirit of the community, it must be stated at the outset that these gifts are not consciously sought for their own sake, but are rather reported as normal results of living 'in the Lord': that is, a committed christian life. Indeed the words 'normal' and 'ordinary' were very frequently employed to comment on events and experiences which struck me as quite extraordinary. Over and over again, it was reported that what drew them to the community was the love and support, the good fellowship and dedication of the membership, rather than the gifts. Indeed to many an outsider, the first and lasting impression conveyed by participants in this charismatic community was their unfeigned joy in living.

It is important to speak here of methodology.⁴ This study is an

⁴ Philosophically, this study is inspired by a minority tradition within empirical psychology deriving from Wilhelm Dilthey, Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. According to this orientation (*Geisteswissenschaften*), human sciences aim not at exterior but essence, not at measurement but meaning, not at explanation, prediction and control, but at understanding. More concretely, the method involves: 1) investigating particular phenomena, particular experiences of healing and prophecy; 2) investigating general essences; 3) apprehending essential relationships within and among essences; 4) watching modes of appearing; 5) watching the constitution of phenomena in consciousness; 6) interpreting the concealed meaning of phenomena. Cf Spiegelberg, Herbert: *The Phenomenological Movement*, vol II (The Hague, 1965), pp 655-701.

effort to understand, through observation and reflection, the structures of experience underlying the behaviour among subjects drawn from the community, most especially concerning prophecy and healing. It demonstrates how the human body, psyche and group interact to cause spiritual, emotional and even physical well-being.

Subjects were recruited by putting a brief advertisement in the *Community Bulletin*, a weekly announcement sheet distributed at the prayer meetings. In the initial experimental design, it had been proposed that twenty healers, twenty prophets, and twenty who had experienced healing be interviewed. It turned out, however, that these were not pure types: all had experienced the gift of tongues; most had experienced prophecy at least in their households if not at public gatherings as well, and most of the healers had also experienced healing themselves. Prophets were healers and had experienced healing, and vice-versa. The typology was abandoned, and subjects were encouraged to speak freely about all the spiritual gifts. The result was that much was learned about other gifts like deliverance, word of knowledge, word of wisdom.

An interview of an hour and a half, recorded on tape, became standard; though some subjects needed more time, some less. The following questions served as an outline for the discussion, but were not slavishly adhered to. In the style of phenomenological research, the author was guided by the remarks of the subjects, and by the questions which occurred to him as the interview proceeded. An attempt was made to make the process as non-directive as possible:

1. Please tell me in your own words how you experienced a single occasion of physical healing/prophecy.
2. What is the history of your experience of spiritual gifts?
3. Is the way you experienced these gifts similar to what has happened to others in the community?
4. Have you thought out or been taught a theology of healing/prophecy/the gifts? In other words, how do you understand what has happened to you?
5. Please tell me about yourself: give me a short biography.
6. Earliest memories: of your father; of your mother.

We must recall here that phenomenology is the study of phenomena-as-experienced. The primary emphasis is on the phenomenon itself, exactly as it reveals itself to the experiencing subject in all its actuality, immediacy and particularity. Hence, the first question above seeks an unvarnished statement of just what happens when gifts are experienced. The second question broadens out the

perspective to include related but similar experiences. The phenomenological approach is characterized by the attitude of openness to whatever is significant for the proper understanding of the phenomenon. A subject is led to concentrate on the experience of the phenomenon exactly as it is given to him; he tries not to prejudge it, or to see it through any specific perspective due simply to previous knowledge about the phenomenon. Thus the third and fourth questions aim at unravelling the effects of community socialization and teaching, and to bracket these off from the subject's own personal experience and interpretations.

The fifth and sixth questions aim at providing some data to make a brief personality assessment, in order to study the effects of upbringing and personal history upon the experience. This method of phenomenology, intuition, reflection and description is thus engaged in by the subject, but especially by the researcher as he begins to make thematic generalizations within and across subjects both during the interviews, and afterwards when reviewing tapes.

Eight males and thirteen females were interviewed for this research. More subjects could have been consulted; but as the dialogues continued, various themes and patterns emerged and repeated themselves with such regularity that further consultation seemed superfluous. What these persons supplied could safely be reported as typical and in some sense usual for the rest, especially since it was so consistent with the many testimonies and 'sharings', heard over hundreds of hours in the formal context of prayer-meetings, and in the informal context of private conversation. The ages of the subjects ranged from nineteen to sixty, with about half being university students: a percentage which reflects their representation in the whole community. From the many anecdotes related, the following provide examples of the gifts as experienced.

A young man describes his first encounter with prophecy: that is, interpreted as meaning the use by God of human persons to communicate his thoughts and wishes:

I felt the Holy Spirit in a physical sense. I had this awareness even when my eyes were closed. The height of my awareness increased. There were no boundaries: I sensed that I could reach out around myself to infinity. I knew it was the Lord. I felt words coming, but the words weren't mine. I felt elated. Now I understood why the apostles appeared to be drunk. I had no idea whether I was talking or not. I felt like I was floating. Meanwhile I was talking with my brother and sister-in-law.

This particular subject, an articulate college student, was especially helpful in distinguishing such an experience of prophecy from the consciousness-expansion due to drugs: the reason being that previous to his conversion, he had frequently been 'high' on hallucinogens. Under the influence of drugs, he felt like an observer of the experience; whereas in an 'anointing', however, 'you are where you started, only you feel changed for the better'. A fourth difference expressed was that a 'drug-high' caused by marijuana or L.S.D. was oppressive. 'I couldn't stop it even though I often wanted to'. Yet an anointing isn't oppressive. It is consciousness-expanding, but like 'standing on a beach and walking into the water. The water wouldn't move you unless you wanted to be moved'.

The content of prophecies could be divided in several ways: encouraging ('My People, I love you'), and exhortatory ('Repent! Change X in your life'); intended for the whole community, or for just a single individual; pragmatically concrete or poetically haunting. With eyes closed, the prophet speaks or sings in naturally flowing cadences, and in the first person as though in the name of the Deity. Often crucial phrases are repeated. Contrary to the popular understanding of the term, relatively few prophecies concern the future. Here is an example:

Remember the darkness that I have called you from and rejoice.
Remember the bondage from which I have freed you, and rejoice.
Remember how you were alone and spread far apart, and see how it is that I have brought you together and made you into a people, and rejoice. It is I who have brought you to birth, and it is I, myself, who have called each one of you by name. Yes, it is I, myself, who have promised to be your God and have made you into a people, and know that you have only begun to see what I would do among you.

Prophecies which do deal with the future often refer to coming political, economic and social cataclysms; they warn the people to prepare especially through loyalty and obedience to their leaders. Prophecy has, to some extent, been brought under the control of the community's leadership in that there is a 'prophecy group' to which experienced prophets belong and to whom alone is entrusted the task of prophecy at the large community gatherings: though all are encouraged to 'yield to' the gift in smaller-group settings.

'Healings' also occur in varied and diverse fashions. The term 'faith-healing' is a misnomer, because it carries with it the implication that the return to health depends on the person working himself up into a state of belief. Frequently, healings have been

reported when the one being healed is being prayed for by someone unknown to him, or when he himself is filled with doubts; when the healing occurs, he is praying about something else or not praying at all. Nor are all healings physical, though these, of course, are the most striking: conditions as severe as hydrocephalus, cancer and blindness, down to relief from allergies, asthma, the common cold and back-ache. Several healers seem to specialize, so to speak, in dealing with certain maladies: for example, limb-lengthening. The 'inner' healings or 'healing of memories' are prized just as highly as the more dramatic physical cures, because psychological and emotional scars bring just as much pain as do physiological disorders. With physicians who have written statements documenting the more unexpected returns to health, the 'cures' are called 'spontaneous remissions'; but to members of the community they are outward manifestations of the providential concern of a God who 'cares' for the universe and the individual.

Sometimes healings happen in the context of the total community gathering, in an atmosphere reminiscent of revival meetings. But quite often only one or two are praying with the sick person, who may be healed instantaneously or more gradually; though in the latter case, the person will frequently report that the cure happened more quickly than the doctor said it would. For instance, at a meeting run by the 'healing team', the sick and the appointed healers pray quietly, in song, or in tongues. Then, two by two, the healers approach each individual while the others are still at prayer; inquire into the specifics of the illness; lay their hands on the head, shoulders, and afflicted bodily part; 'rebuke' any evil spirit they sense may be involved in the suffering; pray to 'the Lord Jesus' that he heal the sick person. Healers often visualize to themselves the bodily organ functioning well, while the sick person is encouraged to have 'expectant faith' that the Lord will heal him, though he is also told to relax and not blame himself if he cannot rouse his faith, or if nothing seems to happen immediately.

These examples have been cited to give something of the flavour of the healing and prophecy sessions. What of the meaning-system, the world-view of the subjects? Though few of them were so systematic in their comments, it is possible to list a series of propositions, enumerating the main tenets of their personal myth with respect to the spiritual gifts.

1. God exists and is personal and active in his world.
2. Through scriptural revelation especially, but also through the

continuing revelation called prophecy, he calls a people to himself to worship him and serve each other.

3. God wants to initiate a personal relationship with this people and with each individual person.

4. Living in a community is a necessary condition for this relationship; a community provides the focus of the relationship and of the reception and practice of the various signs of God's favour, the gifts.

5. Praise is a most important human response to this relationship, and is often proclaimed 'in tongues': ancient, extinct or foreign languages not studied or learned by the one offering praise.

6. God speaks to the heart and mind of each person. Sometimes this 'speech' takes the form of actual words heard interiorly. This interior prompting to utter prophecy, to heal (or not to heal!), to behave in some definable fashion, is called the 'Lord's leading', or a 'sense from the Lord'.

7. Through the exercise of the gift of 'discernment', one learns by practice to distinguish between one's own thoughts and desires, the 'Lord's leading', and promptings of 'the evil one', or the devil/satan/demons. The demonic realm is just as real as is the divine.

8. The Lord's will is that men be whole and sound, physically and psychologically. Trust in him has physiological and emotional correlates: healing the hurts of body and spirit should occur regularly and normally in a christian community.

9. Often the 'Lord's Leading' takes the concrete form of a 'Word of Wisdom': some concrete, practical and sound advice for a person or the community when a decision must be made.

10. A 'Word of Knowledge' is another specific instance of the 'Lord's Leading', wherein a counsellor had a sudden intuition concerning a definite fact about his client's past life, often embarrassing and even forgotten by the latter, and employs this knowledge to further the process of inner healing.

11. 'Expectant faith' is the best attitude for all to cultivate in anticipation of the Lord's dealing with his people to promote their personal growth, increase their numbers, and generally make the planet into a loving unity of brother and sisters.

12. The history of cultures is best interpreted apocalyptically and eschatologically: that is, people, nations and political systems not dedicated to the Lord are moving towards their own destruction; but the Second Coming of Jesus Christ will soon initiate a universal kingdom of justice, love and peace.

So much for the theological myth of the charismatics. What myth do psychologists employ to place such phenomena within the orderly framework of a scientific conceptual universe? There exists a trend of interpreting healing and psychotherapies, like points on

a continuum, embracing these and other methods of influencing people through the use of suggestibility. Already at the beginning of this century, William James, in his Gifford Lectures,⁵ spoke of the power of suggestion in eliciting 'mind-cures' of bodily ailments. Kenneth M. Calestro argues that psychotherapy is the bastard progeny of a long tradition of neo-religious and magical practices that have arisen in every unit of human culture.⁶ Jerome Franks makes essentially the same point, but includes more materials on comparative 'outcome studies' from various forms of modern psychotherapy, 'placebo' action, as well as communist brain-washing techniques, and healings at Lourdes.⁷ His seemingly bizarre grouping of such different forms of 'treatment' is certainly justified by his discovery of the common element of suggestibility in all of them. A more daring synthesis is attempted by Lawrence LeShan, who adopts a viewpoint that is midway between that of science and those of pre-industrial societies.⁸ His book works towards a general theory of the para-normal by comparing three types of consciousness and the realities of which each is aware: the medium experiences clairvoyant reality; the mystic, transpsychic reality; the physicist, sensory reality. Western science gives primacy to the last of these; but LeShan tries to study each carefully, and claims to have performed healings in 'secular clairvoyant reality'.

I propose that a more fruitful approach would be within the psycho-analytic framework of Object Relations Theory. Whether a psychologist is a theist, agnostic or atheist, his process of viewing God as personal and as Father permits him to apply the rich theoretical perspectives and implications drawn by the Object Relations Theorists to the experiences of religious believers who relate to him in that way. While Freud and much of the psychological and psychiatric establishment could not unfairly be described as negative, reductionistic and even hostile to institutional religion, such an approach does not characterize all theorists within the analytic tradition. Even those who are antipathetic still struggle to explain the origin and functioning of religious behaviour within individuals and cultures. The great variety of experiences reported

⁵ James, William: *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York, 1958).

⁶ Calestro, Kenneth, M.: 'Psychotherapy, Faith Healing and Suggestion', in *Int. Journal of Psychiatry* 10 (2), (1972), pp 83-113.

⁷ Frank, Jerome: *Persuasion and Healing: a comparative study of Psychotherapy* (Baltimore, Md., 1973).

⁸ LeShan, Lawrence: *The Medium, the Mystic and the Physicist* (New York, 1974).

above, illustrating healings, prophecies and other gifts, is insufficiently accounted for by the myth of suggestibility.

Much more helpful insights derive from that branch of neo-freudian ego psychology known as Object Relations Theory. W. R. D. Fairbairn is a well-known British pioneer in this tradition, which views the human not as primarily a biological entity (*id*-dominated), but as a psychological reality where the *ego* is the centre of personality.⁹ Human growth and development then centres not so much on conflicting instinctual forces as on interpersonal relationships which begin with the parents, the earliest 'objects'. An American proponent of this school, Paul W. Pruyser, explicitly applied ego-psychology to religion in his studies of motivation for religion.¹⁰ The person's set of beliefs and practices are interpreted 'from the point of view of wish fulfilment, drive control, primary and secondary process thinking, object relations, the genesis of conscience and the ego ideal, and the economic of libidinal and aggressive urges'.¹¹ It is from within this much broader range of constructs than mere suggestibility, this myth which respects the claim of the religious subject to be in a relationship with 'the Lord', that psychologists should begin to attempt a non-reductionistic understanding of the phenomena of spiritual gifts. Psychology as such cannot decide upon the ontological reality of God, of the intra-psychic effects and manifestations of his presence; but it can and does respect the reality, at least within Object Relations Theory, and can serve to illuminate the claims and experiences of charismatics and others who so dramatically witness to God's activity.

⁹ Fairbairn, W. R. D.: *Object-relations Theory of the Personality* (New York, 1952).

¹⁰ Pruyser, Paul, W.: *A dynamic Psychology of Religion* (New York, 1968).

¹¹ *Op. cit.*, p 6.