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Report on Spiritual Speaking. Reprint from the Living Church

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Report on Spiritual Speaking

EDITORIAL NOTE.—This report represents the findings of a commission appointed by Bishop Burrill of the Chicago Diocese of the Protestant Episcopal Church. It is supplemented by the immediately following article on "Glossolalia in the New Testament" by William H. Nes, professor of homiletics, Seabury-Western Theological Seminary. Both were published in the *Living Church* for Jan. 1, 1961. We gratefully acknowledge the permission of its managing editor to reprint these discussions of a question that arises from time to time also in our church. This does not imply an endorsement of every statement in the articles.

I

THE REPORT

FROM age to age the Church, in her fulfillment of the mission committed to her by our Lord, must seek with fervent effort to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit. From the point of view of history in its totality, the Church must have made plain the wholeness and the fullness of God's truth and of God's love, and it is our faith that God will give his Church power to do this. And yet at any single moment or period of time, although the wholeness and fullness of the divine revelation must be the goal and purpose of the Church, there is always the possibility of incompleteness, distortion, or exaggeration. Human weakness and fallibility are always present, to say nothing of the ever-vigorous action of sin, with consequence of ignorance, misdirected zeal, or sloth. Frequently, throughout the history of Christendom, failure or forgetfulness in one area of the spiritual life has led to reaction and excess in another, as earnest men and women seek to compensate for previous failure.

To the Church's pastors, and particularly

to her chief pastors, the bishops, our Lord has entrusted the responsibility for guiding the Church through the perilous possibilities of excess and negation, of superstition and godlessness. The shepherds must protect the flock from error, and especially from error which may carry within it the possibility of hurt and damage to the community of Christians, and to the wholeness of the Gospel committed to the Church's care.

In recent months some devout and dedicated members of the Episcopal Church in this diocese have felt within their lives and within praying groups living the full discipline of the Church's fellowship the touch of a spiritual inspiration strikingly different in character from the usual ordinary experience of the majority of the faithful. This has manifested itself in a kind of "spiritual speaking" (to be distinguished from the "speaking with tongues" described in the second chapter of the book of the Acts of the Apostles, for that was an utterance which conveyed significance in known and identifiable languages) reminiscent of expressions of fervor which characterized the church of Corinth in the time of St. Paul.

Contemporary Christendom yearns for renewal, for a revival of apostolic zeal which will free the Church from bonds of what sometimes appears to be apathy and institutional rigidity. And it is evident that the Holy Spirit is indeed working within the hearts of Christians of all persuasions and in all lands to stir up a new ardor and a fresh vigor in the approach to ancient problems. In manifold outpour-

ings of human effort, in new forms of Christian art and literature, in the cry for Christian witness in social reform and experiment, in the foundation of new types of religious orders, in revolutionary techniques of evangelism, in an almost universal resurgence of biblical studies, in a reawakening of the laity to their vocation in the corporate work and worship of the Church, in the tremendous upsurge of the ecumenical spirit: in countless ways the voice of Christian revival has cried out in the hearts of Christian people everywhere. The Holy Ghost is, always has been, and continues to be at work in His Church. The new voices of prophecy and holiness which have been speaking in these many ways and in a variety of tongues may be indications of this work.

It is not surprising, then, that small groups of sincere Christian people, gathering for deep and attentive prayer, might find their souls stirred to depths of new utterance, and might feel that the Spirit of Renewal, which is everywhere at work in Christ's Church, has touched them, too. The "spiritual speaking" which has occurred in some of our parishes may possibly be understood in these terms. It is, however, the duty of the Church in its teaching and pastoral office to point out that the experience of "spiritual speaking," although apparently unusual and perhaps spectacular, is not the only way in which the work of the Holy Spirit in a soul may be evidenced. St. Paul himself in his letters to the church of Corinth has made this quite clear. It would be wrong indeed, and destructive of all true spirituality, to allow the unusual nature of this manifestation to elevate it to some special eminence of spiritual importance, and to overlook

the omnipresent action of the Holy Spirit throughout the history of the Church, and throughout Christendom at the present time.

Dangers

There is a most real danger that the significance of "spiritual speaking" may be exaggerated, especially when it is viewed in isolation and separation from the wholeness of God's inspiration. The eagerness with which popular curiosity seizes upon stories of such happenings is a clear signal of warning. Furthermore, in anything like "spiritual speaking" which wells up from the mysterious depths of our humanity, where in so many forms primal evil wrestles with the urgency of redemptive good, there is always a most serious danger of delusion, and even of diabolic deception. It is the pastoral obligation of the Church to protect the faithful from any possible incursion of the irrational or pathological forces which prey upon the depths of our nature. "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God . . ." (1 John 4:1). In view of these considerations, we believe it is our duty to suggest the following counsel:

(1) *Separatism and the development of any kind of sectarian spirit is to be deplored.* Special and extraordinary spiritual experience of this type has often in the history of the Church shown an unfortunate schismatic tendency, and has generally not been a continuing experience within the Church at large. A spiritual "elite" has been produced and it arrogates to itself, perhaps unintentionally at first, a certain superiority of insight and qualification; this leads to the disruption of the total fellowship of Christians. A sure test of the genuine basis of such phenomena in spiritual reality, as distinct from emotional delusion, would be the

willingness of those involved to submit to the direction and guidance of the duly constituted authorities of the Church, and to participate humbly with others in the regular work and worship of the Church.

(2) *The danger of irrationality and emotional excess is to be acknowledged as a real danger and to be shunned.* Assessment of phenomena of the type of "spiritual speaking" cannot rule out the possibility that there is a pathological element in them, and also the possibility that they may have a pathological influence on certain types of personality.

(3) *All Christians must be ready to submit special experiences of this type to the judgment and decision of their pastors.* The Church of Christ moves through history by steps of reason, law, and institutional authority. The historic Church of which we are part is the voice of the apostolic order, and this order is in its origins the creation of our Lord Himself. The Church is built upon the conviction that God works through these regular procedures of everyday human experience through the ages, even as He works through the regular processes of nature. All human communication, all human knowledge, all human community and concord, the Holy Scriptures, theological science, and the sacramental Church, all rest upon the primacy of rationality. The intrusion of the non-rational into these areas — although the possibility of authentically divine action expressing itself through such an intrusion should always be humbly *investigated* — must always, nevertheless, be regarded with charitable reserve. God has hallowed the reason of mankind, and we must always believe that reason is supremely the voice of the Holy Ghost and that the Holy Ghost will speak to us in the vocables of rationality.

(4) *The contemporary fondness for the new and sometimes for the bizarre is a temptation, and must be avoided.* In a restless

and impatient age we must be especially on guard against the frenzied search for novelty, particularly in the realm of the spirit. There is no substitute for the long-tested disciplines of spiritual growth and health. For most Christians, growth in holiness will be painstaking and slowly evolved. It would be tragic if the spiritual training of any of our people were interrupted or misdirected by the dangerous expectation that the quest for "spiritual speaking" is an approved way of seeking sanctity.

(5) *Methods of instruction and prayer which are unquestionably grounded in the Holy Scriptures and proven through centuries of Christian practice are to be given priority over methods which rest on tentative if not dubious foundations.* To those earnest Christians seeking a revival of the Church, the committee feels impelled to call attention to the fact that a great awakening has occurred in our Church as well as other Communion in America through increased emphasis on the family Eucharist, adult Bible study, and lay participation in the whole parish program. Bible study classes and such similar enterprises have a tremendous advantage over groups meeting for spiritual speaking in that they have an objective record to study, in the first place, and, in the second place, a great and continuous tradition of commentary. They also have the clear teaching of all the great Christian Communion that through the Holy Scriptures God's word reaches the hearts and minds of men. This is why the Church can commend the study of the Scriptures in every parish, to believer and nonbeliever alike, as a great teaching and devotional aid. To those interested in discovering the truth about God and hearing what God has to say to our age, as well as to those who are interested in the proclamation of the Gospel to the unchurched, we can recommend unreservedly the study of the Scriptures while we cannot with the same assurance suggest a continua-

tion of meetings held for the purpose of speaking in tongues.

(6) *Our strongest apostolic authority is St. Paul (in I Corinthians 12-14). The principles which support his directions to the church of Corinth in the matter of "spiritual speaking" are valid today.* He acknowledges "spiritual speaking" as a gift of the Holy Spirit, among other gifts, but one which requires careful control and regulation. In chapter 14 of I Corinthians his regulations for its control are quite clearly and emphatically set forth; for example, in verses 27 and 28: "If any man speak in an unknown tongue, let it be by two, or at the most by three, and that by course; and let one interpret. But if there be no interpreter, let him keep silence in the church; and let him speak to himself, and to God." In this chapter, St. Paul stresses that the order and the well-being of the Christian community are of the first importance; for example, verse 19, "Yet in the church I had rather speak five words with my understanding, than by my voice I might teach others also, than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue"; verses 36-37, "What? came the word of God out from you? or came it unto you only? If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord"; and verse 40, which concludes the chapter, "Let all things be done decently and in order." The order and well-being of the Christian community, to St. Paul, are clearly of the highest consideration, even as "charity" with relation to "the best gifts" is a "more excellent way" (I Corinthians 12:31-13:1).

In conclusion, we concur in the admonition of St. Paul, "Let all things be done unto edifying" (I Corinthians 14:26b). The building up of Christ's Church — both through a deepening of the true spirituality of the faithful and through her re-

demptive mission to the minds and souls of those who have yet to acknowledge the Lordship of the Holy Ghost — is the criterion by which we should both desire and value spiritual gifts.

Recommendations

In these terms, then, we recommend that provisions be made:

(a) that the exercise of "spiritual speaking" shall in no way intrude itself into the regular worship and work of the Church so as to disturb the order and peace thereof;

(b) that those who engage in this activity avoid occasion for giving offense to the Church either by exalting themselves or by suggesting that others seek this gift as a mark of spiritual superiority;

(c) that the exercise of this gift be guarded with vigilance so as to protect both the faithful and the weak from the dangers of irrationality and emotional excess;

(d) that the persons who experience this gift consult regularly with their pastors;

(e) that groups of people who exercise this gift under the auspices of any minister of this Church shall, through such minister, report regularly to the bishop of their activities.

"If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit." In profound and ever-renewed humility we must submit our judgments in these high matters to God the Holy Ghost, who leads His Church into all truth, who sustains His Church by His love. Let us strive together in patience and in love to witness to His working in us by showing forth the fruit as well as the phenomena of His working. "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law.... If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit" (Galatians 5:22-23, 25).

II

GLOSSOLALIA IN THE
NEW TESTAMENT

"Speaking with tongues" is not frequently referred to in the New Testament; and if it were not for the long discussion of it in I Corinthians we should know of it only through the following mentions:

(1) St. Mark 16:17. (Among the signs that accompany them that believe) "they will speak in new tongues."

(2) Acts of the Apostles:

(a) Acts 2. The Pentecostal narrative. In the descent of the Holy Ghost, "there appeared to them tongues as of fire"; and when the Apostles spoke, the multitude were amazed because "each one heard them speaking in his own language." We should note that here the Apostles are said to have been speaking in "other tongues" whereas in Saint Mark the prophecy is of speaking "in new tongues."

(b) Acts 10:46. "For they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God." This is the passage about the manifestation of the Holy Ghost in the house of St. Cornelius the Centurion. The event is treated as having very high significance, as a "pentecost of the Gentiles" both in the preparation of Saint Peter for it and in its impression on those who accompanied him, for they were amazed "because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles." This significance is heightened, as being that of a unique and *initiating* event, like Pentecost, in the reception of the Holy Spirit *before* they were baptized.

(c) Acts 19:6. "And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke with tongues and prophesied." This is the account of the Baptism *with Christian Baptism* of 12 believers who had formerly had baptism from Saint John Baptist.

It should be noted that in the case of the Samaritans, whom St. Philip had baptized, the Holy Spirit came on them after the Apostles had laid their hands on them, as in the case of the 12 men at Ephesus; but they are not said to have spoken with tongues or to have prophesied. Clearly, then, there is no suggestion in the Acts that speaking with tongues or prophecy ordinarily accompanied the gift of the Holy Spirit at Baptism and/or laying-on-of-hands. On the contrary, we are given to understand that there were particular manifestations of the Holy Spirit joining the first Pentecost to the coming of the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles and to Christian believers who had been followers of St. John Baptist.

(3) I Corinthians 12-14. To this we must now turn our attention in some detail.

It is one of a number of passages dealing with matters with which St. Paul found it necessary to deal because of situations in Corinth involving error and disorder. In this case there was an error regarding *charismata* and a disorder arising from people who considered themselves to be "spiritual" (*pneumatikoi*). The particular disorder was the "speaking with tongues" which these people supposed to be an eminently distinguished operation of the Holy Spirit.

He lays down, therefore, at the very outset, the absolute criterion of spiritual utterance and of the discernment of spirits. All "spiritual" utterance is not from the Holy Spirit, for there are spirits who say "*Jesus anathema*"; only by the Holy Spirit can a man say "*Kurios Jesus*." Similarly St. John says (I John 4:2) "every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not of God."

St. Paul, then, has begun his discussion

of "spiritual" phenomena; all that is or may be "spiritual" is not so in the Christian sense; and with regard to utterance the test of authenticity is not one (as we may commonly suppose it to be) between an inspired utterance and a merely psychical one, but rather between inspired utterance from the Holy Spirit and inspired utterance of demons. The test of the utterance therefore is by what it says.

With verse 4, the Apostle proceeds to the gifts (*charismata*) of the Holy Spirit. He lists them, and uses the rest of the chapter to show that they are manifestations of the Holy Spirit *in the Church*, operations within the Body of Christ, "for the common good." This is indeed the ground on which he wishes to chasten the presumption of all who consider themselves to be *pneumatikoi* pre-eminently because they exercise what they suppose to be a pre-eminent gift.

In this same chapter he has *two* lists—the one, of *charismata*; the other, of the function of these gifts in relation to the persons who exercise them. In both lists the gift of tongues is mentioned last. Now it is important for us to compare here the list in Romans (12:6). This is similarly based on the doctrine of the Body of Christ, and since it is more particularly like the list (the second in the chapter) beginning I Corinthians 12:28, it must be carefully noted that in Romans 12 there is no mention of speaking with tongues.

Chapter 13 proceeds from the statements: "Desire earnestly the better gifts, and I show you a still more excellent way." Certainly the intention of this is evident. Here are people who seem to be or think they are "the spiritual ones." They suppose that a particular *charisma* gives them eminence. To them St. Paul points out

that all gifts are *in the Body*, they are exercised by particular persons severally, but only for the common good. If there is any question as to relative excellence of gifts, he has already placed prophecy above tongues, which he has put at the bottom of the list. But quite beyond any question of greater or lesser gifts, there is a supreme affusion of the Holy Spirit and it is *agape*. In the economy of the Holy Spirit's operation in the Church there are various gifts. But the greatest gifts are for all and supremely to be desired — namely faith, hope, and love. These are intrinsically self-authenticating. Tongues can be the tongues of devils; they can even curse Christ. But love is the work of the Holy Spirit, who says, "*Kurios lesous*."

Chapter 14 continues and concludes the discussion. He says [in essence]: Aim at love, and be eager for the spiritual gifts (*pneumatika*), but especially that you may prophesy. He that speaks in an unknown tongue edifies only himself. He who prophesies is greater than he who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets so that the Church may be edified. If in a meeting you all speak in tongues you may very well appear to be mad. But prophecy is comprehensible. Even though prayer can be in an unknown tongue it would not engage the understanding of him who prays, and therefore one should pray with the spirit and the understanding. Especially is this true of "blessing" and "thanksgiving" (*eulogia* and *eucharistia*); it cannot be in a tongue because there must be Amen.

At the end of the discourse he comes to his specific directions both with regard to *pneumatika* (the spiritual manifestations) and the *pneumatikoi* (the spiritual persons). He orders that:

(1) In the assembly speaking with tongues must be orderly — in course, one by one; by a few.

(2) There must be an interpreter; otherwise let them be silent.

(3) Let two or three prophets speak and let the others weigh what is said.

(4) If a revelation is made to one sitting by, let the first speakers be silent.

(5) You can all prophesy one by one so that all may learn and be encouraged.

"In Church all must be done decently and in order, for God is not a God of confusion but of peace. And if any one thinks he is a prophet or spiritual let him acknowledge that what I say to you is the commandment of the Lord."

Notes and general conclusions:

A. A clear distinction must be drawn between the meanings of *pneumatika* and *charismata*. The latter are the "grace gifts," through Jesus Christ, of the Holy Spirit. The former may indeed be "spiritual" but they are not necessarily — and very often they are not — the operations of the Holy Spirit that says *Kurios Iesous*."

B. In viewing the Corinthian discourse with the Pentecost narrative in Acts we will discern a sharp difference and one ambiguity.

At Pentecost the Apostles spoke in "other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance" and the multitude, in the diversity of their dialects or languages, comprehended the utterance directly and immediately. In I Corinthians it is a speaking in unknown tongues which cannot be understood by the auditors and may indeed be incomprehensible to the speaker, and which therefore demands the exercise of another *charisma*, that of interpretation.

But, as to the ambiguity: In the Pentecost narrative there is also the remark that some who heard mockingly charged the Apostles with being drunk. This reminds us of St. Paul's observation that "they will think you are mad."

The Acts passage seems to emphasize Pentecost as a reversal of Babel: by man's pride and sin peoples cannot speak to each other and a world communication is confused and inhibited; but by the coming of the Holy Spirit a restoration is made through the preaching of the Gospel. The minor reference to drunkenness may be a remembrance of the Corinthian phenomenon in the retrospect of the Church when Acts was written.

C. St. Paul clearly believed that speaking in an unknown tongue could be authentically the utterance of the Holy Spirit, for he says he did it himself. Therefore he is not prepared at all to forbid it, if it is properly safeguarded by interpretation and by the good order of the Church. But — and this is never to be forgotten — speaking in a tongue is not self-authenticating, and indeed may be the work of demons.

D. St. Paul is concerned with the control and regulation of the practice. This requires the chastening of pride in "spiritual ones" and the obedience to his directions "as the commandments of the Lord."

But behind his effort to regulate and control, and clearly fundamental to his argument, is his effort to divert the zeal for spiritual manifestations to other channels — "pursue the better gifts, and above all that, pursue the far more excellent way of faith, and hope, and love," for these are the supreme *charismata* and the intrinsically and supremely Christian *pneumatika*.