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Viewpoint

GEOFFREY SIMMONS

How would you react, as a member of an Anglican Congregation, if your respected and respectable Vicar stood at the chancel steps one Sunday morning and announced that the Lord had given him a special message to pass on that morning and that he himself did not know what the message would be because it would be 'in a tongue'? Your reaction? Horrified—that this should happen today; annoyed that it could happen here; stunned that God needed to give His message like that; or cynically dubious that there was a 'catch in it somewhere'?

Nevertheless the message was given—and interpreted. And those who knew their vicar knew that this was real; he was not play-acting nor 'putting on a show'; his whole life showed an amazing contact with God and such things were common amongst them. In their private meetings many of the members of this 'suburbia' church spoke in tongues, for they had entered into an 'experience', had, they said, been 'baptised with the Holy Ghost' and were enjoying the present outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

Perhaps we might ask ourselves the questions, 'How far does this present outpouring compare with previous revivals?' 'What is the pattern?' and perhaps, for us the most important question, 'Is it Scriptural?' for surely to this of all phenomena we must beware of applying the pragmatic rather than the spiritual test i.e. not 'does it work?' but rather, 'Is it true to Divine Revelation?'

During times of revival when 'God, the Holy Spirit, moves amongst men' in a remarkable way, many strange things happen. 'I had not spoken for long before I perceived numbers melting. As I proceeded, the influence increased, till, at last (both in the morning and the evening) thousands cried out, so that they almost drowned my voice. Never did I see a more glorious sight. Oh what tears were shed and poured forth after the Lord Jesus. Some fainted, and when they had got a little strength, they would hear and faint again. Others cried out in a manner as if they were in the sharpest agonies of death': an extract from *Whitefield's Journal*, Wednesday, May 14th, 1740. Similar illustrations could be quoted from the New Testament times to the present day—from Jerusalem to the uttermost parts of the earth. Are such things happening *here* today? I think not. In other parts of the world there are signs of 'Revival' but here apparently God is singling out individuals—often when they are completely alone (that is NOT in large emotional meetings) and sometimes not consciously seeking the (or an) 'experience' and is blessing them in a particular way.

The following is one illustration of this and is not to be taken as an example so limiting God's power and work but rather is chosen as an illustration solely because it could be, and in fact is, a common experience of some of the writer's personal friends.

'I found that the references to "speaking in tongues" and Pentecostalism, and questions like "Have you had *the* blessing?" most "off-putting" until I saw the difference in a friend of mine who had had "an experience" (call it what you will). He was from a sound conservative Evangelical home and background yet appeared to be lifted out of the traditional pattern and seemed somehow to radiate the presence of Christ. This interested me to read more carefully the book of Acts and to read also literature about this phenomenon. Gradually there grew a desire on my part to "climb higher", to seek a greater, more perfect holiness, to become more like Christ. One evening, whilst praying and contemplating I suddenly found myself repeating a word (or phrase) of some (to me) unknown language—and with the use of this expression I knew a wonderful nearness to the Risen Lord—I could have put out my hand and touched Him. This experience left me "walking on air". Since then I have often (but not always) "arrived" at the same place in prayer and have found that as I have spoken I have almost been learning a new language—yet not knowing the meaning of what I was saying. I have not used this "gift" in public—only in private prayer when I experience an uplift—a drawing closer to Christ—a revealing of His presence and yet I know that I have not arrived at the end—it's almost like climbing a mountain and finding at the top that the horizon is farther off than ever. This experience has given me, not a satisfaction but a longing—a longing not for a greater nor better experience but for holiness—a holiness not of human standards—but to be more like my Lord. I know that I can pray in "this tongue" almost when I please but this does not bring about that closeness but rather it is only when I draw really close to Him that this happens and then I find I am closer still'.

It would appear that some of the things which are foretold (Isa. 28: 11) and recorded (Acts 10: 44-46, 15: 8, 19: 6)* *are* happening today and that Paul himself had a similar experience (1 Cor. 12 and 14 particularly v. 18) and yet we must note that the Lord when 'filled with the Spirit' did not apparently speak with tongues.† It seems to me foolish to deny the reality of this spiritual experience and if we do perhaps we are falling into the dangerous error of only wanting the Giver and not the Gift(s); which is just as silly as only wanting the Gift(s) and not the Giver. Should not our prayer rather be: 'Lord I so desire to be filled with Thy Holy Spirit that I am prepared to exercise any Gift which He gives'.

*Further references include Mark 1: 7-8. Acts 1: 4-8, Acts 2: 2-4.

†The majority of those who have recently received this gift do not claim it as essential evidence of the initial filling; the consensus of opinion seems to be that many more could enter into this experience if the 'filling of the Holy Spirit' were taught at the time of conversion as it appears to have been in the early church.