

RICHARD A. JENSEN

TOUCHED BY THE SPIRIT

*One Man's Struggle to
Understand His Experience
of the Holy Spirit*

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INTRODUCTION

The Holy Spirit has moved among us. Pentecost still happens. Some have called this the "Latter Rain." Others have called it the "Charismatic Movement." Still others refer to it as part of a "Third American Awakening." "I've been baptized in the Spirit. Praise the Lord."

These have been some of the religious sounds of the '60s and '70s in America. A growing number of people have felt "touched by the Spirit." The experience most common to this Spirit movement has been *glossolalia*, speaking in tongues. Over the past fifteen years this experience, which was central to the development of the Pentecostal churches, has occurred with increasing regularity in Presbyterian, Lutheran, Episcopal, Roman Catholic and many other churches.

Experience is an important part of the life of each Christian. The gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ speaks to the experiential as well as to the intellectual part of our being. There is nothing wrong with having a "Christian

experience." Some of the critiques that I have read concerning this new Pentecostalism have criticized it just because it is an experience. Such criticisms in and of themselves miss the mark. There is nothing wrong with having an experience of the Spirit! Experience is an essential ingredient of Christian life. Experience is just that: experience. It is not theology. Experience becomes theology, however, the moment one attempts to reflect on it, interpret it, and share it with others. Thus there is in America today a wide variety of "theologies of spiritual experience."

Over the past several years the number of books relating and interpreting experiences of the Spirit has increased annually. The literature floods the market. The viewpoints expressed in this ever-proliferating field touch every imaginable base.

Most of what I read disturbs me. I read with a double concern. As I will set forth on the following pages, I have shared many of the experiences which are being talked and written about. That is my first concern. As a brother in the experience I am interested in how others interpret it.

My second concern arises because I am a theologian. Most of the books I read pose theological problems for one who is interested in preserving a classical interpretation and understanding of spiritual experience. Experience interpreted and shared becomes theology. It is either good theology or bad theology. That is, it either agrees with the classic Christian faith as one understands it on the basis of the Bible and one's own confessional background, or it does not. I find that I cannot agree with the theological interpretation given to speaking in tongues and other experiences in most of the literature I read.

I have, therefore, attempted to reflect on and interpret

my own experiences on a biblical foundation and within the theological framework of my own theological tradition. What you read in the following pages represents the present stage of these reflections.

There is a real burden on my heart as I take up this task. People want to know the meaning of spiritual and religious experience. Available books on the subject present myriad viewpoints and problems. There is no way that I can address all the problems that have arisen, all the viewpoints that have been expressed, all the questions people ask. That task is insurmountable. What I can say and do within the pages of this work is limited. I pray that it is helpful in the midst of its limitations.

Undertaking this task I am mindful of the words Jesus spoke to Nicodemus:

The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with every one who is born of the Spirit (John 3:8).

Isn't "theologizing the Holy Spirit" an attempt to box up the wind so that it cannot blow where it wills? That is an ever-present danger. When it happens, when we grasp the movement of the Spirit in rigid intellectual categories, the Spirit may well become *our* spirit. There is obviously a great difference between our spirit and the Holy Spirit. God's Spirit controls us; we do not control him. This truth limits the scope of what we can say about the Spirit. Everyone who writes on this subject must live and work within this limitation. Acknowledging it, we press on to clarify and understand the work of the Holy Spirit.

RICHARD A. JENSEN

1

Feathers and All

January, 1963. A beautiful day in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Every January day is beautiful in Ethiopia. 75 degrees. Sunny skies. We had guests for dinner one Sunday noon. The younger couple was a missionary teacher and his wife, newly arrived from America. The other couple was in Ethiopia under World Brotherhood Exchange. Their assignment was to oversee the building of a chapel, library, and classroom building for Mekane Yesus ("place of Jesus") Seminary.

After dinner we sat in the living room and talked. Before I knew it the man from WBE was making a strong and forceful presentation of a phenomenon he had experienced. It was my first encounter with someone who had personally experienced glossolalia. He had lived in southern California where tongue-speaking first broke into the main-line churches. Father Dennis Bennett's Episcopal congregation in Van Nuys is usually pointed to as the originating

source of the Pentecostal experience in non-Pentecostal churches.

(The movement that grew around these experiences was usually referred to as the charismatic movement or the charismatic renewal. I feel that these labels limit the full meaning of the word *charisma*. Charisma is a Greek word which means "gift." All Christians are gifted; all are therefore, charismatic. I would prefer to refer to the movement that has arisen as the neo-Pentecostal movement. The word "Pentecostal" in this definition refers to the fact that many of the experiences which are central to this movement, such as speaking in tongues, are central matters also in classic Pentecostal churches. The prefix *neo*, meaning "new," is used to indicate that what is being described is not the Pentecostal church but Christians in Protestant and Catholic churches who share many experiences in common with their Pentecostal brothers and sisters.)

This was an afternoon and an experience I shall never forget. I was engaged by this warm, "Spirit-filled," businessman-builder who was urging me to take speaking in tongues seriously. I still do not know why I listened to him. The stuff he was talking about was not my bag. I was a theologian. I had finished seminary and a couple years of graduate school. Now I was teaching theology to an intelligent group of Ethiopian students at Mekane Yesus Seminary.

The theology I had learned and the theology I was teaching did not leave much room for non-rational concepts or experiences. Having studied Bultmann and Tillich and Bonhoeffer, I had learned how to restate the Christian faith in rational, down-to-earth, pragmatic language. Theology, in the fifties and sixties, was seeking to speak mean-

ingfully to rational, scientific-minded people. Speaking in tongues is irrational. I should have laughed it off. But I didn't. Don't ask me why. I just didn't. I listened.

And, I asked questions, lots of them. "What's the use of it all?" "What's the purpose?" I remember those two questions particularly well. One answer made some sense. He quoted Romans 8:26. "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words." He said speaking in tongues is a new language one can use to pray as he ought. The Spirit does the praying for us that way. Interesting.

The afternoon passed. The guests left and the conversation ceased. But I thought about it. What did it all mean? Why did he tell it all to me? I soon found out that I was not the only one he told. He talked to many of our American Lutherans and shared his experiences with them. Some were curious. Some were furious. All were perplexed.

Some of us decided to have it out. We met with him one evening for further discussion and prayer. We talked and talked. It turned out that one of the others had had the experience of tongues back in the States but had repressed it since. We talked some more. Finally the Californian suggested that we pray together. We would pray for the needs of ourselves and others. After we had finished our prayers we would see what the Spirit might do. If we wished the "gift" we could raise our hands and he would pray for us with the laying on of hands. He instructed us that if someone should speak in tongues the whole group should immediately pray for an interpretation. Tongues without interpretations were meaningless in a group, he said. Sound advice!

We prayed. Our friend who had repressed his tongue now spoke in it, and the Californian interpreted it. I held up my hand. He prayed for me. Some tentative sounds began to well up and trickle out of my mouth. Some others had similar experiences. It was scary. It was fascinating. I realized the next day that I didn't believe any of it. What had I done? What had we done? Fools! I checked out my perceptions with two other men. My feelings were confirmed. They didn't believe it either. We thought, however, that we ought to talk about it some more. We met again that night. Just the three of us and our wives this time. We talked some more. I don't know when I've ever talked so earnestly about something. What else can you do when something so strange and different happens to you?

Talk. Finally we prayed again. It happened again. What had been only the faintest hint of a sound the night before suddenly came bursting out of my being with a gusto that just about swept me and everyone else off our feet. It was all nonsense syllables. Nonsense syllables at an unbelievable rate of speed. The sounds were mostly consonants. My own tongue has not changed much to this day. I have never heard another quite like it. Every tongue is different.

Some people speak in different tongues at different times. Most of these tongues sound like pure nonsense. Others sound like they could be a language. There are those who claim to have recognized a language that was spoken in tongues. I haven't had that experience. If you have not heard anyone speak in tongues you can just imagine it as sounding like a language you've never heard before or gibberish.

After we had finished praying that second night we

talked some more. We still didn't believe it. We met again a third night. Three nights in a row! I had never prayed so much in all my life. What was God trying to do to me anyway? Our friend from California joined us that third night. By then the format of our times of prayer was practically fixed. It has not changed much to this day. We shared insights and talked about concerns and needs that we should pray for. We prayed for them. After the sharing and prayers of praise, petition, and intercession (taking perhaps two hours), we "waited" to let the Spirit speak. There were a few tongues. Each was interpreted, that is, rendered into English by one of the participants who had the gift of interpretation. The interpretations we had at that time were mostly praise of God.

Occasionally an interpretation would be given when no one had spoken in tongues. We studied 1 Corinthians 12-14 to figure out that these were "prophecies." I just about wore out those pages of my Bible that week. In 1 Corinthians 14 Paul speaks about the greater value that the gift of prophecy has over the gift of tongues. Tongues only edifies the one who prays unless it is interpreted. Prophecy (just as interpretation) edifies the whole body. Paul's emphasis is always on what is good for the church. We really could not see any difference in content between what was said after someone spoke in tongues (interpretation) and what someone, led by the Spirit, said without a tongue as introduction (prophecy). We believed, and I still believe, that there is no essential difference between interpretation and prophecy. The only difference is that an interpretation interprets a tongue. A prophecy is uttered without a previously spoken tongue.

Paul's words have proven true in my own experience.

Though tongues were a kind of initial sign that excited us and drew us together for prayer, they soon faded in significance. What became important were the prayers of the group, the fellowship that was built, and the interpretations and prophecies that were addressed to us.

After that third night we finally began to believe that we had been touched by the Spirit in a new and puzzling way. It took a long time to accept that experience. It has taken me even longer to learn how to integrate it meaningfully into the total expression of my Christian life and theology. I had had a strange new experience. It was emotional to be sure, though not emotional in the sense that I had usually thought of. I had heard of Pentecostal "holy rollers" and imagined all kinds of wild excitement and gyrations. This was not our experience. It was emotional in a quietly profound way. It touched us deeply. But we never lost control of ourselves. Some quiet lost and lonely place within me had been "strangely warmed." I would never be the same. I am sure the others involved share my viewpoint about the emotional aspects of this experience.

Three nights we had prayed. We were convinced now. It was real. Now we could spread the word of what had happened to all around us. It's hard to contain an experience like that. You want to share it. You want to tell somebody. Everybody. We did. Some listened. Some came and prayed with us. But the overall effect of our testimony, however, was not a good one. Many people were turned off.

Since then I have read the advice that anyone coming into the experience of speaking in tongues should not tell anyone about it for a year. I wish I had heard or read that then. It is good advice. I did know from reading the Gospels that when Jesus did miraculous deeds among his

people he sometimes told them to "tell no one." Other times he told them to spread the word around. Which should it be with glossolalia? I didn't know then and I don't know today. My advice, however, is to tell no one. I have learned over the years that the opportunities for sharing such an experience present themselves. When they do the end results are much better than when I decide who needs to be told. This book violates that basic rule. Somewhere in my heart I feel that the time has come to share my story in this form. What happens to it and with it is out of my hands.

In my initial excitement, however, I didn't keep my mouth shut. How I wish I could take back many of the ill-timed words I spoke! I am reminded of Luther's words concerning one of his ex-colleagues, Karlstadt, who claimed to have moved beyond Luther in his Christian experience. Karlstadt claimed that Luther had only the written Word to rely on, while he was led by the direct guidance of the Holy Spirit. Luther thought that Karlstadt had turned everything upside down. Karlstadt valued the *inner* workings of the Spirit over the *outer* means of the Spirit's presence in Word and Sacrament. As far as Luther was concerned that was the wrong way of emphasizing the Spirit's work. He thought that Karlstadt was guilty of devouring the Holy Spirit "feathers and all" (a reference to the dove as a symbol of the Spirit). Those watching and listening to me in those days must have thought that I, like Karlstadt, had also swallowed the Holy Spirit, *feathers and all*.

2

For the Common Good

To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good (1 Cor. 12:7).

An experience had happened. I had tried sharing it with as many people as I could. That didn't work. Why? What happened? What would work? What was I to *think* about this new-found experience? What was I to *do* about it? As time went by the *thinking* got done in the context of the *doing*.

The doing took place within the context of a prayer group. Some of the people who had shared these initial experiences and some who heard us talk about it got together for prayer. For the next few years this prayer group met on a somewhat regular basis. It was in this fellowship that I learned some of my deepest lessons about the meaning of Christian community.

Probably the most humbling lesson I learned was how community among Christians is created. We didn't do it ourselves! The Spirit called us into community. He did it

in a most ridiculous way, or so it seemed. His instrument was the "gift of tongues." The facts are simple. Before this experience took place we of our own will and volition created no community of prayer. We were too weak for that. But the Spirit helped us in our weakness (Rom. 8:26). He helped us in a way we would never have dreamed of. Tongues! Of all things! We were fascinated by this strange new gift/experience. It became the occasion for our meeting together to pray. I am not proud of that. I'm humiliated. Why didn't we get together on our own? Why did we need this unusual "gift of the Spirit" to draw us together? But that's the way it was. That's how the sovereign Spirit chose to create our particular fellowship.

Shaping a Prayer Gathering

We met together often. It was a Spirit-created communion. But what were we to do in these prayer meetings? How was the gift of tongues to be utilized? As I mentioned earlier, I searched the New Testament, particularly 1 Corinthians 12-14, for an answer. The clearest direction came from 1 Corinthians 14:26-33:

What then, brethren? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification. If any speak in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn; and let one interpret. But if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silence in church and speak to himself and to God. Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. If a revelation is made to another sitting by, let the first be silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged; and the spirits of proph-