

From the Edifying to the Unacceptable:
Reflections on Evaluating 'Charismatic Trends in the Church'

'Your worship service is dull and unexciting.'
'Are you a Born-Again Christian?'
'E.P. Church members do not know how to pray effectively.'
'Why do you not speak in tongues?'
'If only you tithed, you would receive all God's blessings.'
'Do you fast in your church?'

These are but a few of multitudes of statements and questions we hear frequently these days. They come from both those who claim to belong to the Charismatic Movement and those who do not. In many instances, they come from members of the E.P. Church who are honestly seeking advice and guidance from church leaders. Presently, a young member of our congregation and I are engaged in counselling sessions as a result of his polite but fervent request to teach him 'how to receive the Holy Spirit.' My prayer is that our humble search together will lead to a deeper and healthier understanding of the Spirit and life in the Lord. What I am sure of, however, is that the young man's quest is the result of the impact of what we have labeled 'charismaticism' on the Christian world.

This is not to say that people who have not come into contact with the Charismatic Movement never ask such questions. They do; but the frequency and intensity with which these questions and statements arise have increased with the rise in the influence of the movement in Ghana.

Fortunately, studies of the movement, which used to be very limited in number and scope, have been on the increase. Both Roman Catholics and Protestants have begun to pay more attention to the phenomenon and its impact on their own denomination. Instead of ignoring or dismissing it outright, more and more serious and hopefully, unbiased studies and reports have begun to appear, and our understanding of its characteristics and effects is increasing.⁽¹⁾ For instance, it is evident that ever since the early years of Christianity, what we are calling charismatic movements have appeared and reappeared many times. This includes aspects of the Reformation as well as the origins of the Wesleyan Methodism.⁽²⁾ It is also clear that the occurrence of spectacular spiritualist revivals is not limited to the Christian faith. They manifest themselves in Judaism, Islam, Buddhism as well as in our traditional African Religion.

In his little but very useful book The Rise of the Charismatic Movement in the Mainline Churches in Ghana,⁽³⁾ Abamfo Atiemo discusses the origins of the movement and its effect on the mission-founded denominations in Ghana. The impact and effects have been very deep and multi-faceted. It is generally agreed that they have been both positive and negative. While some aspects of the movement have led to revival and renewal in some area of church life, other aspects have led to misunderstanding and conflict.

Among the positive and edifying effects, Atiemo mentions the following:

The Restoration of Evangelism.
 Positive Changes in the Liturgy
 A Stronger Sense of Koinonia and Diakonia
 Deeper Commitment of Church Members to the Church's Institutions and Regulations
 More Desire to Understand and Practice the Christian faith
 The Adaptation of Ghanaian Culture Elements to Christian life and Worship.
 The Generation of a Sense of Ecumenism among Christians of Different
 Denomination Living in the Some Area.
 Increased Lay Initiative and Participation in Worship and Witnessing.
 Some Psychological and Group Therapy.

Among the problematic and adverse effects brought about through the movement, according to Atiemo are:

Uncritical Acceptance of a lot of the Doctrines and Practices of Pentecostal and 'Spiritual' Churches as Truth.
 The Divisive Distinction made between the 'Charismatic' and the 'Non-Charismatics.'⁽⁴⁾
 The Question of 'Who Wields de Facto Authority in the Church.'⁽⁵⁾
 And last, but not the least, Insistence on Speaking in Tongues as the Criterion of 'Holy Spirit Baptism.'

This list of the pros and cons of the effects of the charismatic movement on the faith and the life of the Church has been known for some time. The special credit we must give to Atiemo is that he has brought them together in one publication and has discussed them in some detail. Hitherto, reaction to these issues have differed from persuasion to persuasion. Generally, those who are sympathetic with charismatism only extol the benefits and deemphasise the difficulties it generates; and those opposed to the trend emphasise the ill-effects, (actually often 'side-effects') and depreciate the benefits and challenges.

But the time has come for more serious and less prejudiced study of the true nature of the phenomenon, its impact and reactions to these. We need a more refined scrutiny of the real and alleged beliefs, claims and practices as well as their acceptability or otherwise as part of the faith and ethics of the Church. As of now, many Ghanaians do not distinguish between the basic tenets of the Charismatic Movement on the one hand, and that of the Pentecostal, Apostolic and Spiritualist denominations. Part of the reason is that the movement has manifested itself here more in the form and fashion of these denominations. It seems necessary to find out if they might actually be distinguishable. One of the objectives of this paper is to draw attention to this need for distinguishing the fundamental characteristics of charismatism. We would also like to advocate a more refined examination of the effects, actual, imagined and claimed, of charismatic beliefs and practices on our Christian life and belief. Often for example, beliefs in witches and blood sucking aunts which may come originally from the indigenous African religious background, are expressed by people with charismatic tendencies and these may be taken as basic charismatic tenets. The purpose and content of Deliverance services can hardly be

distinguished from traditional exorcising sessions. Although this is rather difficult to do, in fairness to all concerned including ourselves, we should establish what the various persuasions have in themselves and what they share.

A very devoted layman friend, who heard about the theme of this Consultation exhorted me: 'Church members need some clear measuring standards, or at least, some guidelines to go by. Your 'book-long' "On the one hand this, and on the other hand that..." is confusing us.' We need to articulate clearly that a lot of beliefs and statements attributed to charismatics are not uniquely charismatic positions in themselves. Some are positions held primarily by people of Pentecostal persuasion and others have come to Christian seekers from the traditional African cosmology and religious world-view. Nevertheless, we cannot deceive ourselves that these distinctions can be fully made in all cases. In many instances they have merged to form the complex of belief and behavior trait of people. The advocating of compulsory immersion during baptism, for example, while not a basic tenet of 'charismatic' Christians, as far as I know, is tending to become the expected rule among groups who call themselves charismatic. Careful and unbiased investigation and discussion in love can result in a clearer picture. Then a set of parameters could be brought out which can be used for establishing the acceptability or otherwise of various positions, claims and demands.

It is obvious that the 'lumping' of these teachings and the effects they have had on mainline Churches into two groups: 1. 'the positive and challenging' on the one hand and 2. 'the negative and unacceptable' is an oversimplification of the facts. What we are really looking at is the reaction of people to these precepts. While one's first reaction to the advocated positions and actions may be primarily positive or negative, it seems more realistic to suggest a cline of reactions between these two extremities. A very tentative and untested Cline of Reactions may be suggested with the following Reaction Features as contiguous and indistinct categories:

Cline of Reaction Types.

1. Certainly Acceptable and Edifying
2. Challenging and Worthy of Trial
3. Comfortable but not necessarily Obligatory
4. Neutral
5. Uncomfortable but Tolerable
6. Disturbing
7. Possibly Disruptive
8. Unacceptable

The rationale behind the values assigned could be discussed later.

Collected lists of statements and queries, whether theological, ethical or specific suggested behaviour such as those at the opening of the paper are the 'raw data' for our investigation and considered reactions to these may be assigned to these suggested tentative parameters. In some cases direct questions could be restructured into one or several statements.

For example, the following constitute this author's own reaction to some of the positions articulated by inquirers. Each statement is assigned the numerical category selected by the author from the cline suggested above:

- You must be baptized by total immersion to be a christian.(8)
- Tithing is a christian must.(3)
- If you receive the Holy Spirit you must speak in tongues.(7)
- As an African you must clap and dance spontaneously to show that you are worshipping sincerely.(5)
- Christians must testify to their faith.(1)
- Individual testimony must be part of public worship.(6)
- Evil spirits and witches are real and must be exocised through rituals and deliverance services.(8)

First, it must be admitted that the reaction categories assigned are rather personal and therefore likely to be idiosyncratic, but consensus is possible through discussion. Once a group come to consensus it is possible to build up a reasonably acceptable Cline of Reactions.

Secondly, we need to remember that the Scripture, rather than just the individual's sentiment should be the basis of the category assignments. This means that the respondent must know the Biblical basis for the positions held. He must not be just a literary interpreter but well-versed in Biblical Exegesis and Interpretation and must accept that the Holy Spirit continues to enlighten us as we ponder God's Word. While this approach needs refinement and improvement in several places, it is an improvement on what has been available for assessing reactions of, not only charismatics, but of many other positions expressed. We hope that students of religion will continue to develop more and more sophisticated instruments which will enable us to get greater insights into peoples faith and practice.

Now, a few comments on a couple of presuppositions underlying some generalisations frequently made in connection with the phenomenon of charismatic belief and practice in Ghana. These comments are to serve as illustration on how sweeping generalisations regarding both traditional christian and the more charismatic counterparts have been made and how these need further scrutiny. First, it is assumed that the African universally 'drums and dances his religion.' Therefore 1. the whole of the worship act of the traditional African is drumming and dancing and 2. that all Africans, including christians, must clap and dance at worship. This presupposition is not true. Even among Africans there are the extroverted and the introverted. The former would be inclined to dance in situations where the latter would feel reluctant to. It should therefore not be assumed that all genuinely religious people with black skins should clap and dance to show that they are truly worshipping. Moreover, each worshipper must respect the other's temperament. In fact many people who are not necessarily of puritan background, believe that dancing is more of self exhibition than anything else and would rather not perform for show at worship, traditional or christian.

Secondly, it is alleged that charismatics tend to indigenise worship. This is only partially true. In the field of music, it is a fact that the spontaneous songs which are often composed by and for charismatic worship are to African 'highlife' rhythmic patterns and words. But it is observed that charismatics have tended to avoid the more sophisticated truly African compositions like those of Amu, Nayo, T. Kwami, Blege N and others. It is the same ones who avoid items from European hymnology who also avoid the African composers. Is it more an avoidance of the complicated and preference for the simple, short and repetitive, whether in English or the local language?

Also, when we examine the musical instruments used at worship by the more charismatic groups, they tend to prefer western pop musical instruments like electrical guitars, keyboards and drums than truly genuine locally manufactured drums. Some even would avoid our own drums because the 'old evil spirit' still dwells in them.

In vestments, especially in the cities and large towns, there is a tendency for the preacher and choir to appear, preach and sing more and more like Afro-American counterparts than African. It cannot be said that the tendency of the charismatics to indigenise is general. Indigenisation of traditional beliefs, especially in spiritual entities like witches, Mammy Water and money-making snakes do actually take place. But in some other areas, the preference is for 'western pop' style, whether in preaching, singing or dressing. These two examples are meant to illustrate that presently our generalisations are too wide and need refinement.

Finally, we need to point out that our evaluation of the charismatic trends as well as any teaching in the christian faith should be based solidly on the Scripture, but the Scripture as illuminated by adequate appreciation for the context, exegesis and reverent interpretation. And this must be Christ-centred rather than self-centred. In addition to the very appropriate texts chosen for devotion during this Consultation, we would like to suggest Gal 5.13-26 as complement. The gifts of the Spirit are multitudenous and must not be restricted. But Christ-like Love crowns them all.

Before I take my seat, a final admonition to both the enthusiastic charismatic and unchanging mainline church leader, both of whom tend to be avid believers in the Devil as brought us by our pietistic missionary pioneers and embelished from our traditional background. Two formidable agents of Satan, and enemies of Christ, are a pompous charismatic and a stubborn mainline christian.

G. Ansre.

Notes:

1. See for example Baeta, 1962, Debrunner, 1967 Barret, 1982
Beckham, 1975, Hollenweger in IRM, 1986, 'History of Charismatic
Renewal in Ghana (A.C.P) 1986, WCC, 1981.
2. Instances of such earlier revival and ecstatic manifestations are I Cor. 12-14,
Montanism, the Monastic Movement, Waldenses, Anabaptists,
the Wesleyan Methodist Movement.
3. Atiemo, Abamfo O. The Rise of the Charismatic Movement in the Mainline
Churches of Ghana, Asempa, Accra, 1993.
4. In the usual expression, the 'Born-Again' and the 'Un-Born-Again' and
therefore by implication, the holy and the unholy.
5. That is the ordained and officially recognized ministry or the charismatic leader.