

No Church or Christianity Without the Holy Spirit

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Reading: Acts 1:1-5.

"Jesus... was received up, after that he had given commandment through the Holy Spirit unto the apostles whom he had chosen... and, being assembled together with them, he charged them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, said he, ye heard from me: for John indeed baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized in the Holy Spirit not many days hence."

It is of the greatest importance that we, as the Lord's people, should be deeply concerned about two things.

There should be in our hearts, in the first place, a very real concern for the fullest Christian life that it is possible to know. Such a concern is a necessary link between us and that which is the Lord's will for us: for you notice that when the incoming of the Holy Spirit is spoken of in the Word, the expression 'filled' is often used. The Lord's thought is 'fulness': it is not just that we should 'receive' the Spirit (cf. Acts 8:15,17), but that we should be filled with the Spirit; not just that we should be 'filled' (cf. 1 Cor. 4:8), but that we should be filled with the Spirit. If, therefore, we are to come into God's thought for us, we need to be deeply exercised about this matter of knowing a life of as great a fulness as the Lord intends it to be.

And, in the second place, we should have a deep concern for the most effective possible witness in the world by the Church - that the Church's testimony in the nations should be as effective as the Lord would have it.

These two things are essential to the realisation of the Lord's thought and intention. But, in relation thereto, there are certain important considerations.

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In the first place, 'Christianity' - the Christian life and the Church - owes its very existence to the advent of the Holy Spirit, to that day which is marked out in history as 'the Day of Pentecost'. There had been many days of Pentecost before that one, for the Feast of Weeks, the feast of the firstfruits of the wheat harvest (Ex. 23:16, 34:22), observed on the fiftieth day (Gk. pentekostos, fiftieth) after the Passover, was one of the seven principal festal seasons in Israel. The day of Pentecost had been observed year by year throughout the centuries. But there had never been a Day of Pentecost like this one. So much was this so, that this is the only 'Pentecost' that we ever think of when we use the word. We forget that it was an annual event, and so a commonplace in the life of Israel. Although, of course, the actual term 'Pentecost' only entered into the common vocabulary of the Greek-speaking Jews and proselytes of the latter centuries B.C., the feast itself formed part of the common course of Israelitish festivities; it was what we might almost call an 'everyday idea' in Israel. But that particular occasion swallowed up all the others. It brought into full meaning all that the others had foreshadowed; it was The Day of Pentecost, rightly called that in the Scripture. Christianity and the Church owe their existence to what happened on that Day. This means that there is no Christianity - there is no Church, as recognised in Heaven and in the Word of God - that is not the product of the Holy Spirit. Without the Holy Spirit, neither Church nor Christian life is possible.

From which, of course, it follows that Christianity and the Church can never fulfil their purpose, or reach their Divinely intended goal, on any other ground than that upon which they started, that is, upon the ground of the Holy Spirit. No alternatives are open to them; there are no substitutes for the Holy Spirit available. If the Holy Spirit does not continue with them, then Christianity and the Church lose the very meaning of their existence.

Fundamental Principles Underlay the 'Acts' of the Spirit

A second consideration is this. The opening phase of the Holy Spirit's activity was not just a set of unrelated acts. We have sometimes substituted for the artificial and unwarranted title in our Bible, 'The Acts of the Apostles', that other and better title, 'The Acts of the Holy Spirit'; but we have still regarded the events that are here recorded as a mere set of acts. We rightly attribute them to the Holy Spirit; but for us they are still just so many - of course very wonderful - 'acts'. And yet, they were not just unrelated acts of the Holy Spirit, and certainly not of the apostles. The falsity of the latter title is seen in the fact that not half-a-dozen of the apostles have a place in the book, after the first chapter. After being listed there in toto, most of them then disappear from the book completely; and the apostles who really play a part in the 'Acts' are very few - Peter and Paul, and one or two others. No; this may be a record of the acts of some apostles, but it certainly is not a record of the Acts of the Apostles, as a whole.

My point is this: that the 'acts' that are here narrated were related to fundamental principles of the Holy Spirit. These events were not the beginning and end of everything, in themselves, they were the demonstration of certain spiritual realities which lay behind them. We go completely astray when we fail to recognise this. They were not merely isolated 'happenings', without further meaning than themselves. They had a very deep meaning - a much greater significance than what merely appeared on the surface; they carried with them deep spiritual truths. If you and I are really concerned about this matter of a full Christian life and of the Church's effective witness in the nations, we have got to get behind the 'acts' to the meaning of the acts, to the principles which the acts demonstrated, for they were all most significant things, as we shall see later.

The Church at the Beginning - and Now

At this point, we must note - what is, alas, only too obvious - the sad contrast existing between the first thirty years of Christianity and of the Church, and that of all the centuries since. There really has been nothing in all these centuries comparable to those thirty years. The known 'world', certainly, was a very much smaller place than it is now. But, even so, making all allowance for this, the indisputable fact remains that then, in that more limited known world of nations and people, an impact was registered with which nothing that has occurred since bears any comparison. It is doubtful whether all the subsequent centuries put together could represent the spiritual force that was there in those early years. The witness in the nations was unparalleled in its effectiveness. We need only to recall what happened during the lifetime of the Apostle Paul alone: to think of how things were when Paul was converted - the Church small and struggling, limited in range and in effect - and then of the situation when Paul went to the Lord - churches in practically every nation, and many far beyond all national locations. "Their sound went out into all the earth, and their words unto the ends of the world" (Rom. 10:18) - that is the statement. It is a tremendous record for a mere thirty years of Christian service, on the part, mainly, of one man. There has been nothing to compare with it since.

But there then set in something which checked the spiritual impact almost entirely - indeed, started a downgrade movement; so that, but for little lamps of testimony, from time to time, here and there, in remote places, the Church as a whole lost its testimony in the world, and its sense of responsibility for it. So deeply and terribly was that true, that, even at so late a period as the end of the eighteenth century, when William Carey (1761-1834), away in a country church, was speaking about the obligation that rests upon the Church of God for taking the Gospel of Christ to the heathen, he was immediately pounced upon by a member of the gathered company, and rebuked with: 'Young man, if God ever wants to evangelize the heathen, He will do it with better material than you!' 'He will do it without our help' - that was the thought. There was an utter loss of a sense of responsibility.

But then there came a revival - what we may call a 'renaissance' - of that responsibility. I am not going to give a history of missions: that is not the point; but just think of all that has been devoted to this undertaking during, say, the last hundred years. Think of all the lives that have gone out into the nations with the inspiration to evangelize - a great and mighty army of men and women; think of all the millions of money that have been poured into this. If it were possible to produce a comprehensive document, or statement, showing how many Societies have been, and are now, engaged in this work, and how many representatives they have had since they were founded, and how much organization there has been, and how many countries have given of their resources in persons and means and energy; it would be a startling and amazing story.

Today, with it all, not half of the world knows anything about the Gospel! not half the world is touched! And what is more, Christianity is losing its influence in this world - you have only to look at our own country of Britain to see this. We are noting it in these very days. How tragic is the loss of testimony in high places, the loss of the place of God amongst authorities and rulers; the terrible growth of godlessness, and God-forgetfulness, and God-ignoring, in the Western world. What is the matter?

I say all this by way of drawing a comparison. In the beginning, the Church registered such an impact upon this earth that men were provoked to say: "These that have turned the world upside down are come hither"! (Acts 17:6). Rulers and nations - and hell - were stirred, were provoked with fear for the presence of this 'thing'. It is not like that now. I do not dwell too much upon it, but, with every honour and respect for all that is devoted and true and sacrificing, the spiritual ineffectiveness today, the kind of Christianity that is so very general, makes a terrible story - I am speaking quite generally. Why? what is the matter?

The Lord Would Continue His Original Work

It brings us back to this whole question of the Holy Spirit. And it challenges us, and provokes in us, surely,

some questions. The question that immediately arises in our hearts is: Have we any ground for believing that the Holy Spirit would continue or repeat the works of those first thirty years? Was it just something for a time? Did God just then, in this massive way, demonstrate something, which He did not intend to be perpetuated or repeated: something that was for a time only, something merely to be looked back upon?

I think the answer lies in two directions.

First of all, surely it is at least implied in the words of Luke at the beginning of this second treatise of his: "The former treatise I made... concerning all that Jesus began both to do and to teach, until the day in which he was received up". Implicit in that statement is - not only that now Luke is saying: 'I am going to tell you what Jesus continues to do after He is received up' - but, surely, that His 'receiving up', and His continuing of the work from His heavenly position, is something that is not related to time at all, much less to the few short years of one man's life, His life on earth. Surely we have ground for believing that the Lord, from His heavenly position, would go on. And in reality He is going on with His work: because, as the Scriptures throughout testify, it is a work for a whole dispensation. The Lord Jesus Himself said: "I am with you all the days, even unto the consummation of the age" (Matt. 28:20, mg.). The end of the age did not come when the Apostle Paul was executed and went to the Lord!

But we have other evidence that answers our question: namely, the fact that through this age, and even in our own day, wherever the Lord has His required conditions He does this very thing. He does it - the thing happens! It may not be world-wide; nevertheless, here and there, from time to time, the Lord has done something comparable in its range to what happened at the beginning - He has just done it. And, in some parts of the world, He is doing it now: it is there, and it can be seen. The Lord is doing something quite wonderful, and when you see it and know it, you have to say: This is just what we read of in the book of the Acts! Yes, there are instances through history that prove that, if the Lord has His required conditions, He would go on with the same kind of work as He did at the beginning.

That leads us, of course, to ask the further question: Why was the work arrested? why, at a certain clearly defined point in the history of Christianity, did the work begin to fade out? You can see when it began to happen; and, if you look into it carefully, you can see why it began to happen. We could, in fact, put the question in another form: What is the ground of the Holy Spirit's work? If we can answer the second question, we have answered the first - why it was arrested? The answer is found in a discovery of the ground upon which the Holy Spirit works, and continues His working.