**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**ACTS-010. A FOURFOLD CORD by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And they continued stedfastly in the Apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers."*

*Acts 2:42*

The Early Church was not a pattern for us, and the idea of its greatly superior purity is very largely a delusion. But still, though that be true, the occasional glimpses that we get at intervals in the early chapters of this Book of the Acts of the Apostles do present a very instructive and beautiful picture of what a Christian society may be, and therefore of what Christian Churches and Christian individuals ought to be.

The words that I have read, however, are not the description of the demeanour of the whole community, but of that portion of it which had been added so swiftly to the original nucleus on the Day of Pentecost. Think, on the morning of that day the number of the names was one hundred and twenty, on the evening of that day it was three thousand over that number--a sufficiently swift and large increase to have swamped the original nucleus, unless there had been a great power of assimilation to itself lodged in that little body. These new converts held to the Apostolic doctrine and fellowship, and to breaking of bread and to prayers, and so became homogeneous with the others, and all worked to one end.

Now, these four points which are signalised in this description may well afford us material for consideration. They give us the ideal of a Church's inner life, which in the divine order should precede, and be the basis of, a Church's work in the world. But, while we speak of an ideal for a Church, let us not forget that it is realised only by the lives of individuals being conformed to it.

**I. The first point, which is fundamental to all the others, is They continued steadfastly in the Apostles' doctrine.**

An earnest desire after fuller knowledge is the basis of all healthy Christian life. We cannot realise, without a great effort, the ignorance of these new converts. Parthians and Medes and Elamites, and Jews gathered from every corner of the Roman world, they had come up to Jerusalem, and the bulk of them knew no more about Christ and Christianity than what they picked up out of Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost. But that was enough to change their hearts and their wills and to lead them to a real faith. And though the contents of their faith were very incomplete, the power of their faith was very great. For there is no necessary connection between the amount believed and the grasp with which it is held. Believing, they were eager for more light to be poured on to their half-seeing eyes. They had no Gospels, they had no written record, they had no means of learning anything about the faith which they were now professing except listening to one or other of the original Eleven, with the addition of any of the other old disciples--that is, early disciples--who might perchance have equal claims to be listened to as witnesses from the beginning. We shall very much misunderstand the meaning of the words here, if we suppose that these novices were dosed with theological instruction, or that the Apostles' doctrine consisted of such fully developed truths as we find later on in Paul's writings. If you will look at the first sermons that Peter is recorded as having delivered, in the early chapters of the Acts, you will find that he by no means enunciates a definite theology such as he unfolds in his later Epistle. There is no word about the divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ; His designation is Thy holy child Jesus. There is no word about the atoning nature of Christ's sacrifice; His death is simply the great crime of the Jewish people, and His Resurrection the great divine fact witnessing to the truth of His Messiahship. All that which we now regard, and rightly regard, as the very centre and living focus of divine truth was but beginning to shine out on the Apostles' minds, or rather to gather itself into form, and to shape itself by slow degrees into propositions. The Apostles' teaching--for doctrine does not convey to modern ears what Luke meant by the word--must have been very largely, if not exclusively, of the same kind as is preserved to us in the four Gospels, and especially in the first three of them. The recital to these listeners, to whom it was all so fresh and strange and transcendent, of the story that has become worn and commonplace to us by its familiarity, of Christ in His birth, Christ in His gentleness, Christ in His deeds, Christ in the deep words that the Apostles were only beginning to understand; Christ in His Death, Resurrection, and Ascension--these were the themes on the narration of which this company of three thousand waited with such eagerness.

But, of course, there was necessarily involved in the story a certain amount of what we now call doctrine--that is, theological teaching-- because one cannot tell the story of Jesus Christ, as it is told in the four Gospels, without impressing upon the hearers the conviction that His nature was divine and that His death was a sacrifice. Beyond these truths we know not how far the Apostles went. To these, perhaps, they did not at first rise. But whether they did so or no, and although the facts that the hearers were thus eager to receive, and treasured when they received, are the commonplaces of our Sunday-schools, and quite uninteresting to many of us, the spirit which marked these early converts is the spirit that must lie at the foundation of progressive and healthy Christianity in us. The consciousness of our own ignorance, of the great sweep of God's revealed mind and will, the eager desire to fill up the gaps in the circle, and to widen the diameter, of our knowledge, and the consequent steadfastness and persistence of our continuance in the teachings--far fuller and deeper and richer and nobler than were heard in the upper room at Jerusalem by the first three thousand-- which, through the divine Spirit and the experience of the Church for nineteen hundred years are available for us, ought to characterise us all.

Now, dear friends, ask yourselves the question very earnestly, Does this desire of fuller Christian knowledge at all mark my Christian character, and does it practically influence my Christian conduct and life? There are thousands of men and women in all our churches who know no more about the rich revelation of God in Jesus Christ than they did on that day long, long ago, when first they began to apprehend that He was the Saviour of their souls. When I sometimes get glimpses into the utter Biblical ignorance of educated members of my own and of other congregations, I am appalled; I do not wonder how we ministers do so little by our preaching, when the minds of the people to whom we speak are so largely in such a chaotic state in reference to Scriptural truth. I believe that there is an intolerance of plain, sober, instructive Christian teaching from the pulpit, which is one of the worst signs of the Christianity of this generation. And I believe that there are a terribly large number of professing Christians, and good people after a fashion, whose Bibles are as clean to-day, except on one or two favourite pages, as they were when they came out of the bookseller's shop years and years ago. You will never be strong Christians, you will never be happy ones, until you make conscience of the study of God's Word and continue steadfastly in the Apostles' teaching. You may produce plenty of emotional Christianity, and of busy and sometimes fussy work without it, but you will not get depth. I sometimes think that the complaint of the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews might be turned upside down nowadays. He says: When for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles. Nowadays we might say in Sunday-schools and other places of church work: When for the time ye ought to be learners, you have taken to teaching before you know what you are teaching, and so neither you nor your scholars will profit much. The vase should be full before you begin to empty it.

Again, there ought to be, and we ought to aim after, an equable temper of mutual brotherhood conquering selfishness.

They continued in the Apostles' doctrine and in fellowship. Fellowship here, as I take it, applies to community of feeling. A verse or two afterwards it is applied to community of goods, but we have nothing to do with that subject at present. What is meant is that these three thousand, as was most natural, cut off altogether from their ancient associations, finding themselves at once separated by a great gulf from their nation and its hopes and its religion, were driven together as sheep are when wolves are prowling around. And, being individually weak, they held on by one another, so that many weaknesses might make a strength, and glimmering embers raked together might break into a flame.

Now, all these circumstances, or almost all of them, that drove the primitive believers together, are at an end, and the tendencies of this day are rather to drive Christian people apart than to draw them together. Differences of position, occupation, culture, ways of looking at things, views of Christian truth and the like, all come powerfully in to the reinforcement of the natural selfishness which tempts us all, unless the grace of God overcomes it. Although we do not want any hysterical or histrionic presentation of Christian sympathy and brotherhood, we do need--far more than any of us have awakened to the consciousness of the need--for the health of our own souls we need to make definite efforts to cultivate more of that sense of Christian brotherhood with all that hold the same Lord Christ, and to realise this truth: that they and we, however separate, are nearer one another than are we and those nearest to us who do not share in our Christian faith.

I do not dwell upon this point. It is one on which it is easy to gush, and it has got a bad name because there has been so much unreal and sickly talk about it. But if any Christian man will honestly try to cultivate the brotherly feeling which my text suggests, and to which our common relation to Jesus Christ binds us, and will try it in reference to A, B, or C, whom he does not much like, with whose ways he has no kind of sympathy, whom he believes to be a heretic, and who perhaps returns the belief about him with interest, he will find it is a pretty sharp test of his Christian principle. Let us be real, at any rate, and not pretend to have more love than we really have in our hearts. And let us remember that he that loveth Him that begat, loveth Him also that is begotten of Him.

**II. Another characteristic which comes out in the words before us is the blending of worship with life.**

They continued steadfastly in the Apostles' doctrine ... and in breaking of bread. Commentators who can only see one thing at a time--and there are a good many of that species--have got up great discussions as to whether this phrase means eating ordinary meals or partaking of the Lord's Supper. I venture to say it means both, because, clearly enough, in the beginning, the common meal was hallowed by what we now call the Lord's Supper being associated with it, and every day's evening repast was eaten in remembrance of Him.

So, naturally, and without an idea of anything awful or sacred about the rite, the first Christians, when they went home after a hard day's work and sat down to take their own suppers, blessed the bread and the wine, and whether they ate or drank, did the one and the other in remembrance of Him.

The gradual growth of the sentiment attaching to the Lord's Supper, until it reached the portentous height of regarding it as a tremendous sacrifice which could only be administered by priests with ordained hands in Apostolic succession, can be partly traced even in New Testament times. The Lord's Supper began as an appendage to, or rather as a heightening of, the evening meal, and at first, as this chapter tells us in a subsequent verse, was observed day by day. Then, before the epoch of the Acts of the Apostles is ended, we find it has become a weekly celebration, and forms part of the service on the first day of the week. But even when the observance had ceased to be daily, the association with an ordinary meal continued, and that led to the disorders at Corinth which Paul rebuked, and which would have been impossible if later ideas of the Lord's Supper had existed then.

The history of the transformation of that simple Supper into the bloodless sacrifice of the Mass, and all the mischief consequent thereon, does not concern us now. But it does concern us to note that these first believers hallowed common things by doing them, and common food by partaking of it, with the memory of His great sacrifice in their minds. The poorest fare, the coarsest bread, the sourest wine, on the humblest table, became a memorial of that dear Lord. Religion and life, the domestic and the devout, were so closely braided together that when a household sat at table it was both a family and a church; and while they were eating their meat for the strength of their body, they were partaking of the memorial of their dying Lord.

Is your house like that? Is your daily life like that? Do you bring the sacred and the secular as close together as that? Are the dying words of your Master, This do in remembrance of Me, written by you over everything you do? And so is all life worship, and all worship hope?

**III. The last thing here is habitual devotion.**

I suppose the disciples had no forms of set Christian prayers. They still used the Jewish liturgy, for we read that they continued daily with one accord in the Temple. I am sure that no two things can be less like one another than the worship of the primitive Church and the worship, say, of one of our congregations. Did you ever try to paint for yourselves, for instance, the scene described in the First Epistle to the Corinthians? When they came together in their meetings for worship, every one had a psalm, a doctrine, an interpretation. Let the prophets speak, by ones, or at most by twos; and if another gets up to interrupt, let the first speaker sit down. Paul goes on to say, Let all things be done decently and in order. So there must have been tendencies to disorder, and much at which some of our modern ecclesiastical martinets would have been very much scandalised as unbecoming. Wise men are in no haste to change forms. Forms change of themselves when their users change; but it would be a good day for Christendom if the faith and devoutness of a community of believers such as we, for instance, profess to be, were so strong and so demanding expression as that, instead of my poor voice continually sounding here, every one of you had a psalm or a doctrine, and every one of you were able and impelled to speak out of the fulness of the Spirit which God poured into you. It will come some day; it must come if Christendom is not to die of its own dignity. But we do not need to hurry matters, only let us remember that unless a Church continues steadfast in prayer it is worth very little.

Now, dear brethren, it is said about us Free Churchmen that we think a great deal too much of preaching and a great deal too little of the prayers of the congregation. That is a stock criticism. I am bound to say that there is a grain of truth in it, and that there is not, with too many of our congregations, as lofty a conception of the power and blessedness of the united prayers of the congregation as there ought to be, or else you would not hear about introductory services. Introductory to what? Do we speak to God merely by way of preface to one of us talking to his brethren? Is that the proper order? They continued steadfastly in the Apostles' teaching, no doubt; but also steadfastly in prayer. I pray you to try to make this picture of the Pentecostal converts the ideal of your own lives, and to do your best to help forward the time when it shall be the reality in this church, and in every other society of professing Christians.