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

**ACTS-074. TWO FRUITFUL YEARS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. And it came to pass, that, while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul having passed through the upper coasts came to Ephesus: and finding certain disciples. 2. He said unto them, Have ye received the Holy Ghost since ye believed? And they said unto him, We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost. 3. And he said unto them, Unto what then were ye baptized? And they said, Unto John's baptism. 4. Then said Paul, John verily baptized with the baptism of repentance, saying unto the people, that they should believe on Him which should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus. 5. When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. 6. And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Ghost came on them; and they spake with tongues, and prophesied. 7. And all the men were about twelve. 8. And he went into the synagogue, and spake boldly for the space of three months, disputing and persuading the things concerning the kingdom of God. 9. But when divers were hardened, and believed not, but spake evil of that way before the multitude, he departed from them, and separated the disciples, disputing daily in the school of one Tyrannus. 10. And this continued by the space of two years; so that all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks. 11. And God wrought special miracles by the hands of Paul: 12. So that from his body were brought unto the sick handkerchiefs or aprons, and the diseases departed from them, and the evil spirits went out of them."*

*Acts 19:1-12*

This passage finds Paul in Ephesus. In the meantime he had paid that city a hasty visit on his way back from Greece, had left his friends, Aquila and Priscilla, in it, and had gone on to Jerusalem, thence returning to Antioch, and visiting the churches in Asia Minor which he had planted on his former journeys. From the inland and higher districts he has come down to the coast, and established himself in the great city of Ephesus, where the labours of Aquila, and perhaps others, had gathered a small band of disciples. Two points are especially made prominent in this passage--the incorporation of John's disciples with the Church, and the eminent success of Paul's preaching in Ephesus.

The first of these is a very remarkable and, in some respects, puzzling incident. It is tempting to bring it into connection with the immediately preceding narrative as to Apollos. The same stage of spiritual development is presented in these twelve men and in that eloquent Alexandrian. They and he were alike in knowing only of John's baptism; but if they had been Apollos' pupils, they would most probably have been led by him into the fuller light which he received through Priscilla and Aquila. More probably, therefore, they had been John's disciples, independently of Apollos. Their being recognised as disciples is singular, when we consider their very small knowledge of Christian truth; and their not having been previously instructed in its rudiments, if they were associating with the Church, is not less so. But improbable things do happen, and part of the reason for an event being recorded is often its improbability. Luke seems to have been struck by the singular similarity between Apollos and these men, and to have told the story, not only because of its importance but because of its peculiarity.

The first point to note is the fact that these men were disciples. Paul speaks of their having believed, and they were evidently associated with the Church. But the connection must have been loose, for they had not received baptism. Probably there was a fringe of partial converts hanging round each church, and Paul, knowing nothing of the men beyond the fact that he found them along with the others, accepted them as disciples. But there must have been some reason for doubt, or his question would not have been asked. They believed in so far as John had taught the coming of Messiah. But they did not know that Jesus was the Messiah whose coming John had taught.

Paul's question is, Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed? Obviously he missed the marks of the Spirit in them, whether we are to suppose that these were miraculous powers or moral and religious elevation. Now this question suggests that the possession of the Holy Spirit is the normal condition of all believers; and that truth cannot be too plainly stated or urgently pressed to-day. He is the Spirit, which they that believe on Him shall receive. The outer methods of His bestowment vary: sometimes He is given after baptism, and sometimes, as to Cornelius, before it; sometimes by laying on of Apostolic hands, sometimes without it. But one thing constantly precedes, namely, faith; and one thing constantly follows faith, namely, the gift of the Holy Spirit. Modern Christianity does not grasp that truth as firmly or make it as prominent as it ought.

The question suggests, though indirectly, that the signs of the Spirit's presence are sadly absent in many professing Christians. Paul asked it in wonder. If he came into modern churches, he would have to ask it once more. Possibly he looked for the visible tokens in powers of miracle-working and the like. But these were temporary accidents, and the permanent manifestations are holiness, consciousness of sonship, God-directed longings, religious illumination, victory over the flesh. These things should be obvious in disciples. They will be, if the Spirit is not quenched. Unless they are, what sign of being Christians do we present?

The answer startles. They had not heard whether the Holy Ghost had been given; for that is the true meaning of their reply. John had foretold the coming of One who should baptize with the fire of that divine Spirit. His disciples, therefore, could not be ignorant of the existence thereof; but they had never heard whether their Master's prophecy had been fulfilled. What a glimpse that gives us of the small publicity attained by the story of Jesus!

Paul's second question betrays even more astonishment than did his first. He had taken for granted that, as disciples, the men had been baptized; and his question implies that a pre-requisite of Christian baptism was the teaching which they said that they had not had, and that a consequence of it was the gift of the Spirit, which he saw that they did not possess. Of course Paul's teaching is but summarised here. Its gist was that Jesus was the Messiah whom John had heralded, that John had himself taught that his mission was preliminary, and that therefore his true disciples must advance to faith in Christ.

The teaching was welcomed, for these men were not of the sort who saw in Jesus a rival to John, as others of his disciples did. They became disciples indeed, and then followed baptism, apparently not administered by Paul, and imposition of Paul's hands. The Holy Spirit then came on them, as on the disciples on Pentecost, and they spoke with tongues and prophesied. It was a repetition of that day, as a testimony that the gifts were not limited by time or place, but were the permanent possession of believers, as truly in heathen Ephesus as in Jerusalem; and we miss the meaning of the event unless we add, as truly in Britain to-day as in any past. The fire lit on Pentecost has not died down into grey ashes. If we believe, it will burn on our heads and, better, in our spirits.

Much ingenuity has been expended in finding profound meanings in the number of twelve here. The Apostles and their supernatural gifts, the patriarchs as founders of Israel, have been thought of as explaining the number, as if these men were founders of a new Israel, or Apostolate. But all that is trifling with the story, which gives no hint that the men were of any special importance, and it omits the fact that they were about twelve, not precisely that number. Luke simply wishes us to learn that there was a group of them, but how many he does not exactly know. More important is it to notice that this is the last reference to John or his disciples in the New Testament. The narrator rejoices to point out that some at least of these were led onwards into full faith.

The other part of the section presents mainly the familiar features of Apostolic ministration, the first appeal to the synagogue, the rejection of the message by it, and then the withdrawal of Paul and the Jewish disciples. The chief characteristics of the narrative are Paul's protracted stay in Ephesus, the establishment of a centre of public evangelising in the lecture hall of a Gentile teacher, the unhindered preaching of the Gospel, and the special miracles accompanying it. The importance of Ephesus as the eye and heart of proconsular Asia explains the lengthened stay. A great door and effectual, said Paul, is opened unto me; and he was not the man to refrain from pushing in at it because there are many adversaries. Rather opposition was part of his reason for persistence, as it should always he.

There comes a point in the most patient labour, however, when it is best no longer to cast pearls before those who trample them under foot, and Paul set an example of wise withdrawal as well as of brave pertinacity, in leaving the synagogue when his remaining there only hardened disobedient hearts. Note that word disobedient. It teaches that the moral element in unbelief is resistance of the will. The two words are not synonyms, though they apply to the same state of mind. Rather the one lays bare the root of the other and declares its guilt. Unbelief comes from disobedience, and therefore is fit subject for punishment. Again observe that expression for Christianity, the Way, which occurs several times in the Acts. The Gospel points the path for us to tread. It is not a body of truth merely, but it is a guide for practice. Discipleship is manifested in conduct. This Gospel points the way through the wilderness to Zion and to rest. It is the Way, the only path, the Way everlasting.

It was a bold step to gather the disciples in the school of Tyrannus. He was probably a Greek professor of rhetoric or lecturer on philosophy, and Paul may have hired his hall, to the horror, no doubt, of the Rabbis. It was a complete breaking with the synagogue and a bold appeal to the heathen public. Ephesus must have been better governed than Philippi and Lystra, and the Jewish element must have been relatively weaker, to allow of Paul's going on preaching with so much publicity for two years.

Note the flexibility of his methods, his willingness to use even a heathen teacher's school for his work, and the continuous energy of the man. Not on Sabbath days only, but daily, he was at his post. The multitudes of visitors from all parts to the great city supplied a constant stream of listeners, for Ephesus was a centre for the whole country. We may learn from Paul to concentrate work in important centres, not to be squeamish about where we stand to preach the Gospel, and not to be afraid of making ourselves conspicuous. Paul's message hallows the school of Tyrannus; and the school of Tyrannus, where men have been accustomed to go for widely different teaching, is a good place for Paul to give forth his message in.

The special miracles which were wrought are very remarkable, and unlike the usual type of miracles. It does not appear that Paul himself sent the handkerchiefs and aprons, which conveyed healing virtue, but that he simply permitted their use. The converts had faith to believe that such miracles would be wrought, and God honoured the faith. But note how carefully the narrative puts Paul's part in its right place. God wrought; Paul was only the channel. If the eager people, who carried away the garments, had superstitiously fancied that there was virtue in Paul, and had not looked beyond him to God, it is implied that no miracles would have been wrought. But still the cast of these healings is anomalous, and only paralleled by the similar instances in Peter's case.

The principle laid down by Peter (ch. 3:12) is to be kept in view in the study of all the miracles in the Acts. It is Jesus Christ who works, and not His servants who heal by their own power or holiness. Jesus can heal with or without material channels, but sometimes chooses to employ such vehicles as these, just as on earth He chose to anoint blind eyes with clay, and to send the man to wash it off at the pool. Sense-bound faith is not rejected, but is helped according to its need, that it may be strengthened and elevated.