

The Holy Spirit and Personal Experience

NO enquiry into the nature and work of the Holy Spirit would be adequate without some consideration of the Spirit's work in our personal life. Members of the Church believe in the Holy Spirit, but they might be at a loss to say just how the Holy Spirit works in their own experience. It is not necessary to be able to analyse the composition of the air in order to live by breathing. Even so, ministers of the Gospel cannot afford to be in ignorance here. It is here, more than anywhere else, that we test our theology and find it adequate as a scientific understanding of our experience. Moreover, it is just here that we can prove to ourselves and to others that the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is not dry and formal, but one which touches our life at every possible point. Again, it is only as we understand it ourselves that we are able to teach others. We are members of the Body of Christ, and the Body of Christ is a very special sphere of the Spirit's influence. But we are thinking now of ourselves as individuals and in terms of personal experience whilst ever remembering that it is as individual members of the Body that we make our contribution to the life of the Body as a whole. What we are about to say is in no sense a denial of that social emphasis which has surely been apparent throughout our study.¹

We begin by noting that there are two ways in which, as individuals, we experience the power of the Spirit—the way of Communion and the way of possession. Regarding the way of Communion we know fully how in communion with men and women of like mind with ourselves we receive a strength and a power which otherwise would be beyond us. This simple fact is the rational explanation of the power of community life. Union has always meant strength, and nowhere is that truth more apparent than in the experience of the Christian Church. In regard to the way of possession we must go a little deeper. The thought of being possessed by God rather than of enjoying communion with our fellowmen in God is, at first sight, something lower, if not even repulsive. And we have, in the Gospels, those cases of being possessed by demons; these we cannot ignore, since it is with a background of demon-possession that the Gospels portray the work of Christ. However much we in these days have outgrown those ancient beliefs in demon-possession, or, with the help of modern psychology, give to those Gospel cases another

¹ This concludes the writer's series of three articles on the Holy Spirit.

interpretation, the fact remains that we do know what it means to be possessed. A man in a bad temper is possessed. But there is also another kind of possession. We can be possessed by the good as well as by the bad. We know what it means to be possessed by our work, or by a book, or by an experience in pastoral life. Possessed in a book, a man may have even forgotten the breakfast which he has just eaten and, looking up from the book, have asked for the meal. One can become possessed to the exclusion of the rest of consciousness. We become lost in our work or lost in the preparation of a sermon. A doctor can be lost in a diagnosis of a case, he stands by the bedside of the patient and is oblivious to all else until the diagnosis registers in his mind. We know, too, the experience of being lifted above ourselves so that we do work which even, on reflection, surprises ourselves. In all these experiences we have, somehow, an additional source of power coming into us from outside; a power which makes us more truly ourselves than otherwise we should be; a power which works for good. It was after studying Dr. Leonard Hodgson's book on the Doctrine of the Trinity that the writer became fully aware of how fruitful and approach these experiences were to an understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit, and he acknowledges his indebtedness to that illuminating theologian.

Let us now turn to a saying of our Lord, one which chronologically must be placed towards the close of the ministry. Its position in the Gospel is in the Little Apocalypse of *Mk. xiii*. Jesus is warning His disciples of the difficult times which lie ahead of them and of the persecutions they will have to endure for His sake. He says, "When they lead you to judgment, and deliver you up, be not anxious beforehand what ye shall speak, but whatsoever shall be given you in that hour, that speak ye, for it is not ye that speak, but the Holy Spirit." We are all aware of how these words have been misused. Dr. James Black tells us of a celebrated evangelist who was invited by Dr. Denny to address the students at New College. The visitor advised those students for the ministry to test their faith in the Holy Spirit by occasionally going into the pulpit unprepared and, opening the Bible at random, speak from the first text that caught the eye, trusting, he said, to the Holy Spirit. Dr. Denny concluded his rebuke of the speaker by saying that he confused inspiration with desperation. Dr. Black adds that for himself it would be perspiration too! We know how easy it is to take a saying like this, remove it from its context, and apply it to situations for which it was never meant to apply. It is both easy and dangerous to do that with any saying of Jesus. But this particular saying is, nevertheless, capable of a much wider application than its immediate

setting. After all, it would have not been of much use to prepare beforehand any defences, for the simple reason that the early followers of our Lord never knew at what minute they would be arrested, nor could they know the exact charge which would be brought against them until the moment when they appeared before the magistrate. What these words of Jesus surely mean is that the disciples must be the kind of men who could meet the crisis when it came. In that sense they would be able to say the right word, and that right word would be given to them. The Christian is the kind of person who can see his way through an emergency because he possesses a character which has been trained in the school of Christ; thus he relies on the Spirit of God to assist him, and such reliance is never misplaced. Now, as Dr. Hodgson says, this meaning is not read into these words, but read out of them. Our Lord's own life is the outstanding example of this kind of experience.

From this starting point we can begin to understand the activity of the Spirit in our personal experience. There is so much in our life which can be ascribed to the Spirit's power, once we begin to think about it. Dr. Hodgson gives two examples of the right approach in our personal experience to the power of the Spirit. The first is concerning our prayers. He writes:—

“As we kneel to pray, we pause to recollect who we are and what we are doing. Moved by the Holy Spirit we are coming into the presence of our Heavenly Father, brought in by the Lord Jesus whom we adore and worship as He takes us by the hand and presents us to our Father. We have turned aside out of the world, but as we offer ourselves, our souls and bodies, we bring with us all our worldly interests, for they are His interests—or should be. We offer our sins that they may be forgiven; we offer our interests He cannot share that He may wean us from them; we offer our thanks for the victories and joys that He has given us, our petitions and intercessions for all those people, causes and things with which He wills us to be concerned. And as we rise to return to our life and work in the world, we look out in our mind's eye beyond the wall of the room or Church where we may be, we look out into all the world around as those who are being sent forth, united with Christ and enlightened by the Spirit, in order that we may share God's joy in all that is good and true and beautiful, His grief at all that is ugly and base and sinful, His labours in overcoming the evil and building up the good.”

The second concerns ourselves in the pulpit. It runs thus:—

“It has been a great help to me personally to realise that what I have to pray for to the Holy Spirit as I kneel before entering the pulpit, is that for the next twenty minutes or so I may be enabled to forget everything except this message and this congregation, and to put my whole self in bringing it home to them. Then, when I am in the pulpit, the time for prayer is past, the time for action has come. So, too, it is with all activities. The gift of the Spirit for

which we need to pray is the gift of concentration. The fruit of the Spirit is to be found in our power to bring our whole mind to bear upon the matter in hand."

Here there is practical guidance for ministers, lay preachers and those who have specialised Christian work to perform. As ministers we have two messages to prepare for each Sunday, plus innumerable addresses to other sections of the Church. In all our preparations we should be conscious of the Spirit's help. For the Spirit is not an excuse for hard work but the power to work hard. No preparation is too arduous for the delivery of God's eternal Good News. But having, under the Spirit's guidance, made our preparation, we then enter the pulpit and in a way not realised by the evangelist in Glasgow we do rely on the inspiration of the Spirit. We give ourselves to our message. As preachers we know that it is only as we give ourselves to our message that the message becomes effective. But what is that giving of ourselves to our message but a possession by the Holy Spirit? There is a need for teaching such as this for those about to enter the Ministry. Its truth can be tested every Sunday by every serious preacher of the Gospel. Is it not a fact that as preachers we can take for granted this movement of the Spirit? We have not been as Trinitarian as we supposed we were.

But the work of the Holy Spirit in personal experience can be seen in every department of life. To understand that work in our own experience fits us to interpret that work in the experience of others. When a young man or woman comes seeking baptism and Church membership is he or she not moved by the Spirit and, if so, why not say so? Why should we be hesitant to speak about the Spirit? As reasonable beings we are fully aware of the danger which obviously attends this habit of ascribing experiences to the Holy Spirit. Nothing is so tiring and no one so boring as the person who is always speaking as if he were specially inspired by the Spirit. Church History abounds with examples of absurdities along this line of conduct. But the answer to this is not a suppression of all reference to the Spirit, but a right understanding of the Spirit. Paul did not meet the crisis at Corinth by forbidding all reference to speaking with tongues; what he did was to insist on an interpretation of those tongues and then he went on to show those uncritical Corinthians that the fruits of the Spirit were in fact very homely virtues.

Dr. Wheeler Robinson has called our attention to what he describes as the Kenosis of the Spirit. We are all accustomed to the Kenotic theory in regard to the Person of Christ; how the earthly life of Christ was a descent on the part of Godhead into our human experience; how Jesus lived as a man and suffered as a man. The same truth applies equally to the Holy Spirit. The

Holy Spirit works in the Church but, owing to the imperfections of the Church, cannot do His perfect work; He is hindered by the frailty of the human material. In the same way the Holy Spirit is frustrated in our own personal life. The Holy Spirit suffers a kenosis in every individual. But the goal of the Spirit is surely the establishment of the kingdom and the perfect harmony of individuals within that kingdom. At present we fall far short of all that the Spirit is capable of doing in and through us. But the power of the Spirit is present, and the more we understand, by experience and meditation, of the power of that Spirit the nearer we shall be to being the kind of people Jesus intended us to be.

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Disciples of All Nations, by Basil Mathews. (Oxford University Press, 12s. 6d.)

This is a fuller and in some ways different version of the book published in America as *Forward Through the Ages*, and its manuscript was in the press at the time of Basil Mathews' death in March, last year. Indebted inevitably to Dr. Latourette's famous seven volumes, but based also on Mathews' own worldwide personal contacts and the knowledge gained from forty years spent in studying and teaching missionary history, this absorbing book outlines in fewer than 300 pages the story of the spread of Christianity from the beginning to the present-day. It could not be regarded as suitable as a college text-book and was probably not intended for that purpose. But as a popular account of the expansion of the Church it could hardly be improved upon. Colourful, racy, gripping, this is the book to put into the hands of anyone whom one would wish to interest in the history of the Faith. The final section, dealing with the period 1910-1950, is particularly valuable. The seven maps are admirable, and there is a useful table of dates and bibliography. While the book necessarily has limitations from the point of view of the serious student, nevertheless as a clear, live and vivid presentation of the subject it deserves to be warmly commended.