

The Administration of the Spirit

The apostles, moved by the Spirit, went forth as ministers of the Spirit. As ministers of the Spirit, they did not simply preach Jesus and the Resurrection, and so lead men to repentance and to faith in Christ; they communicated to others the Spirit which they themselves had received. They not only revealed the Spirit by their words and deeds, they not only convinced men that they had received the Spirit, but they administered the Spirit.

There are in the Acts a few accounts of the setting apart of Christians for special work in the Church by the laying on of hands. The seven were so ordained in Jerusalem by the apostles (6.6); Paul and Barnabas were so set apart in Antioch for their missionary work (13.3); and it is almost universally agreed, though it is not definitely stated by St Luke, that the elders were so ordained in the churches of Galatia (14.23).

In these accounts it is interesting to note:

First, that in none of these cases does St Luke assert that there was any gift of the Holy Spirit then given. Such a gift, a special gift for special work, there probably was. Such a gift is certainly suggested by St Paul's words to the Ephesian elders when he reminded them that the Holy Ghost had made them overseers (20.28); such a gift is certainly suggested by St Paul's charge to Timothy: 'Stir up the gift that is in thee through the laying on of my hands' (II Tim. 1.6), 'and of the presbytery' (I Tim. 4.14); but, if there was a gift, St Luke does not call attention to it.

Secondly, it is noticeable that St Luke constantly tells us that the persons upon whom hands were laid for some special office in the Church were men who had already received the Holy Spirit. This is definitely stated in the case of the seven (6.3) and of St Paul (9.17) and of Barnabas (11.24). Similarly, we are told of the disciples at Antioch in Pisidia that they were 'filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit' (13.52) before their elders were appointed (14.23). Indeed it is apparent that men were everywhere chosen for special office in the Church because they were full of the Holy Spirit.

These two considerations, that St Luke does not mention any gift of the Holy Spirit at the time of ordination, whilst he does notice the fact that the men so set apart were men already full of the Holy Spirit, must be enough to satisfy us that it was not in these cases that St Luke perceived the peculiar glory of that administration of the Spirit which began at Pentecost. Every reader of the Old Testament was familiar with passages which spoke of the imparting of a Spirit to men appointed to special work, by the laying on of the hands of inspired men, or by an anointing. The idea was quite familiar. What was not familiar, what was indeed peculiar to the new dispensation, was the communication of the Spirit to the whole body of Christians, and to every individual member of the body. That those who were possessed with the Spirit should lay hands on common men that they might be filled with the Spirit for their common daily life as Christians, was marvellously strange. It exalted the common life of common men to heights before held only by some special and important service of God. It exalted men occupied in humble tasks of daily toil to the position before peculiar to prophets and kings and priests. Christians all became kings and priests (Rev. 1.6; I Pet. 2.9); the Church became a kingdom of priests.

This laying of hands upon all who were baptized that they might receive the Holy Spirit seems to have been the universal practice. It is true that St Luke does not repeat again and again in every place that the apostles laid their hands on their converts that they might receive the Holy Spirit. But he begins with a promise made to the multitude by St Peter that if they would repent and believe in Jesus, they should receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (2.38); and he goes on to declare that St Peter asserted to the Council that this promise had actually been fulfilled (5.32). He then particularly explains what happened in Samaria: 'Now when the apostles which were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent unto them Peter and John, who when they were come down prayed for them, that they might receive the Holy Ghost; for as yet he was fallen upon none of them, only they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then laid they their hands on them, and they received the Holy Ghost' (8.14-17). He further tells us what happened when St Paul met at Ephesus disciples who had been baptized into John's baptism, how he directed them to be baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus, and laid his hands upon them and the Holy

Ghost came on them (19.5, 6). Though he does not repeat again the like event in the case of each convert, he implies that they all everywhere did receive the gift, as when he says of the disciples at Antioch in Pisidia that they were filled with joy and with the Holy Ghost (13.52), though he has not mentioned any laying on of hands. This is borne out by the epistles of St Paul, who writes to his converts in Galatia, or in Thessalonica, or in Corinth as to men perfectly familiar with the gift of the Holy Spirit.

That St Luke considered the gift of the Holy Spirit necessary for every Christian is certain; consequently it seems strange that, in his account of the missionary preaching of St Paul, he never once mentions the promise of the Holy Spirit nor any teaching concerning that gift. I have before pointed out that the sermons and speeches of St Paul, as recorded in Acts, do not contain any complete statement of St Paul's gospel, and that a fuller statement can be gathered from the I Thessalonians alone than from any speech or sermon in Acts.¹ The fact that in these speeches and sermons there is no teaching about the Holy Spirit, a teaching which St Paul certainly gave to his converts, and which he certainly considered vital, makes this conclusion the more secure. St Luke, in reporting St Paul's speeches to particular people in particular places, was not setting forth his gospel in any fullness, but was accurately reporting what St Paul actually said under the special circumstances to the particular audience before him.

St Luke certainly teaches that the Holy Spirit was given to all the members of the Christian body; his language would certainly lead us to believe that the gift was administered by the laying on of hands of the apostles; nevertheless, it is remarkable that of the four cases in which he actually gives us any details there should be two in which the laying on of hands by one of the Twelve is definitely excluded. In the first of these St Luke tells us that St Paul, after his wonderful conversion, received the gift of the Holy Spirit by the laying on of hands (9.17); but he also expressly states the name of the minister, and the minister is not one of the inner circle of apostles. In the second case he expressly states that the gift was given without any human intermediary at all (10.44; 11.15; 15.8).

It is indeed strange that St Luke should have given us such very different accounts of the manner in which the gift was given; once by

¹ *Missionary Methods: St Paul's or Ours?*, chapter 7.

the laying on of the hands of St Peter and St John, once by the laying on of the hands of Ananias, once by the laying on of the hands of St Paul, and once in the presence of St Peter without any laying on of hands. When we consider how frequently reference is made in this book to the Holy Spirit, and how important St Luke manifestly considered the gift to be, it is indeed hard to escape from the conclusion that he was far more profoundly concerned with the reality and universality of the gift than he was with the mode of the administration of the gift. That which was of primary importance in his eyes was the presence of the Spirit, the gift of the Spirit, the certainty of the presence, the certainty of the gift; the means by which the gift was received seems to have been stated rather to assure us of the certainty of the fact than for its own importance.

In saying this I do not deny that there was a normal manner and means by which the gift was administered. That means doubtless was the laying on of apostolic hands. I do not wish to deny that St Luke teaches us a very important fact when he assures us that the gift was administered by the laying on of the apostles' hands. But I think it is useful to observe how the emphasis is laid by St Luke; for I perceive that we are often in danger of laying the greater emphasis on that upon which he laid the less. Some of our teachers speak of the allusions in the Acts as though the laying on of apostolic hands was the one point of vital importance, whereas St Luke writes as though the gift of the Holy Spirit were the one thing of vital importance, by whatever means that gift was conveyed, whether with, or without, the external act.

The apostles, then, did manifestly go forth as men moved by the Spirit to communicate the Spirit to others. The Holy Ghost was promised, the Holy Ghost was ministered. 'If the ministration of death written and engraven in stones was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not steadfastly behold the face of Moses for the glory of his countenance; which glory was to be done away: how shall not the ministration of the Spirit be rather glorious?' (II Cor. 3.7, 8). Glorious it was, glorious it remains.

This administration of the Spirit is the key of the apostolic work. It alone explains the promise of remission of sins in the preaching of the apostles. It alone explains the assurance of forgiveness which filled the hearts of their converts. It alone explains the new power which was manifested in the life of the Christian Church, the new

striving after holiness, the new charity expressed in organized form for the amelioration of the sufferings of the poorer brethren. It alone explains the certainty of the hope of eternal life which filled the souls of the Christians and enabled them to face persecution and martyrdom. It alone explains the new sense of the value and dignity of the body which led to a new enthusiasm for purity of life and created hospitals for the care of the diseased. It alone explains the zeal for the salvation of men, which carried the gospel of Christ throughout the then known world.

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