

# Notes on Biblical Exposition

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## XXIII. THE SPIRIT OF GOD

*"This only I wish to learn from you: Was it by the works of the law that ye received the Spirit, or was it by the hearing of faith? Are ye so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit do ye now make an end in the flesh? Have ye suffered so great things in vain—if indeed it be in vain? He therefore who supplieth to you the Spirit and worketh miracles among you, doeth He it by the works of the law or by the hearing of faith?" (Gal. 3:2-5, in a literal translation).*

### The First Glorious Days



WITH the first verse of the third chapter of Galatians, which we studied in the last article in this series, Paul introduces the second main division of the Epistle, which contains his defense of justification by faith alone as over against the gospel—falsely so called—of the Judaizers, which offered justification by faith and works. Today we study the first of the arguments which Paul adduces in defense of his gospel.

It is a very simple argument indeed. "You received the Holy Spirit," says Paul, "by faith alone, before you ever heard of the teaching of the Judaizers, before you ever thought of trying to attain merit by keeping the law. But if you received the Spirit apart from the works of the law, what more can the works of the law possibly bring you? By the gift of the Holy Ghost God set the stamp of His approval unmistakably upon the gospel as it was originally proclaimed to you—the gospel which bade you trust to the Cross of Christ not for a part of your salvation but for all."

"This only I desire to learn from you," says Paul. He does not mean that the immediately following argument is the only one that he intends to adduce, but he does apparently mean that it would be sufficient even if it stood alone. "Just tell me this one thing," he means to say, if we may venture to explain his meaning by a modern colloquial usage: "How did you receive the Spirit—by faith alone or by works? If you will just answer me that one question, the Judaizers will be refuted then and there."

When Paul speaks of the "Spirit" in this connection, he is no doubt thinking, in part at least, of special or miraculous gifts of the Spirit of God such as those that are described in I Cor. 12-14; for he refers to those special gifts rather plainly in verse 5. Evidently the presence of the Spirit in the Galatian churches was not something that could be doubted. It could be made the basis of an argument because it did not itself need any argument to establish it. It was a perfectly clear and palpable thing.

But those special gifts were not the only marks of the

Spirit's presence in the Galatian churches. Another mark of His presence was found in the changed lives of the Galatian converts. "Love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance"—these things, as well as prophecy, healings and the gift of tongues, were "the fruit of the Spirit."

There is one thing, however, which Paul does not mean by "the Spirit"; he does not mean what the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. apparently means when in a recent official statement it refers to "the spirit and principles of Christ." For "the spirit of Christ" in that vague sense there is small place in the gospel of Paul; what Paul means by the Spirit is not the "spirit of Christ," with "spirit" spelled with a small letter—not the spirit in this vague sense so over-emphasized by the unbelief of our day—but the Third Person of the blessed Trinity, the Holy Spirit of God.

### How Was the Spirit Received?

"You received the Spirit," says Paul, "not by doing something but by hearing something; not by doing the things that the law commands but by hearing the gospel of the Cross of Christ. You received the Spirit by the hearing of faith"—that is, by listening, not in indifference or in unbelief but in faith, to that story of the Cross of Christ. "Jesus Christ crucified was openly pictured before your very eyes in my missionary preaching. You simply listened to the story, and you received it in faith. You did not try to do anything to earn what Christ had already given you by His death. You said simply: 'Christ died there on the cross for me; He died to wipe away my sins; he died to make all well between God and me; I receive the gift and that is all.'" That is what Paul means by "the hearing of faith"—it is the hearing which faith renders to the story of the Cross of Christ.

"The result of that hearing," Paul says, "was plain. By that hearing, without merit, without works, without anything contributed on your part, you received the Spirit of God."

"But if you received the Spirit by faith alone, what folly to think that anything else is needed now! What folly to think that anything else is higher than the Spirit of God! Are ye so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, do you now come to completion in the flesh?"

That is said, of course, from the point of view of Paul, not from the point of view of the Judaizers. The Judaizers would never have admitted that in advocating the keeping

of the law of God, as a means of attaining God's favor in addition to what they had obtained from the Cross of Christ, they were advocating something that consisted in, or was dictated by, "the flesh." But Paul believed in calling things by their right names, not by the names applied to them by human pride. So, no matter what the Judaizers thought about it, he insists that in advocating attainment of merit with God by their works, they were asking the Galatian converts to follow a glorious beginning, when they received the Spirit of God by faith alone, by a miserable end when they would drop back to dependence upon that which is trusted in by unredeemed humanity. There may possibly be a secondary reference to the external character of those observances—especially circumcision—by which the Judaizers asked the Galatian converts to attain merit with God; but even if there is such a reference it should not be allowed to obscure for one moment the central observation that this Epistle is directed essentially not against ceremonialism in the interests of "spiritual" religion, but against human merit in the interests of divine grace.

#### Were the Galatians Persecuted?

"Have ye suffered so great things in vain?", Paul asks. But what things does he mean; what were the sufferings to which he here refers? The only answer, if we hold to the usual translation of this verse, can be that the sufferings here referred to were persecutions which the Galatian converts had been called upon to endure. We may surmise that they were persecutions instigated by the non-Christian Jews, persecutions which might have been avoided by the Galatian converts if they had not evoked the jealousy and ire of the Jews by insisting on the freedom of Gentile Christians from the ceremonial law. Paul says in Gal. 5:11 that if he were still preaching circumcision the "offence of the Cross" would be done away. So here, if the translation "suffered" be right in the question, "Have ye suffered so great things in vain?", Paul would apparently be meaning to say: "If you are now going to fall at last into a practice which would have avoided all these persecutions, what was the use of enduring the persecutions in the first place? It looks as though you had endured them in vain."

It is by no means certain, however, that the translation "suffered" is correct. The word which we have just translated "suffered" is in itself a neutral word—that is, it can be used to designate experiences either good or bad. But if it is taken as a neutral word here, the reference to persecutions is removed. Paul would be taken as saying not, "Have ye suffered so great things in vain?", but simply, "Have ye experienced so great things in vain?" In that case, all would be perfectly plain. The reference would of course simply be to the great experiences of the Spirit's presence of which Paul has just spoken and of which he continues to speak in the following verse. "You received glorious manifestations of the Spirit's presence," he would be saying, "before you ever heard of the Judaizers and before you ever thought of keeping the ceremonial law; you received them by faith alone. But did you receive them in vain? After

God poured out upon you those signal manifestations of His grace as a result of the simple preaching of the Cross of Christ, are you now going to turn your back upon all that by having recourse to another gospel; despite those wonderful experiences of the Spirit's presence, received as a gift of God through faith, are you now going to try to earn by your own miserable works that which God has already showered upon you so richly; was it all in vain that God put the stamp of His approval so clearly upon the gospel of the all-sufficiency of the Cross of Christ; are you now going to desert that gospel after all for the 'other gospel' of the Judaizers?"

The only difficulty with this interpretation is that the word translated "experienced" usually (to say the least) means "suffered" unless there is some word with it to indicate plainly that it is used in a good or in a neutral sense. The bad sense, "suffered," though it did not necessarily belong to the word, is usually attached to it unless there is clear indication to the contrary.

On the whole, we are rather inclined to think that that indication is here plainly enough given in what precedes and follows. If the word means "suffer" here—if, thus, there is a reference to persecutions—that reference is entirely isolated in this Epistle. If, on the other hand, the word means "experience," then this verse is in perfect accord with what precedes and what follows; Paul would simply be continuing his appeal to the glorious manifestations of the Spirit's presence. He would be insisting that these manifestations would seem to be all in vain if the Galatian converts should now turn to some gospel different from that on the basis of which they had been so richly blessed by God.

The matter is, however, by no means certain. It cannot be denied that the verb is usually employed in the bad sense "suffer" unless there is some adverb with it; the possibility cannot be excluded, therefore, that there is, after all, in this verse an isolated reference to persecution. The verse involves an exegetical problem which may never be solved.

#### An Appeal to the Readers

At any rate, Paul does not allow his question, "Have ye experienced [or "suffered"] so great things in vain?", to stand without qualification. "If indeed it be in vain," he adds. Various interpretations have been suggested for this conditional clause. But it is best interpreted as a kind of appeal to the readers not to allow the painful supposition in the preceding question to stand even for a moment. "Have you experienced so great things in vain—if indeed it be in vain?" That is, Paul means to say: "I hope that the necessity even of putting the question may be done away; I hope you may cease to listen to the Judaizers and may return to the simplicity of the gospel of Christ; I hope that that dreadful supposition that those glorious experiences of the Spirit's presence were all in vain may at once be refuted by the heed which you give to my Epistle. 'In vain,' do I say? Oh, let it not be in vain, my brethren; let

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## Editorial Comment—Concluded

tianity in all its fundamental beliefs. This report is based on views of God, of CHRIST, of man, of sin, of the way of salvation, of the future, of the church, of the Bible (not to mention other matters) which are all alike hostile to the views taught by CHRIST and His apostles and all but universally confessed by the Church of all ages—at least until the rise and spread of Modernism. So far from being the duty of Christians to support missions conducted on the basis recommended in this report, it would rather be their duty to oppose them by every legitimate means available. And that because their success would spell defeat for genuine Christianity.

We are not accusing the authors of this report of insincerity or dishonesty. Doubtless they are not only animated by a desire to further the well-being of humanity but actually believe that the message they commend is rightfully called Christianity; but that view will hardly be shared by any who are able to give anything like a correct answer to the question, What is Christianity?

The basic issue raised by this report is whether the missionary enterprise is to be dominated by Modernism or Christianity. Its advocates will resent our contrast. We think, however, that it is thoroughly justified as we regard Modernism (in any of its consistent forms of expression) not as Christianity but as a somewhat that is opposed to Christianity at all fundamental points. Be the motive back of this report what it may, its adoption by the churches would mean that the missionary enterprise had been transformed into an agency for the promotion of what, from a Christian viewpoint, is—unbelief.

The reader may or may not share our judgment of Modernism. Whether he does or not, we do not see how it is possible for him to deny that this report is throughout a modernistic document. There is nothing strange in the fact that it has had an enthusiastic welcome in modernistic circles with corresponding distrust in conservative circles. If any proof, other than a mere reading, was needed to make clear its modernistic character and the nature of the issue its publication has precipitated it has been supplied by *The Christian Century*, the leading weekly exponent of Modernism. In its issue of November 30th, under the title "Is Modernism Ready?", it says in part:

"Another major battle looms on the horizon of Protestant Christianity. Its lines are likely to be drawn by the Laymen's report on the work of Christian missions. . . . Up to this date, modernism has been satisfied to accept the organized enterprises of the churches and their accepted policies without much critical con-

cern. . . . But that period of silent and uncritical acquiescence in the status quo has passed, and the Laymen's report is the signal that it has passed. . . . This is the first time that modernism has acted explicitly, and upon its own initiative, to effect the reconstruction of any primary function of the Christian church. . . . Modernists are not now a minority in Protestant leadership. . . . They cannot escape the responsibility that goes with numeral strength and accepted leadership. It was inevitable, therefore, that soon or late, the attitude of acquiescence would have to be abandoned and an attitude of critical responsibility adopted in its place. The Laymen's report, which challenges many aspects of traditional missionary policy and offers constructive principles for its revision, reflects the new sense of responsibility which Christian modernism feels for the fate of Christianity in the modern world. . . . It reflects the dominant ideals and standards of modern ethical and spiritual culture, rather than the presuppositions of orthodox theology upon which the missionary enterprise has always operated. . . . The Laymen's report signalizes distinctly the obsolescence of dogmatic orthodoxy and the emergence of an effective and responsible modernism. . . . Are modernists ready for the discharge of the responsibility which the Commission, in making this report has assumed on their behalf? . . . The report will be condemned by those who read it with the fixed ideas of orthodoxy. . . . We repeat our opening sentence: A major battle looms on the horizon of Protestant Christianity. . . . The basic functioning of organized Christianity is involved. When you touch the missionary enterprise you touch everything that goes by the name Christian. Is modernism ready to take over so fundamental a function as the long cherished enterprise of Christian missions?"

It seems to us that *The Christian Century* has correctly stated the fundamental issue raised by this report. Shall missions in the future be carried on in the interest of Modernism? The report answers that question in the affirmative. Hence we derive no comfort from the fact that its authors declare that they regard it as beyond serious question that missions should go on. In our judgment, the sooner such missions as they advocate are discontinued the better it will be for all concerned. We indeed believe that missions will go on and that they will continue to go on until the kingdoms of this world have become the kingdom of our LORD and His CHRIST but they will be missions that exalt JESUS CHRIST as the only but all-sufficient Saviour and Redeemer of the world, not missions that reduce Him to the level of one of the world's religious leaders.

## Notes on Biblical Exposition (Concluded)

us at once put that supposition behind our backs, because you return at once to the gospel from which the Judaizers are trying to lead you away."

In the following verse, Paul summarizes the argument which he has just advanced in verses 2-4. "He, therefore, who supplieth to you the Spirit and worketh miracles among you, doeth He it by the works of the law or by the hearing of faith?"

So translated, the verse would seem to imply that the manifestations of the Spirit's presence had not yet been discontinued in the Galatian churches; despite the perilous condition of the churches, Paul would seem to be saying that God was still supplying the Spirit to them and was still working miracles among them. But the matter is by no means so clear in the Greek as it is in our provisional English translation. The verse may perhaps be translated: "He who supplied to you the Spirit and worked miracles among you, did He it by the works of the law or by the hearing of faith?" So interpreted, the verse would simply be referring to that first glorious time before the Judaizers had appeared on the scene. Or, finally, the time when God supplies the Spirit may simply not be in view. "He who supplieth to you the Spirit in general," Paul may mean, "without reference to the question whether He is still doing it, doeth He it in general, at any time that He may be found to do it, by the works of the law or by the hearing of faith?"

The words which we have translated "worketh miracles among you" may also be translated "worketh miraculous powers in you"; since the decisive word *dynamis*, "power," may be used in either sense. Obviously the difference is not important. In either case, the reference is to special gifts of the Spirit's presence—presumably like those which are mentioned in I Cor. 12-14.

So ends the first of Paul's arguments in defense of his gospel. It is a perfectly simple argument: "The Cross was proclaimed to you. You listened to the story and received it in faith, without attempting to add any merit of your own to what Christ had done for you when He died for your sins. The result was plain. You received the Spirit of God. But if you received the Spirit thus through faith alone, how can you possibly believe the Judaizers when they tell you that something in addition to faith is necessary if you are to be saved? What more can a man possibly have than the Holy Ghost? What surer sign of salvation can there be than His presence?"