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## MY FIRST SERMON.

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*"Let her alone; she hath wrought a good work on me." Mark 14:6.*

One Sunday morning in 1869, a young theologian sat in his room at Number 9 University Place in this city contemplating a sermon on the foregoing text, which he regarded as a masterpiece of clever composition. It was his first sermon, his "trial sermon," and not unnaturally he was eager to deliver it. The church bells had ceased ringing. There came a knocking at his door and, as if in immediate answer to his wish, a messenger announced that Dr. Joseph P. Thompson of the Broadway Tabernacle had been suddenly taken ill and somebody was needed to supply his pulpit. Would the young man preach? *Would he?* How true it is that fools rush in where angels fear to tread! The youth mounted the pulpit steps of the Broadway Tabernacle that morning with a degree of self-confidence that he has never been able to command even to this day. At the close of the service he was assured by some of the ladies present that his sermon was "simply beautiful"; he knew, without telling, that it was profound. His only misgiving was lest he had preached over the heads of his congregation. He realizes now that half a century has passed—for this is the fiftieth anniversary of that notable debut—that the sermon in question was "faultily faultless, icily regular, splendidly null."

## THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE BOOK OF ACTS.

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The book of Acts has been called the Gospel of the Spirit. The whole book is a concrete proof of the truth of the prophetic word: "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, saith the Lord of Hosts." (Zech. iv. 6.) In it we find the first fulfillment of the promise which Christ made to his apostles: "Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he shall guide you into all the truth. . . . He shall glorify me: for he shall take of mine, and shall declare it unto you." (John xvi. 13-14.) The leading characteristic of the book is the manifestation of the power of the Holy Ghost. There are over seventy references to the Holy Spirit. The first occurs as early as i. 2, where we are told that just before his ascension Jesus "gave commandment through the Holy Spirit unto the apostles whom he had chosen." And the last is found as late as xxviii. 25, where it is declared that the rejection of the Roman Jews and the opening of the church to the gentiles is the fulfillment of the word spoken by the Holy Spirit through Isaiah the prophet. It has been a fascinating study to trace these references through the book and to discover that they furnish the thread which ties the book into one organic whole. Thus we arrive at a correct idea of the author's real purpose. Luke has graciously supplied us with the key to the whole structure of his book in his opening statement: "But ye shall receive power when the Holy Spirit is come upon you: and ye shall be my witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea and Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth" (i. 8). Here is the Acts in a nutshell: The church, empowered and guided by the Spirit, witnesses for Christ in Jerusalem (i.-vii.), in Judaea and Samaria (viii.-ix.), and unto the uttermost part of the earth (xi.-xxviii.). Dr. Harnack puts it thus: "The might of the

Spirit of Jesus Christ at work in the apostles founding the early church, starting the mission to the gentiles, carrying the Gospel from Jerusalem to Rome, and installing the Gentiles who received it in the place of the Jews who more and more harden their heart.”

In both the Gospels and the Acts the great themes are the deeds and doctrines of Jesus—what he did and what he taught. However, there is this striking difference. In the Gospels Jesus is present in the flesh, and in his own person teaches and works directly. In the Acts, no longer present in the flesh, he works through the Spirit. The Acts completes the Gospels. The work which Jesus began in the Gospels in person is carried forward and accomplished in the Acts by the Spirit. This is what Mark has in mind when he declares that after the ascension the apostles “went forth, and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word by the signs that followed.” (Mark xvi. 20.)

From the day of Pentecost the Spirit has occupied an entirely new position. Since that day the guidance of the church of Jesus Christ has been in his hands. That day was the installation of the Spirit as the administrator of the Christian Church. The twenty-eight chapters of the book of Acts are but the beginning (see i. 1 and xi. 15) of the new dispensation. That is why the book lacks a definite conclusion. We are still in the dispensation of the Spirit. There is but one other great event to which the Bible directs us to look, and that is the second coming of Christ. Till then we live in the Pentecostal Age under the rule of the Holy Spirit. The same Spirit who guided the church in the Acts is guiding the church today. Hence a study of the Holy Spirit in the book of Acts should furnish us with practical lessons for the church today. Nowhere in all the Bible are the personality and the deity of the Holy Spirit more vividly and powerfully taught. We need today to stress the personality and deity of the Spirit. Again the book has much to teach concerning the effects of being filled with the Spirit. Surely all Christians need to experience these blessed effects. However, in the

present article we shall confine our attention largely to the operations of the Holy Spirit in the church, and this will be treated only in suggestive outline

I. *The officers and members of the early church were chosen by the Holy Spirit.*

The officers were elected by a vote of the people, but they were first chosen by the Holy Spirit; and this choice was then confirmed by an election on the part of the people.

1. *Apostles.*

Christ himself chose the original twelve apostles; but in the first chapter of Acts we learn that the Spirit directed that the place of Judas should be filled by another, and this other was first chosen by the Holy Spirit and then His choice was confirmed by an election by the one hundred and twenty brethren (i. 16-26, especially verses 16, 20, 24). Paul was an apostle "born out of due time": and, while he was called to the apostate by the risen Lord, yet he did not begin his apostolic labors until he had received the gift of the Holy Spirit through the laying on of the hands of Ananias of Damascus (Acts ix. 17-18).

2. *Elders.*

They were chosen by the Holy Ghost. In his address to the Ephesian elders Paul says: "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers" (xx. 28).

3. *Deacons.*

We are safe in saying that the seven men, whose election is recorded in the sixth chapter of Acts, practically correspond to our deacons. For if this is not the origin of the diaconate, we have an office spoken of in the pastoral epistles, of the origin of which we have no account. These seven men, the first deacons of the Christian church, were elected by the people because they possessed the necessary qualifications; namely, men of wisdom and full of the Holy Ghost (Acts vi. 3). The deacons must have the approval of the Holy Spirit before they could be elected by the people.

#### 4. *Evangelists.*

The first man who went out on an evangelistic tour was Philip, called in Acts xxi. 8 "the Evangelist." This first tour this evangelist made was to Samaria, where he had great success. There is no specific reference in the Acts that the Spirit sent him on this trip. But when we pass on to his second evangelistic tour, we find that he was guided every step of the way by the Holy Spirit. In Acts viii. 29, we read: "Then the Spirit said unto Philip, Go near and join thyself to this chariot"; and in viii. 39 we read: "The Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip, that the eunuch saw him no more."

#### 5. *Missionaries.*

The missionaries in the early church were likewise chosen by the Spirit. "The Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them" (xiii. 2). These were chosen and sent out by the Holy Ghost.

#### 6. *Members.*

In ii. 47 we read: "And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved." In ix. 31 we read: "The churches were multiplied in the comfort of the Holy Ghost." In the first passage we are told that the Lord gave the increase to the church. In the second passage, the growth of the church is attributed to the Holy Ghost. Combining the two passages we learn that the increase in membership came from the Lord through the Holy Spirit.

II. *Everything that the officers and members of the early church accomplished, they accomplished under the guidance and with the power of the Holy Ghost.*

#### 1. *Apostles collectively.*

Not only did the Spirit choose them to office, but the same Divine Spirit empowered them to discharge the solemn duties of that office. In i. 2 we have an interesting statement, "After that He through the Holy Ghost had given commandments unto the apostles." Christ gave His last instructions to the apostles in regard to their work through the help of the Holy Spirit. It was fitting that the Holy Spirit should give these instructions, because they were to be carried out under His

supervision and direction. Christ told the apostles that they could not even lift a finger to begin their great work until the Spirit came: "Tarry ye, until ye be endued with power from on high" (Luke xxiv. 49). He commanded them that they should not depart from Jerusalem, but wait for the promise of the Father. "Ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence" (Acts i. 4-5).

### 2. *Apostles individually.*

When Peter preached on the day of Pentecost, the record says he was "full of the Holy Ghost." When he spoke before the council, they were amazed at the boldness and power of his speech. It was because he was "full of the Holy Ghost" (iv. 8). In giving an account of his sermon in the house of Cornelius, Peter said: "As I began to speak the Holy Ghost fell on them" (xi. 15). After his conversion on the way to Damascus Paul asked Christ: "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" The answer was: "Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee "what thou must do." Then Ananias came to him and said: "Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus, hath sent me that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost." The Holy Ghost told him what Christ would have him do.

### 3. *Members of the church.*

Peter states that when the one hundred and twenty disciples spoke with strange tongues on the day of Pentecost, it was as the Spirit gave them utterance (ii. 4). And when the disciples at Tyre told Paul that bonds and imprisonment awaited him at Jerusalem, they spoke under the influence of the Holy Spirit (xxi. 4).

## III. *The Early Church as an organization was guided and controlled in all its official acts by the Holy Ghost.*

There are certain things recorded in Acts that were done not by the apostles, neither by the private members, but by the church as an organization. They are the official acts of the church itself. Let us consider a few of these official acts.

### 1. *The reception of the Samaritans into the church.*

Here was a crisis in the church. Her doors were to be opened and outsiders admitted. Observe the wisdom of the Holy Spirit in bringing in the Samaritans first. They were neither Jews nor Gentiles; they stood just between; and the narrow Jewish Christians would not be so deeply prejudiced against them as they would be against full Gentiles. Now turn to the eighth chapter of Acts and you will see that the church was guided by the Holy Spirit in the reception of the Samaritans.

2. *The reception of Gentiles into the Church.*

Shall Gentiles be received into the church without circumcision? Here was another crisis. Under the direction of the Holy Spirit, Simon Peter had received Cornelius into the church without consulting the Jerusalem church. And the trouble was Cornelius was not only a Gentile, but an uncircumcised Gentile; and it was contrary to the laws of the church to admit such a one. So when the church heard what Peter had done, they summoned him to appear before them and explain his conduct. In the eleventh chapter of Acts we have Peter's defence, which was: "I received Cornelius a Gentile and uncircumcised, because the Holy Spirit commanded me to do it." He told the church how the Spirit had led him step by step in receiving Cornelius, and the church decided that he did right.

3. *The Holy Spirit launched, directed and sustained the first great missionary enterprise of the church.*

a. The Spirit selected the missionaries. "The Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work wherunto I have called them" (xiii. 2).

b. "The Spirit thrust them forth into the field "So they, being sent forth by the Holy Ghost, departed unto Seleucia" (xiii. 4).

c. The Spirit empowered them to speak. "Then Saul, who also is called Paul, filled with the Holy Ghost, set his eyes on him, and said . . ." (xiii. 9-10).

d. The Holy Spirit sustained them in their persecution: "And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Ghost" (xiii. 52).

e. The Holy Ghost counselled them in difficult questions of missionary policy. "For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things; that ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication: from which if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well" (xv. 28-29).

f. The Spirit restrained them from entering a field not yet appointed by the Lord. "They were forbidden of the Holy Ghost to preach the word in Asia. They assayed to go into Bithynia; but the Spirit suffered them not" (xvi. 6-7).

#### 4. *First case of discipline.*

The Spirit guided the church in its first case of discipline. "Peter said, Ananias, why hath Satan filled thine heart to lie to the Holy Ghost" (v. 3). "Then Peter said unto Sapphira, How is it that ye have agreed together to tempt the Spirit of the Lord" (v. 9).

Thus we have seen that the Holy Spirit chose the officers and members; He gave them power and guidance to accomplish all that they did accomplish; and He directed and controlled the church as an organization in all its official acts and forward steps. He was the leader in every advance both external and internal. To Him was due the extension of the church into new countries and among new peoples. He also guided the church internally into all the truth, speaking in the utterances of her councils, and was the supreme authority in all church government.

Is there not a vital lesson in all this for the church of the present day? Once Mr. Moody was asked to explain the secret of his great power. He was standing on the beach at Atlantic City. He replied by stooping down and taking a handful of loose sand and letting it run out through his outstretched fingers. Then he said: "I am as sand in the hands of the Holy Spirit."