Vital Forces Of The Early Church

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VITAL FORCES OF THE EARLY CHURCH

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PREFACE

This volume is entirely due to the conviction urged by the officials of the Student Christian Movement, that there was room for a treatment of the earlier growth of the Church which should give prominence to its inner forces rather than its external history. I know that, regarded from this point of view, the treatment runs the risk of lacking in concreteness. But the attempt seemed worth making, although no one is more conscious than I am of its defects. I have at least tried to go to the sources, and to make no general statements for which authority could not be adduced.

My warm thanks are due to Messrs J. R. Coates, B.A., and Hugh Martin, M.A., for the kind interest they have shown in the preparation of the book, and for the real trouble they have taken, by supplying questions for discussion in study circles, to adapt it more fully for practical purposes. To them I am also indebted for various suggestions in the references to available literature, as well as for valuable hints towards the entire shaping of the discussion. Mr Martin has been so kind as to prepare the index.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION


No more fitting summary of the account given in Acts of the Early Christian movement could be found than the words of chap. xix. 20: "So mightily did the message of the Lord grow and prevail." The book intends to be a narrative of the victorious progress of the good news of Christ. Even those elements in it which fail to appeal to us were influential at the close of the first century A.D. This was what Christianity had achieved. It had come to occupy successfully the chief centres of the ancient world. It had spread from Jerusalem to Rome.

We have a picture of the methods of its progress. These methods are bound up with prominent leaders. Such emerge, in the first days, at Jerusalem, from among the members of the Twelve. Peter and John are marked men. No less so is James, the son of Joseph
and Mary, who apparently associated himself with the new Faith only after a remarkable experience of the risen Jesus (1 Cor. xv. 7). The part played by St. Peter in the first half of the book gives place to that of St. Paul in the second. There the author speaks from direct personal acquaintance with the facts. Were these men of unique eminence?

It is futile to talk of the Apostolic leaders as ill-bred, uncouth, illiterate men. That estimate is due to crass explanations of such passages as Acts iv. 13. It was their religious earnestness and spiritual penetration which had prompted them to follow Jesus. The two years or so which they had spent in His company must have brought the profoundest kind of education. Spiritual illumination is life-enhancing on every side. It constantly affects the intellect as truly as the emotions or the will. These apostles must have shone in any society. Jesus seems to have recognised that in sending them forth as His delegates to evangelise Palestine several years before. He never doubted that they could take their place wherever they went. Their equality in the early community with men like St. Paul reminds us of their unusual natural equipment.

But, difficult as it is to reach a full interpretation of the opening chapters of Acts, it is plain that after the first believers became convinced of the undying life and supremacy
of their Lord, they attained a new level of spiritual endowment, called in the documents “the gift of the Holy Spirit.” The risen Jesus is represented as having prepared them for this (Acts i. 8). And Peter, who seems to speak quite calmly, has no hesitation in referring to the ancient prophecy of Joel (Acts ii. 16 ff), which connects with the coming Messianic epoch such a special visitation of the Spirit of God.

It is interesting to note that Joel speaks of the unique gift in terms of prophecy. No adequate explanation has ever been given of prophetic phenomena. Whatever else was involved, an unusual religious receptivity was presupposed in which the human spirit was turned aside from earthly and material interests. It became deadened to the secular, and marvellously alive to the Divine. Philo, who had long reflected on the meaning of prophetic inspiration, thus appeals to the soul: “Go forth from thyself, filled with a Divine frenzy . . . and holden by the Deity after the manner of prophetic inspiration. For when the mind is filled with God and is no longer self-contained, but rapt and frenzied with a heavenly passion and driven by the truly existent and drawn upwards to him . . . this is thy [Divine] inheritance” (Quis Rer. Div. H. 69-70).

The main effect of this remarkable experience was a new sense of spiritual power.
It was inevitable that in the late traditions embodied in Acts the power should be associated with miracles and marvels. But any penetrating reader can discern that what really counted in the primitive community was the abnormal endowment for spiritual situations. So that it is not going beyond the evidence to say that the early Christians soon began to feel their call to victory. From their intimate knowledge of Jesus they believed that this was the Divine purpose. Hence they never hesitated to become fellow-workers with God. The outcome of this equipment in their daily thought and feeling was enthusiasm. So much is plain from the opening chapters of Acts, corroborated by many passages in the Epistles. It is unfortunate that attention has been turned aside from the more general features of the community to such more or less accidental details as the sale of their goods by individuals and the contribution of the proceeds to a common fund. The important feature in the famous story of Ananias and Sapphira is not the terrible penalty represented as falling upon them suddenly, but the high standard of Christian morality which the story presupposes.

Already in Acts, we see the spread of the Christian mission, not only among Jews but also in the Gentile world. This necessity followed from the circumstances in which the new message was proclaimed. We can hardly