

The Sole Test of Communion

Roland Allen (1868-1947)

from Pentecost and the World

Moved by the Holy Spirit given to them, the apostles went forth as missionaries. The Holy Spirit filled them with a desire for the salvation of men in Jesus Christ. He revealed to them the need of men. As they came into contact with different types and orders of men, so the Holy Spirit filled them with the desire for the salvation of these and with the sense of their need. They could not but preach. Hence arose the great controversy over the admission of the Gentiles into the Church, a story which occupies so important a place in the Acts of the Apostles. We have already seen how the apostles were led to preach to the Gentiles, and how they justified their action on the ground that they were guided by the Holy Spirit. It now remains to point out how the Church in Jerusalem was led to admit these Gentiles as members of the body of Christ.

The difficulty to be overcome was great. Before Christ came, a revelation of God had been made to men. One nation had been chosen by God to be the recipients of that revelation. The people of that nation had been brought near to Him. He had established His covenant with them and ordained the rites and ceremonies by which they should be admitted into His covenant and preserved in it. Christ, the Christ in whom the Apostles believed, whom they preached as the only Savior, appeared in that nation, within that covenant. He came in fulfillment of promises made to the covenant people alone. He Himself accepted the authority of the Mosaic system by word and by example. He obeyed the law. He observed the feasts. He learned the Scriptures, quoted them with approval, and commanded obedience as a duty. Some traditional interpretations He rejected as calculated to overlay and hide the real force of the teaching contained in the Mosaic code; but no one, not even His enemies at His trial, contended that He broke the law, or undermined its authority, or that He attempted to lead men to despise, or escape from, the covenant made by God with the fathers.

He was condemned within the covenant on the ground that, within the covenant, He made a claim which His opponents declared to be blasphemous. Even Saint Paul, in his controversy with the Judaizing party within the Church, never attempted to argue that Christ in His life overtly, or by implication, had overthrown the law or had taught His disciples that they need not keep it. Christ appeared within the covenant, and when He appointed His apostles, He appointed only men who were within the covenant. He had found faith among Gentiles. Of one of these He had said that He had 'not found so great faith, no, not in Israel' (Luke 7:9); but He called no Gentile to preach the gospel to Gentiles. He Himself and His chosen apostles were all within the covenant.

How, then, could disciples of this Christ do otherwise than He had done, or be other than He was? How could any one outside the covenant be the disciple of Christ who was within the covenant? The very notion was absurd. Could He be outside and inside at the same time? Could he follow a Christ who was within the covenant, whilst he remained outside the covenant? Could he accept Christ and not accept Moses whom Christ accepted? How could Christ's apostles overthrow the covenant, abandon the covenant themselves, and admit or recognize as servants of Christ men who were not within the covenant? Christ and His salvation were to be found only within the covenant. Who dare venture outside it? This argument alone should be sufficient to hinder any who called himself a Christian from preaching Christ without the law.

If such a dangerous experiment were tried, nothing but disaster could follow. The Mosaic teaching had been a preparation for the gospel, invaluable and necessary. Outside the covenant what sort of ideas of God prevailed? The gods of the heathen were degraded and degrading abominations, devils, whose worship and everything connected with it was contamination for a righteous man. A few happily escaped out of the slough, but they escaped, not by listening to the teaching of philosophers, but by becoming proselytes. If, then, Gentiles were to become Christians, that was the path by which they must approach Christ.

If Gentile ideas of God needed to be corrected, their morals needed correction as fundamental. The immorality of the Phrygian scandalized the Greek; the immorality of the Greek scandalized the Roman of the old school; the immorality of them all scandalized the Jew still more deeply. Fornication was not even thought to be a vice. Men practised it openly, unashamed. It was not only condoned by religious men, it had a place in their religious rites. And vices more degrading still were commonly practised and condoned. Thus to the Jew the restrictions of the law were not merely valuable customs, designed to preserve the unity and purity of the people of God from contamination by intermixture with others, they were not merely safeguards of a ritual purity, they were the only possible and absolutely indispensable safeguards against positive and flagrant immorality. They were the foundation and pillar of sound moral life, both for the individual and for the people.

How, then, could the gospel be preached without the law? How could men accept Christ and not accept the law on which all purity of life depended? How could men be promised salvation in Christ without being directed to undergo the rite which symbolized adherence to the moral life, without being compelled to keep the law? Was immorality of life agreeable to Christian faith? Was Christ the minister of sin? Christ and holiness were inseparable. To teach men to believe in Christ, to teach that they could be saved by Christ, without teaching them the law was to separate these two. It was to ensure that the Christian faith would be divorced from purity of life.

To attempt to teach the heathen to keep the moral law without binding them to the Mosaic Law was to attempt the impossible. The Jews needed the law to direct them even at home; abroad, they needed it still more. How, then, could new converts in an atmosphere of heathenism be expected to maintain any moral standard without the law? If they deliberately accepted the Jewish code, if they bore in their bodies the marks of their dedication to the moral life, if they associated themselves as closely as possible with those who, by tradition and inheritance and the long discipline of centuries of training, through much suffering had learnt the necessity of a high moral standard, then there was hope for them but, without that, how could belief in Christ alone suffice? The temptations of their surroundings, the customs of their people, the inherited tendencies of ages could be too strong for them. They must fall. Christian morals would be no better than heathen morals. This was surely enough to secure that the Gentiles could never be admitted into the Church of Jews until they accepted circumcision and confessed themselves bound by the law.

But this was not all. If uncircumcised Gentiles were admitted into the Church what was to be their relation to faithful Jews? If Jews received them and shared with them in the Breaking of Bread, they themselves would lose their own position, they themselves would cease to be within the covenant, they would be unclean. For the keeper of the law to associate on equal terms with one who did not keep the law was impossible. Jewish Christians would, in accepting Gentiles, put themselves outside the pale. In order to admit men who, on every reasonable ground, ought not to be admitted, those who by birth and education were within must be exiled. What could be more absurd than to cast out the children in order to receive

strangers who could never really be received, even at so great a price! If the Jewish Christians received the uncircumcised they themselves and their children would lose the great safeguards which strict observation of the law provided. The weaker brethren would become worse than Grecian Jews. Already they had seen the dangers of laxity; they had seen a despised race of Jews who sought to compromise with heathen surroundings. Their history provided them with a fearful warning and a strong incentive to resist to the uttermost any approach to uncircumcised life. The story of the Maccabees might well deter them from weakness and persuade them to fight to the last for the strictest obedience to the law.

But even if they avoided the Gentile converts and refrained from communion with them, they could not escape. The mere fact the uncircumcised men were admitted into the Church, by whomsoever they might have been admitted and wherever, that mere fact that uncircumcised men were members of the Church of Christ would involve the acceptance of the principle that men could be saved without the law. The Church would be a body in which circumcised and uncircumcised members alike hoped for, and received, a like salvation. Then, if some men could be saved without the law, so could all. If the heathen who knew not the law could be saved by Christ in the Church, then the Jew too could be saved by Christ without the law, if he chose to abandon the law. The observance of the law was certainly a burden. Some, at least, would be glad to escape from the burden. Such an escape would be a great relief and a great convenience. Some would certainly escape. And so there would be Jewish Christians living like heathen, and a great temptation to follow their example would lie in the way of every young Christian who lived in a Roman or Greek city. There was really no alternative. To admit the uncircumcised meant that the Church of Christ forsook the covenant rather than that the Gentiles were received into a church within the covenant.

The example of Christ, the duty of disciples, the religious privileges of the Jews, the foundations of morality, were all to be abandoned. Any heathen who could show that he had been baptized might claim to be in as good a position as the Jewish Christians. Surely it was absurd and wicked to suggest such a thing; and for what end was the sacrifice to be made? Merely that heathen who were accustomed to licentious lives might escape from a burden which every Jew and every proselyte knew that they ought to bear.

How was this argument answered? By one fact: God gave them the Holy Spirit. 'They of the circumcision which believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Ghost. For they heard them speak with tongues, and magnify God. Then answered Peter, Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we?' (10:45-47). The gift of the Holy Spirit to these men convinced and satisfied St. Peter that they must be received into the Church. When his action was called in question at Jerusalem this was his answer: 'The Spirit bade me go to with them' (11:12); 'the Holy Ghost fell on them as on us at the beginning' (11:15); 'Forasmuch, then, as God gave them the like gift as He did unto us who believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, what was I, that I could withstand God?' (11:17). That answer silenced his opponents.

Later, when the preaching of St. Paul and the rapid extension of the Church in heathen provinces and the admission of large numbers of men who had not even been taught the Jewish code caused the question to be raised again, it was St. Peter who, after hearing the account given by St. Paul of his work, brought forward this first answer to all objections. He simply recalled his own earlier experience. 'God which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as he did unto us' (15:8). If God gave the Holy Spirit there was no more any possibility of refusal on the part of the apostles to receive those to whom the Holy Ghost was given.

The gift of the Holy Ghost is thus seen to be the one necessity for communion. If the Holy Ghost is given, those to whom He is given are certainly accepted in Christ by God. All who receive the Spirit are in reality and truth one. They are united by the strongest and most intimate of all ties. They are all united to Christ by His Spirit, and therefore they are all united to one another. Men may separate them, systems may part them from the enjoyment and strength of their unity; but, if they share the one Spirit, they are one. In this case the new converts desired communion with the apostles. The apostles acknowledged that they had the Spirit. Being led themselves by the Spirit, they put aside all the countless and crushing objections which could be raised, they put aside all the serious disabilities under which these new converts laboured, they recognized the fact and accepted the consequence. God gave the Holy Spirit; they admitted at once that nothing more was needed for salvation, nothing else was needful for communion.

Roland Allen was an Anglican missionary in China working with the Society of the Propagation of the Gospel. Later he labored some 40 years writing missionary principles, retiring to Africa, where he died in Kenya in 1947. First edition of *Pentecost and The World* was in 1912.

AUTHORS NOTES :

- (1) Perhaps someone will say that all who were received into the Church by the Apostles accepted the apostolic doctrine and order, none were admitted who did not accept these, and consequently there is here another test of communion.

To this I would answer: FIRST, the whole point of the story of Cornelius and the admission of the Gentiles lies in the fact that these people had not accepted what up to that moment had been considered a necessary part of the christian teaching. The question was whether they could be admitted without accepting the teaching and undergoing the rite. It was that question which was settled by the acknowledgment that they had received the Holy Spirit. SECOND, when the Apostles spoke of men with whom they were not in communion, they used language which showed that they were convinced that those with whom they were not in communion had not the Spirit (Jude 19). The moment it was admitted that they had the Spirit they were accepted.

The difficulty today is that christians acknowledge that others have the Spirit, and yet do not recognize that they ought to be, and must be, because spiritually they are, in communion with one another. Those who hold a theory of the Church which excludes from communion those whom they admit to have the Spirit of Christ, simply proclaim that their theory is in flat contradiction to the spiritual reality. The Spirit accepts them and dwells in them; the theory excludes them. We must distinguish carefully tests which prove whether the Spirit is given like Paul's "No man can say that Jesus is Lord,, but by the Holy Ghost" (I Cor.12.3), and tests which are applied after it is admitted that the Holy Ghost is given. The first is a true test, for there can be no communion between those who have and those who have not the Spirit of Christ. The second is the introduction of a test that subverts a spiritual fact already recognized.

- (2) It will perhaps be said that in our present state of schism this assertion of spiritual principle can give us no definite guidance for action, can provide us with no clear programme, and must remain unfruitful. Surely that is not wholly true. It certainly must help us if we recognize that it is the presence of the Holy Spirit which creates a unity which we can never create. If men believe in the existence of this unity, they may begin to desire it, to seek for it, and seeking it to find it. If, when they find it, they refuse to deny it, in due time, by ways now unsearchable, they will surely return to visible communion. It would make a difference if christians, in their approach to one another realized that, in spite of appearances, they were in fact one. If, in their seeking after reunion, they realized that they were seeking not to create a unity which does not yet exist, but to find an expression for a unity which does exist, which is indeed the one elemental reality, they would approach one another in a better frame of mind.