

Articles by John Ritchie

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Assurance

The Scriptures bearing on Assurance may, for the sake of simplicity and clearness, be divided into sections, viz.: — The Position, Possessions, and Prospects of Believers; or, in other words, the assurance of what we are, of what we have, of what we know, and of what we shall be.

Concerning all who believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, the following facts are true, as recorded in the Word of God.

We Are

Saved (1 Cor. 1:18).

For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God.

Forgiven (1 John 2:12).

I write unto you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for his name's sake.

Washed, Sanctified, Justified (1 Cor. 6:11).

And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God.

Sons (1 John 3:1).

Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God...

Complete (Col. 2:10).

And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power.

We Have

Redemption (Eph. 1:7).

In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace.

Peace (Rom. 5:1).

Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Eternal Life (John 3:15).

That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

The Spirit (1 Cor. 2:12).

Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God.

The Word (John 17:14).

I have given them thy word; and the world hath hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.

A High Priest (Heb. 8:1)

Now of the things which we have spoken this is the sum: We have such a high priest, who is set on the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens.

An Advocate (1 John 2:1).

My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.

We Know

We are of God (1 John 5:19).

And we know that we are of God, and the whole world lieth in wickedness.

Have passed from death (1 John 3:14).

We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren...

We are of the truth (1 John 3:19).

And hereby we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before him.

We are in Him (1 John 2:5).

But whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in him.

He abideth in us (1 John 3:24).

And he that keepeth his commandments dwelleth in him, and he in him. And hereby we know that he abideth in us, by the Spirit which he hath given us.

We have eternal life (1 John 5:13).

These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God.

We have a Home (2 Cor. 5:1).

For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

We Shall Be

Raised (1 Thess. 4:16).

For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first.

Changed (1 Cor. 15:52).

In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.

Caught up (1 Thess. 4:17).

Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord.

Be like Him; See Him (1 John 3:2).

Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.

Be with Him (1 Thess. 4:17).

Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord.

Satisfied (Psa. 17:15).

As for me, I will behold thy face in righteousness: I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with thy likeness.

The Gospel Proclaims Assurance.

“For our Gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance” (1 Thess. 1:5).

To have the assurance of salvation, and to rejoice therein, is the normal state of every believer in Christ.

To lack this assurance is the result of unbelief of God's testimony (1 John 5:10) or of traditional teaching (Gal. 3:1;4:9), or of backsliding (2 Peter 1:9).

How Assurance Is Obtained.

The assurance of Salvation is not obtained by certain inward evidences. It is not the result of attaining to a certain degree of sanctity, or Christian attainment. It is not dependent on the experiences of God's people. The finished work of Christ is the ground of the believer's salvation; the testimony of God's Word gives the assurance of it. Both are outside of himself, and in no wise dependent on him. The perfectness of Christ's work and the immutability of God's Word are the two great pillars on which salvation and its assurance rests. God says, "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life" (John 3:36). "All that believe are justified from all things" (Acts 13:39). To believe God because He speaks, is faith; to doubt Him is unbelief. To ask evidences or signs, either external or internal, is equivalent to saying, "I cannot take God's bare Word for it, and believe that I am saved, because He says it." Unbelief asks signs; faith trusts God without them. Unbelief wants to, "understand" all about it, to reason it out, in order to "believe." Faith accepts God's testimony. "Through faith we understand" (Heb. 11:3). Unbelief wants to "see" in order to believe (see John 20:25). Faith "believes" to see (Psa. 27:13).

Old Testament pictures of Assurance.

Such was the faith of Noah, he believed God about a coming flood while as yet he saw no cloud on the horizon. He had the "assurance" of the deluge one hundred and twenty years before it came. He knew it,

and preached it, because he believed God. "Abraham believed God" when He promised to give him a son. "Evidences" were against it, but "he staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief" (Rom. 4:20), although its magnitude might well have made him stagger— "but was strong in faith ... being fully persuaded that what He had promised, He was able also to perform" (Rom. 4:20-21). He had the "assurance" of receiving a son, long before Isaac was born, through faith. The Israelites were safe under the shelter of the blood on the lintel and doorposts; they had the assurance of their safety in the Word— "I will pass over you" (Exod. 12:13).

Their security depended on the faithfulness of God, but their assurance of that depended on their confidence in His Word. If they believed that Word simply as He gave it, then they could say — "We are safe; God has said it." If they consulted their frames and feelings, instead of taking God at His Word, their assurance might go and come. In like manner, many now, instead of receiving God's testimony and resting on it for the assurance of their salvation, look within themselves, seeking for evidences of assurance there. Of course they are disappointed. There can be no assurance of anything, apart from faith in God. But here comes the difficulty. How can I know if I have faith, and if it be of the right kind? The same kind of faith which accepts God's testimony that there was a flood in Noah's days, and implicitly believes it, without further proof, is just the kind of faith that believes God, when He says He has given me eternal life (1 John 5:11). In each case it is taking God at His Word, without further evidence, than

that He says it. This is how people get the assurance of salvation.

People want to “feel,” to “realise,” to “enjoy,” before they believe, but this cannot be. God must be believed; His Word must be honoured. “He that hath received His testimony hath set to his seal that God is true” (John 3:33).

To have the “knowledge of salvation” (Luke 1:77) and “much assurance” (1 Thess. 1:5) was the common property of the Saints of early times.

How Assurance Is Lost.

To encourage doubt and fear was no part of the teaching of the Lord or His Apostles. “Doubting Castle” had its foundations laid in the dark days, when God’s Book was deposed from the place of authority, and when man’s traditions and human creeds were put in its place.

Legality, ritualism, sacramentalism, and purgatory itself were all brought in after, and found easy access among those who had been taught, that no assurance of salvation or of Heaven could be gained in this life.

Blessed be God, assurance is within reach of all who believe the Gospel of God. “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved” (Acts 16:31) are words leaving no room for doubt. “He that hath the Son hath life” (1 John 5:12) is sufficient for a simple soul who can believe God. Such will at once assert their claim to that possession, and joyfully confess, “We know that we have passed from death unto life” (1 John 3:14). And if they be charged with “presumption” for so doing, they may call in the witnesses of earlier times who, rejoiced in the same blessedness. Of these, the following may be named:—

Job had assurance (Job 19:25), so had David (Psa. 103:12); Isaiah possessed it (Isa. 6:7), so did Paul (2 Cor. 5:1); John (1 John 3:22); Timothy (2 Tim. 1:9); Peter (1 Peter 5:1), all the believers at Ephesus (Eph. 1:7); Colosse (Col. 1:12-14), and other Churches. It was the normal condition of believers to know that they were saved and possessors of eternal life. If any lack this now, it must be the result of backsliding (2 Peter 1:9), or of bad teaching (Gal. 3:1).

There are preachers, some of them of high rank, in the professing Church, who openly avow their belief that no assurance of salvation is possible in this life; others admit that a favoured few — either those unquestionably elect, or of a high degree in Christian virtue — may attain to it, but that the ordinary rank and file of believers must “hope” and “wait” till the revelations of the great day. All this, tested in the clear light of God’s open Bible, is simply nonsense, and the wonder is, that any should be misled and deceived by it. O that men would go to the Book of God, and read it there for themselves, in words so plain that the wayfaring man, though a fool, need not err therein. While the wise and the great are blinded and stumble, the simple believer sings—

“The gospel of the grace of God, Unchangeably the same, ‘Forgiveness’ speaks through Jesus’ blood, ‘Salvation’ in His name. ” ‘Eternal life’ for ever sure, To all who do believe; ‘Eternal glory’ kept secure, For those who Christ receive. “Nor height, nor dept, nor earth, nor hell, Shall ever them remove, Who in the heart of Jesus dwell, Who know and trust His love.”

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Conversion

Conversion, as the word is used in the Scriptures, means — “a turning to God.” Regeneration is a change of nature; the implanting of a new and heavenly life within. Conversion is the outward and manifest turning of the person to God, and as a consequence, from sin and Satan. In every case of genuine conversion, there is a positive and a negative side: the man is turned round to God, to Christ, to holiness; he is turned from the world, from Satan, and from sin.

The Necessity of Conversion.

The words of the Lord Jesus are “Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3). Apostles of the Lord preached “Repent ye therefore, and be converted” (Acts 3:19). This change is necessary then as now. Man’s face is naturally turned from God. His back is toward his Creator; the path that he treads leads away from God and Heaven: it tends to death and hell. “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way” (Isaiah 53:6) is a confession of the common course of men. “They have turned their back unto me, and not their face” (Jeremiah 2:27) is Jehovah’s complaint concerning His ancient people, and the charge is universally true. There are no exceptions. It is to man thus living, with his face set for death and destruction, that the voice of the Lord is heard calling, “Turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die?”

What Conversion is Not.

It is to be feared that, in the thoughts of many, conversion is little more than a change of creed. They join a new church, or become adherents of a new theology. To pass from Romanism to Protestantism, from being a Churchman to become a Dissenter, from Calvinism to Arminianism, these and others of a similar kind are frequently spoken of as being “conversions.” But they are not so in the sense in which Scripture speaks. All these may be known apart from a Divine work within, and without the man being turned to God. Nor is reformation to be confounded with conversion. A man may change his ways and leave off his sinful habits, yea, he may even assume a religious life, and do religious work, apart from true conversion to God. There may be a “new leaf turned,” a “fresh start” made, a “new vow” taken, a “good resolution” formed, and all this may, for a time, give indication of a changed life. But, sooner or later, it will come to nought if the heart has not been reached, and the springs of life turned to God. Experiences, impressions, and flushes of religious feeling are often mistaken for conversion, especially during seasons of revival and Gospel work, but these being without foundation or root, through time lapse into the former, or into a worse condition. To such the word in 2 Peter 2:22, applies— “The dog is turned (the same word as converted) to his own vomit again.”

What Conversion Is.

Conversion, as the word implies, is a turn to God. “Ye turned to God from idols” (1 Thessalonians 1:9). “Ye ... are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls” (1 Peter 2:24). The heart once closed against God’s love is now opened to receive it, as the petals of the flower turned toward the sun receive and absorb its

rays. The ear once closed against God's Voice, is now open, in the spirit of a child, to hear His Word, and to do His will. The secret springs of life, which before were supplied with motive power from sin and Satan, are now actuated by the power of grace and the Spirit of God. The man is brought "from the power of Satan unto God" (Acts 26:18) and God henceforth becomes His joy and His trust. The time of his lawlessness, his choosing of his own way is now past: he has "return" unto the Shepherd and Bishop of his soul, to own His claim as Lord, to bow beneath His rule, to be fed, and led by Him along the right way to Heaven and home. It is to be feared that in a day of counterfeit and hypocrisy such as the present is, the standard of conversion has been sadly lowered, and anyone making a slipshod "profession" has been counted as a "convert." Sensational and pointless preaching, abounding with sentiment and senseless story, often accompanied with music and non-Gospel singing, and destitute of ploughshare and hammer to break up the fallow conscience and strike hard the stony heart, can hardly be expected to produce conviction or result in conversion according to God. Man's conversion may be manufactured by man's methods, in man's own power, but the real article — that which bears the heavenly brand — is, as of old, the Word of God alone.

How Conversion Is Produced.

It is not in man's nature to turn to God. His thoughts and his desires are all against God. Religion cannot change the current of his inner life; the most it can do is to dress up in another fashion that which is without. In order to have new fruit, there must be a new tree, for "a corrupt tree cannot bring forth good fruit."

This new nature is implanted at regeneration. There is a new creation. The regenerated man stands up in the power of a new life, and in that life he turns to God and serves Him.

An illustration may help us here. There are certain creatures, such as the gad-fly, whose early existence is in the mud of stagnant pools. They are able to move from place to place in the mud, but not to rise above it. They feed on that which is on their level; they cannot reach to anything higher. Presently a new force is developed within them, and immediately then they rise to the surface of the water, above and beyond the region of mud. Then wings are given them, and soon they rise up into the air, to bask in the warm rays of the sun, to find their food, and to spend their brief life in other spheres, never more to return to the muddy pool, or to find their subsistence there. Thus it was with some at Thessalonica of ancient days. They were idolaters, absorbed and engrossed with earthly things. They had no desire for things beyond, nor had they power or will to rise to better spheres.

By-and-bye the Gospel reached them. They heard the word of life, in power and much assurance, from men who walked with God, and held the Gospel as a sacred trust from Him. They received the message, they believed the truth. The immediate result is recorded in the glowing words, "Ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God; and to wait for His Son from Heaven" (1 Thessalonians 1:9-10).

The power of idols was broken by the power of God. The Living Christ, believed and received, expelled the enemy. They were able to say, like one of old — "I have

heard Him, and observed Him: what have I to do any more with idols?" (Hosea 14:8).

The testimony is the same throughout. The Grecians who heard from the men of Cyprus and Cyrene of the Lord Jesus, "believed, and turned unto the Lord" (Acts 11:21). Believing on the Son of God gives life, (see John 3:36), and that life is at once made manifest by the possessor of it turning to, or being converted unto the Lord. Such were the conversions of early days, and such are God's conversions still. Christ received in the heart changes the whole current of the life. Old things pass away: former habits drop off like leaves in autumn: the new man stands forth in a new character, with new aspirations and new hopes filling his mind and spirit; His feet tread in new paths, and his hands are filled with new employments. The old lose their charm and their power, and are left behind. "The explosive power of a new affection," as one named it, has accomplished this transformation: this "new affection" is the love of Christ now indwelling the heart, and nothing short of this can affect it.

Hindrances to Conversion.

We need not wonder if the craft and power of Satan are combined to hinder this Divine work of conversion from taking place. He blinds the mind, he closes the eye, he seals the ear, lest men "should be converted" (Acts 28:27). He fears the Gospel of God, and so he sends his emissaries with "another gospel" (Galatians 1:6-9) in its stead, which has no Divine power behind it, and no Divine conversion resulting from it. Let those who know the Gospel of God, and have confidence in its efficacy,

sound it forth, in all its simplicity, freshness, and power, and God will own it in the conversion of souls to Himself.

As Jannes and Jambres withstood Moses of old, and sought to hinder the deliverance of Israel, by imitating the work of God, so we are told shall the servants of Satan seek to turn away the ears of those who would hear the truth and be converted by it, into “fables.”

These “fables” now abound on every side. The world’s religion is permeated by them, as leaven hid in the meal leavened the whole mass in which it worked. Need we wonder that gospels of evolution, non-atoning death of Christ, non-eternal punishment, denial of Christ’s Divinity and man’s ruin, produce no genuine conversions followed by holy, Christ-like lives. It would be a greater wonder if they did. God’s Gospel preached in God’s power, by God’s servants, will bear its fruit, and that fruit will remain.

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Redemption

Redemption is the “act of buying back.” It has also in it the thought of taking possession of that which has been thus bought. There is a redemption by purchase, and also a redemption by power, spoken of in the Scriptures. There is a redemption which the believer has now, and there is a redemption that he hopes for, by-and-bye. It is needful to distinguish between these.

Man’s Need of Redemption.

Man is the slave of sin and Satan. In his fall, he surrendered himself into Satan’s hand. His inheritance, was lost with him. The world is claimed by Satan, and he rules it. He is the “prince of this world” (John 12:31). Man is a subject of his power (Acts 26:18) and must remain so until delivered by the power of God. He cannot redeem or deliver himself, nor can his fellow. “None of them can by any means redeem his brother, nor give to God a ransom for him” (Psa. 49:7). If deliverance comes, it must be from above. This is what the Gospel reveals. “Deliver him from going down to the pit: I have found a ransom” (Job 33:24) is the Word of the God of redemption. “He sent redemption unto His people” (Psa. 111:9). This redemption comes through Christ, as we read—“Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption” (I Cor. 1:30). He obtained “eternal redemption” (Heb. 9:12) for His people.

Redemption by Blood, and by Power.

The language of the Word concerning the believer is, “In whom we have redemption through His blood, the

forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace” (Eph. 1:7). Then, looking onward to the day of coming glory, when redemptive power shall be extended to his mortal body, and to creation, the word is— “In whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise, which is the earnest of our inheritance, until the redemption of the purchased possession” (Eph. 1:13-14). Then again, “Grieve not the holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption” (Eph. 4:30).

Redemption by blood was effected at the Cross. There the Lord Jesus “purchased with His own blood” (Acts 20:28) His people. Yea, more; He bought the field — the world, in which the treasure lay (see Matt. 13:44), and will yet take possession of it, set it in order, and rule it for God. But the time for this display of His redemptive power in the world has not yet come. He is now engaged in gathering His purchased treasure out of it. This He is doing by the Gospel. When a sinner believes the Gospel, his sins are forgiven, he is sealed by the Holy Spirit, and he waits for the day of full and final redemption.

Like a farmer who goes to the market to buy a flock of sheep, He purchases them, pays for them, and sets His mark upon them as His property. By-and-bye He returns, and takes the sheep that bear His mark out from the rest, and appropriates them to Himself.

These two aspects of redemption by blood and by power had their foreshadowing in the redemption of Israel. First, they were redeemed by the blood of the lamb from judgment, next by the arm of the Lord from Pharaoh. He “redeemed them from the hand of the enemy” (Psa. 106:10) to be unto Himself a peculiar treasure above all

people: a people among whom He might dwell, and rule by His Word.

Kinsman, Redeemer, Avenger.

Under the law, a kinsman had a right to redeem (Lev. 25:25; Ruth 4:6-7). He might also avenge his brother's blood (Joshua 20:5). The Hebrew word for Redeemer is also translated— "Kinsman" and "Avenger"; it has in it the threefold significance of Kinsman, Redeemer, Avenger. We have in the Lord Jesus all these three characters sustained. He is at once our Kinsman, Redeemer, and Avenger. He became our Kinsman by His incarnation. So we read, "Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same" (Heb. 2:14). Being "made in the likeness of men" (Phil. 2:7), His humanity was sinless, He had no share in man's fallen nature, He was not at a distance from God as others were by nature. We must jealously guard against the thought that such things were associated with His manhood. But in all respects — sin excepted — He was a man. Thus He became our kinsman. But this of itself did not deliver. It is a fundamental error to say — as some have said — that in becoming man Christ linked Himself with our race, and thus elevated and dignified man as such. The Scriptures teach the reverse. Man's nature has not been elevated since the day of his fall, nor will it ever be. He murdered Christ. He can only enter God's Kingdom by being born again. The Lord became Kinsman in order that He might become Redeemer. He took flesh and blood in order that He might enter into man's responsibilities, and discharge them by death. By death redemption was secured. The redemption of His people and the redemption of His inheritance were both

secured by the Cross. By death He also became the Avenger. He destroyed the power of Satan, He bruised the serpent's head, and, in virtue of His triumph over the enemy there, His people shall yet, in a day to come, see Satan bruised beneath their feet also (Rom. 16:20).

These three aspects of the work of Christ are all given in Heb. 2:14-15. Redemption by blood is past at the Cross: it never will be repeated; but redemption by power will go on until all that Christ has purchased shall be possessed and restored to God.

Redemption from the Curse.

"Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us" (Gal.3:13). The curse is the penalty of sin: it must have come upon us; but One was found who willingly died in our stead. Now all who believe are free. As we sing—

"Believing, we rejoice To see the curse removed; We bless the Lamb with cheerful voice, And sing redeeming love."

Redeemed From All Iniquity.

"Who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto Himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works" (Titus 2:14). This is redemption from sin's power. The people of the Lord are a purchased and a purified people. They are redeemed from lawlessness and set apart to God, to be of service to Him and for Him among men.

Not long ago, a Christian farmer was showing me over his fields waving with yellow grain. Not many years before, that same ground was over-run with whin, and yielded nothing. It passed into other hands, and the new

owner began at once to reclaim his possession. Skill and labour were brought to bear, on the wild, uncared-for soil; it was first “purified,” then sown, and now it yields a good return to its owner. The redeemed on earth “are God’s husbandry” (I Cor. 3:9).

On them He is bestowing His grace, His discipline, and His care, with the object of having them a people zealous of good works, such as He has ordained for them to walk in (Eph. 2:10).

Redemption of the Body.

There is a redemption yet to come. “Waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body” (Rom. 8:23). The body has not yet been delivered from that condition into which the fall has brought it. It has changed owners (see 1 Cor. 6:20), its members are no longer the weapons of sin, but now instruments of righteousness unto God (Rom. 6:13). It is still “our vile body” (Phil. 3:21), and must either be “dissolved” — as it is in those who have fallen asleep — or “changed” — as it will be in those who are “alive and remain” unto the coming of the Lord. In both, the body shall be fashioned anew, “like unto His glorious body” (Phil. 3:21), in that day when redemptive power shall be put forth on the bodies of the saints. For this we wait.

Creation Redeemed.

There is also the “redemption of the purchased possession” (Eph. 1:14). Creation has long been subject to the bondage of corruption. The ground has been under the curse for man’s sake. It has long groaned and travailed in pain under its burden, but a day will come when it too shall be delivered and become a sharer of “glorious liberty of the children of God” (Rom. 8:21).

Then a new Heaven and a new earth, wherein righteousness dwells, shall shine forth, and all trace of sin and its fruit shall be done away. Everything in that new creation shall stand in the power of redemption, and not like the first creation, in the goodness of the creature. Thus God shall receive back unto Himself, through Christ and His redemption, the glory lost by sin, and fill His Heaven with a ransomed throng, who, looking on the Redeeming Lamb “in the midst of the throne,” shall ascribe to Him the honour and the praise. “Thou art worthy ... for Thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by Thy blood” (Rev. 5:9).

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Regeneration, or the New Birth

Regeneration, or the new birth, is the initial act of true Christian life. Apart from this, there is no Christianity according to God. Yet this vital and fundamental truth is sadly obscured in popular theology, and frittered away alike by rationalism and ritualism. Nevertheless, it abides as that great operation of Divine power by which fallen man is created anew “in the image of God,” and brought from death in sin to life in Christ. There is in the Word of God the fullest, clearest testimony given to this great foundation truth.

The doctrine was spoken of first by the Master Himself to Nicodemus, the Jewish ruler, in that midnight interview recorded in the third chapter of John’s Gospel. Nicodemus was a religious as well as an educated man. He came to the Lord acknowledging Him as a Teacher sent from God, but in His reply the Lord would not acknowledge him as a subject of God’s Kingdom. It was not education, but regeneration that Nicodemus needed. It was not reformation, but a new birth. Had the Lord acknowledged this teacher of Israel as a subject of the Kingdom, and proceeded to instruct him, he would have been flattered, but when the Lord struck at the root of the tree by saying “Ye must be born again,” he was perplexed, and had to take his place as a sinner in the presence of the Saviour.

The Necessity of Regeneration.

“Ye must be born again” (John 3:7). “Neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature” (Gal. 6:15). “That which is born of the flesh is flesh” (John 3:6), and can neither be improved

nor got rid of. "The flesh profiteth nothing" (John 6:63); it is corrupt, unclean, and [not] subject to God (Romans 8:7). Man's nature—not only his acts—is contrary to God. He is part of a fallen race (Rom. 5:12). "Born like a wild ass's colt" (Job 11:12). "As an unclean thing" (Isa. 64:6). By nature a child of wrath (Eph. 2:3). "Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? not one" (Job 14:4). Not reformation, not religiousness, not morality. "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). This is the great necessity.

Nothing short of a birth from Heaven meets man's need. Apart from this, man remains outside God's family and Kingdom, no matter what his knowledge or creed may be. The religion of unregenerate men is dead works. A corrupt tree cannot bring forth good fruit; its production must be according to its nature. We do not expect to gather grapes from thistles, or to find roses on a nettle. No more can good works or holiness or the fruits of the Spirit be found on one whose nature is enmity against God. Man's religion may reform, but it cannot regenerate. Philanthropy may cleanse from outward vice, but it cannot renew. Reformation may change the current of the stream, but it cannot cleanse the source.

The Nature of Regeneration.

What is this new birth? It is a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17); the workmanship of God (Eph. 2:10). It is the germ of a new existence; the dawn of a new life. At regeneration a new nature is implanted (2 Peter 1:4); a new man is formed in the image of God (Eph. 4:24, with Col. 3:10). It is not the old improved, but the new begotten, leaving the born-again one a complex being, possessed of two natures, perfectly distinct, and entirely different in

origin and character. The result of this is incessant conflict (Gal. 5:17).

It is of the utmost importance to understand what regeneration really is. By some it is understood to mean a change of creed, with others a change of conduct, but in Scripture it means a re-creation, a heavenly birth, the beginning of a new life. In nature the sinner is “alienated from the life of God” (Eph. 4:18); he is “dead in trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1). At regeneration the believer becomes a possessor of Divine life, a partaker of the Divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4). The old is still there, but sin is no longer the law of his being. He is able to say, “I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me” (Gal. 2:20). Christ becomes the object of his soul; he is able henceforth to say, “For to me to live is Christ.” The flesh is not eradicated, it is not changed, but it no longer reigns. Like Nebuchadnezzar, who was deposed from his throne and driven from his palace, but was yet permitted to live within the borders of that land over which he once held sway, so the flesh is in the believer, but not in dominion over him.

How Regeneration is Effected.

“Born of the Spirit” (John 3:8). “It is the spirit that quickeneth” (John 6:63). “The Spirit giveth life” (2 Cor. 3:6). The “renewing of the Holy Ghost” (Titus 3:5). The SPIRIT is the operator; the WORD is the instrument. “Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth” (James 1:18). “Born again ... by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever” (1 Peter 1:23).

“Not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man,” that is, not by natural descent: such as baptismal regeneration would have it, “but of God” (John

1:13). Born of God, born of the Spirit, born by the Word of God. The believer is created anew, regenerated. He is not merely re-formed without, but, a new nature is implanted within. This is effected instrumentally through the Word. It is not by "Sacraments," or prayers, or what men may call the "means of grace." There is no value or virtue in these to regenerate a sinner. "Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth," is the testimony of the Spirit. "He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me hath everlasting life," (John 5:24) are the words of the Lord Jesus. As of old, in the first creation, "He spake, and it was done," (Psalm 33:9) so it is in the new creation. "Thy word hath quickened me" (Psalm 119:50).

How the New Life is Received.

"Ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:26). "Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God" (1 John 5:1). "Whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:15). It is not by prayer, or repentance, or penance, but by faith.

Faith receives God's testimony; faith believes God. The object of faith is Christ. It does not look within for evidences, it does not look without for signs: it looks to Christ and, looking, lives. As the serpent-bitten Israelite looked from himself and his wounds to the Divine remedy, the uplifted serpent on the pole, so the sinner looks from himself, from his sins and his religiousness alike, right away from sinful or righteous self, to Christ. He commits himself to Another, he casts himself on Christ. He receives God's testimony concerning His Son. He believes what the Word says about Christ, and then,

instead of examining himself for evidences whether he has become God's child or not, he again receives the testimony of the Word, which says, "Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God" (1 John 5:1). To seek assurance of this new birth by examining one's frame and feelings is no wiser than for a sailor to cast his anchor into the hold of his ship. Good anchorage is to be found without. The foothold of faith is the eternal Word of the eternal God. This abideth for ever.

The Fruits of Regeneration.

"Whosoever is born of God doth not commit [practice] sin" (1 John 3:9). "Ye have your fruit unto holiness (Rom. 6:22). "In this the children of God are manifest" (1 John 3:10).

The new life implanted at regeneration has for its present vessel "the mortal body" of the believer (2 Cor. 4:10), and through the deeds of the body it is made manifest. The members, once the servants of sin, are henceforth to be controlled by the new life, and used as instruments of righteousness unto God.

"Whosoever doeth not righteousness is not of God" (1 John 3:10), no matter what he may profess. Of the believer, as of his Lord, the word will be fulfilled, "the life was manifested, and we have seen it."

The Counterfeits of Regeneration.

Here then we have the testimony of God regarding this great foundation truth of the Gospel and of Christianity. "Baptismal regeneration" virtually denies all this. It says that regeneration takes place by passing an unconscious infant through a form for which there is neither Scripture command nor example, but which was first

instituted by an apostate Church when it had given up the very fundamental doctrines of the Gospel and supplanted, God's Word by its own traditions. How any man can practise this deception of the devil and believe the Bible is a mystery. No less, how one, said to be regenerated by water in infancy and become "an inheritor of the Kingdom of Heaven," needs to be told in later years, "Ye must be born again." Is it any wonder that honest, thoughtful men, seeing the inconsistency of this prevailing sham, turn from it with disgust and abhorrence. Would to God that they would turn to the Word of Truth to seek their light and guidance in all things spiritual and eternal there, but, alas! infidelity receives its largest contribution of admirers from the ranks of those who were at one time camp followers in the ranks of traditional religion.

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The Basis of Fellowship

In Reply To A Letter Written Over 60 Years Ago...

You ask me, "What is now the basis of fellowship among believers, assembling as we were accustomed to do thirty years ago, and what is the way of reception to that fellowship?" Judging from certain pamphlets which have reached us, and from the testimony of some, both seem to be changing; or at least, an effort is evidently being made to change them, from what we gathered from the Scriptures, and have sought to give effect to in our practice.

I shall endeavour to answer these questions, and seeing I am writing a letter rather than expounding a subject, I shall do so in a free and familiar manner.

When over thirty years ago, you and I, as young believers in Christ, were received into a small, but very happy, assembly of Christians, gathered simply in the Name of the Lord Jesus, there was no diversity of opinion amongst us as to the basis of our fellowship, or the way of reception into it. We had all been led into the position where we then were, by the Word of God; some through long exercise of soul, and at much cost to themselves, in the severing of links of long standing, and others of us as newly-saved ones, who had no such separations to make, but simply to begin as "free born," with God and the Word of His grace," never having known the bondage of traditional religion. We all learned what we knew from one Book, and, as we firmly believed, were taught by one Spirit. We all believed and spoke the same thing.

There was one mind and one mouth, and, consequently, unity of spirit and uniformity of action. Those who had been brought out from denominations, at much personal cost to themselves, involving the snapping of many links of cherished friendship, had no desire to return even for a day. They had gone forth “without the camp” to own an earth-rejected but Heaven-exalted Christ as Lord; to be where they could carry out what they had learned of His will, and gather as worshippers according as His Word had commanded, amid much opposition manifested by the religious world, to give effect to the principles set forth in the Word of God, regarding the corporate and assembly character of His people.

All this continued happily and with much blessing from the Lord, for a number of years. Many companies came into existence gathering in the same way, and long-neglected truths – such as the Lordship of Christ; the present indwelling of the Spirit in the Church; the common priesthood of all believers; separation from worldly religion and sectarian churches; the constitution, fellowship, and rule of the Christian Assembly, and the coming again of the Lord Jesus, and, of course, believers’ baptism by immersion, were taught fully and continuously with much power and blessing to God’s people, many of whom were attracted by the truth.

“The fellowship of saints “was very sweet and very real; and the testimony thus borne to the long-lost truth of “The Lord in the midst” of His gathered people, feeble and much opposed as it was, led many of the Lord’s people to search the Scriptures for themselves, and as they became convinced that the will of the Lord for His people is, that they should be separate from the world,

and together according to the pattern set forth in the Word, they severed their connection with the religious systems in which most of them had been brought up, and sought fellowship with those who were seeking as a feeble remnant in the midst of surrounding ruin, to return to the ancient pattern of God's assembly as set forth in His Word.

This was the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ (Matt. 18:20), unto which the Spirit through the Word always leads the saints. The common confession of that Name; the acknowledgement of His Headship over, and Lordship in the Church (Ephes. 1:21-23; 1 Cor. 12:3), with the Supreme Authority of the Word as the all-sufficient guide in everything pertaining to the fellowship, worship, ordinances, and service of the Assembly, were considered sufficient to give the needed confidence in receiving any "born again" person, sound in faith and godly in walk, who sought to be identified with the Assembly thus gathered, and in order to give all the opportunity of satisfying themselves and of welcoming thus, the name of each applicant was submitted to the Assembly by those who were its guides, and the following Lord's Day the new-comer was welcomed heartily by the whole Assembly.

Many "exercised" and inquiring Christians came to the Assembly as onlookers, and compared what they saw with what they read in the Word; but none were hurried, or in any way pressed into the Assembly, much less asked to "break bread" casually for the day, simply because we saw no warrant in the Word for such a course. We firmly believed that a desire for fellowship, or separation from Sectarianism, must be the result of

God working in His people by means of His truth, and that time was needed to effect such a result.

These were our earliest convictions and practice and I confess that after thirty years, I have seen nothing in the Word of God to cause mine to be modified or altered. I firmly believe that this is the only Scriptural basis of fellowship among saints, but it needs Divine Wisdom in its application, and Divine Power to give it due effect. God's ways need God's help, and can only be practiced by those who are in a right spiritual condition. This lacking, they will fail, and turn aside into some bypath which human wisdom will devise, and in which man's own resources will avail to carry him forward. I am perfectly satisfied that this is the chief cause for some getting tired of, and turning away from, the simple but godly way of assembling, set forth in the Scriptures. But in the Lord's grace, I am happy to be able to testify, that in the main, the principles I have named, as being those we first learned, and the practices I have stated, as those which first obtained among us, continue to the present time in the greater number of assemblies, and, I believe, through grace, will be preserved by those whose desire is to "go by the Book" and honour the Lord in the midst of His gathered saints.

There are few assemblies in which there are not those who would either widen the basis of fellowship and admit those to whom the Word gives no welcome. But these must be withstood, and for the same reason, namely that they would, for what they think necessary reasons, change that which an All-Wise God - who saw the end from the beginning, and knew all the difficulties that would arise - has given as the abiding pattern of

His Church, and the unalterable basis of its fellowship, until the Lord shall come.

For a number of years, as you know, the line of separation was fully maintained between those thus simply gathered, and the various systems and denominations of the world's religion. The saints in these denominations, were distinguished from the systems which held them in bondage, and, as brethren in Christ, recognized and loved. Whatever could be enjoyed in common, of the things of God, outside their unscriptural position was, and many of them, while not prepared to give it up, were glad to come to our Bible Readings and meetings for ministry, which they confessed helped them more than all that they got in their "churches." This I can testify continues also in many places, where the truth has been maintained and is preached, and by means thereof a continuous work of grace goes on among God's people, as well as in the conversion of the lost.

"UNDENOMINATIONAL UNIONS"

A result of fruitful work carried on by well known preachers was the formation of what they called "Udenominational Unions" for the carrying on of evangelistic work outside of, yet in nominal connection with all the churches. These are now to be found all over the country, some of them actively engaged in continuous Gospel effort. For a time they were supported by the ministers, but this gradually fell off, and as most of the "ordained" men dropped out, the help of certain gifted brethren in the assemblies was permitted - in some few cases, sought after. It was something new, to find those who had been branded as

“heretics” and written against as “Plymouthists,” on platforms alongside leading men in denominations, and in some few cases preaching with clerics from the same platform. Nothing beyond the most elementary truths could be spoken there. Nothing to disturb ecclesiastical position, or separate saints from worldly religion dare be mentioned, or if it ever was, the man who did it, never found himself there again.

Two results followed. First; those who went into such circles, lost the power of all the truth once practiced and preached by them, bearing on the separation of believers from sectarianism. Very soon they manifested little sympathy with any who spoke of it, and finally, most of them opposed it altogether. Second; believers in these “Unions” (who, according to their constitution, are all supposed to be members of the churches), in order to show their liberality, or because they were not at ease in their unscriptural position, were willing to come occasionally to “break bread,” without however, either asking to be received to the Assembly’s fellowship, or disturbing their connection with the sects of which they were members; indeed, they would have spurned identification with any Assembly. They simply wished to come as casual “visitors” when away from home.

Some prominent men, among those who so practice, have publicly denounced the “separated” position and applied to those in it, unlovely epithets. Some within the assemblies – chiefly those who had formed acquaintance with such believers by going to their “Unions,” and even to the very denominations from which they had professedly “come out” some time before – advocated that such should be allowed, and a few went further, taking the law into their own hands, and bringing them

to the Lord's Table on their own responsibility, without consulting any one, claiming on the ground, that as "The Lord's Table was for all the Lord's people," they were at liberty to bring any week-end visitor, whom they recognized to be a Christian, and set him down at the Lord's Table, with the same ease, as if it were their own tea table; the same individual in many cases being announced to preach in a Free Church, a Baptist Chapel, or Gospel Mission, on the same evening, where collections are taken from the ungodly; where instrumental music and many unscriptural practices are recognized and upheld.

Need you wonder, that young believers were stumbled; others driven to schisms, parties and cliques formed within assemblies, which have rent many, and reduced others to "All sectarian Missions," with little to distinguish them from the world's religious denominations. But the Word of the Lord will stand and must be held fast, notwithstanding all the failures of men. I believe God has used all this as a testing and sifting process, and that there will come forth to be maintained in more lowly but godly ways, a feeble but true testimony to the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and to the great truths of the present time-His Headship, His Lordship, His Coming, with the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, by whom alone such a testimony can be sustained.

May we be found always in such a spiritual condition that we shall not be hinderers, but "fellow workers with the Truth." (3 John 8)

This then, is a brief but true account of some changes, which you would observe among certain assemblies well

known to you in years gone by. There is still a measure of the former simplicity and warmth in many country and village gatherings, where believers are cast in their weakness upon God, and where the old spirit of persecution dies hard. But in the cities, where worldliness has made terrible inroads, especially among some who take the place of leaders and preachers, there is increasing departure from the Lord's way, and I fear, deep and determined hostility to all who through grace would seek to hold fast and act upon the Truth of God. This is grievous, but it is no more than we are taught to expect, and to prepare ourselves to meet, in the strength of the Lord and His grace. (2 Tim. 3:1)

The Second Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ

The Personal return of the Son of God from Heaven is the hope of the Believer and of the Church. This is the great event to which the Lord Himself has directed the hearts of His people. It was for this that the saints of early days were looking. The Church in her early love and beauty was waiting for her Lord, as the expectant bride with yearning heart, waits for her bridegroom. To see the One who loved her and who was loved by her was her hope. But the mists of traditions soon arose, and "the hope" became obscured. Love waxed cold, and worldliness set in; then the desire for the speedy advent of the Lord declined and soon the doctrine was conceived and spread abroad that He would not, and could not come, for many generations. For century after century this has held the field, and even now is believed and accredited as truth by thousands who bear the Christian name. Strange are the theories and manifold the speculation, which have been conceived and propagated since the Church's proximate and proper hope was hid to the eye of faith; some so crude and irrational that they have turned the subject into ridicule; others so ingeniously set with perverted Scripture that even God's own saints have been misled thereby. The conversion of the world; the universal spread of Christianity; the fulfillment of many prophecies, and death, have all been raised between the believer and the personal return of his Lord.

It is with an earnest desire to lead fellow-believers to read and search the Word of God for themselves, and to

find therein that “testimony of the LORD” which “is sure,” and makes “wise the simple,” that we would seek to look at some of our Lord’s own sweet words of promise, and of those of His apostles inspired by the Spirit, that teach us to look for His personal return as the hope of our hearts.

May He who walked with the two on the Emmaus’ road, expounding to them “in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself,” causing their heart to burn within them, draw near to us, and so speak, that our daily longing, yearning cry shall henceforth be, “Come, Lord Jesus.”

The Lord’s Own Promise.

It was in an upper room in the city of Jerusalem, with His eleven true followers gathered around Him, that the first full intimation of His going away from them and His personal return for them was given. It is recorded in John 13:33 to 14:3. These are the very first words He had plainly spoken to them of His going to the Father’s house and His coming back again. They are in harmony with His presentation as the Son of God, given in the Gospel according to John throughout. What we have in Matthew regarding His coming is as the King, and in Luke as the Son of Man, but here it is the Son of God going to the Father and returning to receive His loved ones to the Father’s House, the place of love. His disciples were very sad and sorely troubled at the thought that He was about to leave them, and that they were to be without Him in a dark and evil world. It was just then that the words were spoken — “In My Father’s house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and

prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto Myself; that where I am, there ye may be also" (John 14:2-3). This is what is called "The Promise" (Hebrews 10:36)... The manner and the accompaniments of His return are made fully known by the Spirit, through the Apostles, in the Epistles, but here we have the personality of it.

(Note A — The Manner of the Lord's Return. The commonly held opinion that the Second Advent of the Lord will be "at the end of the world, to judge all mankind," is a strange contradiction of all that the Scriptures, and especially the Epistles teach us, regarding the various aspects of our Lord's return. To fail in distinguishing His coming for His own, which the world may neither see or hear, from His return with His own in power and glory on the clouds of heaven, in flaming fire, accompanied by angels, to execute judgment, is to confuse everything, and make the reverent study of prophetic truth a hopeless puzzle. But if we put away preconceived opinions, set aside theological discussions, and cease to read Scripture in light of the Creeds, taking the Word alone as our guide, and noting the distinctions as to times and peoples and dispensations which it makes, the whole subject will stand forth in its order and completeness, without confusion, in perfect symmetry.)

It is from His own lips that we have this first sweet promise "I will come again" (lit. "I come again"). And it is direct from Himself again that we hear of it for the last time, in His own words from the highest heaven, "Surely I come quickly" (Revelation 22:20). The wonder is, that any should have mistaken the meaning of these words. Yet this has been done, and instead of the

personal return of the Lord Jesus to receive His own, death, fulfillment of prophecy, the conversion of the world, and the progress of science, have all been made to fill the place of the believer's hope. The One who said "I go," is the One who says "I will come."

The testimony of the heavenly visitors, who came forth to speak to those who witnessed His ascension to the right hand of God was, "This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen Him go" (Acts 1:11). It was Himself, the Eternal Lover of His people, who was taken up from the midst of His disciples in the act of blessing them, and it is "the Lord Himself" who "shall descend from heaven with a shout" to receive His people to His heart and home. Yet it has been asserted by men of influence, and received as true by many, that the only "coming" of the Lord for which Christians are to look, is a "spiritual" coming, or "a coming to the heart." Now, we do not for a moment doubt that there is a sense in which the Lord comes and takes up His dwelling in the hearts of His people (Ephesians 3:17). Equally true it is, that to those who love the Lord, and keep His words, both the Father and the Son come and make their "abode" (or "mansion" — the word is the same as in verse 2) (John 14:23). But neither of these, nor any season of spiritual reviving or refreshing, which may come to the saints on earth, is the fulfillment of the promise of the Lord— "I will come again and receive you unto Myself." Nothing short of the Lord Himself, His personal return and presence, can fulfil the promise, or satisfy the believer's heart. And not only is it a Person for whose coming we are taught to look, but the very same Person who went away. "This same Jesus ... shall so come" (Acts 1:11). Eighteen

centuries in that bright glory, where He now is, exalted to the highest place in heaven, surrounded by myriads of holy beings, have wrought no change in Him. He will come forth "the same Jesus" as when He took the babe in His arms and blessed it, or stood by the grave of Lazarus and wept. True, He is now glorified, and no longer in the form of a servant as when He trod this earth. But He has carried His Manhood with Him into Heaven, and there, amid all the glory of the eternal throne, He lives as the God-Man. And as such He will come again. There on that bright throne He sits, waiting for the hour when He shall receive and welcome the Bride for which He bled, to be for ever with Himself.

There, amid the songs of heaven, sweeter to His ear, Is the footfall through the desert, ever drawing near; There made ready are the mansions, glorious, bright and fair, But the Bride the Father gave Him, still is wanting there."

He waits, as Isaac waited for the home-bringing of Rebekah; we look, as Rebekah looked for Isaac, until their eyes met, and the bride was presented to the son by the faithful servant. It is not events, it is not prophecies fulfilled, it is not even glory, but it is the Lord Himself, we long to see. Not the crown He giveth, but the pierced hand. Not heaven, but "His face." To illustrate this: When the British soldiers returned victorious from Egypt, there was great excitement in London on the day of their arrival. Banners were flying, and crowds waited to do honour to the conquerors. By and bye there was a public banquet, and the Queen herself decorated those who had distinguished themselves by acts of heroism. But there stood on the platform awaiting the arrival of the train, one solitary

person, absorbed in the object of her hope. She was a soldier's bride. More than banners or banquets to her, was the hope of seeing him whom she loved, and more to him than a "Victoria Cross" was the joy of meeting and receiving his bride.

The Time of His Coming.

"Surely I come quickly" (Revelation 22:20). "Yet a little while, and he that shall come will come, and will not tarry" (Hebrews 10:37). Men have fixed dates and proclaimed the year and day when Christ would return. But they have only displayed their ignorance and folly. The Scripture gives no hint as to the day: dates do not belong to the dispensation of the Church's call. Signs and tokens of His nearness there will be none. All has been said that will be said. The stillness of the heavens has not been broken for over eighteen centuries; not since the last uttered word from the throne, "Surely I come quickly." The next will be His shout as He descends, the rallying cry that will gather around Him His loved ones of every clime. Dates there are in the prophetic Word; events to transpire, and prophecies to be fulfilled, ere He can return to earth in manifested glory, to set up His Kingdom and to reign, but between us and His return to "receive" His bride, there is nothing. No event that must transpire. Not the thickness of a sheet of tissue paper is placed between us and His return. Do we really believe this? That ere the sands of this day run out, the Lord Himself may come! That our feet may stand even now on the outskirts of the glory, and that in an eye twinkle we may be there. Like Israel of old, encamped on the banks of the Jordan: the goodly land lying just across, full in view, and all that had to take place ere they were in it, was the silent passage of

the ark through the stream, an event unknown to the nations, and quickly accomplished.

The “Hope” and the “Appearing.”

The personal return of the Lord Jesus is presented to us in two distinct stages. First — He will come to the air, and there He will gather His sleeping and His waking saints from earth up to, and around Himself. Then from that place He will return with them to heaven, into the Father’s Home. After an interval, during which momentous events in heaven and on earth will occur, He will return with all His saints to the earth, to manifest His glory, and the glory of His people, and to execute judgment on His enemies. In order to a right understanding of the truth, it is necessary to distinguish between these two aspects of the Lord’s return.

(Note B — His Coming For and With His Saints. The key to much of the New Testament teaching on the subject is the clear and oft-repeated distinction between the Lord’s coming FOR His people, and His return WITH them to earth. Consideration of the words most commonly used to distinguish them, their accompaniments and objects, would prevent the existing confusion regarding these two distinct, though related aspects of the Lord’s return.)

His coming as Son of God to the air, is the proximate hope of the saints (1 Thessalonians 1:10). There is no predicted event which must occur, and no prophetic word that must be fulfilled, before the Lord’s descent into the air, to call together His sleeping and His living people. His own word regarding this event, uttered from the throne above, is, “Surely I come quickly” (Revelation 22:20). No one can tell the day. Dates and numbers do

not help us in the least regarding it. But the attitude of the saints is to be “Waiting for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ ” (1 Corinthians 1:7). “Looking for that blessed hope” (Titus 2:13).

Before He comes as Son of Man to earth, accompanied by His people in power and glory, many prophecies must be fulfilled: the Antichrist must arise (2 Thessalonians 2:3) and God’s ancient people will be gathered to their land (Ezekiel 37:21).

The words used by the Spirit to describe these two events are worthy of our notice. The Lord’s coming to the air is spoken of as “The blessed hope.” It is called His Parousia, or presence. His return to earth is named “The appearing in glory.” His Epiphany, or manifestation in glory. (See Titus 2:13).

(Note C — “Parousia,” “Apokalupsis,” “Epiphany.” the word most frequently used to describe the Lord’s coming to the air for His People is Parousia, as in 1 Corinthians 15:23; 1 Thessalonians 2:19; 4:15; 2 Thessalonians 2:1,8; 1 John 2:28, which means — presence. It is used for one’s arrival (1 Corinthians 16:17), and continued presence in contrast to His absence, and includes the period during which Christ with His glorified saints, continues in the heavens before His manifestation with them in glory. Apokalupsis, as in 2 Thessalonians 1:7; 1 Peter 1:7, 13, and elsewhere, means – manifestation, unveiling, revelation, and is commonly used of the Lord’s return to earth with His people in power and glory. Epiphaneia, as in 2 Thessalonians 2:8; 2 Timothy 1:10; Titus 2:13 — means forth shining, appearing, and is connected with the

manifested gory of the Lord and His people, with the effects thereof on the world.)

The Manner of His Coming.

As Son of God, He will come to the air (1 Thessalonians 1:10), as Son of Man he will return to earth (Matthew 24:27-37). The descent into the air will be with a “shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God” (1 Thessalonians 4:18). This will be immediately answered by a resurrection of sleeping saints and a transformation of those who are alive and remain; whereas, at the descent of the Lord to the earth, He will be accompanied by “His mighty angels in flaming fire, taking vengeance” on His enemies (2 Thessalonians 1:7-9, 2:8). The Gospel by John, in which the Lord is presented throughout as the Son of God, is the only Gospel in which we find distinct mention of His coming as Son of God FOR His people. The many references found in the Gospel by Matthew, in which the Lord is presented as the King of Israel, and in the Gospel by Luke, in which He is presented as the Son of Man, are especially connected with His return TO earth, to judge His enemies, to deliver His earthly people, and to set up His Kingdom. It has been said by some, who contend for the theory of a general return, in which all these events are supposed to transpire, that this makes “Two Second Comings of Christ.” Our answer is, No. It only distinguishes between two stages and aspects of the Second Advent of our Lord, and this is exactly what the Scriptures teach us to do. His first advent, when He came to live and to die for us, was in two stages. First to Bethlehem as the infant of days, and later, to Jerusalem as the King of Israel to reign, and the Lamb of God to die. When He came to Bethlehem, the world knew

nothing of His coming: it was only revealed to a few, and they gathered unto Him and owned Him. When He entered Jerusalem, the multitudes thronged the road, before and after Him, and the shouts of “Hosanna” were heard afar off. And so when He comes again to mid-air for His own, they shall gather to Him at His call from earth and sea, but the world will go on in its course. The descent of the Lord, and the rapture of the saints may not arrest the world’s attention. The world will not behold the descending Lord at all, and we have nothing to warrant the thought that the world will see the ascending saints.

(Note D — The Rapture of the Saints. the ascension of the Lord, although it took place in the full light of day, and near to the city of Jerusalem, was not seen by any, save the disciples over whose heads His hands were uplifted in blessing, as He was silently lifted from their midst, and “carried up into heaven” (Luke 24:51). There is nothing said in the Word to indicate that it will be otherwise with the saints in the moment of their translation.)

When He comes to earth “Every eye shall see Him” (Revelation 1:7), and His enemies shall quail before the brightness of His manifested glory. But on the fair morn of resurrection, the saints alone shall behold the beauty and loveliness of their Lord, and they shall see Him “as He is,” without a vail or a cloud between.

“Him eye to eye, we then shall see, Our face like His shall shine; O what a glorious company, When saints and angels join.”

The Accompaniments of His Return.

The ascension of the Lord Jesus from the midst of His own disciples, while in the act of blessing them on the slope of Olivet, was an event unknown and unshared by the world. He had led His loved ones out from the religious but guilty city, and gathered them around Himself. Thus separated from the world, and alone with Himself, He lifted up His hands — His pierced hands — and blessed them. Who can estimate the joy of that hallowed moment? With nothing between; the Blessor and the blessed ones face to face: all grouped around Him, with the world far away. There they stood, under the uplifted hands of their Risen Lord! And while He was thus in the act of blessing them, He was quietly lifted up from their midst, and carried upward, until a cloud received Him out of their sight (Luke 24:51). Their eyes saw Him no more, but their faith knew and beheld Him, beyond that glory-cloud, within the heavens, blessing them still. As they stood there with uplifted eyes, looking steadfastly into the heavens (see Acts 1:10), whither their Lord had gone, two messengers, clothed in white raiment, appeared at their side, with the cheering words, "This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen Him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11). These words inform us of the manner of our Lord's return. How did He go away? From the midst of His loved ones, in the act of blessing them. Such will be the manner of His coming again. "The Lord Himself shall descend from heaven" (1 Thessalonians 4:16). "I will come again and receive you unto Myself" (John 14:3). He will not send, He will come Himself. Never did an earthly bridegroom go forth to claim his bride, with a love like His! With yearning, loving, longing heart, He will go forth from the glory and the peace of His Father's house, to gather

from earth's wastes, the saints for whom He lived and died. O wondrous moment! Fit recompense for the sorrows of Gethsemane, and the deeper woes of Golgotha. Who can tell the sufferings of that Cross; the travail of His soul; the anguish of His broken heart? But the day of His recompense will come. He who knew the sorrow will also know the joy. As we sing—

“Lord Jesus Thou, and none beside, its bitterness could know; No other tell Thy joy's full tide, which from that cup shall flow.”

“The Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout:” a shout of triumph and of victory. Such is the meaning of the word. It is the word of a captain to his soldiers, well known to their trained ears, already familiar with his voice. Others may see and hear, as they have done before (see Acts 22:9), but the voice will be heard and known by those alone to whom He speaks. Heaven's voices have often been a secret to the world. The heavenly host sang on Bethlehem's plains, but only the waking shepherds saw and heard. The world slept on. The glory of the transfigured Lord shone “above the brightness of the sun,” on the holy hill, but only the disciples were awakened to see His glory (Luke 9:32). The world knew nothing of the event at all. In keeping with this, is the Lord's own announcement of His second advent, His last description of Himself as the Coming One: “I am the root and the offspring of David, and the Bright and Morning Star” (Revelation 22:16). The Morning Star disturbs not the sleeping world. It steals quietly into the lower heaven, shedding forth its silvery light — fair harbinger of the coming day — and then it retires. It comes at that unique moment, which can scarcely be reckoned of the night, or of the day; the

witness to the waking watcher that the night is past, and the day at hand. And such will the advent of Christ be, when He comes to the air to receive unto Himself His own. He will not disturb the world: His business is not with it. Enoch was “translated” without seeing death, and was “not found,” but the world knew not where He had gone. Elijah was “taken up,” but only Elisha saw him go: the sons of the prophets sought him in vain on hill and in valley. Before the night of earth’s travail and sorrow, before the fiery blast of judgment which earth must feel, will be the morning of bliss and of glory for the saints. They will be safely gathered into the Father’s house, before one shaft of judgment can proceed from the throne. The flock will be around the Shepherd: the Bride will be in the presence of her Bridegroom. This will be more to Him than crowns and kingdoms. To have with Him for ever the saints who are the purchase of His blood. “He shall see of the travail of His soul and shall be satisfied” (Isaiah 53:11). And more than heaven and all its glory to the saints will be the joy of being by the side of their Lord, the Eternal lover of their souls. To gaze upon the brow once crowned with thorns! To see the Man who wept at Bethany! And to be thus for ever with the Lord.

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What Church Should I Join

"What Church Should I Join?"

An Address To Young Believers

John Ritchie

Many of you here tonight have recently been converted to God. A few weeks ago you were asking the all-important question -- "What must I do to be saved?" And this you had answered, by the Word of God telling you, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved" (Acts 16:31). You have believed, and you are saved, for God was as good as His Word. As young believers, other inquiries now rise among you, and among these, as some of you have expressed it, is the question -

What Church should I join? Or where, and with whom, can I have Christian fellowship?

This is a very important question, and I am glad to know that many of you are deeply exercised before God about it. Next to your soul's salvation and your individual walk with Him, nothing can be of more importance than to be guided aright in the matter of "Church Fellowship." Your decision in this will have an abiding effect on your after-life, either for good or evil. Many seem to think it does not matter much where they go, or with whom they have fellowship, provided they get on smoothly; and consequently they make it a matter of their own choice, "what Church they join," or, as it happens very often, they just drop in where they have been in the "habit" of going, and where, perhaps, their parents are "Members." Now this would be alright, if God had left it

an "open question" - "What Church should I join?" I would impress upon my own soul and yours, the absolute necessity of being guided wholly and solely by the Word of God. Men's ideas and advices are of no use here; not even the counsel of a pious parent. The Word of God, and that alone, must answer the question. And this makes it at once simple and easy; for if God has told me in His Word where, and with whom I am to have Church Fellowship, it ceases to be a question of what I think or what my friends think, or what any man says, and becomes a question of "What saith the Lord?"

Where does He say I am to be, and where does He forbid me to go? That's the point to get settled first of all, and then, no matter how much opposition may arise to hinder you, or how much failure there may be around you, you'll have the consciousness that you stand where God has commanded you, and have in your soul the testimony that you are pleasing Him. And what can be put into the balance against that? Nothing, no, nothing! For if you have the witness that you are pleasing God, and that He is on your side, it will make you as bold as a lion, even if earth and hell be engaged against you.

We will open the Book then - the precious Book - the "lamp to our feet" - the "light to our path" - and see what God says about the Church, and who they are that compose it. When once we get to know this, there will not be so much difficulty left about the "joining."

First of all then - the word "Church" is never used in the Scriptures as the name of a building used for religious purposes, as many of us from our childhood have been accustomed to use it. It is always used in connection with persons, and signifies "called out" ones. Turn to Acts 20:28. There we read of "the Church of God, which

He hath purchased with his own blood"; and again, "Christ...loved the Church and gave Himself for it" (Eph. 5:25).

Here we see whose the Church is, and at what a cost it was purchased. It is the "Church of God" -- not the Church of a nation, a country, a creed, or a person, but "of God"; purchased by the precious blood of Christ, and the object of His everlasting love. Like the merchantman seeking goodly pearls, who, when he had found one pearl of great price, sold all to buy it - the Lord Jesus gave Himself to obtain the Church for His Bride, to be the sharer of His glory forever. It is spoken of in the New Testament (and not found in the Old at all, save in type) under the figures of a Body, a Temple, a House, a Bride, and a City. It is called the Body of Christ, the Temple of God, the House of God, the Bride of the Lamb, and the Holy City, new Jerusalem (see Eph. 2:22, 23; 1 Cor. 3:16; 1 Tim. 3:15; Rev. 21:2-9).

Of His Body, Christ risen and glorified is the one and only Head; for God hath made "him to be the Head over all things to the Church which is His Body" (Eph. 1:22-23); and, "he is before all things, and by Him all things consist, and He is the Head of the body the Church" (Col. 1:17, 18). To Him the Church is called to be in subjection, as the wife is to her husband (Eph. 5:23, 24), and to Him alone.

No Pope or Archbishop, no Council, or Assembly, has any divine warrant to legislate for the Church of God; they have never been called to issue bulls, frame canons, or devise laws outside the Word of God, for her obedience. Her Head yet lives, seated at the right hand of God, to nourish, sustain, and rule His Body; the Spirit of God

dwells within each member, uniting them to the Living Head; and the Word of God containing all his counsel, is in our hands. What more need we?

As there is but one Head, so also is there but one Body (Eph. 4:4). It is composed of many members, differing in rank and attainment, even as in our natural bodies we have the eye, the hand, the foot; but though many members, yet only one Body (1 Cor. 12:20), "for by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body" (1 Cor. 12, 13). Each member has a place and sphere assigned to him by God. The unity is God-made, and God-sustained. Man never formed it, and he can never break it, because its keeping is in the hands of God - it is divine. By forming many and varied sects, man may ignore or deny this unity; but that in no way annuls it. The Church, viewed as the Body of Christ, is one in spite of all man's failure and schism; it embraces every child of God, north, south, east, and west, by whatever name they may be known among men. They are all redeemed by the same precious blood, sealed and indwelt by the same Spirit, encircled and enlocked by the same Almighty Arms of Love, and to be in the same glorious home throughout eternity. These are everlasting links between saint and saint -- they shall know no decay, though, sad to say, they are oftentimes disowned here, while others of man's making take their place.

Dear young believer, this is the Church as spoken of in the Scriptures; begun on the day of Pentecost by the descent of the Holy Ghost - at present being gathered out from the nations of the earth through the preaching of the Gospel, having no earthly inheritance or potentate - separate alike from Jew and Gentile - One New Man -

One Holy Church - the Bride of Christ, to be completed and presented to Him when He comes.

Of this Body (the only one mentioned in the Scriptures) you are already a "member" you have already been "joined" to it. Nothing on your part can make you any more a member than you at present are, and you cannot "unchurch" yourself. By the act of God you became a member of the Church, which is Christ's body, on the day of your conversion, and you'll continue so for all eternity. Hallelujah!

Part of the members of this Church are now absent from the body, and "present with the Lord"; others are for the present living in the world among men, and must needs live in some city, town, or country. It is not the will of God that they should remain isolated one from another, for His Word has said -- "Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is" (Heb. 10:25). The Christ-life within each of them also craves for fellowship with other members in whom the same life dwells, for "we are members one of another." Their association must therefore be one of life, and not mere outward uniformity; and the dead - that is the unconverted - cannot have any share in it, for what fellowship has life with death, or light with darkness? Clearly none whatever. Therefore it is impossible that anything like true fellowship can exist in those Churches where the living and the dead - the children of God and the children of the Devil - are massed together God distinctly forbids that such should be, in the words - "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers; for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? And what communion hath light with darkness?... Wherefore come out from among them, and

be ye separate, saith the Lord" (2 Cor. 6:14-17). The tares and the wheat are to grow side by side in the world - (and "the field is the world" remember, and not the Church, see Matt. 13:38) until the end; but in the Church of the living God the unsaved should have no place: they ought to be "without" (see 1 Thess. 4:12; Col 4:5).

It was so at the beginning. We find in the New Testament there were local Churches, such as the Church at Jerusalem (Acts. 8:1), the Church at Corinth (1 Cor. 1:12), the Churches of Galatia (Gal. 1:20, and the Church in the house of Nymphas (Col. 4:15). These Churches consisted of believers, and believers only. They were gathered into a divinity constituted fellowship, in subjection to Christ as Lord, the pattern of which remains for us to follow. They received all *whom the Lord had received, even those who were "weak" and required "support" (see Rom. 14:1; 1 Thess. 5:14); and to have been narrower than this they would have become a sect. In their assemblies they worshipped God, guided by the Spirit (1 Cor. 14); they observed the Lord's Supper on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7); but we hear no word of any "presiding minister" or "elder" at the head of the table. They owned and received the gifts of the risen Christ - evangelists, pastors and teachers; but they did not choose, elect, or ordain their own minister; nor was there any such person known in these Churches as the modern "minister," who is chosen by the congregation to do all the preaching, teaching, and shepherding of the flock. At Antioch there were five teachers (Acts 13:1), and at Philippi several Bishops (Phil. 1:1) in one church. How would that do now-a-days? What would become of "the

minister"? These Churches owned and obeyed those whom God had fitted to rule (Heb. 13:7, 17); they exercised godly discipline towards the erring; and if any one among them became guilty of holding and teaching evil doctrine (Rev. 2:17, 20), or of immoral practice (1 Cor. 5:11), they put away the offender.

*The only warrant for the refection or exclusion of any believer from Church-fellowship is, that he be guilty of any of those sins specified in Scripture for which God excludes him (see 1 Cor. 5:11-13; Rom. 16:17; Titus 3:10).

Such are a few of the characteristic features of the Churches mentioned in Scripture, and they are the patterns of what Churches ought to be till the Lord come. I have no more right to devise a new order of fellowship in the Church of God, than I have to make a new way of salvation. God has given both in his Word, and it endureth forever.

When any one was converted he did not require to ask, "What Church should I join?" for there was only one Church in each place, and he there and then became identified with it.

For example, in Jerusalem there were one hundred and twenty disciples on the day of Pentecost in an upper room. Three thousand more were converted; and we read, "the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls, and all that believed were together" (Acts 2:41, 44). And this was not only on the "special occasion" of that "great Revival," but "they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread and in

prayers" (Acts 2:43), "and of the rest durst no man join himself unto them" (Acts 5:13).

There were no unconverted "young communicants," no "dead members" in that Church; they "durst not join themselves to them." The ungodly Jews carried on their religion in the temple, headed by the high priest and his "colleagues," who condemned the Son of God; even as the unconverted religious people do now in their churches and chapels; but the young converts could have had no fellowship with such persons, and I'm sure neither would you. Like Saul of Tarsus, you would have gone to the disciples, and been received to their fellowship as he was (see Acts 9:26-28). You see your path would have been plain then. It is very different now. Numerous sects are spread over the face of the earth; the church and the world are mixed up together; and when Hod's now-born babes open their eyes, it is not to look upon the Church as it was in the beginning, but sect after sect named after their founder, their creed, or their country, and all contending for the mastery - who'll be the greatest.

What is to be done? That's the point: and we must fairly face it. Here in --- you have most of the leading sects represented, and you wish to know which of them you ought to join. Well, the simplest answer to your question is, "Which of them is according to the Word of God? Which of them answers to the pattern given in the Book?"

Let us test them and see. The leading churches are far from the mark. They allow the unconverted to sit at the Lord's Table - there can be no doubt about that. If you question this, just go up to some of them and ask the

plain and legitimate question, "Is your soul saved?" and you'll see. Hey choose their own ministers, some of which are unconverted beyond all doubt. They have one man set up, who acts as evangelist, pastor, and teacher, and for this he receives a stated salary - in short, is "hired" to do the people's religion. He says all the prayers, gives out all the hymns, and does all the preaching. No matter who else may be called of God to speak or pry while they are at "public worship," they dare not do it, else they would be turned out. They Holy Ghost must act through "the minister," or not at all; and all this honour is conferred upon him, because he is an "ordained man" - that is, because the hands of some other of his fellow-ministers were once laid upon his head, in imitation of the apostles - which most honest men now see to be a sham. These are serious obstacles to any one whose desire is to please God and obey His Word, "joining" or having church fellowship in such places. Are they not? Then there are others who make "water baptism" the door of admission into the church, and have no room for the Spirit's guidance in worship, or the exercise of all God's gifts in ministry. This is sectarian, and apart from the Word of God. Others gather on "the ground of the one body," and exclude many of God's people who are walking in the truth. This is highly sectarian, and strongly condemned in the Word of God (see 3 John 10). What then is to be done? Where can we go? Must we out of many evils "choose the least"? Certainly not. We must have the right thing - the God-appointed church fellowship and order, or none. Surely nothing less will satisfy a true hearted saint who wants to do the will of God in this matter.

Well, then, find out if there are any believers gathering in the name of the Lord Jesus, and having Him in their midst, according to Matt. 18:20; who have left all sects and parties, with their names, creeds, and traditions, because contrary to Scripture, and who have returned to the first principles of the Church of God; who have no name but that of Christ; who are gathered according to the divine pattern, who have room for the exercise of all his gifts, liberty for all the operations of His Spirit, and have His Word alone for their creed. This is what is commanded in the Book - this is what we see was practiced in the early churches - and this is your place. Shrink not from taking it, and, when you have taken it, "continue steadfastly" in it - hold it fast. Those so gathering may be but a "little flock," poor and despised, compared with the crowd of religious professors around them; but Jesus says - "Where two or three are gathered together in My name there am I in the midst"; and surely it is better to be where He is, than in the crowd without Him.

Let those who thus gather make no pretensions to be "the people of God," for this they are not, so long as there are saints in the sects around them, who nevertheless are dear to God, and will be in the same heaven for all eternity. Let us love such as brethren, who are one with us in Christ, although the systems they are mixed up in we must ignore. And having gained the right position in Church fellowship, let us live in the right condition in fellowship with God, and so walk among men as to commend the truth to every man's conscience in the sight of God. May He help us individually so to do. Amen.