



# *Living Water*

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# *Living Water* — Issue No. 82

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## **Recent Ministry**

**Page**

THE ROCK	Ken Hollands	<b>1</b>
An address at Defford, 21 <sup>st</sup> October 2006		

## **Poetry Selection**

JESUS ONLY	Hannah K Burlingham	<b>10</b>
THE GLORY SHINES BEFORE ME	Hannah K Burlingham	<b>11</b>
THE GOSPEL OF GOD	Hannah K Burlingham	<b>12</b>

## **Testimony Section**

READY TO FLY, READY TO DIE	Eric Impey	<b>12</b>
A story from the Warsaw Rising, 1944		

## **A voice from the past**

GOD IS AND WILL PREVAIL	William Johnson	<b>14</b>
The second in a series of gospel preachings. (These preachings were given in London sometime between 1920 to 1922.)		

## **A word for today**

THE ASSEMBLY, ITS USE AND OBJECT	J. B. Stoney	<b>21</b>
Continuing the series based on articles written month by month for the “Voice to the Faithful”. This article first appeared in July 1884		

## THE ROCK

**“Hear, O God, my cry; attend unto my prayer.**

**“From the end of the earth will I call unto thee, when my heart is overwhelmed: thou wilt lead me on to a rock which is too high for me.”**

**Psalm 61:1-2.**

**“Upon God alone doth my soul rest peacefully; from him is my salvation.**

**“He only is my rock and my salvation; my high fortress: I shall not be greatly moved.”**

**Psalm 62:1-2.**

I want to speak about the Lord Jesus Christ as the rock. We read in 1 Corinthians “the rock was the Christ” (1 Corinthians 10:5). A rock conveys to me the idea of something stable and permanent. That is what the Lord Jesus Christ is.

We live in a very unstable world. If we look at the world in its political aspects how unstable everything is. We see terrible conflicts and unstable social conditions. Everything is uncertain and unstable. If we come a little closer home, within the Christian profession there is great instability — people blown about by winds of doctrine and many ideas and opinions. Then if I come closer home still, what weakness and fickleness I find in myself! How good it is, then, to turn to another Man — to Jesus, the Rock of our Salvation.

The Psalms are a very interesting part of the Bible because they speak of soul experience, experience with God. Sometimes they are happy experiences and sometimes they are sad but they are experiences of people of faith. We read in Psalm 61, “From the end of the earth will I call unto thee, when my heart is overwhelmed: thou wilt lead me on to a rock which is too high for me” or, as it could be rendered, ‘Higher than I’. In other words, the psalmist is saying he can call upon God and he would be led on to a rock that is higher than he is. He was going to be led into a position of stability.

I like this. From wherever you are in your experience, even if unconverted, you can call upon God and find that God has the answer in Jesus, a Person who is absolutely stable, absolutely firm. “The Father loves the Son, and has given all things to be in his hand” (John 3:35). Everything is secure in the hands of the Lord Jesus Christ. The work that He accomplished at the cross of Calvary is an eternal redemption; it will never have to be added to, amended, brought up to date. It is certain, firm, secure.

So the Psalmist says, “From the end of the earth will I call unto thee, when my heart is overwhelmed”. One of the worst sinners ever mentioned in the Bible

## Recent Ministry

was Manasseh. He was brought up in a good home and his father was a God fearing man. However, once Manasseh became king he tried to undo all the good things his father had done. Some of the worst acts of evil in the history of the Old Testament were committed during the reign of Manasseh. He turned away from God. He adopted evil customs of the pagan world round about him and even went beyond what they did.

God spoke to him during his fifty-five years of reign and he did not listen. Eventually he was taken captive by the king of Assyria. What happened then? Manasseh turned to God and God listened to him and set him free and led him to a rock. Tonight any soul who turns to Christ and accepts God's way of salvation through faith in Jesus can get their feet upon this solid Rock. The Lord Jesus Christ is a wonderful Saviour. What a work He accomplished at the cross of Calvary. It is great enough to meet the need of any repenting sinner.

Manasseh turned to God; he was genuine. If you read the story in 2 Chronicles 33:12-13 you can see this was not superficial. It was genuine prayer that went up to God and God heard him. God delivered him from captivity and brought him back to Jerusalem and into his kingdom. Everybody who turns to Christ, whatever kind of sinner, however overwhelmed with sin, they can get set free of it through trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ. What a wonderful Person Jesus is.

Others in the Old Testament called upon God. You think of Hannah, she called upon God. She was a good woman, an upright woman, but she was overwhelmed. Things had not worked out in her life as she had hoped. Have you ever felt like that? That things in your life do not work out the way you would like and expect them to do? Others mocked Hannah. Her heart was overwhelmed and what did she do? She called to God.

Eli, the High Priest, saw her praying. She prayed in her heart and her voice was not heard, only her mouth moved, and Eli even thought that she was drunk. She was pouring out her soul to God. God heard her and answered her prayer. She got her feet on the Rock and out of her experience she writes a psalm (see 1 Samuel 2:1-10). Sisters have composed some of the most wonderful hymns. There was a sister in this area, Hannah Burlingham, who wrote some beautiful poems through her own experiences with God.\* Well, Hannah, in the Bible, wrote a beautiful hymn; she speaks about God as the Rock, because she had learned Him in that way. It is a sad, sad time in our life when we are overwhelmed, but it is a wonderful experience to get our feet upon the Rock. So king David in

*\*If you would like to read some of Hannah Burlingham's poems, turn to page 10*

Psalm 61 says, “Thou wilt lead me on to a rock which is higher than I”. Hannah found that there was a rock that was higher than she was and she got her feet on to that rock.

Think too of David who wrote that Psalm and the next one. Some people think that he wrote Psalm 62 after the revolt of Absalom his son. David certainly experienced rough times before he became king, and afterwards. He knew what it was to feel downcast. He was so downcast at one stage that he pretended to be mad to try and escape from the trouble he was in. David knew what rough times were but he also knew God as the Rock. God intends that whatever our circumstances or needs, however we might be feeling today, however wrong things might have gone for us in our lives, we look to Christ, find Him as the Rock and are able to say as David does in Psalm 62 “Upon God alone doth my soul rest peacefully ... He only is my rock and my salvation”. He only is my Rock. Do not rely on other things, do not rely upon yourself. Some people make a great play today about what you can do from within you. I am not saying that human beings do not have innate capabilities to do lots of things for themselves but when it comes to our soul’s welfare, and our need of moral guidance, we need to look to Someone who is higher than we are and that is Jesus. Find in Him the Rock, the point of stability on whom we can rely totally for our lives here and for all eternity.

So the Psalmist says, “He only is my rock and my salvation”. Moses wrote a song at the end of his life. He refers to the Rock quite a number of times and one of the things he says is that his Rock, the Rock of Israel, is different from other rocks (Deuteronomy 32:31). There are all kind of religions and ideas in this world, ideas, beliefs, but salvation is in no One else but the Lord Jesus Christ and He is the rock of our salvation.

God has committed Himself to Christ. He is God’s Man. We sometimes sing:

*‘None shall ever be confounded  
Who on Thee their hope have built.’*

God has committed Himself absolutely to Jesus. It speaks of Him as “a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner-stone, a sure foundation” (Isaiah 28:16). It is wonderful to think of what God has found in Jesus. If you and I find stability in Jesus, let me tell you this: God has committed everything to Him. He is going to head up everything in Him, the things in the heavens and the things upon earth. Everything in this universe is one day going to centre on Christ in a public sense. It is wonderful to know that Person now and to know Him as the Rock of our salvation.

## Recent Ministry

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**“...for they drank of a spiritual rock which followed them: (now the rock was the Christ;)... 1 Corinthians 10:1-10.**

This scripture sets out an additional thought about the Rock – as a source of refreshment.

I love this expression, “Now the rock was the Christ”. Paul is writing about the history of the children of Israel in the wilderness. They had been delivered from Egypt and had proved how the pillar of cloud could lead and protect them as they went through the Red Sea and then through the wilderness.

Paul draws attention to five different occasions in the wilderness when the Israelites turned away from God and sinned. Yet right through the wilderness, “They drank of a spiritual rock which followed them, now the rock was the Christ”. In Exodus chapter 17 we read about the rock at the start of their wilderness journey. In Numbers 20 we read about the rock again towards the end of their journey but Paul says that it was with them all the way, “They drank of a spiritual rock which followed them, now the rock was the Christ”. Think of the detailed care and provision of the rock that followed them.

In Exodus 17 we read that the children of Israel had no water. They were thirsty! They needed water for themselves and their animals to keep them alive. God tells Moses what to do — to go to the rock and that He would stand upon the rock. Moses was to take his staff, the staff that he had used to bring the judgments of the plagues upon Egypt, and smite the rock for water to flow forth.

Jesus had to be smitten. He had to be smitten for you and me. Jesus had to suffer so that there might be blessing and refreshment from God for us. He “suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God” (1 Peter 3:18). Jesus suffered on the cross in order to make available the water of life for you and for me.

In John chapter 4 the Lord Jesus speaks of the water that “I shall give him”; “Whosoever drinks of the water which I shall give him shall never thirst for ever” (John 4:14). In order to make that water available Jesus had to die. He had to endure the judgment of God so that you and I could be set free and this wonderful provision of God be made available to us.

So it says, “They drank of a spiritual rock which followed them, now the rock was the Christ”. Think of the Israelites going through the wilderness, drinking of that spiritual rock that was the Christ. The wilderness must have been very

difficult. It seems at times that the Israelites went round in circles. At one stage it says, “Ye have gone round this mountain long enough” (Deuteronomy 2:3). As they went all kinds of things cropped up. We read about some of them in this passage in Corinthians and it brought out just what was really in the heart of these men and women. Yet, “They drank of a spiritual rock which followed them, now the rock was the Christ”.

When we first trust in Christ that is only the start of the Christian life. As believers in Jesus we come morally into the wilderness and God intends that we should learn Him through those experiences. Others have said, ‘The wilderness does not form part of the purpose of God but it does form part of His ways’. We learn God through His ways with us. That might mean difficult circumstances but we are intended to learn God in the wilderness. Learn His love, His support, His care and learn this refreshment that can keep us going while we are here.

We can relate to these sins that marked the children of Israel; in fact it says here, “these things happened to them as types, and have been written for our admonition”. Paul writes in the first century and we are in the twenty first century but I can read this scripture and say, ‘This has been written for my instruction’. We should read the scriptures in that way. Reading the Bible is quite different from going to school or college and studying certain subjects. You can study a subject and learn to answer lots of questions about it. The Bible is moral teaching that is intended to affect us in our lives, day by day, and in our relations with God and in our relations with others.

Paul mentions a few things in this passage. He speaks of those who were, “lusters after evil things”. God gave the children of Israel the manna on which they were to feed each day and which was provided to sustain them in the wilderness, but they got fed up with it! They wanted the things that they claimed they had enjoyed in Egypt for nothing (Numbers 11:5). Egypt is a picture of what the world is like. The devil is always trying to make the world and its things attractive to us and cause us to turn away from the Lord, from the scriptures and the company of God’s people. How often the devil tries to do that, to turn us into those who lust after evil things. It says, “These things happened as types of us”.

Then Paul goes on, “Neither be ye idolaters”. Idolaters! Yes! The Israelites had not been very long in the wilderness before they asked Aaron to make them a golden calf and started to worship it. They became idolaters. We can become idolaters too by allowing other things or persons to displace God. Naturally we look to some human being to follow but the Person we have to follow is Jesus.



## Recent Ministry

He is the Man at God's right hand. We do not see Him literally but we can see Him by faith. What a wonderful Person He is.

Paul goes through these different tests in this passage in Corinthians but I did not want to concentrate on the failures of the children of Israel but on the fact that "they drank of a spiritual rock which followed them: (now the rock was the Christ;)". As we look back over our lives and as we think about the situation today we should know there is a source of refreshment in Jesus to sustain us and help us and keep us in life.

Some Israelites benefited from this water. Caleb said about himself, after the end of the wilderness journey, that God had kept him alive for forty-five years. How did He keep him alive? He kept him alive by drinking of the Rock that followed them; now the Rock was the Christ. That is the way that I keep alive in my soul. That is the way that you keep alive in your soul. I cannot keep you alive, you have to keep yourself alive by coming to Christ and drinking (see John 7:37).

Think of Moses himself. I feel sorry for Moses, sometimes, when I read some of these passages, particularly those in Numbers. The children of Israel in the wilderness must have been a sore trial to him. What kept him in life? It was drinking of the rock that followed him, now the rock was the Christ.

I want to refer to one other passage about drinking of the rock and it is part of the story of Samson who was given special strength. One day Samson did a great service for God. With the jawbone of an ass he killed a thousand men (Judges 15:15). After this great victory he was very thirsty. Have you ever tried to serve the Lord? Every Christian should serve the Lord according to his or her measure.

Now, after this great service Samson was very thirsty. There was a danger that because he was thirsty he might have fallen into the hands of the Philistines, the very people that he had defeated. He called to God. It is a great thing to call to God. Sometimes you feel drained in your soul, sometimes you feel down. Maybe you have done something for the Lord but afterwards you feel drained. What should you do? Call upon God!

What did God do? He split the hollow rock, water came out and Samson was able to drink and revived. We need to keep going to the Lord in our Christian life, all the way through. Whether we are in everyday life or whether we are seeking to serve the Lord, keep going to Christ, find the water, the refreshment, the supplies that come from Him: grace upon grace. It will keep us alive in our souls, and keep us in life until He comes for us.

## Recent Ministry

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**“...Whoever therefore hears my words and does them, I will liken him to a prudent man, who built his house upon the rock...” Matthew 7:21-27**

The passage we read in Matthew comes near to the end of what is sometimes called the “Sermon on the Mount”. The Lord Jesus had been teaching the laws of His kingdom and He is just about to finish. Now at the end He gives a warning about people who say to Him, “Lord, Lord” but had no real link with Him. It was not enough to make outward profession of Jesus. He says, “Not every one who says to me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of the heavens, but he that does the will of my Father who is in the heavens”. And then He goes on to speak about the importance of hearing His words and doing them.

The words of Jesus are very important. He says elsewhere, “The heaven and the earth shall pass away, but my words shall in no wise pass away” (Matthew 24:35). That is how important the words of the Lord Jesus are. Thank God, we have His actual words in the Bible. We also have the words of His apostles in the scriptures as well. They are very important for us. And we need not only to hear them but put them into practice.

God does not want us to be superficial christians. God does not want us just to be tossed about by every idea that comes along. I believe the way to become stable and mature christians is just what Jesus says here: to hear His words and do them, put them into practice! That is a challenge to everyone initially. Every person who hears the Gospel needs to have the word mixed with faith and to put it into practice, to repent towards God and have faith in Jesus. But it is also true of those of us who believe: we need constantly to hear His word and do it. Jesus describes the outcome here.

Hearing His words and not doing them is like building your house upon the sand. If a difficulty comes along, the rain, the wind, the storm, it collapses. Now the contrast is with people who hear His words and do them so that whenever the trials come and the difficulties we stand firm. It says, “the rain came down, and the streams came, and the winds blew and fell upon that house, and it did not fall, for it had been founded upon the rock”. The words of Jesus have a rocklike character in themselves and doing them is so important. Each of us should be concerned that we do not just hear the words, but are doers as well as hearers. I feel for myself often how little I get the gain of what I read and what I hear.

## Recent Ministry

When we read the Bible we should gain from what we read. It is not a question of reading so many verses today and so many another day, and reading the Bible in a set time. It is a question of hearing the word and doing it, putting it into practice. May the Lord help us all to do that. To hear the word and to put it into practice in our own lives is the way to become more stable christians and be serviceable to the Lord. There is a crying need for people like that today, who take up responsibility for the Lord. We should have a sense of being entrusted with sacred things and value them and respect them and stand by them and maintain them.

We were speaking earlier today of Aquila and Priscilla and how they continued as stable, useful believers. Paul had known them over quite a number of years from the time he first met them until the time he writes about them in his last letter — the second letter to Timothy. What marked Aquila and Priscilla was continuance. They were amongst those who heard the word and did it. They put it into practice and they became stable believers who were a source of blessing and help to others. That is what God wants you and me to be. He wants us to take on the Lord's word, to be affected by it and therefore to be a source of help to others.

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**“... Jesus ... demanded of his disciples, saying, Who do men say that I the Son of man am? And they said, Some, John the Baptist; and others, Elias; and others again Jeremias ... He says to them, But ye, who do ye say that I am? And Simon Peter answering said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. And Jesus answering said to him, Blessed art thou Simon Bar-jona for flesh and blood has not revealed it to thee, but my Father who is in the heavens. And I also, I say unto thee, that thou art Peter, and on this rock will I build my assembly, and hades' gates shall not prevail against it.”**

**Matthew 16:13-18.**

Finally, I want to speak about what God is doing as spoken about in Matthew 16. Jesus refers here to the rock. Simon Peter, like others, heard the challenge of Jesus, “Who do men say that I the Son of man am?” If you ask that question today, you also would get a wide variety of answers. I met church-going people recently who knew something about Jesus but they were not sure if He is God. It is amazing how uncertain many professing christians are as to the Person of Christ. That emphasises the importance of hearing the word, studying the word, finding out what the Bible says about Jesus and laying claim to it and making it our own so that when a challenge comes we stand by it.

## Recent Ministry

Here, where we read, Peter and the others are challenged by Jesus' question, "Who do men say that I the Son of man am?" They give different answers. They obviously knew what people were saying about Jesus. We too should know what people round about think about the Lord Jesus. But the most important thing is — what do we believe about the Lord Jesus? Simon Peter answers the Lord's question, "Who do ye say that I am?" with the declaration, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God". Peter was very certain about the uniqueness of Christ and Jesus told him where he had received it. He said, "flesh and blood has not revealed it to thee, but my Father who is in the heavens".

Then the Lord Jesus says these words, "I say unto thee that thou art Peter, and on this rock I will build my assembly, and hades' gates shall not prevail against it". Peter is not the rock that the church is built on. The Son of God is the rock. The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ the Lord. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 3, "other foundation can no man lay besides that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ". The church is built upon Christ, "this rock", this wonderful rock and nothing can prevail against it.

That building work is going on. Jesus said, "I will build ...". He had not started it then; He said, "I will build My assembly". Thank God He is building and Christ's building is going on today. Peter takes up the theme later on in his epistle. He speaks about believers as being living stones. He says, "To whom coming, a living stone". Christ is the living Stone, we come to Christ and then we are "built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God by Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:4, 5). God's building is going on today.

There is a temple that is being built. You may say that you cannot see it, and that would be quite true but it is being built today. "A holy temple in the Lord" is being built today by the Spirit of God (Ephesians 2:21). He is building features of Christ in the souls of believers like you and me and hades' gates will not prevail against it. Nothing will prevail against what God is doing.

It is important to see that God's building is under construction: one soul, another soul, coming to Christ, one soul, another soul, feeding on Christ and growing in their appreciation of Him and as a result a temple is being built. It is founded upon the rock. He says, "on this rock I will build my assembly, and hades' gates shall not prevail against it".

It is wonderful to realise that God builds today and that is going through into eternity. We read in Revelation of the holy city coming down out of the heaven from God. The passage identifies that city as "the bride, the Lamb's wife,

## Poetry Selection

coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God” (Revelation 21:9, 10). God’s building is going through. Thank God I belong to that building. Thank God, if you are a believer you also belong to that building and that it is founded upon the Rock.

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May we all seek to appreciate the Lord Jesus Christ as the Rock. May our faith be solidly based upon Jesus and upon His finished work and thus we get stability in our souls. In this way we stand upon the rock that is higher than I.

May each one of us partake of the refreshment, the encouragement, the strength and the supplies that come from an ascended Christ so that we are kept fresh and living as we go through the wilderness journey.

May we take on the words of Jesus, not just in our heads but in our hearts so that they affect us in practical, everyday life and we are not swept away when the storms come.

And may we appreciate what Christ is doing, this building that He is making, He is forming, that will be for His pleasure and His glory eternally.

May the Lord help us all for His name’s sake.

*Ken Hollands*

*An address at Defford, 21 October 2006*

## JESUS ONLY

Tis Jesus in the sunshine,  
And Jesus in the shade;  
Tis Jesus still, when lesser hopes  
Like summer blossoms fade;  
Tis Jesus the unchanging One,  
Whose changeless love I know;  
And when the work He gives is done,  
To Jesus I shall go.

*Hannah K. Burlingham (1842 – 1901)*

## THE GLORY SHINES BEFORE ME

The glory shines before me;  
I cannot linger here:  
Though clouds may darken o'er me,  
My Father's house is near.  
If through this barren wilderness  
A little while I roam,  
The glory shines before me,  
I am not far from home.

Beyond the storms I'm going,  
Beyond this vale of tears;  
Beyond the floods o'erflowing,  
Beyond the changing years.  
I'm going to the better land,  
By faith long since possessed;  
The glory shines before me,  
For this is not my rest.

The glory shines before me;  
I know that all is well:  
My Father's care is o'er me,  
His praises I would tell;  
The love of Christ constrains me;  
His blood hath washed me white;  
Where Jesus is in glory,  
Tis home, and love, and light.

*Hannah K. Burlingham (1842 – 1901)*

## Testimony Section

### **THE GOSPEL OF GOD**

The Saviour, Christ the Lord,  
Mid guilty sinners came,  
Maintained the truth of God,  
Bore grief, reproach, and shame:  
Unwearied in His love and grace,  
He took the guilty sinner's place

Alone, upon His cross,  
God's judgment Jesus bore,  
He paid in full the cost  
Of glory evermore:  
His precious blood was freely shed,  
And Jesus crushed the serpent's head!

By resurrection now  
God doth His rights declare;  
Let men and angels bow  
To Jesus everywhere  
For to "this Man", God's Son, is given  
All power on earth, all power in heaven.

*Hannah K. Burlingham (1842 – 1901)*

### **READY TO FLY, READY TO DIE**

The 1944 Warsaw Airlift has been described as 'one of the great unsung sagas of the second World War'. The airlift was intended to provide supplies—food and weapons—to Poles in Warsaw who were fighting the German forces occupying the city.

For the aircrews concerned, the flights were extremely dangerous, since the planes had to fly very low over Warsaw at no more than 125 mph in order to target the drops effectively. On the first flight, during the night of 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> August 1944, of the seven RAF planes taking part only two survived. Later attempts to drop packages from a higher altitude, well clear of enemy guns, resulted in 80% of the supplies falling into enemy hands. One load drifted 25 miles from the city before landing! There was no alternative therefore but to make low flights over the city.

## Testimony Section

The RAF, the South African Air Force, and the Polish Special Duties Flight made the majority of drops, flying from bases in Italy. Supplies flights were made on 4, 8, 11-18, and 20-28 August, 1944.

On the 16<sup>th</sup> August, Eric Impey, a young pilot with the South African Air Force, made his last flight. His Liberator plane was shot down over Warsaw that night killing the whole crew. Shortly before take off he was seen writing a poem. This is what he wrote:

My God, this night I have to fly,  
And ere I leave the ground  
I come with reverence to Thy throne  
Where perfect peace is found.

I thank Thee for the life I've had,  
For home and all its love,  
I thank Thee for the faith I have  
That cometh from above.

Be with me at the target, Lord,  
When danger's at its height;  
Be with me as I drop my load  
And on the homeward flight.

And should it be my time to die,  
Be with me to the end.  
Help me to die a Christian's death,  
On Thee, Lord, I depend.

Then as I leave this mortal frame,  
From human ties set free,  
Receive my soul, O God of love,  
I humbly come to Thee.

*Eric Impey*  
*16<sup>th</sup> August 1944*



## **GOD IS, AND GOD WILL PREVAIL.**

### **Proverbs 30:1-6**

The passage we read begins with the words, “The words of Agur the son of Jakeh, even the prophecy: the man spake unto Ithiel ... and Ucal”. The Hebrew meaning of 'Ithiel' is: 'God is', and the meaning of Ucal is: 'God will prevail'. That is the key to all I have to say.

Scripture says, “The fool hath said in his heart there is no God”. It does not mean that such a one does not believe in the existence of a Supreme Being, but the force of it is, 'No God for me'. It means the exclusion of God from my life. There are millions of people who believe in the existence of a supreme Being, the Almighty God, and yet they constantly say and have said by their ways all their lifetime, 'No God for me'. Now, it is the greatest possible folly to exclude God. The exclusion of God will end in eternal ruin. You cannot afford to exclude God.

If I speak of religion, and there is to-day plenty of religion, my definition of it is this, that it is the respectful recognition of God at a distance on occasions. People make a respectful recognition of God at a distance on occasions, but there is nothing in that. It is not christianity. Christianity is this, that God has come into my life to beautify it, and to make me supremely happy down here in this world in the blessed knowledge of Himself. That is the nature of the proposal in the gospel. The blessed God desires that we should know Him, and know Him in such a way that our happiness shall not depend upon our circumstances here. The nature of the proposal is to make us supremely happy in the knowledge of God here and now. That was the nature of the proposal in the early days of the gospel. There was not one word said by any of the preachers in the early days of the gospel that if people believed the gospel they would go to heaven, not a word about it.

You may study it and look closely into the inspired record of the early proclamation of the gospel, and you will find that none of the preachers ever said that if they believed the gospel they would go to heaven. What was the nature of the proposal in the proclamation of the gospel? That people should have the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit, and in the gift of the Holy Spirit here shall be the knowledge of God, and His blessed love shall be shed abroad in our hearts. What a magnificent thought that is. God proposes to make you supremely happy in the knowledge of Himself down here in this world. After the early christians were thus blessed with the gospel and had received the Holy Spirit they were taught that they were going to heaven, and they were taught it because love

## A Voice from the Past

wanted them there. That is how it comes out. I impress this point on you, that you cannot afford to exclude God from your life.

There was a time — I speak as a christian — when I tried to exclude Him, but now I am never happier than when I think of God. I have known Him for fifty-three years; He has come into my life and beautified my life and made me supremely happy, and that happiness does not depend upon whether I have a fine coat or a shabby one, a long purse or a short purse, or whether I live in a palace or a cottage; my happiness does not lie in these things but in the knowledge of God.

Now then, the fool hath said in his heart, 'No God for me'. The Lord tells us in Luke 12 — I draw a contrast now — of a man who had a piece of land. Who gave it him? God gave it to him. He had the strength and the ability to cultivate that piece of land. God gave the ability. He had the sunshine and the rain. God gave it him. He was very diligent and he expanded it — men love to expand, because it gives them a place in the eyes of their fellow creatures, poor things that we are; he prospered and said, "What shall I do?" "I have much goods laid up for many years... This will I do: I will pull down my barns, and build greater; and there will I bestow all my fruits and my goods". Now, there was not one thought of God or of his neighbour. That man's life was self-centred and God was excluded, and not only God, but also his neighbour.

What an awful life to live, to be self-centred, to shut out God, and if you shut out God you shut out your neighbour. That was the condition of that man. The neighbours said, 'Well done'; the newspapers would say, 'Well done', but what does God say? God says, 'You fool, this night your soul shall be required of thee'. If you exclude God from your life here, He will exclude you from His life there for ever and ever. The very fact that such is the danger that some of my hearers are in fills me with anxiety, and I long after your souls, for this man used the goodness of God to exclude God.

I will draw you another picture from this gospel of Luke. The evangelist puts it so graphically that you can see it livingly before you. There is a man in Luke's gospel standing in a boat in the water. He is a fisherman called Peter and he is pursuing his trade. The circumstances are that they have been out all night and have taken nothing. If you do not take anything, you still have to wash your nets in the morning. He is there washing his nets. Yonder on the shore a great crowd is gathering and in the foreground of that crowd is Jesus, the blessed Son of God, and they are crowding down to hear the gracious words that He spoke.

Who is this Jesus? He it was who made the worlds, who spoke and it was done, commanded and it stood fast. He it was who spangled the heavens and upheld

them with the word of His power. It was Jesus, yet as we see in Luke's gospel He is here in the world He made — let it touch your hearts — the blessed God has come down to man to win the confidence of His poor degraded creatures. Do you know that this degradation as God sees it lies in distrust of Him, — all the rest is detail. Jesus is there by the shore, the blessed Son of God, and they press down to hear the words that He speaks and Jesus draws near to Peter. The first meeting of these two is found in John's gospel, they are known to each other, but this was going to be a wonderful day in Peter's history.

Jesus says, 'Let me preach from your boat'. The people are crowding down on the shore — and Peter is there listening. I think I can see him there listening to Jesus, the blessed Saviour. Have you listened to Jesus? He will make you forget everything and everybody but Himself. Have you listened to Him like that? Peter is listening and he forgets his nets. So may it be with you; you have heard about Him, you may have been taught His name from early childhood, but I do ask you with great anxiety, does He stand out before your consciousness in the reality of who He is? Have you heard His voice? Has He spoken to you? Is there a living link between your soul and this Jesus, the blessed Son of God? God grant that to night there may be a link with Him, that you may listen to Him and that you may hear His voice and be conscious of a living link between your soul and Himself.

When the preaching was over and the audience dismissed, the Lord turned to Peter and said, 'Launch out into the deep, and I will give you a draught', Peter said to the Lord, "We have toiled all night, and have taken nothing; nevertheless at thy word". Ah that is it! "At thy word". That proves the value of the listening; Peter was listening and his heart said, 'I can trust You'. That is the point; the blessed God was there in Peter's boat and He won his confidence. Has He won yours? "Nevertheless at thy word", Peter said, and he let down the net, and then He who created the fish commanded them and filled Peter's net with fish. Creatorial power and goodness were shining there. The nets are full of fish, the nets are breaking and the boats are filled with fish; but the draught of fish drew Peter's soul into the presence of God. 'Ithiel' —God is!

Let me tell you, that is conversion. If God be for me at any given moment it must raise the question as to what I am to Him. Let me tell you that conversion is intensely individual. We are not converted in a company, but one by one we come to Christ. We must come to Him; we must have the sense in our souls that He has received us, that we have heard His blessed voice. Here is the point; you know very well—I speak as a man—what it is to have the feeling of success in your veins when you have done a good stroke of business, when you have had a

## A Voice from the Past

good catch of fish or what ever it may be. What is Peter thinking of at this point, the commercial value of that catch? No! He never had a catch like that before but what is happening in that man's soul is that he is drawn into the divine presence.

You might have said to Peter, 'You had better wait till you see the Lord alone, James and John are seeing you and listening'. It does not matter about James and John; when God is there we are delivered from all such feelings. It is God and you, and you and God, and no intrusion of a third person — that is conversion; in the blessed solitude with God to learn what you are and to learn what God is.

Peter turns his back on his companions and on his fish, and he falls down at Jesus' feet. Well I know it through grace, I know the action of it. "Depart from me for I am a sinful man, O Lord", he says. 'You have filled my nets with fish that I might learn that I am full of sin, that I am a man full of sin. But if you go what shall I do?' He tells Him to go but clings to Him. What is it? Why just this — "Ithiel," God is. "Ucal," God will prevail. In the day of grace He will prevail, but if He prevails not with you in the day of grace He will prevail with you in the day of judgment. Surely it is most blessed to meet Him now in the day of His grace. The Lord looks upon Peter and says, 'If you are full of sin I am full of grace, and My grace is greater than your sin'.

You see, on the one hand, the rich fool excluding God. Creatorial power and goodness only served to make him selfish and he left God out, but he died that same night. Here in our other passage creatorial power and goodness only drew this man into the light of the presence of God to learn that he was full of sin and to learn that God is full of grace, and His grace is greater than sin. How blessed it is; does it touch your heart? I never tire of the story, the more I speak from it the more I enjoy and love it. That is what is so lovely in God's word; the more you read it, the more you love it and the more blessed it is, you never tire of it.

Surely we who are the subjects of God's grace are growing as christians in the sense of the grace that has met us. Do I forget the first touch, my first meeting with Christ? How can I forget it? It grows more beautiful to me. I do not lose the sense of it, but there is a growing apprehension of the grace that met me.

I have said all this that you may see the divine meaning of these words "Ithiel" and "Ucal". "God is", and "God will prevail". No matter what evil you may find in yourself, you will find that the good that is in God is greater than the evil in yourself, and if I have to learn — and I must learn — the evil in myself, it is so that I may find God. If I have to go down through the mire, and it is very painful, I have to go down and find what I am, and I find God underneath it, and the goodness in God is greater than the evil in me. He never condones evil, but He has taken advantage of the evil to show what the good is in Himself.

## A Voice from the Past

I am saying this that your heart may be led to trust Him, that the presentation of Him may win your confidence and you may be found among those of whom it may be said, "Every word of God is pure: he is a shield unto them that put their trust in him". He was a shield for me and He will be a shield for you.

Now this scripture is very fascinating and I will proceed to show you the force of verse 4:

*"Who hath ascended up into heaven, or descended? Who hath gathered the wind in his fists? Who hath bound the waters in a garment? Who hath established all the ends of the earth? What is his name, and what is his son's name, if thou canst tell?"*

There are five questions raised in verse 4, and these five questions are answered by Christ. I could not speak on it if I had not the light of the New Testament scripture. The first question is, "Who hath ascended up into heaven, or descended?" That is not a geographical question; behind it is a moral question. Who has measured the distance between a holy God and an unholy sinner? Let me tell you, dear friends, that one of the sweetest thoughts in the gospel is this, that God felt the distance at which His poor creatures were. God cannot bear distance. He loves nearness. God sent His own Son to remove the distance. You remember that when the prodigal "was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and ran." If the prodigal was hungry, and he was, the father's heart was hungry for the prodigal. That is God. He felt the distance. There were painful results to the poor prodigal; there was departure, distance, destitution, and degradation, but the father felt it.

Is God like that? He is! He felt the distance in which His poor creature was, so He sent His own Son to remove the distance by going Himself into the distant place. Where was the distance removed? In the cross. Have you heard that bitter cry, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" wrung from His blessed lips and from His heart? Who could measure what it was for Jesus to be out in the distance? In dark Gethsemane angels were sent to strengthen Him, but when He was forsaken no angelic being could cross that dark abyss; He was left alone. Come and learn His love, and learn to hate the sin that put Him there, by that bitter cry, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" The distance was removed by the blessed Son of God being in the distance. It is a moral idea. He removed the distance; and He who measured the distance measures the nearness.

*'So near, so very near to God,  
Nearer I could not be,  
For in the Person of His Son,  
I am as near as He.'*

## A Voice from the Past

The second question is, “Who hath gathered the wind in his fists?” Who is greater than Satan? Satan is a powerful being, the prince of the power of the air. Satan is behind all those things that we are subject to. He can blow with his winds and raise the mighty fury of the will of man; but the One who opposed Satan, the Son of God, is greater than Satan; He has been down into Satan’s dark domain and He has broken his power. Jesus, the Son of God, has won the victory. He has gone down into Satan’s headquarters and broken them up.

What a wonderful Saviour He is. How we should trust Him. I sometimes feel that I cannot stand against Satan’s winds. I am a poor creature, however can I stand against Satan? But I can get behind the One who has gathered the wind in His fists and I feel perfectly safe there. “Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death . . . and deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.” What a mighty victory He won over Satan.

Question number three: “Who hath bound the waters in a garment?” In other words, “Who has annulled death?” He is greater than death. Who? Jesus. How He looms before my delighted heart in the grandeur of what He is. He has annulled death and He has brought to light life and incorruptibility through the gospel. When you came into the world — every one of you — death said of you as children of Adam, ‘I will pull you down; I will feed on you’. Of every child of Adam death could say, “I will pull you down and I will feed on you.” It cannot be denied.

One of the great statesmen of the 19th century was dying; a Christian doctor stood by his side and held his hand, and he said, ‘Doctor, I am overwhelmed’. Death was overwhelming him. Death was over him. Gone were all his honours and all his glories. Oh, how pitiful it is. That is what brought me to Christ, the thought that I must die. My heart was beating high with ambition, I wanted to get on in this world, and I was urged to do so by some who knew me. But I was the subject of a mother’s prayers — she looked through her tears at me when I left home and said, ‘I will never leave off praying to God for you’. When I went away — poor silly fellow that I was — I thought to see life, to have a fine time, to have liberty but it was absolute slavery. My mother kept praying for me. I have sat in a concert hall and heard sweet music and I have felt the touch of my mother’s hand and heard her pleading voice. She was spoiling all my pleasure by her prayers. The thought was on my spirit that I must die, and I wanted something to love outside the reach of death. Like the child who said to its mother, ‘Give me something to love that cannot die’. Pet after pet had died, and the child

## A Voice from the Past

wanted something to love that would not die, but the mother could not do it. The Lord looked in pity on me — His compassions are very great. I well remember it, I was a sailor lad and sitting up in one of the largest churches in Glasgow, right away from home, and I sat up there in the gallery. There were probably three thousand in the place, and the preacher got up and said, ‘I take for my text the first chapter of Colossians and the nineteenth verse. “In him all the fulness was pleased to dwell”’.

What kind of a sermon was it? I do not know, but I know what happened to me. This glorious Person, my precious Saviour, drew me out, He looked into the depths of my sad and weary heart and said, ‘I am for you, and you are for Me’. I said, ‘A poor sinful creature like me?’ ‘I am for you, and you are for Me’, and we two came together, never to be severed, never. Many a time I have thought of it; it is fifty-three years ago, but it comes sweetly to me over again. ‘I am for you, and you are for Me’. My heart was awakened to a new affection and I have found what my heart desired, some One to love outside the region of death, and I have got it.

I have known hours of sorrow and bereavement and have had to look through my tears into His face and say, ‘I shall never lose Thee’. He is outside the region of death. What a magnificent thing it is to be a Christian. Christ has annulled death. What is the good of my preaching to you if I do not say it to myself? I can say to death, ‘You will never pull me down and you will never feed on me now. I know the One who has said, “Whoso eateth my flesh... hath eternal life”. He has the keys of death. Thou art my servant, O death’. That is Christianity. How could I say it but for Jesus, who died and went down into death to annul it.

Question number four is this, “Who hath established all the ends of the earth? “ Take the last few years, where have people been? Governments breaking up, everything giving way. Many a time have I said during the last five years, ‘I have received a kingdom which cannot be moved’. Everything for christians is established on the resurrection platform in Christ. We preach a risen Christ to you:

*‘That glorious resurrection morn  
Bids doubts forever cease,  
For far and wide the news is borne,  
Of perfect peace.’*

I was preaching at Newport some years ago, and I said to the people in giving out that hymn, ‘We Christians keep Easter all the year round; not only once a year, but all the year round’. A few years later I was travelling by train in Somerset. I had to get out at the junction. It was a very dark night, but I heard a voice saying,

'Mr. Johnson'. I groped my way along the platform and said, 'Who are you?' There I saw the engine driver who had driven the train I had come in by, and he said, 'You don't know me, but, thank God, I know you, and I thought I would tell you about it. Do you remember telling us in Newport that you kept Easter all the year round?' I said, 'Yes, I think I do'. 'Well', he said, 'I have been keeping Easter all the year round ever since'. That is it! A risen Christ is presented to you. All is established in a risen Christ and on an unshakable foundation.

Now the last and best of all is question five. "What is his name, and what is his Son's name, if thou canst tell?" Can you tell me what His name is? Who can tell what His Son's name is? We Christians can. "We have seen and do testify that the Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world." That is His name and that is His Son's name. We can tell. All we Christians here can join with the preacher and say, "We have seen and do testify that the Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world." Is He your Saviour? Your own personal Saviour? God grant it may be so.

As you sit there listening I hope that your heart has been saying, 'Jesus is worthy of my trust, worthy of my confidence'. You are never saved by creed, but by personal faith in Christ. I trust that all of you here, if you have never been conscious of a personal faith and contact with Christ, may know what it is now to have a personal sense of your need. He is worthy to be trusted. I have known Him for fifty-three years. I have summered with Him and wintered with Him; I have not been all that I should like to have been, and I cannot take pleasure in what I have been, but I take the greatest possible pleasure in what He has been. May He be all this to you for His name's sake. Amen.

*William Johnson*

## **THE ASSEMBLY; ITS USE AND OBJECT**

Our blessed Lord, taking His place in the midst of His own on the day of His resurrection, and there and then forming the assembly for the first time on the earth, would of itself convey to us the greatness and importance of it. The disciples (the eleven, and they that were with them) were gathered into a room, with closed doors with the Lord Himself the one paramount Object before their hearts. He comes into their midst, and He now forms the assembly (or church). He first fits the disciples for it, assures them of peace — the state belonging to the new ground — that of divine righteousness, in which He now sets them. He confers life in the



## A Word for Today

power of the Holy Spirit. He sends them as missionaries into the world, and He announces to them their responsibility, in the words, "Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained".

The assembly is now shown in pattern. I do not say that it commenced then, but I submit that the pattern of it was given then. The value of a pattern is that we have in it the essential parts of the thing described. The Lord, on the first day of the week, when everything is new, places the disciples, both as to their own state and responsibility, as He desired to have them, in assembly order. No soul, unless in life and peace, is really qualified to fulfil his part in the assembly.

It is plain that if my own soul's interests are not assured, and that I am not in real restfulness of heart about myself, I cannot truly take an interest in Christ's interests in the church. But being settled, as to myself, before God, now I am called to act for Christ in the assembly. Invigorated in heart by His presence, His death prominently before me, I travel through remembrance of His death to the great fact that I am beside Him, that He is in the midst; while absorbed by His presence, I learn from Him that I am sent by Him into the world, and that our responsibility is set forth in the words, "whosoever sins", etc. So that the present position of everyone is determined by the assembly receiving or refusing. If we apprehend, in any measure, that the object of the assembly was to care for the interests of Christ on earth, we at once see how much it has departed from its object and use, while it is our blessing to seek from Scripture how we may return, in purpose and practice, to the mind of the Lord. We may lay down, then, that the Lord's presence, and its effect, is necessarily the first object and use of the assembly. Secondly, we have the way He directs and sends forth from there for His service; and thirdly, responsibility as to remitting and retaining sins.

Now, seeing that the assembly is here for objects so deeply important, let us gather from Scripture more about it. In Matthew 18:20 we read, "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them". Here we have the basis of the assembly. Two or three would be as nothing without the Lord, but if He is in the midst — everything must be rightly determined. From the context it is evident there was a sense of powerlessness, and this led to prayer; but we were not to be despondent, for where two or three were gathered to His name, He would be in the midst; that is, He, in His grace, would form one of the company, when they were simply gathered to His name. The Spirit only could gather to His name, and He, the blessed Lord, will then come Himself. There is no power otherwise, and thus, in Luke 24 and John 20, the Lord is in the midst of His gathered ones, then only to form in pattern that assembly which is now in existence. We see in Matthew 18:17 that the assembly was the last place for appeal in personal

## A Word for Today

difficulties with one another, in our wilderness journey; and this affords evidence of the use and object of the assembly.

Now, in Acts 2 the disciples were together when the Holy Spirit descended, and filled the house where they were sitting; and, besides, each individual was filled by the same Spirit who had filled all the house where they were sitting. The assembly, so to speak, was then established in true power; surely Christ was in the midst. It is a great thing to apprehend the nature of the assembly which is the habitation of God through the Spirit, as here begun at Pentecost. It was there each individual at first received the Spirit. The greatest blessing of the time is connected with the assembly. If we bear in mind that the descent of the Holy Spirit was not on one here, and another there, scattered abroad, but first to the assembly, possibly the same number as in John 20:19, we must be impressed with the special nature of it; and that a manifestation of the Lord would occur there which would not occur elsewhere.

Now a very important fact, which is often entirely lost, must be added here — namely, that once in the assembly, I am always in it. I cannot properly say that I am going into the church, or that I am going to church. It is quite true the assembly meets, or it may be convened; but I am a constituent part of the assembly, at my work, as well as at the convened meeting. In Israel an assembly was called by trumpets, which I conclude has given rise to bells in the christian era; but the assembly meeting there was in order to provide for some apprehended difficulty. With christians the assembly is convened also, according to the necessity of the times; and, I conclude, also with the twofold intention of receiving comfort and help to the saints, and guidance and wisdom, under the circumstances, from the Lord. Surely thus it was in the beginning. “They continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers”. “All that believed were together”. “And being let go, they went to their own company”. “And when they had prayed, the place in which they were assembled shook, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and spoke the word of God with boldness”. It is important to note how blessing is connected with the assembled saints. It would appear also that Ananias and Sapphira came to the place where the assembly was gathered. Ananias had come in first, and three hours after, his wife, “not knowing what was done, came in”. The Holy Spirit was connected with the assembly, and hence Peter can say to Ananias, “Why has Satan filled thy heart that thou shouldest lie to the Holy Spirit?” Again, we read in Acts 6 that when there was a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministration, then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples to them. Thus we grow into some apprehension of the use and object of the assembly. The interests of the Lord were to be secured there.

## A Word for Today

Now, in Acts 13:1-2 we get a very interesting use of the assembly. "As they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, Separate me now Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them". This occurred in the assembly, and it recalls to us one of the great things connected with the first assembly, in pattern (John 20:21) when our blessed Lord said, "As my Father hath sent me, even so send I you". That is, that servants were appointed to definite services in the assembly; as it is said of Timothy, "the gift that is in thee, which has been given to thee through prophecy, with imposition of the hands of the elderhood". This doubtless occurred in the assembly.

We get another interesting statement in Acts 15: 4: "And when they were come to Jerusalem, they were received of the church, and of the apostles and elders, and they declared all things that God had done with them". The assembly is evidently here the central object, and not the apostles and elders; and we find in the same chapter, after the apostles and elders had discussed the question of circumcision, and had arrived at the Lord's mind about it, the assembly endorsed it. "Then pleased it the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas; namely Judas surnamed Barsabas, and Silas, chief men among the brethren". Again, in 1 Peter 2: 4, 5 & 9: "To whom coming, as unto a living stone, disallowed indeed of men, but chosen of God, and precious, ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ. ... But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light". Here we get the twofold use of the assembly; one to God, offering up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ; the other, setting forth the excellencies of Him who hath called us out of darkness into His marvellous light.

To this I must add the counsel to Timothy, "that thou mayest know how one ought to conduct oneself in God's house, which is the assembly of the living God, the pillar and base of the truth". Surely a godly soul, on reading the above quotations from the Scripture, will be impressed with the dignified nature of the assembly. It may be alleged, and truly, that the assembly now has, to man's eye, lost all trace of its original greatness. This will be readily admitted, but, at the same time, we must remember that its object, and the use for which it was formed, are the same as ever, though there be a marked inability in answering to them. No creature of God can lose its responsibility as to the object and use for which God formed it; however, from injuries or internal weakness, it may become incapable of conducting itself as it ought; still, the responsibility remains, and this is all I would press; while I am encouraged by the assurance that, however powerless the assembly has

become, to any heart which is really set for instruction as to the interests of Christ, there will be given now, as surely as to Nehemiah or Daniel in another day, both light and opportunity for promoting them according to the mind of the Lord.

I must add a few remarks on the assembly as the body of Christ. We must bear in mind that every believer is a member of the body of Christ, and that, when convened as in 1 Corinthians 12, because of the intimate connection between each, that if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honoured, all the members rejoice with it. They are there gathered by the Spirit to the name of Christ, in whose name He (the Spirit) was sent by the Father; and consequently each member, in faith holding the Head, which he must do to be true to his responsibility, is really led by the Lord to behave himself in the house of God, and to carry out the mind of the Head there and then. The apostle adduces the truth of the one body to the Corinthians, to awaken them to their responsibility, and to deter them from merely doing their own pleasure in the assembly. Now note, that not only are the saints edified in the meeting, but, “if all prophesy, and there come in one that believeth not, or one unlearned, he is convinced of all, he is judged of all”, (1 Corinthians 14:24). This great blessing was not effected by the assembly being the habitation of God through the Spirit, but by the present energy of the Spirit, through the members of the body of Christ.

The Lord grant that we may apprehend a little more clearly the use and object of the assembly as it is in His mind.

One word more as to the mystery—the church as one great structure on the earth, of which Christ is the Head in heaven. I speak of it now, not merely convened, as in 1 Corinthians 12, but as we get in Ephesians 4:15-16: “But, holding the truth in love, we may grow up to him in all things, who is the head, the Christ: from whom the whole body, fitted together, and connected by every joint of supply, according to the working in its measure of each one part, works for itself the increase of the body to its self-building up in love”. Each one of us, however apart, is called to promote the benefit and progress of the whole body; and to effect this there are two great ministries; one—gifts from the ascended Head in heaven, which are exercised in relation to His members here (the evangelists to pick them as diamonds out of the mire, and the pastors and teachers to set them in their proper settings, to the glory of God); and the other the joints, the individual exercise in the Spirit to promote the health and vigour of one another, unto the edifying of itself in love.

*J. B. Stoney*

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