

Account of Two Scenes,
in which the world saw the unity of the church;
and so could believe that the Father sent the Son.

Acts 2: 41-47; and Acts 4: 31-35.

from Memorials of the ministry of G. V. Wigram.

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FIRST SCENE.

"Then they that gladly received His word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles. And all that believed were together, and had all things common; and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved." (Acts 2: 41-47.)

SECOND SCENE.

"And when they had prayed, the place was shaken where they were assembled together; and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and they spake the word of God with boldness. And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and one soul: neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common. And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and great grace was upon them all. Neither was there any among them that lacked: for as many as were possessors of lands or houses, sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold, and laid them down at the apostles' feet: and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need." (Acts 4: 31-35.)

It cannot be denied then that there has been a manifestation of the body (the Church), and of the unity of that body on the earth at the beginning. Apostles and prophets upon earth, though a spectacle to angels in heaven, did not exercise their ministry in heaven; and the faithful who composed that unity, that body (the Church), were all upon earth.

The unity which I speak of is the unity of the Church, as a body on earth during this dispensation, the unity of a society here below. It was first produced by the sending of the Holy Spirit here below after Christ had ascended and been glorified; it only took place and existed after the sending of the Holy Spirit, and as the result of His mission. It is evidently something different from the unity of all the elect in heaven; for a great portion of these elect were already saved and removed from earth ere the unity that is spoken of began. It is a unity which belongs to the present time, between Pentecost and the coming again of the Lord, of which the Holy Spirit, sent down from above, was to be the strength. It is

a unity which should have acted on the world, and consequently have been seen by the world. As the Saviour Himself said, "That they also may be one . . . that the world may *believe*," etc., and the manifestation of the Holy Spirit applied in effect to the welfare of the body here below. Further, that unity was visible at the beginning after Pentecost; all the manifested saints formed part of it. The joints of supply were all working in the unity of the body upon earth. Yes; there has been here below a manifestation of the unity of the body by the power of the Holy Spirit, carrying it out in all the joints of supply. These joints of supply did exist, and were active; and if any joint did not perform its functions aright, the Holy Spirit, by means of the apostles, applied the remedy, although Jesus was no more on earth. "What will ye," says Paul, "shall I come to you with a rod, or in love, or in a spirit of meekness?" Thus *the glory of Christ was not in the dust* here below. The Church, filled with the Holy Spirit, one and united, reflected in the midst of the darkness of the night of the world the glory of that hidden One, of Jesus its beloved Saviour. This manifestation of the glory of Christ by the Church in unity no longer exists. Is that a matter of indifference?

To me it is a subject for tears and deep humiliation. The glory of Christ present, so to speak, in the Church on earth, by the power of the Holy Spirit, shed all its light. on the cross, all its brightness on sin, and on the world. The cross, which began the Christian life, closed the life and hopes of the world; but it shone with all the brightness of the glory to which it led, and which was to be its crown. The cross and the crown were the two *termini* of the Christian life, the beginning and end of it. All the rest, all that lay between, was only passing away.

It was easy to be a stranger and a pilgrim, where the cross and the glory united together to place in its true light the world which had crucified the Lord of glory, where the world was for the heart — only *the empty tomb of Christ*; and for love — only the scene for a testimony borne to a glory and to a love which produced the ardent desire that He might come again quickly.

Is it so now? Are we united as at the beginning? Does that testimony of devotedness still exist? Are the glory of Christ and His coming things so present to the Church that every sacrifice is easy to it? that the cross is light for it? that the riches of this world are only for it an opportunity given of God to bear witness to His love, only *unrighteous* riches of which one frees oneself, as of a burden, in order to cast them into the treasuries of Christ, that they may come out transformed and purified in the waters of His love?

Am I to be satisfied when people tell me that the unity of the Church, in the bosom of which all this did manifest itself, can no longer exist, because "the first Christians, who formed part of it, are dead"? Ought my heart and my conscience to content themselves with such an answer?

Reader, is your heart satisfied with it? If it be, I have done reasoning.

If the manifestation of the glory of Christ in us and by us here below on earth, in His body, which is the Church, does not touch you, I have nothing more to tell you. If the heart is indifferent to all this, there is no more reasoning for the Spirit of God. But if it be only knowledge that you lack, may God deign to bless my words to your heart!

The doctrine of the unity of the church, as a body, whether at the beginning or through the whole duration of the dispensation, is closely connected with the doctrine of the presence of the Holy Spirit here below. If He unites the members which are on earth to those who have departed [and will unite all together in glory hereafter,] is it not just as true, that, being on earth as regards the order of the dispensations, He necessarily unites into one body all the Christians who are on earth? It is perfectly certain that this it is which He did at the beginning.

If, then, the Holy Spirit does not now visibly unite the children of God into one body — if that is now impossible (for whatsoever reason it may be), it is evident that the state of things established by God on earth, as the means of manifesting His glory, and as the instrument of testimony, has ceased to exist. You may give it what name you like - *failure, ruin, apostacy*. * It is one of the gravest facts, of the deepest import, in the kingdom and in the dispensations of God.

*If the Holy Spirit gives us to penetrate through that which envelopes *the mystery of lawlessness*, and if thus, before the full manifestation of the apostacy to the world, we can say, "*There is the apostacy*," it seems to me that to condemn the anticipative application of this expression to those who walk in the spirit of the apostacy, and who will be the apostacy when the veil is removed — it seems to me, I say, that this is less profitable and less true than to warn the Church of the circumstances in which it is placed. [As Jude said: "Enoch . . . *prophesied of these*, saying, Behold, the Lord cometh . . . to execute judgment . . . and to convince all the ungodly . . . of all their hard speeches which ungodly sinners have spoken against Him," although they were still hidden in the bosom of the church, where they had got in unnoticed. Man, reasoning according to his own views, might say, They are not "these" at all. According to man he would be correct. In fact, they were not these persons; but the Holy Spirit says "of these," because, though hidden, they were of the same race. It was the same principle; they were the same men, morally speaking; only the discernment of the Spirit was necessary in order to designate them. Is it wrong to speak as the Holy Spirit speaks?] If anyone found a plant which produced poisonous fruit while it was not yet the season for it to bear its fruit, and said to an ignorant person, This plant bears poisonous fruit, pay great attention to it, would there not be more blessing for that person than if it had been said, See that plant, it does not bear poisonous fruit? [Or, than if nothing had been said about it?] The first remark might, perhaps, fail in exactness, and be less logical than the second; but would it be less true, less seasonable?

In order that the force of the unity produced by the presence of the Holy Spirit may be better understood, I call attention to a fact. At the time of His first coming, Jesus, as Son of Man, was corporeally here below, although, as God, He was present everywhere. All the ways of God, on earth, were connected with that great fact; so it is also with respect to the Holy Spirit. Jesus, when He was going away, promised "another Comforter." That promise was fulfilled not many days after, and the Holy Spirit came down on the disciples, although He was present everywhere, inasmuch as He is God. According to the dispensation of God, the Holy Spirit dwells now also personally in the Church of God here below on earth. All the ways of God are connected with this great fact — the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church. The Spirit bears a living testimony to the glory of the Son of God, as the Son Himself glorified the Father while He abode here below.

This doctrine of the coming down of the Holy Spirit, and of His abiding presence on earth, in the Church, is evidently of the deepest import in the question of the unity of the Church.

At the beginning, "the Lord added to *the Church* . . . such as should be saved."

The expression (1 Cor. 12: 26) "And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it" [and such like] is not applicable to the members of the body of Christ who are already in heaven. Either, then, this principle of love no longer finds any application, or the Church has yet a unity on earth, and must be viewed as a body which has "many members," but the members of which — of this body which is one, although *they* are "many" [members] — are but "one body." In its present state, that body has failed, is dilapidated, ruined, if you will.

The word apostacy has frightened some; it occurs in Scripture, however. As in Acts 21: 21, *to forsake Moses, lit. apostacy from*; 2 Thess. 2: 3, *a falling away*. And a word almost itself occurs for

divorcement, Matt. 5: 31, Matt. 19: 7; and Mark 10: 4. Apostacy supposes *the falling away from* an original position in which that which is spoken of *stood*.

The failure or fall of man in the present dispensation is according to the analogy of all that ever came to pass until now. Sad are the proofs of the folly and weakness of man, and of the power of Satan, of our enemy, in every scene in which man has been tried.

Adam soon lost his innocency, and Eden.

Noah got drunk in his tent soon after the flood.

The Israelites made a golden calf before Moses came down from the mount.

Nadab and Abihu offered strange fire, before the days of their consecration were ended; and Aaron did not eat of the sin-offering as commanded.

Solomon, set up as king, in peace, fell into idolatry.

And even though the glory of Christ will have been manifested in the last days, the moment Satan is loosed, the nations will submit to him, and make war against the beloved city and camp of the saints.

The fall of man in the present dispensation, and the ruin of the dispensation, by means of man's unfaithfulness in keeping the deposit which was entrusted to him, is only a repetition of that which has been found in him from his creation downwards; in all the situations, in all the circumstances, in all the dispensations, in which he has been placed (or, alas! ever will be placed) on trial — failure, and nothing but failure, the result. If this did not take place in this dispensation, that would be which is contrary to the analogy of all that is presented to us in the history which is given to us in the Bible, and contrary to all that is revealed to us about man in all the dispensations of God.

P.S. — The subdivision of Christ's Church (His body) meets one on every hand. It puts me in mind (as all doubtless may have some separate portion of the form of the Church) of those who parted the Saviour's garments among themselves; while that one vest which could not be rended, which was inseparably one in its nature, was cut lots for whose it should be; but in the meanwhile, the name of Him, the presence of the power of whose life would unite them all in appropriate order, is left exposed and dishonoured. I fear, indeed, that they have fallen too much into the hands of those who care not for Him, and that the Lord will never clothe Himself with them again, viewed in their present state. That could not be when He appears in His glory. I say it not in presumption or dislike to any (for it is a reproach to me, a grievous burden; it is a humbling, most afflicting thought).

There was a second temple raised, by the mercy of God, after the long Babylonish captivity; but, alas! they learned to trust in it too much, and to say, "The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord are these;" haughty, because of the Lord's holy mountain, they looked at it as adorned with goodly stones and gifts, and ceased to look to the Lord of the temple; ceased almost to walk by faith, or to have communion in the hope of the return of the Messenger of the covenant to be the glory of the latter house. The unclean spirit of idolatry may have been purged out, but the great question still remained, Is there the effectual presence of the Spirit of the Lord? or is it merely empty, swept and garnished? Blessing, there was, but did they not disregard Him from whom it came, by pride and self-complacency, and seeking to turn it to their own, instead of going on to His, glory? If so, and (alas!) so it was, 1 Cor. 10: 1-14 may apply it to ourselves, for things happened to them as types (or ensamples).

In conclusion. Faith boasts not itself in the faithfulness of Him in whom it is. That could not be in a case in which the Lord has been put to shame in the "house of His friends," if one is of that house. Faith identifies itself rather; first, *with the Lord* (Ex. 32: 11-32), as did Moses of old, in zeal.

And secondly, with the sins of God's people, which are ours too, in deep humiliation of self, bearing them in confession before the Lord. Ezra 9 and Nehemiah 9 and Daniel 9 and Ezekiel 9, and Paul and Peter and John are witnesses of this, concurring therein with the ensample of their Lord Himself. (Luke 13: 33-35.)

O Lord, to us belongeth confusion of face, to our kings, to our princes, and to our fathers, because we have sinned against thee. To the Lord our God belong mercies and forgivenesses, though we have rebelled against Him, Neither have we obeyed the voice of the Lord our God, to walk in His laws which He set before us by His servants the prophets. (Dan. 9: 8-10.)

And thirdly, in sympathy with the sorrows, misery, and even failure, of God's people, and in testimony too, as did Joshua and Caleb. Individual faithfulness does not prevent one feeling, in spite of oneself, the effect of the unfaithfulness of the company of which one forms a part; and though Joshua and Caleb reaped in the end the effect of their faithfulness, they experienced also, during the passage through the wilderness, the effect of the sins and unbelief of the assembly; nevertheless, not without receiving consolations and a strength in their hearts which the rest of the people did not enjoy. The members of the same body ought *to wish* and desire to suffer from the misery of the other members *through love*, through the Spirit of Christ and of charity. If they *will not* do so through love, they will have to do it through necessity and pressure from outside.