

"Receive ye the Holy Ghost."

John 20: 22.

W. Kelly.

It was the first day of the week, and the same day at even our Lord finds Himself in the midst of His people gathered together. The first word He utters is peace — "Peace be unto you." Precious word! It was not remission of sins simply, blessed as this may be, but "Peace be unto you." Peace is much more than sins forgiven; and "when He had so said, He showed unto them His hands and His side." He showed them what was the sign and witness of the shed blood of His cross, by which He had made peace. "Then were the disciples glad when they saw the Lord." But speaking to them again He repeats the words, "Peace be unto you." Only this second time, remark, it is not now so much personal as prefatory to their mission; for He adds, "As My Father sent Me, even so send I you." Thus the first words of peace would be for their own enjoyment, as I conceive; the second declaration comes as the introduction to their mission. It is this with which they are sent to others. It is therefore repeated to them, that in the renewed strength of this peace they may go forth. As the Father sent Him so the Son sends them, for He always speaks as the conscious Son of God in communion with the Father.

But there is a notable sign appended: "When He had said this, He breathed on them, and said unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost." Probably many who read these lines are not ignorant of the correspondence that has been carried on but recently on this very passage.

There are two contradicting theories which claim to be received: one, that our Lord here establishes a kind of sacerdotal authority, by virtue of which those whom He addressed and their successors were entitled, in His own name, to give remission of sins to everyone who confessed his sins duly. I wish to put the view as fairly as possible. They all admit, of course, that there may be a failure in the conditions, whence, after all, the remission comes to nothing, notwithstanding where there is uprightness on man's part; they hold that the Lord pledges His part through His servants; that is to say, His absolution pronounced by virtue of this commission through certain authorised channels to the end of time. "No," says the opposite party, "nothing of the sort. There is miraculous action here supposed. If men nowadays profess to absolve people from their sins, why not cleanse lepers and raise the dead? Why not perform the other miracles which the Lord empowered the disciples to work?" Now does it not seem amazing that Christian men should broach theories so miserably short of the truth of God as both of these? The one seems to be just as unsatisfactory as the other. Even the latter view, which emanates from the evangelical party, really concedes what is worst in the former, while it falls into absurdity, as well as evasion of the truth, by bringing the performance of miracles into a passage which alludes to nothing of the sort. For it is clear that the argument just spoken of assumes that if men could cleanse lepers and raise the dead they are competent to absolve sins. But we deny that it ever was the title of disciples to grant such absolution as is contended for. Thus, whether we take the ritualistic or the evangelical theory, it is hard to say which is farthest from Scripture.

Is it then insinuated that the passage has no determinate meaning? Far be such a thought. What gives a clue to the subject is the Lord's resurrection as here presented. If men better knew Christ and the power of His resurrection they would understand that which is a fruit of it. Hence ignorance of resurrection privileges leaves men, whether on one or other side of the quarrel, in the dark as to the truth which is here revealed. For let it be observed that after our Lord sends the disciples out with peace He breathed on them. I am not aware of any action in the Bible to which this can be supposed to refer but one, and with this it stands in marked and instructive contradistinction. If we examine

Genesis 2 a very striking difference on Jehovah Elohim's part appears in forming man as compared with any other animal. When He made the various beasts, birds, reptiles, etc., each became, as it is said, "a living soul" by the simple fact that it had been duly organised. In man's case it was not so. Man was made out of the dust of the earth, as we know; but he did not become a living soul by being thus fashioned. There comes out an essential difference between man and every other such being then created.

It is not merely that all the rest of the animal kingdom were put under man here below, but he alone had his life direct from above. "Jehovah Elohim breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul." No other animal became a living soul thus. Man, and man alone, enjoyed the breath of Jehovah Elohim. Such is the true source of the immortality of the soul; this is the reason why man alone stands in direct moral responsibility to God, and must give account of the things done in the body to that God who thus gave him his soul and spirit. In the case of a beast, though possessed of a spirit, it goes downward and not to God, because God never breathed into it. The living principle of a beast, in other words, perishes, because it is a mere question of what is connected by God's will with its material organisation. Therefore an irrational animal when it dies perishes, but in man's case there is a soul and a spirit which abide distinct in origin from the body, having a far more intimate connection with God Himself. Accordingly therefore, the soul partakes of an immortality which the mere body, alive here below in its own nature, does not possess. *This* was a physical question of the will of God, but *that* was a thing which indelibly and intrinsically belonged to the soul and spirit. Therefore it is that the body of man will be raised up in the resurrection to be reunited to that soul and spirit, and so every one of us shall give account of himself to God.

Here the risen Lord Jesus stands before us, and in this Gospel alone characteristically unites these two aspects. He is man, and now He is the risen man; but He is also the Lord God, even as Thomas immediately after says, "My Lord and my God." He is One who, in His own person, united both divine nature and proper manhood. He stands, the risen man, "the second man," on the first day of the week, and as the quickening or life-giving Spirit He breathes into the disciples. That is, it is the Spirit of Christ Jesus risen from the dead. It is the Holy Ghost accompanying this resurrection-life, and the power of it which the Lord, as the Head of the new family, conferred upon the members of that family. They had believed on Him and had life eternal. Now they had life abundantly. (John 10: 10)

Accordingly such is the all-important change which came in with the action of our Lord Jesus Christ. One can conceive a person reasoning on this subject and saying, "If people get eternal life, I do not see what great difference it makes that it should be risen life — that this life in resurrection together with Christ should so signally mark it." Very possibly you do not; but allow me to say that full victory already achieved and made ours in Christ widely differs from life struggling with death; life with the handwriting uneffaced and contrary to us in ordinances; life not yet delivered from the power of the evil that surrounds it; life seeking after what is good though failing; life striving to avoid what is bad, yet constantly drawn somehow or other into it. This is precisely the state of man where the delivering power is unknown. But it was closed for the believer, as far, at any rate, as showing the new place into which the believer is put by the death and resurrection of our Lord. The life that one receives now in the Lord Jesus is life *not* under the law — life *not* having to do with the earth or its ordinances. It is the life of One who has brought me into perfect peace with God. It is the life of One who has put me in possession of His own relationship with God. Accordingly, it is as giving this in its most intrinsic form and its fullest power that our Lord Jesus Christ thus breathed to show the new character of life, so to speak, that was given them — that the life that they lived in the flesh was really

by the faith of the Son Himself: "Not I, but Christ that liveth in me." This, then, was given by the notable fact that He thus breathed upon them. It was a partaking of Himself as He then stood — a participation in what He was, specially in the life that was in Him, after all questions of good and evil were settled, and perfect deliverance from sin and death was won by Him and given to them.

Hence it is that the apostle Paul, referring to this, says, "There is therefore now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus."* Why? "For," says he, "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death." "The law of the Spirit of life" is the phrase of the apostle Paul. This is the very life, as John tells us, that was here given. If in being born again (John 3) one was born of water and Spirit, much more was it here the Holy Ghost received; but it was the Holy Ghost as the Spirit of life. It was not the Spirit of external power working miracles, or any such energies — things which to men might appear to be far greater. Much less was it anything so wanton as men taking the place of God, and professing to forgive sins on the earth: to this no apostle ever pretended. Nevertheless it is a real privilege, and as true now as on the day when Jesus rose from the dead. What the Holy Ghost then did was simply communicating life according to its resurrection power and character through Jesus Christ, the Second man risen from the dead and withal the Divine Person, the Son, giving life no less than the Father.

* The latter clause in the Received Text, represented in the Authorised Version, has no sufficient authority. It hinders the immediate connection with the reasons given, first in verse 2, next in verse 3; and it undermines the assurance of verse 1 by turning into a condition what rightly follows as the consequence in verse 4.

But He adds more: "Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained." Someone may ask, "Well, do you believe this?" Assuredly I do; and more than this, I believe that you, Christians, having the Spirit, possess the power and are responsible to God to walk in it. (Gal. 5: 25) But this is a high claim, some will think — this power of remitting sins and retaining sins. Without doubt it is so. But to whom did the Lord speak on that day? Not to the apostles only, nor even to all of *them*, but to the disciples. "Then the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled." Surely, if it had been some restricted prerogative confined to the company of apostles, some care would have been taken to make this appear. It is thus that even a sensible man acts. If there were a special communication from the Queen to her cabinet ministers, it would not be made to the House of Commons or to the House of Lords either. Where would be the propriety in such a course? Whereas, on the contrary, if we suppose a royal message were delivered to the House of Lords, or to the House of Commons, to whom would this be understood to be addressed? If meant for the whole house it would be addressed accordingly. And so it is here. Our Lord was speaking to the disciples; He was addressing the whole of them. The moment we take the word as it is written we see clearly that what He said applies to all. Will any man say that the resurrection-life of the Lord Jesus Christ was only for the twelve? Shall I be told that the peace the Lord gave so solemnly and repeatedly was only for the apostles? Nothing of the sort: though of course the apostles shared it, and it must have had a most valued place in their souls.

There was, indeed, special authority from the Lord to form assemblies confessing His name, and to rule them when formed, not to speak of powers which were personal. There was a post of authority in laying the foundation; there were also acts initiatory and regulative which Scripture assigns to the apostles. But it is so little the aim or the character of John's Gospel to dwell on what was official, that the very word "apostle" never occurs throughout its course save in John 13: 16. The spirit, form, and substance of it are devoted to what is intrinsic and essential and what passes not away. More

particularly we shall have reason to gather in a moment that this very portion is the express setting of Christianity on its proper basis, and stamps on it a very distinctive character before God and man. For various reasons, therefore, I am persuaded that we are not to look for the accomplishment of these words in anything that was personal to the twelve, still less to any others imagined to succeed them; least of all are they to be construed of the function of elders or presbyters, as if they were officially entrusted with remitting and retaining sins, as is most deliberately assumed in the standards of certain religious bodies. The truth is that the Lord Jesus has the "disciples" as such before Him, and to them He imparts the Spirit as the power of risen life; them He thereon charges with this spiritual commission.

Does the inspired history, then, do the epistles give no light how the apostles understood, and how we are to interpret, Christ's words? Take, for instance, those converted on the day of Pentecost, and others whom the Lord added from time to time: by whom were their sins remitted? They were not satisfied with individually believing the Gospel; they submitted their confession of the Lord's name to those who were Christians before them. And a most important thing this is. I am not entitled to set up to be a Christian on my sole opinion of myself, on my judgment of the faith I confess.

Are we not bound to submit our pretensions to those who have been in Christ before us? Miraculous as may be the call of Saul of Tarsus, even he, though an apostle by call, was not exempt from this duty; he was baptised by a certain disciple; he was subsequently received by others. This is full of instruction and comfort. It is real presumption to shrink from or weaken it, because the more really a man has faith, the more willing he is to let others examine it. Even the apostle Paul had to taste the bitterness of this at first, for some were in doubt of him. Surely if this most honoured of Christ's servants had to bear with not a little that was trying to him, it is not for any of us to count ourselves too sure confessors of His name to yield for a little our own importance, and, at the same time, to submit to that which is the Lord's will, and of vast moment for the blessing of the Church of God. Think how the enemy might take advantage if you supposed it was a question of setting up to be a Christian on one's own sole and independent warrant. It is good to be subject one to another, and this from the first, in the fear of God, who is wiser than men, and has laid down His will through these words of the Lord Jesus.

This, if we accept the apostolic writings as a comment, is the manner and practical working of it. When one professes to turn to God in repentance and faith, when one believes in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ for the salvation of the soul, then one must "confess" with the mouth, as well as "believe" in the heart. This confession may and should, of course, go out as a testimony to the world; but it belongs to those who are the confessors of His name to judge of it. I may admit something that is derogatory to Christ; I may overlook that which is injurious to my own soul and offensively evil to others. Then comes in the all-important function of those in the faith before, to which Scripture attaches no small weight, and regulates it for God's glory, as we find the apostle Paul doing in Romans 15.

I affirm, then, that the disciples, as the assembly of God, did warrant the remission of sins in certain cases, and did retain sins in others. Since they received heartily and simply, owning as the brethren of Jesus those that before then had been wallowing generally in sins of every kind, and suddenly (it might be in an hour) turned to God, was it not of exceeding moment that there should be a company in this world constituted by the Lord, having distinct responsibility, as well as possessed of capacity in His own life, even the Spirit as the power of abundant life in resurrection, and that they should endorse the confession of those accredited true, while examining the pretensions of all who professed? It is not, of course, that this could in the long run be injurious to a child of God, but, on the

contrary, be a signal mercy and comfort, even an additional joy to his heart — the welcome of others in owning him here below — as the angels, instead of man here, rejoice over the repentant in God's presence. Consider what a serious check it would be were there any reserve, or again if anything evil lurked underneath, or the mere desire to bring in people privily.

We find that in this spirit, accordingly, the assembly of God did act They remitted sins and they retained them. I speak not now of the solemn case where a man and his wife were successively struck dead on the spot, and also of a baptised man rejected almost immediately. (Acts 8) But we read also how the apostle insists on the saints putting away one that sinned grievously, and on their restoring him when duly repentant. Here, then, is the case in which a man who had been received, and had his sins thus publicly remitted, was put out from them as a wicked person. (1 Cor. 5) This offender, when broken down, they were to receive back. (2 Cor. 2) Thus the two Epistles to the Corinthians illustrate both sides. "Sufficient to such a man is this punishment, which was inflicted of many. So that contrariwise ye ought rather to forgive him, and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow. Wherefore I beseech you that you would confirm love toward him." (2 Cor. 2: 6-8) Here, then, we have the cases of remitting sins on the one hand, and of retaining sins on the other. Can there be a doubt that one of the reasons why Christians have failed to carry out their separate place in this world, and thus to walk in their proper joy and delight, and as a rich means of blessing to others, is that they have lost sight of this responsibility, treating it as either ministerial, or as a power long passed away?

Alas! the cause is as obvious as it is humiliating. The Church has not kept its place as in the Spirit a people separate to God, endowed with the love and glory of the Lord Jesus. They have taken in all the world in a misnamed "judgment of charity"; but no judgment of charity can avail unbelievers, nor is it really in question for believers, who by faith stand in God's favour. Thus the deep and public landmarks of grace and holiness have been broken down; and, consequently, the very profession to retain or to remit sins, except for the superstitious as a sacerdotal act, is scouted, because its nature is wholly ignored. It is as a fact attached to the disciples collectively by the risen Lord Himself since the day of His resurrection.

The Lord's words make it to be of the essence of the Christian congregation in this world to stand forth as publicly owning what grace has done, by receiving those whose confession satisfies, and as publicly refusing what does not approve itself to their conscience.

Let me, however, press with decision, that what we receive is not a certain amount of intelligence. It is not for me any more than others to make light of spiritual understanding, Unquestionably it has its place, season, and value; but of this we may be assured, that what Jesus breathed on the disciples was not merely intelligence, but His own resurrection-life in the Spirit. This, then, is what He would have us own; this is what we are bound to recognise in those that come forward. "You hath He quickened together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses." I do not mean thereby that we are to sanction what is sinful along with life in Christ. But we are bound to accept the sheep and lambs of Christ, and to be very tender in dealing with mistakes, the fruit very often of a wrong position and of bad teaching. Let us beware of playing into the enemies' hands by even seeming to mix up the ground of reception with points of attainment in practice or in doctrine. Hold fast the grand, simple, but infinite fact, that Jesus breathed the Spirit of His own resurrection-life on the disciples. We are to treat the feeblest as a part of the Christian assembly.

But if we receive on the one hand, let us not fear to reject on the other, according as the confession may or may not be suitable to the name of Jesus. If a man really has the resurrection-life of

Christ, one looks for holiness with a purged conscience; but let us press also another thing — that Christ be the standard of all his judgments, as He is the source of all his blessings, and withal the object to be kept before his soul. Therefore the name of Jesus, which is the sole and sufficient passport to the simplest possessor of eternal life in Him, is the same name by which we can reject the loudest pretension that compromises His glory. Let the Lord Jesus be for us, as in truth He is, the perfect and only personal standard. If Christ is owned and honoured, His name and His word, it is well and safe and blessed.

The attempt to unite Christ with sin is fatal. All thought of having Christ and playing fast and loose with His name be far from us! What can be more offensive to God? Therefore it is of all-importance that we should steadily have Him before our eyes, and avoid the snare of building up the ecclesiastical plans and developed theories we have left behind. All ecclesiastical theory is assuredly false when in any measure allowed to shroud the glory and value of Christ. Not less firmly should we refuse to treat ecclesiastical mistakes as calling for such dealing as ought to be demanded were it a question of Christ dishonoured or positive known iniquity allowed. If there be so much as the connivance at the holding of what is not of Christ — if one bring not the doctrine of Christ, it is ruin. The man might appear to be as sound as an apostle on ecclesiastical truth and have every other New Testament doctrine at his finger-ends. But what is the value of anything where the name of the Lord is put to shame? On the other hand, where Christ is the object of the soul, though His confessor may be uninformed, has He not breathed His life there? and is not our course clear if we be subject to Christ? Let us welcome such a one to the heart in His name. It is the Church's business to take all such up and to foster them; for how are they to acquire more light, and where can they get the crooked joints adjusted, if it be not in God's Church? But if we hold aloof till they get all right, this is well-nigh an impossibility on their part, as it is to forfeit our own place of help and duty. Methought that the Church of God was the pillar and ground of the truth, and that there only can the truth be truly learnt where it is lived in, and that those saints, ill-taught though they be, having received Christ have Christ within and Christ without. Do I want or boast of more? Why, then, should there be the slightest hesitation? See that ye neither offend nor despise one of these little ones.

The Lord enable His own to be thorough in removing difficulties and hearty in welcoming souls where there is no question of ungodliness in faith or ways. I do not say where the doctrine of justification by faith is held. Many a wickedness and a worldliness may be allowed where that great doctrine is confessed. But these words of our Lord Jesus Christ are a standing rule for the disciples, and we are responsible for acting on them. If we are met together in His name let there be a plain, unswerving expression of our place and privilege. Our action, our collective action, should be as firm for the truth as our individual wall; — that we have and supremely value Christ — that to those confessing Christ we are to remit sins, and, whenever there is anything inconsistent with Christ, we are no less to retain sins. We disown the pretension of doing either as between God and man: the Church never claimed such a right; the apostles never aspired to such a prerogative. But our Lord Jesus clearly here called the disciples to discharge the retention as well as the remission of sins, and this, as we have seen, was verified in the Christian assembly which exercised both, not as a question for eternity between God and the soul, but administratively and now on earth as a duty to Christ in receiving the true or in rejecting the false, of putting away in prescribed cases or in restoring when repentance is plain.

W. K.