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THE EARLY CHURCH.

– ACTS 2:37-47. – JAN. 19. –

"The Lord added to the Church daily such as should be saved."

THE MEAGER outlines of the preaching on the day of Pentecost, afforded us by the extracts from Peter's discourse, indicate simplicity, wisdom and courage, such as we should expect in those who were guided by the holy spirit. The Apostle first took advantage of the charge of some that the speakers were intoxicated. He showed the unreasonableness of the proposition on the surface and then explained the true meaning of the phenomena, referring his readers directly to Joel's prophecy, "And upon the servants and the handmaids in those days I will pour out my spirit." – Joel 2:29.

It may be well to note in passing that Joel's prophecy is a double one, and that, probably for the very purpose of hiding the truth until due, it states matters in their reverse order; telling first about the general blessing of the Millennial age "*afterward,*" and telling subsequently about the blessing of the Gospel age, which is confined exclusively to God's servants and handmaidens – "*in those days*" – during the Gospel age, prior to the general outpouring of the spirit which will follow the establishment of the Kingdom.

Having gotten the attention of his hearers, many of whom were believers in the prophets – and "waiting for the consolation of Israel," which they promised – the Apostle proceeded to preach Christ unto them. He did not becloud his subject and confuse his hearers by saying: You have heard of great philosophers and great teachers amongst the Gentiles, and as Jews we have had some great prophets ourselves, one of whom was Jesus; but he came directly to the point he wished to impress, [R2930 : page 5] and declared to them that Jesus, the despised Nazarene, of whom, doubtless, the majority had heard something, probably derogatory, was indeed the Messiah; that though he had died

he had arisen; and having arisen and ascended on high he had shed forth his power upon these speakers, who were now his representatives and mouthpieces in the world, to declare his mercy. Neither fear of rulers nor shame in confessing the crucified one to be his Master is the least apparent in the Apostle's language. He fully identified himself with the crucified one, and as plainly declared that the rulers had been wickedly and sinfully responsible for his death, in that they had incited the Roman governor to its accomplishment. He pointed out that this was no mischance, but God's foreknown and prearranged plan – that it was necessary that Messiah should die as the Redeemer of the people, before he could deliver them fully. He pointed out that although it was necessary for Christ to die nevertheless a heavy responsibility, a curse, hung over that nation which had thus, in its wickedness of heart, rejected and crucified God's Son.

The word of truth, as always, was a savor of life unto life or death unto death. (2 Cor. 2:16.) To many the words were foolishness and had the death odor, and they passed on; but to those deeply interested ones who remained, the Apostle's explanation of matters was forceful, – especially as he backed this up by quotations from the prophets, showing that God had foreknown the death of Messiah, and had foretold his resurrection also, and this miraculous outpouring of his spirit, of which they all were witnesses. The record is that many of the hearers were pricked to the heart – conscience-smitten. They noted the aptness of the Apostle's quotations and their application, and the logic of his reasoning; and doubtless in all these things they remarked of the apostles what they had previously remarked of our Lord – that the teaching was not like that of the scribes and Pharisees, uncertain, indefinite, but with force, with authority, with distinctness, with conviction of its truth.

And after this same sort is all the preaching of God's true servants, done under the influence of the holy spirit. It is illuminating and not confusing. Error is never clear; it is always confused and confusing. Clearness and simplicity, on the contrary, are marks of the truth. For

various reasons the old, old story, which the Apostles here preached, is considerably neglected in our day by professed ministers of the Gospel of Christ. One reason is that those who attempt to teach realize their own confusion of thought, and need first to be taught of God through his Word, by his holy spirit, and through such channels as the holy spirit may use in granting illumination of mind and appreciation of the Word. Another reason is that the nominal churches have in great measure ceased to believe the old, old story, and have accepted instead an evolution theory. Only to a small minority of Christian people, therefore, is the true Gospel precious. The majority more and more have itching ears for something new – a new gospel of education, refinement and wealth. – 2 Tim. 4:3,4. [R2931 : page 5]

As the Apostle clinched one feature after another of his argument, and showed how completely Jesus had fulfilled the declaration of the prophets in respect to his life, his teachings, his miracles, his death, his resurrection, and the holy spirit now poured out upon his followers, conviction of the truth was forced upon the minds of many of the hearers, and they cried out, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" – is there any mercy for us, seeing we are members of this nation, whose rulers have thus despised God's grace, and crucified his Son?

This was exactly the condition of heart which Peter desired to awaken. He wisely realized that people must see the provision for their forgiveness and rescue before they will lay hold upon salvation. He would not begin by tendering mercy, but by showing the right, the truth, and the wrong. But now that his hearers were in the right condition of heart the Apostle did not seek to terrify them, but promptly told them of God's mercy and love, assuring them that they were still his favored people, and that if they would come to the repentant condition of heart they would be accepted of the Lord, even as the other believers were already accepted; and that they, too, would have the blessing of the holy spirit and its gifts. There is a pattern in this preaching which all of the Lord's Royal Priesthood should take note of and practice as they have opportunity to dispense the good tidings.

Instead of ranting, they should use logic, reason and Scriptural quotations; – and those convicted, and seeking to know the way, should not be terrorized, but should be promptly assisted and guided in the Lord's way, and assured of his mercy.

The Apostle was fully justified in telling his hearers that the promises were still theirs as a people; for it was clearly declared by the Lord, through the prophet, that Christ should be cut off in the midst of the seventieth symbolical week of Israel's favor, leaving one-half of that seventieth week, viz., 3½ years, of special favor to Israelites individually, after their national favor had ceased.* – Dan. 9:25-27; Matt. 23:37,38.

*[Millennial Dawn, Vol. II, p. 201](#).

Specifically, Peter's answer was that his conscience-stricken hearers should individually repent and be baptized. He did not make the mistake that some are inclined to make, when they suppose that sorrow for a wrong is repentance. Peter perceived that they already were sorry, "perplexed in their hearts." Sorrow is not repentance, but, as the Apostle explains, "Godly sorrow leadeth to repentance." (2 Cor. 7:9,10.) Repentance would be the proper fruitage or result of a proper sorrow. Repentance would mean a full retraction of all share in the great national sin of Israel, the rejection and crucifixion of Messiah. It would mean, therefore, an acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah, and the confession of him as such. And this, in turn, would mean that confessing him to be the Son of God they would become fully submissive to his teachings, become his disciples. Repentance, therefore, rightly understood, meant a great deal, and it means no less today than then. Whoever today refuses to acknowledge **[R2931 : page 6]** Christ as the Messiah, the sent of God – whoever refuses to obey his teachings, to follow him – is unrepentant; no matter how fully he may believe that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah, the sent of God, the Redeemer; and, even though he sorrow at the record of the sufferings of Christ, he has not come to the point of repentance until he has renounced the sins for which Christ suffered, and become a follower of

his teachings. Only such as are thus repentant have part or lot in the household of faith. God's proposition is not to save people in their sins, but to save them from their sins; and during this Gospel age the first condition of acceptance, and even a reckoned salvation, is that the sinner shall renounce his sin and accept the Lord and the righteousness and harmony with God for which he stands as representative. "He that hath the Son hath life, and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life." – I John 5:12.

The persons whom the Apostle addressed were all Jews, and hence he said, "Be baptized *for the remission of your sins*." Baptism is not God's appointed channel for the remission of sins; for, as the Apostle declares, "Without the shedding of blood there is no remission." (Heb. 9:22.) However, the Jewish nation, under God's arrangement through Moses, was accepted of him as a whole, as a nation, and sin-offerings had been made for them all as a nation, and had been accepted, and a covenant had been made called the Law Covenant. Those whom the Apostles addressed, being under the Law Covenant, were under all these favorable conditions, under the blood of the typical sacrifices, typically justified and reconciled; and to them, consequently, God's promises pertained, as they did not pertain to the Gentiles, who had not come under such typical reconciliation through typical sacrifices. The sin which the Apostle wished his hearers to emblematically wash away in baptism was not, therefore, original sin, but was a sin against their Law Covenant, – including their national sin in the rejection of the Messiah. With these purged away, with the symbolical washing, they would be back to the standpoint of true Israelites, "Israelites indeed;" and as such they would have every right and privilege belonging to the Israelites, but belonging to members of no other nation.

The Apostle Paul explains this relationship (Rom. 11), saying that the Israelites were the natural branches in the olive root of the Abrahamic promise. As branches already in that root they would not need to be grafted in, as do we who by nature are Gentiles. They were already in relationship to God, and all that they needed to do was to

repent of their sins and figuratively wash them away, when they would be fully acceptable branches in the olive tree, which would not be broken off, but, on the contrary, would receive now a special share in the Pentecostal blessing. Subsequently, when exhorting Gentile converts to baptism, the Apostle Paul explained most clearly its difference from this baptism of Jews for the remission of sins. (Acts 19:1-6.) He shows that our baptism signifies or emblemizes our introduction into the body of Christ, as wild olive branches grafted into the approved stock, to be partakers of the richness of the promises through the root. (Rom. 6:3-5.) We should, however, remark that the Jew no longer holds this same peculiar relationship; so that if the Apostle were addressing Jews today we believe he would address them exactly as he would address Gentiles on this point of seeking union with Christ. Our reasons for so thinking are: That as the *national* favor to Israel ended with the death of Christ, in the midst of their "week" of favor, so the *individual* favor to the Jew above the Gentile ceased with the breaking off of the natural olive branches during the remaining thirty-three years of their "harvest," which ended with the destruction of their polity, A.D. 70. A natural branch once broken off could be reunited only by engrafting – in no way differently from a wild-olive branch. Consequently, any Jew, seeking to come into Christ since the day of wrath upon his nation, could come in only under the same terms and conditions as a Gentile.

The Apostle would have his hearers understand that the rejection of Christ and his crucifixion did not end the mercy of God toward them. These matters were merely steps in the divine plan for the execution of divine mercy; – the promises were still theirs, yea, they would be for their children, and ultimately for all mankind, however far they might be from God at that time. But he intimates distinctly that a divine election is connected with the matter, and that only those called of God could at present be expected to hear and to respond. And this we see about us today, and as we look back through the past. As Abraham sent his servant, and invited Rebekah to be the bride of his son, Isaac, so the Heavenly Father has sent his servant, the holy spirit, during this Gospel

age, to call the antitype of Rebekah, the Church, to be the bride of Christ, – joint-heir with his Son. As not all the women of the world were called to be the bride of Isaac, so at present not all mankind are called to be the Bride of Christ. Those invited to this joint-heirship must first be related to God, even as the one invited to be Isaac's bride was a relative of Abraham. Hence the step preparatory to this call to joint-heirship with Christ is justification through faith. The Apostle's hearers, being members of the typically justified nation, needed only to accept Christ, as the antitype of Moses, and to recognize spiritual Israel as the antitype of natural Israel, in order to be fully in relationship to the Lord's call.

Evidently the Lord was guiding in respect to every feature of the establishment of the Church, and it was on this account that so large a number as three thousand persons were prepared to accept the message, – to accept Jesus as their Redeemer and King, and to avow themselves his followers, his disciples. It is not necessary that we should suppose that they were all baptized in the one day, nor are we, indeed, certain that they all avowed their allegiance to Messiah in the same day; but that as a result of that one day's preaching about three thousand were added to the Church. These were not added to a denomination, a party, a sect, but were additions to the one Church, the body of Christ, – members added to the one head of the **[R2932 : page 7]** Church. We do not read that their names were enrolled as members of the Church, nor that they took certain vows, nor that they assented to certain confessions of faith. He who accepts Christ as his Redeemer and as his instructor, who pledges himself to obedience to him, and to walk in his footsteps, has taken the only obligation which the Scriptures define as marking those who are probationary members of the true Church. And it is still proper to make an outward acknowledgment or sign of this acceptance of Christ by a symbolical baptism. The real baptism, the real consecration of the heart, or will, its burial into Christ, takes place first; the outward or symbolical representation of this in water is the good confession by which the individual shows, in God's appointed

way, to his fellows or to whoever may witness, that he has died to the world and become alive toward God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

That the new converts were "Israelites indeed" was demonstrated by the fact that they did not speedily fall away and become cold. On the contrary, we are informed that they continued steadfast, recognizing the teachings of the apostles – that God specially used them as his representatives and mouthpieces for the instruction of his Church. They thus continued in fellowship with the household of faith, and this would imply meeting with them every first-day of the week to celebrate the Lord's resurrection, to unite their prayers at the throne of grace, and to build one another up in the most holy faith. Breaking the spiritual bread on these occasions, they also united in a common meal, in remembrance of the Lord's first meeting with them and making himself known after his resurrection in the blessing and breaking of bread. (Luke 24:35.) This has no reference to the Memorial Supper, which was celebrated yearly, and not with bread alone, but also with the cup, of equal importance.

"Fear came upon every soul" – reverence – an appreciation, to some extent at least, of the wonderful relationship to God into which they had been introduced, and of the wonderful power of God working in their midst, and especially manifested through the miracles and signs which the apostles were thus permitted to perform for the establishment of the faith of the justified.

It has been assumed by some that communism as that term is applied today, was practised in the early Church; and it is the claim of some that it should never have been discontinued, but should always obtain amongst the Lord's people. We answer, first, that the early Church did not practise what is now known as communism; second, that something akin to what the early Church did practise (but modified) still is the rule amongst the Lord's saints; third, the extreme view (and practice) of the early Church was apparently not intended to remain, was never enjoined by the Lord nor the apostles, and serves

rather as an evidence against the feasibility of the doctrines of communism under present conditions.

So far as the record shows there was no compulsory division of wealth, such as communism proposes. On the contrary, everything was voluntary; and everything of the same kind is just as free, just as voluntary, and just as proper, now as then, – no more so, no less so. Some of those who owned farms and personal property sold them and brought the money and placed it at the Apostles' feet – gave it into their charge. Some may have given all that they had in this manner, but it is not so stated. On the contrary, various things give the inference that Barnabas, who sold the field and gave the money, may still have retained other properties, which no doubt, he would have been willing to have disposed of later, and to have made similar use of the money as it might be needed. The sin of Ananias and Sapphira did not consist in their not putting all of their property into the common treasury, but in their deceitfulness in the matter; – in their pretending to give the entire proceeds of one property when they did not do so. Some Scriptures clearly intimate that some of the Lord's people at that time had private possessions aside from those which were put into the common fund. (See Acts 12:12; 21:16.) It is possible, of course, that in the two instances cited the properties might have been given to the community and might have been returned when the community failed, and when the believers were scattered abroad. On the other hand, we think it reasonable to suppose that the selling of the possessions was merely to such an extent as was necessary to supply the wants of all – so that none of the Lord's people might lack while others had superfluity. This kind of brotherliness and common interest should still prevail amongst the Lord's people. Indeed, to a considerable extent it must prevail, or else we are none of his. We are not to forget, however, that the necessity for private provision of this kind today is less than it was eighteen centuries ago; for now there are many more opportunities for earning a livelihood, and many provisions for the aged, the sick and the infirm. The public provision for the poor today is probably quite superior to that which was accorded to the poorer brethren under

consideration. The same spirit of charity finds ample opportunity today. On every side we see brethren and sisters having need, not of the meat that perisheth, but of the "meat in due season," the spiritual food, and having need also of the robe of justification. There is abundant opportunity for all to join in dispensing these blessings, worth so much more than temporal good things to those who have need of them.

It is noteworthy that the apostles neither commanded nor advised communism; nor do their writings intimate that it prevailed in the early Church. As showing that there were both rich and poor in the assemblies of the primitive Church, note the Apostle Paul's words to Timothy, "Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not high-minded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy: that they do good, that they be rich in good works, *ready* to distribute, *willing* to communicate; laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal [R2932 : page 8] life." (I Tim. 6:17.) The same Apostle reproves some of the wealthy brethren for improper displays in connection with the Memorial Supper, saying, "Have ye not houses to eat and drink in, or despise ye the Church of God, and shame them that have not [wealth]?" (I Cor. 11:22.) The Apostle John intimates differences in financial condition when he asks, How could he who loves God shut up the bowels of compassion against a brother, who lacks life's necessities. (I John 3:17.) The Apostle James says, "If a brother or sister be naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you say unto them, Depart, and be ye warmed and fed, notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body, what doth it profit?" – James 2:15,16.

Indeed, in our judgment, the necessary lessons of life could not be so well learned, either by the rich or the poor, if community of goods were either the law or the rule amongst Christians. There can be no question, however, respecting the propriety of *community of provision* for those who are in want, in distress. It is in harmony with

this thought that the Apostle advises each to lay by him on the first day of the week, according as God hath prospered him, a share of his income, – for good service to the Lord and to the brethren, in temporal and spiritual things. (I Cor. 16:2.) No doubt, after the Millennial Kingdom shall have brought the willing and obedient of mankind to perfection, there will be some kind of communism such as we may presume obtains amongst the angels. Even then it will be a communism which will recognize some head or authority; for amongst the angels, we are informed, there are principalities and powers, cherubim and seraphim, and God over all.

The early Church, full of love for the Lord and for each other, is a beautiful and in many respects an ideal picture, in which we can rejoice: no wonder it is recorded that they had joy, gladness, in their hearts, and in their thanksgiving to God, and that the people in general, their neighbors, were pleased with them and rejoiced in their loving spirit. How delightful it would be if all the Lord's people in the world today could be thus in harmony with each other and appreciated by their friends and neighbors. Indeed, we must suppose that the Lord specially shielded the infant Church for a short season, until it should become somewhat established in knowledge and in faith, else the Great Adversary would have raised up opposition and persecution more quickly than he did. Even as it was, it was but a little time until the persecution arose, and with it the testing of those who had espoused the cause of Jesus. Then came the great scattering under persecution, so that those who had learned the way of the Lord learned additionally patience and obedience; – some of them even unto death, and others being scattered abroad became preachers of the gospel of Jesus and their newly-found hopes in him.

The Lord "added to the Church daily such as should be saved," says our Golden Text; or, as the Revised Version renders it, "such as were being saved." As the same Apostle Peter declares, the salvation promised us is still future, – we are waiting for it; it is "to be *brought unto us* at the revelation of our Lord and Savior Jesus," at his second

advent. (IPet. 1:13.) But meantime there is a beginning of this salvation in the present life. Even now we are, as the Apostle declares, "saved by hope." (Rom. 8:24.) The salvation is not merely of hope, either, but it begins to take hold upon us, mentally, morally and physically – the regenerating work begins; the new mind, the new will, is the start, and from that proceeds true obedience to the Lord's Word, progress in knowledge and progress in grace, and all the progress of the new creature. It often, indeed, means the sacrifice of the earthly interests of the natural man, but it means the development of the new creature. It means the progress of the work of salvation in the heart, which alone God recognizes; and the new creature thus making progress is ultimately to be perfected in salvation by a share in the "first resurrection."

