

| Index of Articles:               | Page |
|----------------------------------|------|
| Rest                             | 1    |
| Prologue to John's Gospel, pt. 4 | 3    |
| Christian and Money, pt 2        | 6    |
| Oversight and Rule               | 8    |

## Rest

*E.W. Rogers*

The world has been restless ever since the Fall. Is true rest, then, attainable for the Christian? If so, where and how can it be found?

Hebrews chapters three and four are devoted to the topic of rest. The writer uses a word for rest which is different from that used in Matthew 11:28. In the latter scripture, the Lord is concerned with the lifting up of burdens from others' weary shoulders; in Hebrews, with the laying down of the legal works of Judaism.

The Hebrews were engaged in a great struggle: the law tended to pull them down; Christ sought to draw them up to Himself. Which would they allow to have the mastery? Christ is superior to angels, Moses, Joshua, Aaron, and all others. There should be no doubt as to Who is entitled to the mastery, but two other forces were at work which made the issue uncertain.

These forces are named in Hebrews chapters three and four; one is "unbelief" (3:12, 19); the other is "disobedience" (Revised Version, 3:18; 4:6), meaning "unpersuasableness." Unbelief has to do with distrust of a person; unpersuasableness, with unbelief of promises, and consequent failure to act on them.

Israel was assured that the promised land would certainly be theirs. Notwithstanding the evidence, they remained unconvinced; they could not trust God to empower them to possess the land, nor to redeem His promise and give it to them. God was not trusted nor were His Promises believed. No wonder they fell in the wilderness and failed to enter the land.

Are we totally immune to the same dan-

gers of distrust and unpersuasableness? Do they spoil our rest? Do we too ask, "Can God? ... Can He furnish a table in the wilderness?" "Can He bring us right through our long journey to the ultimate goal?" Do we, by asking such questions, limit the Holy One with Whom we have to do, thus becoming inwardly perturbed?

The Holy Spirit speaks to us in no uncertain tone; He calls upon us "today" to listen and to exhort each other before it is too late. We must pull ourselves up immediately and not defer the issue. To "harden the heart" is a very easy thing to do; we have our MASSAHS AND MERIBAHS (Exodus 17:7) too frequently, despite the evidence in our past experience of the faithfulness of God. Why then tempt Him now?

If the heart is not right, we will not likely understand God's ways (Hebrews 3:10). We may see His acts, and find it impossible to attribute them to anything but His power, but do we know His "ways"? His acts have to do with that which is manifest; His ways relate to the principles involved, and the latter is of greater importance.

The rest spoken of in Hebrews chapters three and four is a present spiritual experience. Of course, it does not terminate at death or at the coming of the Lord, but it will be enjoyed all the more fully then. On the other hand, there are cogent reasons for rejecting the thought that the rest relates only to the future in our case, when life is past. Certainly, in Israel's case, the rest lay at the end of the wilderness journey, but it is not so in ours. Some of the reasons for making this statement are as follows:

1. The Christian today is both a pilgrim in the wilderness and a warrior in the land. From one point of view, he has really entered his inheritance already; hence, the rest is something to be enjoyed here and now. (Pilgrimage is prominent in Peter's epistles, and in that to the Hebrews; inheritance and warfare are prominent in Ephesians.)

2. In scripture, Canaan never represents heaven, for sin and conflict were both found in Canaan.

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3. Faith and rest are united in Hebrews, and what God has joined, we must not separate. As soon as there is faith, rest is enjoyed. "We which have believed do enter into that rest." Note the tense: it is present, not future.

4. Rest is a cessation from works (Hebrews 4:4). The Hebrews were liable to persist in legal works and to forfeit their spiritual rest. The two cannot go together. If it is "of faith," it is "not of works." God entered into His creation rest when He ceased from His works.

5. The rest, in Hebrews, is harmony with God. "He that is entered into His rest, he also hath ceased from his own works as God did from His. Let us labour, therefore, to enter into that rest." The thought is complementary to that of Matthew 11:28; in Hebrews, it is the abandonment of the burdens of Judaistic ritualism. This rest is the enjoyment of all that has been procured for us by our Lord Jesus, who, through death and resurrection, brought to an end the Levitical ceremonial system.

Furthermore, note the emphasis laid upon the heart in this section of Hebrews. We must "keep our heart with all diligence" lest it should go astray. There is a constant propensity to wander, but we must take care lest "we always err in heart." It is a grievous thing to lapse at all, but altogether a more grievous thing always to do so. Backslidings do occur, although they should not; but how tragic if they should become "perpetual" (Jeremiah 8:5).

These chapters in Hebrews have often caused difficulties to believers; but the writer is quite consistent with the clearly and indubitably stated doctrine of the eternal security of the child of God, when he warns us against possible failure. We must distinguish things that differ. Relationship, the result of life imparted, is not here in view; rather, the pilgrim character of the Christian. These chapters have to do with a position which we have voluntarily taken by confession (Revised Version, Hebrews 3:1), as separated from the world and having started on the pilgrim journey to better things. Having thus confessed ourselves to be among the many sons who are being brought through the wilderness on the way to glory, "let us, therefore, fear lest" under the pressure of circumstances or persecution we should "seem to have come short of" God's intended rest. In

reading these two chapters,—as indeed in reading the whole epistle to the Hebrews—we must remember that the writer is taking his addressees on the ground of their profession. He does not assume that it is genuine necessarily; he would fain hope so, but they must examine themselves and “take heed.” This explains his use of the word “if” in such passages as Hebrews 3:14 and elsewhere. Continuance is the proof of genuineness; apostasy is the evidence of unreality.

The argument of the writer appears to be as follows: God’s rest existed from the foundation of the world; that is, the completion of the restorative work as detailed in Genesis 1. God rested on the seventh day, and, if we would be in communion with Him, we too must share His rest. True rest is the product of harmony with given laws; when these laws are broken, discord ensues and rest is forfeited.

Creation’s rest was followed by the offer of Canaan’s rest but Israel, as a whole, failed to attain to it. They fell in the wilderness. Nor did Joshua bring them into it; enemies still remained in the land.

Later on, therefore, David is able to speak of that rest as still “remaining” available for the people of God. It still remains available for us to obtain; whether we do so depends on the condition of our heart, and on our response to His voice.

The writer speaks of the “word of God” in Hebrews 4:12, referring to Psalm 95:7-11. That word is “living and operative.” While Hebrews 4:12 is true of the whole volume of Holy Scripture, it has special reference to the immediate context. These four verses cited from the Jewish Psalter have life and power in them; their sharp edge is surely felt by those whose hearts are not hardened; they pierce us and reveal what we are; these verses lay us bare and naked before the eyes of God. What failure and weakness they reveal! How sorely we need the help of our Great High Priest! How gracious that He is at once introduced in verse 14!

Leviticus 23 shows that rest is the goal which God has in view for His people. The numeral seven speaks of it. We read there of the seventh day, the seventh week, the seventh year, and the Jubilee year at the expiration of seven sevens of years. Seven speaks of com-

pletion, attainment, and rest. On the seventh day God rested. There is, therefore, a “sabbatismos” available for us (Hebrews 4:9). This rest “remains” for the people of God, who, like Israel, have been redeemed from worse bondage and by more precious blood. We “enter” it by faith, now; only to discover that it is but the beginning of an eternal rest in fellowship with God Himself.

Assuredly it is possible for God’s pilgrims to have peace in the storm, songs in the night, joy in the prison, light in the cell. “We which believe do enter into rest.” Faith is not a blind resignation to events but a simple intelligent trust in God and His word. Faith dispels doubts and refuses to judge things by appearance. Faith rests on God, and in Him the soul rests also.

The Holy Spirit, as the common higher principle of life, gives to the Church its true unity. Outward uniformity is as yet unattainable; but beginning by having one mind, we shall hereafter end by having “one body.” The true body of Christ is already one, as joined to the one Head. But its unity is as yet not visible, even as the Head is not visible; but it shall appear when He shall appear. Meanwhile the rule is, “In essentials, unity; in doubtful questions, liberty; in all things, charity. There is more real unity where both go to heaven under different names than when with the same name one goes to heaven, the other to hell. Truth is the first thing: those who reach it, will at last reach unity, because truth is *one*; while those who seek unity as the first thing, may purchase it at the sacrifice of truth, and so of the soul itself.

(JFB Commentary on Ephesians 4:4)

## ***John's Prologue, pt. 4***

*Joel Portman*

**T**he differing reception of the Word when Christ came is an indication of the continuing attitude of men, even those enlightened, to

Him at all times. John 1:11 emphasizes that He came to the things that rightly belonged to Him, the world, mankind, and Israel especially, but those who were His own people refused to receive Him. This will be the basis of their lament as Isaiah 53 expresses it: "Lord, who hath believed our report. . ." or, "who among us believed the report that was ours?" Again we read, "He was despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief." To that favored nation God had entrusted the oracles and the prophetic utterances that were intended to prepare them for His coming so that they would recognize Him. In addition, this prologue tells us that God had done even more, sending John as a forerunner to bear witness of Him. Those who heard John preaching and baptizing at Jordan also responded in the same manner, since there were some who came with true repentance and expressed a longing for the coming Messiah. But there were those who came to His baptism among others, including Pharisees and scribes (Matthew 3:3-12), who failed to see their need for His coming or the need for repentance. For them was reserved the winnowing judgment of God and the expectation of being cast into the fire as chaff.

It must have saddened our Savior to come to the sphere belonging to Him, much as one would come into his own home, and on behalf of those with whom He identified Himself (Hebrews 2:14-16), and for them to refuse to receive Him. Robertson's Word Pictures says that it is the same idiom that John 19:27 uses, when John took our Lord's mother "to his own home", and then he continues, "the world was 'the own home' of the Logos who had made it." Matthew 6:4 quotes the Lord saying that a prophet is not without honor, save in his own country and among his own kindred. Even Nazareth, where He had grown up, refused Him and would have thrust Him over the brow of the hill (Luke 4:28). This was not unexpected, for later He said that He had come, not to send peace upon the earth, but division that would exist within communities and even in families (Matthew 10:34). That division over the Person of Christ exists today, because reception of Him is an individual matter and cannot be determined by nationality or religious identity. And now, as in that day, such division results in

strife and separation between individuals.

And yet, at all times, there are some who do receive Him. The thought is that they embrace Him fully, dependently, and without reservation, recognizing who He is and what He has done for them, so that they have believed with absolute certainty in Him as their Savior. John uses the preposition "eis" with reference to those who believe "into" His Name, which seems to signify that more than mentally accepting facts about Him or a superficial belief that one might profess is involved, like those at the end of John 2, but a full commitment to and dependence on Him that results in a lasting, spiritual link that involves the entire person. This is what results in the individual who displays genuine reality that demonstrates spiritual life. They are the ones who are constituted "children (not sons) of God" for they received divine life from God and have every right to claim a place in His family and enjoy a relationship with a Heavenly Father. When the disciples were challenged by the Lord after others went away instead of continuing to follow, Peter responded, "Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the Living God." (John 6:68-69).

John continues by saying that those who received Him, "were born", as an action accomplished by another, surely the Holy Spirit. 1 Peter 1:23 also tell us that those who are saved, have been born again, "not of corruptible seed, but incorruptible, by the Word of God that liveth and abideth forever." It is not of blood(s), that is, not of natural descent such as the Jews loudly protested in John 8:33. It is not of family relationship, such as the children of believers might claim. Others have suggested that this means that it is not of the blood of the Passover or other sacrifices, nor of that of circumcision. Hengstenberg insists, in his commentary, that this refers to a natural birth, accompanied by blood, in contrast to the spiritual, as the Lord emphasizes in John 3:5. Amidst these differing interpretations, it is clear that John is saying that it must be a work that only God can accomplish, and since it is in the passive voice, it is beyond the capability of the individual. As Bishop Ryle puts it, "Grace does not descend from parent to child." It does not

flow through the blood stream.

He says that it is not of the "will of the flesh", or it is not something that the flesh can produce or cause. Self-works and all religious activities can never transform the inward character and bring the soul into a present enjoyment of having divine life. It is not of the will of man, either, for it is not through anything that others might initiate or cause in another. It is a direct work in the soul of a repentant, believing sinner that is the result of the Spirit producing the change inwardly.

### **The Word Made Flesh**

It is more correct to say, "the Word became flesh," not only to be true to the text grammatically, but also because in John, the Word is presented as a Divine Person who moved under His own voluntary will. We can note the many indications of deliberate action on the part of our Savior. For example, at the crucifixion, we read that "then came Jesus forth" and "he, bearing His cross, went forth. . .", since John is presenting Christ to us as the Burnt Offering, who offered Himself freely for the glory of God and as a sweet-savor offering that was acceptable.

John declares that He became flesh, to emphasize the genuine reality of His humanity. Evidently he directs these words against those who, corrupted by heresy, denied the corporal reality of the Word and only accepted the spiritual aspects of His words. Vincent ("Vincent's Word Studies"), says that "The phrase became flesh, means more than that He assumed a human body. He assumed human nature entire, identifying Himself with the race of man, having a human body, a human soul, and a human spirit. . . He did not assume, for a time merely, humanity as something foreign to Himself. The incarnation was not a mere accident of His substantial being. 'He became flesh, and did not clothe Himself in flesh.'" Hebrews 2:14 declares that "he also himself likewise took part of the same" to become like His brethren. In 1 John 4:2, John emphasizes the fact of His becoming flesh by saying, "Every spirit that confesses Jesus Christ come in flesh is of God" (JND and more literally). It is more than He became like men, or became a man, but that His manhood was in the fullest sense genuine, sin apart.

Saying that the children are "partakers of flesh and blood" signifies that they had no prior existence before their birth, for that is their only existence. However, He did, for He voluntarily "took part" of the same to be identified with them to deliver them. His becoming flesh, a real Man, is one theme of John's writings, both the gospel and his epistles. What a blessing and encouragement it is to us to meditate on Him who became like us, apart from sin, and thus He is our great Kinsman-Redeemer in every aspect of the word.

But John also emphasizes the reality of His deity in humanity by using the expression that takes us back to the tabernacle in the wilderness. He "tabernacled among us" is literally what John is saying. Just as the reality of God's presence was known in the tabernacle in the wilderness, so His presence is fully known in Him who dwelt among men. God "has taken up residence on earth in the Word made flesh." (F. F. Bruce, "The Gospel of John"). Bruce also says that the words used are specifically designed to relate His presence to the glory "which shone in the tabernacle and temple" which was "but the foreglow of that excelling glory which shone in the incarnate Word, veiled from those who had no mind to come to the light, but manifested to faith." The tabernacle was God's dwelling place on earth amid His people, but it was also, as the following phrase amplifies, the place of God's revelation of Himself. He expressed the glory of the eternal God now seen in the tabernacle of human flesh.

John not only declares His humanity by way of the incarnation, but he moves beyond that to develop the reality of the glory that was unique, for it was "glory as of an only begotten of (from) a Father" (JND). Only the unique Son of God could display that glory, and in so saying, John refutes the heretical statements of those who relegated His Person and glory to that of a created, though exalted, being who came forth from God. "No," John says, "He was all that God was, manifested in true humanity, and in every respect expressing to men the reality of God's Person." Our Lord declares and affirms His deity to His enemies further in the book, such as in 8:46-59. It is glory of the eternal Word manifested in flesh, that John says is "full of grace and truth." We remember

that Moses besought the Lord to show him His glory, and Jehovah condescendingly passed by before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering and abundant in goodness and truth." (Exodus 34:5-6). This was the surpassing glory that He revealed to Moses, and in the person of the Word made flesh, we see the glory of the eternal God displaying God's grace and truth toward unworthy men. V. 17 amplifies that statement, for not only was "grace and truth" manifested in Him, but they "subsist through Jesus Christ". What a blessing for us to see this and to enjoy the results of God's work accomplished in this lovely Person, our Lord Jesus Christ. May we appreciate more the marvelous truths that are displayed in their clarity in Him.

(continued)

There are so many stony ground hearers, who receive the Word with joy, that I have determined to suspend my judgment till I know the tree by its fruits. I cannot believe they are converts till I see fruit brought back; it will never do a sincere soul any harm.

-- George Whitefield

## Christian and Money, pt 2

*Robert Surgenor*

### Providing for Preachers

A profitable verse to remember is, "Let him that is taught in the word communicate unto him that teacheth in all good things" (Galatians 6:6). When a servant of the Lord visits an assembly and feeds them with spiritual food, it is only proper that they, in return, supply him with the means of supporting him, and his family's needs. This principle is clearly taught in 1 Corinthians 9. Paul takes us to the Law, showing God's care for animals, laboring farmers, and those in Levitical service. "For it is written in the law of Moses, Thou shalt not muzzle the mouth of the ox that treadeth out the corn. Doth God take care for oxen? Or saith

he it altogether for our sakes? For our sakes, no doubt, this is written: that he that ploweth should plow in hope; and that he that thresheth in hope should be partaker of his hope. If we have sown unto you spiritual things, is it a great thing if we shall reap your carnal things? Do ye not know that they which minister about holy things live of the things of the temple? and they which wait at the altar are partakers with the altar? Even so hath the Lord ordained that they which preach the gospel should live of the gospel" (verses 9-11, 13-14).

Let me go further. Have you ever noticed the responsibility of an assembly to provide the temporal means of a servant in his traveling expenses to an assembly? Consider the following scriptures. "Which when the brethren knew, they brought him (Paul) down to Caesarea, and sent him forth to Tarsus" (Acts (9:30). "They determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question. And being brought on their way by the church, they passed through Phenice and Samaria, declaring the conversion of the Gentiles: and they caused great joy unto all the brethren" (Acts 15:2-3). "And then immediately the brethren sent away Paul to go as it were to the sea: but Silas and Timotheus abode there still. "And they that conducted Paul brought him unto Athens" (Acts 17:15-16). "And when we had accomplished those days, we departed and went our way; and they all brought us on our way" (Acts 21:5). "Whensoever I take my journey into Spain, I will come to you: for I trust to see you in my journey, and to be brought on my way thitherward by you" (Romans 15:24). "And it may be that I will abide, yea, and winter with you, that ye may bring me on my journey whithersoever I go" (1 Cor. 16:6). "Let no man therefore despise him (Timothy): but conduct ("propempo." Fit him out with the requisites for a journey) him forth in peace, that he may come unto me: for I look for him with the brethren" (1 Corinthians 16:6,11). "Bring Zenas the lawyer and Apollos on their journey diligently, that nothing be wanting unto them" (Titus 3:13).

Can anything be plainer? Scripture encourages assemblies to provide the expenses for a servant coming to minister unto them,

prior to their coming.

Years ago it was planned for me to return to Northern Ireland for a gospel tent series. The brethren there sent me a considerable sum of money, more than enough to pay for my round-trip flight. Circumstances arose that prohibited me going. I wrote the brethren and told them that I thought it only right to return them the money sent. They wouldn't hear of that, and told me to use the money for the furtherance of the gospel in my homeland. I was humbled over their exceeding grace to me.

At the other extreme, is it right to expect an invited servant to a conference which will cost him \$500 traveling expenses, and then give him a \$150 gift at the conference for coming? Let your own conscience provide the answer.

Then we have provision made for evangelists that are not even near the ministering assembly. When Paul was laboring in Thessalonica, he not only preached, but he labored night and day in physical work, so that he would not be chargeable to them (1 Thessalonians 2:9). While there, the newly formed assembly in Philippi sent once and again to his necessity (Philippians 4:16).

I remember when on the oversight of the West Cleveland Assembly, we sent to many preachers who had never visited us. They were working their own field of labor. Thus, by giving, we were associating ourselves with them in their labors for the Lord.

When I went out into the work of the Lord, a certain preacher told me that being out of sight was to be out of mind. I proved that untrue. However, when an evangelist launches out into the deep for God and enters a field of labor where there are no assemblies, how does he exist? Well, if all the assemblies were like some, he wouldn't! Is it true that there are some assemblies that never minister to a servant unless he darken their door? Sad to say, Yes. Only if he comes their way, will they give him fellowship. If another servant is fulfilling the commission to go into all the world with the gospel, and is far removed from them, he is not considered at all - he is forgotten. Those with that strange concept of fellowship, will suffer loss at the Bema.

### **Providing for the Poor**

When Paul and Barnabas attended the council at Jerusalem, recorded in Acts 15, before leaving they were exhorted to remember the poor (Galatians 2:10). Visiting the Gentile churches Paul received their donations for the poor saints in Jerusalem.

Writing Corinth regarding their contribution he constrained the Corinthians to give, bringing before them the example of the churches of Macedonia. Notice: "Moreover, brethren, we do you to wit of the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia; How that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded unto the riches of their liberality. For to their power, I bear record, yea, and beyond their power they were willing of themselves; Praying us with much intreaty that we would receive the gift, and take upon us the fellowship of the ministering to the saints. And this they did, not as we hoped, but first gave their own selves to the Lord, and unto us by the will of God. Insomuch that we desired Titus, that as he had begun, so he would also finish in you the same grace also" (2 Corinthians 8:1-6). Imagine, saints in deep poverty abounding richly in liberality! It is simply amazing what the grace of God can do!

This grace is also seen in Luke 21:2-4). "And He (the Lord) saw also a certain poor widow casting in thither two mites. And He said, Of a truth I say unto you, that this poor widow hath cast in more than they all: For all these have of their abundance cast in unto the offerings of God: but she of her penury hath cast in all the living that she had."

I remember a man with nine children approaching the late William Warke at a conference and pressing into his hand a considerable sum of money. Brother Warke told the man, "You can't afford to give this." The man quickly replied, No, I can't afford NOT to give this." What a beautiful answer. Where was this man's heart? In heaven. "But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Matt. 6:20).

In contrast to this we have in James 2:15-16; "If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit?"

### Corporate Giving

It is a wonderful thing to be able to place in the offering on Lord's Day a portion of our substance. This is part of our worship, for God says in Hebrews 13:15-16; "By Him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to His name. But to do good and to communicate forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased."

To communicate is to give our substance to the Lord, and God calls it a sacrifice. How much are we to give? Let 1 Corinthians 16:2 provide the answer. "Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him." So we give in proportion to what God has given to us.

The past few years we have noticed some married brethren giving an offering also for their wives. Is this right? I will answer with a question. Is it right for a husband to partake of both emblems for his wife? She is as much a priest as he, and has the right to give her own portion whatever she purposes in her heart. The word "every one of you" embraces women.

### Individual Giving

Not only this, the Christian has the privilege of giving in an individual way to the Lord. One thinks of Mary called Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, and many others, which ministered unto Him of their substance (Luke 8).

I remember the late Clay Fite relating to me of being in a new place with the gospel. He was out of sight, consequently he wasn't receiving any fellowship from the assemblies. However, he wasn't out of mind, for one morning he went to the local post office to see if perhaps a letter containing fellowship had arrived. There was none! However, there was a parcel. It was from a poor widow and inside was a note stating that she didn't have any money to send him, but she did have some food in the house,

so she had sent him some peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. He, with a smile, told me, "Bob, the sandwiches were not too fresh, but man were they good!" He was hungry. God allowed that trial to prove his faith.

(continued)

The author would strongly deprecate the false and foolish popular notion, that all study of prophecy is unpractical - a notion too often propagated by passing, but mischievously-influential allusions to the subject, from pulpit, platform, and press, made by those who know little either of it, or of its effects. It ought to be a sufficient rebuke to the levity that hazards such an assertion, or admits such an idea, to recall the facts, that one-third of the Bible consists of prophecy; and that our Lord and Master said, "Search the Scriptures," not a portion of them. The apostle Peter expressly tells us that we do well to take heed to the "more sure word of prophecy," as to a light shining in a dark place until the day dawn and the day star arise. Is it unpractical to make use of a good lantern on a pitch-dark night, in traversing a dangerous road? Or is it not rather impractical and unreasonable to attempt to dispense with it? And further, a special and emphatic blessing is attached to this study in the closing book of the Bible: "Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep the things that are written therein, for the time is at hand."

—Henry Grattan Guinness (The Approaching End of the Age: Viewed in the Light of History, Prophecy, and Science, Preface, 1879)

## Oversight and Rule

Donald Munro (Toronto)

Many seem to have the idea that God's Assembly is a place where every man may do that which is right in his own eyes, where there is no rule, no order. Maybe you have heard of the man who had tried a great many of the sects, the Methodists and the Baptists, and then finally he thought he would "join the Brethren." The first day he came in, he got up

and made a long prayer, in which he thanked God that he had found a place "where every one could do just what they chose." That is not God's assembly. It is not a place for lawless, self-willed men. It is where God's will, not man's, is to be done. Let us see what God's Word has to say on the subject of Oversight and Rule in the assembly of God. We read in Acts 14:23, that the apostles "ordained then elders in every church' which they had planted and built up in the truth.

These elders were not necessarily preachers, their work was to shepherd and guide the saints (Acts 15:1). When they returned to Antioch they found a different state of things from that which they had left it. Certain men had come down from Judea teaching strange doctrines. In verse 6, we read, "And the apostles and elders came together for to consider this matter," and again in verse 22, "The apostles and elders," "The whole Church," and "chosen men of their own company." Here are four different classes all recognized in that assembly at Jerusalem, showing that God is a God of order, and has set some in His Church to guide and rule others. Then in Acts 20:17-28, the "elders" are called together by Paul and addressed.

Who were they? The apostle says, "The Holy Ghost hath made you overseers." They are told to take heed to their condition and to "feed the flock," for if a man is not himself in a right condition of soul, he cannot look after the saints of God. Here we see there were elders or overseers in local assemblies, not men like Paul and Barnabas, with special gifts from the Ascended Christ, traveling from place to place, preaching the Gospel, establishing assemblies, confirming souls, teaching the saints and passing on to other placed, but local brethren, who cared for God's saints, feeding and guiding the flock while they wrought. The Church is here spoken of as a flock, and they were to shepherd it, not fleece or lord over it, as those who call themselves bishops now do. The apostle warns them that from among themselves men would arise speaking that which would draw away the disciples after them, to form sects, which has long since happened, and that "grievous wolves" would enter, tearing and scattering the sheep.

Here we have the apostle's "successors," the apostolic succession claimed by the Pope and others. In 1 Thessalonians 5:12, we read "Know them which are over you in the Lord." Here is a very young assembly, according to the dates in our Bibles. These Thessalonian saints were Paul's children in the gospel, but he had not been to see them since they were saved. He had to flee for his life because of persecution, and now he sends this letter to them. There had been no elders ordained by the apostles there, but Paul was sure that from among themselves the Lord was stirring up some who were able to do shepherd work, and were doing it. He exhorts the saints to "know" them? Not by their peculiar dress or title. No, but by their work. Somebody gets sick, something goes wrong. Who will look after them? Some worldly believer who is never seen at a meeting except at the breaking of bread? No, not at all.

But there is a brother who has a care for the saints, who has a word of encouragement or of warning for them, and who is living godly. The sheep know where they get "a green bite," and they soon learn to acknowledge those who have a heart for and a care of them. How would you know a shoemaker? By the sign? No, but by his work. This is just how we are to know God's ministers, God's overseers, by their work. Those who are godly "know them," and "esteem them." In Hebrews 13:7, 17-24, we have another description of the same men. "Remember them which have the rule" (margin, "who are the guides"). If you consult a Greek Concordance you will find that this word "guides" is the same as the word found in Acts 15, "chief men," and the meaning is, men who were going before the flock, guiding the flock, marking out the path for the flock to follow in God's ways.

We read of elders chosen by the apostles, pointed out by them, men whom they saw having grace and ability to help the saints, but we read also of "overseers" in places where there never was anything of this kind such as Thessalonica, where the apostle could not point out men as overseers when they were only three week old. But he knew that God was raising up and fitting some, and that they were doing the work. He had confidence in the

Master of assemblies, the Chief Shepherd, who gave His life for the sheep, and now lives to care for them, raising up under-shepherds to do the same work. Wherever there are a few gathered in dependence on Him, looking to Him, not to men, He gives all that they need for their godly progress.

In 1 Peter 5:1, Peter calls himself "an elder," not in the sense of being an "ordained" one, for the Lord Jesus ordained him to be an apostle, and that was far higher than an elder. But he was an elder in another sense; he was an old believer, for this was about 30 years after the Lord Jesus called him from his boat and nets. He says to other elder brethren, "Feed the flock of God which is among you." How beautiful to see the elders- not the elders up on a platform and flock down below, not doing the work for money, not saying "This is my flock, my congregation, my people, my church." Not as clericals, lording it over God's heritage, but as toiling shepherds, feeding and guiding the flock, because they love it and its owner. Jesus said to Peter, "Lovest thou Me? Then feed My sheep." It is Christ's flock, not theirs. He has purchased it with His own blood, He has not given it up to anybody else.

What reward is there for such a service? None here: often not even the recognition and esteem commanded by the Lord. But go on all the same. When the Chief Shepherd shall appear, you shall get your pay then. What is it going to be? "A crown of glory which fadeth not away." Younger believers are exhorted to "submit themselves" unto the elder. This is pleasing to God, especially in this day of insubjection, lawlessness, and self-will, when many boast of being subject to nobody. In 1 Timothy 3:1, we get the character of those who aspire to such work. Does some one say, "I would like to be an overseer, I think I will go to the oversight meeting." Listen then. Here are the qualifications in the verses that follow. No one lacking them is an overseer according to God. Here is a man and he has got three spheres where he is to exercise his gift. First over his own spirit, for if a man does not know how to oversee himself, take heed to himself, he cannot rule others. A man who has no rule over his own spirit is like "a city without walls" (Proverbs 25:28). An army coming up against a city

without walls, would not have great difficulty to get in. So the devil gains an easy victory over a man who is unable to rule himself. Then, there is his own family.

You have sometimes gone into a house, and perhaps the head of the house you would find was at the oversight meeting. All was in disorder: wife, children, everything in disorder, a house where there is only misrule and confusion. The head of that house, whatever his abilities may be, is not a fit man to first know how to rule his own house before he can "take care of the house of God". What a high place, what a responsible place. With what godly fear should anyone filling such a place act! How they ought to put their shoes from off their feet in the house of God. Verses 14-16 tells what that house is. At one time the mystery of godliness was seen in the Son of God down here walking to and fro. He is not here in person now, but here is the Church called forth to give testimony to the mystery of godliness, even the testimony of our Lord Jesus Christ. With what holy fear, with what godliness, with what faithfulness ought those to walk and act who serve the Lord thus among His saints. Whether you call them "bishops" or "overseers" or "chief men," they are men seeking to lead the flock in God's ways. This is their work. And in order to do it efficiently, they must be godly, they must be obedient themselves, so as to examples to the flock.

"The historical matters of Scripture, both narrative and prophecy, constitute, as it were, the bones of its system; whereas the spiritual matters are as its muscles, blood-vessels, and nerves. As the bones are necessary to the human system, so Scripture must have its historical matters. The expositor who nullifies the historical groundwork of Scripture for the sake of finding only spiritual truths everywhere, brings death on all correct interpretation."