

**Peter
And
The
Church**

by

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Foreword

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he last four chapters of this brochure consist of the official reports of Bible Readings given at the Keswick Convention of 1937. Those Bible Readings were a consideration of a description of the Church from the pen of the Apostle Peter (1 Peter 2. 9).

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s it was to Peter that our Lord was speaking when He made the first explicit disclosure of the Church, we are devoting the first chapter to a consideration of the declaration He then made. what disclosure at Caesarea Philippi was the background of all Peter's life, experience, and teaching; and what he wrote by the Spirit enables us to understand more clearly the glory and beauty of the words of our Lord.

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CHAPTER I

Caesarea Philippi

Matthew 16:13 When Jesus came into the coasts of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, saying, Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?

14 And they said, Some say that thou art John the Baptist: some, Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets.

15 He saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am?

16 And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.

17 And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven.

18 And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

19 And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.



Every student of the life and ministry of our Lord is conscious of the importance of Caesarea Philippi. It was there, at the close of three years ministry (some say two and a half years), that our Lord created a crisis in the training of His disciples; as, leading them away from the crowded areas He challenged them in the words, "Who say ye that I am?"



They had been with Him during the previous period, observing Him personally, listening to His teaching, watching Him at His work. The hour was approaching when He would leave them as to bodily presence, and He prepared them by this question for receiving things from Him which He had never said to them before. It was here and now that He told them three great secrets in connection with His ministry and purpose, those of the Church, the Cross, and the second Advent. Whereas these had been implicit in His teaching before, it was now He made the first explicit announcement concerning each.



We are concerned now with His declaration concerning His Church. In these days when the question is being asked and discussed, "What is the Church?" it is good to go back to the historic sources of information, for there we find an account of its beginning, and a revelation of its purpose. In a very remarkable way certain foundation truths concerning this matter were revealed by Christ in what is His first disclosure of purpose concerning His Church. They are found in these words, and were addressed to Peter. His inquiry was addressed to the group, and it would seem that members of the group had made answer to His first inquiry, "Who do men say that the Son of Man is?" for Matthew says: "They said, some say John the Baptist; some, Elijah, and others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets."



While His second question was asked of the same company, one man answered, and that was Simon Peter. I think there is no reason to doubt that he was expressing the conviction of the company.



Without further reference to the local setting, let us devote our attention to the declaration of the Lord Himself: "Upon this Rock I will build My Church; and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. I will give unto thee the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven; and whatsoever thou shall bind on earth shall be bound in Heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in Heaven."



In order to have an intelligent apprehension of the value of the declaration it is necessary that we should remind ourselves that His words were spoken to a company of Hebrews who necessarily would interpret whatever there was in the declaration of a figurative character by their religious training and knowledge of the Sacred Writings.



In considering the declaration I propose that we should consider the idea suggested by the words "My Church;" then the definite declaration made; finally deducing from the consideration an application to the subject of the Church.



We inquire then, first, into the suggestiveness of the phrase which has become so familiar, "My Church." Our word "Church," from the standpoint of etymology does not strictly convey the thought embodied in the word employed by our Lord. The word "Church" is derived from a Greek word meaning "the Lord's," and is strictly accurate in describing the Church. But the word employed here, and everywhere in the New Testament, is the word Ecclesia. It was a familiar word at the time, and it had a Hebrew and a Greek application. As to the Hebrew application, we find the word once in the New Testament applied to the Hebrew people (Acts 7.38), Stephen in his defence referring to "The Church in the wilderness." This Hebrew use of the word marked the nation as a separate people, distinct from all other nations in the fact that they constituted a Theocracy, a God-governed people. It is interesting to note also that in every Greek city at the time there was an Ecclesia. Reference to such is found in Acts 19.39. There is no doubt that the supreme thought would be that of the Hebrew conception of a theocracy, although the Greek idea might also enter into it. In that idea it is to be borne in mind that no slave could hold office therein, and the body in the Greek city was the centre of governing authority.



he whole emphasis of our Lord's utterance is to be placed upon the personal pronoun "My." He declared His purpose to build or create a people who should be a God-governed people, a Theocracy, and of transferring an office and responsibility to the new Institution. Turning to the declaration itself, we notice two matters; first, that of the foundation upon which the superstructure was to be reared; and secondly, our Lord's intended action.



he foundation is described as "This Rock." Here admittedly we are in the presence of a very much disputed subject. It is not my purpose at all to enter into these discussions, but to confine our thought very strictly to the actual statement made by Christ.



o understand this we need first of all to go back to the confession which Peter had just made. In doing this, once more it must be remembered that Peter was a Hebrew, a child of the Hebrew race. He was born in its midst, and had been nurtured upon its thinking. It was upon the basis of these facts that he said to our Lord, first, "Thou art the Christ." That meant to him that He was the Fulfiller of all the expectations of the Hebrew people, the One Who according to long foretelling, would bring the economy to a new issue. The Hebrew seers, psalmists, and prophets had all looked for the coming of such an One. All their literature reveals the merging of an idea in a Person. To summarise, we may declare that such a Person was revealed as One Who should he zu ollee Servant and Sovereign, that is, One Who should merge in His own Personality the great offices of Priest and King. Peter's affirmation was that that One had now appeared. To that affirmation he added the phrase which marked his consciousness of the mystic nature of the Person, "the Son of the living God." The expression "the Son" stands in distinction from a son. It marks some unique relationship, and the relationship was to the living God.



ow that expression, "The living God," crystalized the deepest conviction of the Hebrew people concerning Jehovah. Once more the whole of their literature bears witness to this fact. Other gods were unreal, not living. One sentence of the Old Testament stands out in sun-clear revelation of this conviction, that in which the psalmist said of idols: "Neither is there any breath in their mouth."



o Peter, then, the Son of man was seen as the Messiah, the Administrator of the will and way of God, as the Son, bearing unique relationship to God, and the living God as the ultimate fact.

It is to that ultimate fact that the definite reference was undoubtedly made, when our Lord said: "Upon this Rock I will build My Church."

Once more reminding ourselves that He was speaking to Hebrews, it is of great significance that if we trace the figurative use of the word "Rock" throughout the Hebrew Scripture, we find it is never used symbolically of man, but always of God. The Hebrew word is the word Tsur, and we find it occurring at least forty times figuratively in the Old Testament. Twice it is used of false gods in Deuteronomy 32, as they are put into contrast with the Rock of Israel, Who is the living God. In every other instance the figurative use of the word applies to God.

The Rock therefore is the living God, and those forming the Church are such as are built into Him, as Peter presently puts it in one of his letters, such as are "partakers of the Divine nature." The intention is very clearly revealed as we take the words of Peter once again, beginning at the end. First, "the living God," then One Who is "the Son of the living God" ; and finally, that One, the Messiah. Jesus said, "On that Rock I will build My Church," that is, on God manifest in time in His Son, and administering the affairs of the world through that Son as Messiah. Peter had found the foundation, the petra, and by being brought into living touch with Him, had become petros, of the Rock nature.

Our Lord's intended action was revealed in the words, "I will build." In those words the one of supreme importance is the first, "I." We tarry for a moment, however, with the word "build." The word our Lord employed was one that signified more than the mere act of building. The verb is built up of a noun, Oikos, a house, and demo, to build; so that it indicates the idea of becoming a house-builder.

Thus it has within itself the suggestiveness of the formation of a dynasty, or an economy, which is interpreted by the words we have already considered, "My ecclesia." Thus the description of action harmonises completely with the revelation of intention. When Paul wrote his letter to the Ephesians, he referred to the whole process as he spoke of "One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God . . . over all, and through all, and in all."

The one Lord is the Messiah, Son of the living God. The one faith is that of the human soul exercised in Him. The one baptism is that of the Holy Spirit wherein the believing soul is joined to

the Lord. The ultimate value is the creation of a Church wherein God is over, through, and in all its members and its corporate life. This mighty work is to be done by Christ Himself, "I will build." The process of His activity is that of the revelation of God through Himself, and the redeeming activity whereby those responding to the revelation by faith, become living stones, joined to the living Stone.



Two great facts are implicated as we thus place our emphasis upon the Person of the Builder. The first is that of the strength of the work done. This means that the building is impregnable and invincible. There can be no force equal to the destruction of what He builds. The second implicate is that of the beauty and glory of the structure. It is characterized by the infinite diversity of individualities, but these all united in their ultimate likeness to Him. When Solomon built his temple we are told that he set up two pillars, named respectively Jachin and Boaz. They were symbolic, the first standing for strength, and the second for beauty. The suggestion of these symbolic pillars in the material temple of Solomon found fulfilment in the spiritual House of God, which is the Church, because He Who in Himself is eternal strength and eternal beauty is the Builder.



The full realisation of the strength and beauty of the Church will only come in the glory of the second Advent of the Lord. To-day as we look at her, we are conscious of much weakness, and certainly often-times of a lack of beauty. We need to be reminded that our eyes are often fixed upon the scaffolding that surrounds the building, rather than the building itself. Nevertheless we all see something of the glory of the Church in its individual members. How many we have known, true Christly souls, who so share His life that His beauty, His compassion, and His tenderness are all manifested through them. The time will come when He will present His Church to God, a glorious thing, not having spot or wrinkle, or any such thing. It was in view of this, undoubtedly, Paul urged those to whom he wrote in his Corinthian letter, "to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace," where the word "keep" means to observe, or keep in view; referring to the fact that the hour will come when "we all attain unto the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a full grown man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ."



Proceeding, our Lord declared what would be the twofold value of His Church. The first of these is found in His words: "The gates of Hades shall not prevail against it."



The figure employed suggests not defensive strength, but aggressive strength. A simple consideration of the figure of speech shows that it cannot mean defence, because no attacking city carries its gates with it. The Church is rather seen at war, and the declaration is made that the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. And yet once more, the figure does not suggest that the Church

will capture Hades. In that sense it is involved, and unless we look closely we may lose the meaning of the declaration. The figure is really that of escape from Hades. The Church is seen opening up a way of escape from a beleaguered city. Here the Lord, surveying the whole field of the conflict, refers to the last enemy which is to be destroyed, which is death, and declares that that must yield to the onward march of His soldiers. That involves complete victory over that which has caused death, namely sin, and over that which issues from sin, namely sorrow. The great enemies of the human race are sin, sorrow, and death, and in that order. Surveying the field and the conflict, the Lord saw His Church as an aggressive force conquering sin, overcoming sorrow, and therefore triumphant over death.

It is of great value that we remind ourselves in passing that that word of our Lord has been fulfilled, and is being fulfilled in the case of all His followers who pass to death. All such win their victory over sin through His Cross, over sorrow, by communion with Him, and at last over death in the sure triumph of the certainty that death is but the gateway into life. Thus the Church is an aggressive army, for evermore leading the way out of the realm of sin, sorrow, and death into that of purity, joy, and life.

The second fact implicated in the words of our Lord is that symbolised by the keys. “I will give unto thee the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in Heaven ; and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in Heaven.”

It is well that we note at once that whereas these words were addressed to Peter, they really applied to him as a representative member of the Church. When a little later our Lord was speaking to His disciples, He used the plural pronoun as He said: “Verily I say unto you, What things soever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in Heaven; and what things soever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in Heaven (18. 18).

In the statement to Peter two phrases are of supreme importance, “the keys,” and the reference to binding and loosing. These were phrases connected with the office of the scribes. Those hearing our Lord speak were perfectly familiar with the phrase “the keys.” They constituted the insignia of the office of the scribe who was the teacher of the Law of God. The keys were symbols, not of priestly office, but of moral interpretation. When our Lord had uttered the parables of the Kingdom in chapter thirteen, He ended with the words: “Every scribe who hath been made a disciple to the Kingdom of Heaven is like unto a man that is a householder, which bringeth forth out of his treasure things new and old.”



hen Peter made his great confession he showed that he was a scribe instructed in the Kingdom of Heaven. Therefore there was committed to him and all those who were similarly instructed, the keys by which to open the treasure-house, and bring forth things new and old. The keys of the Kingdom were thus committed to the illuminated, to those who understood the principles of the Kingdom, the laws of the Kingdom, the method of the Kingdom. Thus the Church is seen not merely as an aggressive force, moving against all the enemies of God and man, but a constructive force in the midst of each age, declaring what are the laws of the ultimate Kingdom of God.



losely connected with this word of Christ are the words: "Whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in Heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in Heaven."



ere again we have phrases that had distinct relationship to the office and work of the scribes. Binding meant the declaration of that which was obligatory, and loosing meant the declaration of that which was optional. In Jewish literature we find the phrases used sometimes when putting great teachers into contrast, as when it is said: "Hillel looses this, but Shammai binds it." Whatever the subject, it simply meant that Hillel's view was that it was optional, and Shammai's that it was obligatory. Thus the Church in the world holds the keys of the interpretation of the Divine will, and is called upon to erect the moral standards for the world. Whatever the Church binds is obligatory. Whatever it looses is optional. Of course all this depends entirely upon the ideal of the Church already set forth. What the Church binds on earth is bound in Heaven, because it is Heaven's law, and therefore originally bound in Heaven. Similarly, what the Church looses on earth is loosed in Heaven, because primarily it is loosed in Heaven and from Heaven's standpoint is an optional matter. This applies to all the sides of human life, personal, social, national.



It is well that we remember that every high ideal recognised by men in the world to-day has been learned from the Church. The final ethic for the world came through Christ. Everything that is truly high and noble and uplifting in the thinking and legislation of the nations, has come out of His heart by the interpretation of His Church.



It is most significant in this connection that when our Lord had made this great declaration He charged His first disciples "that they should tell no man that He was the Christ." At first it seems a strange charge to have laid upon them. It would seem as though their one business was to go out, and to declare and prove that He was, as Peter had confessed Him, the very Christ of God. And yet

He thus charged them. I think we shall find our explanation of what may appear to be a difficulty, by reminding ourselves of what He had said to Peter, after Peter had made his confession : “Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-Jonah; for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but My Father Who is in Heaven.”

Conviction concerning the’ office of Christ will not come by dialectical methods. The Church is not called upon to preach theories about Him, but to bring men into contact with Him, that so there may come to them personal and individual illumination and regeneration.

Thus we have attempted to consider this first disclosure of the Church as given by the Lord Himself; and at least there are certain facts which it makes perfectly clear. The first is that men do not come to Christ through the Church; and the second, resulting from that, is the revelation of the fact that men come into the Church through Christ. Every newborn soul is a member of the Church. Thus, after a lapse of years, and out of a varied and full experience, Peter, to whom the first words of disclosure were addressed at Caesarea Philippi, now writing as the result of their interpretation by the Spirit to him, and within the Church itself, declares of that Church: ”Ye are an elect race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, that ye may show forth the excellencies of Him Who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.”

CHAPTER II

The Setting and Structure of the Passage

As a preliminary to our consideration, let us read two passages, and as we read them, let us imagine that we have never seen them before. I go first to Matthew 16.13-20; and then to 1 Peter 2. 1-12.

The readings constitute the background of the meditations, of this and the following three chapters. But our attention is to be concentrated on one passage, “Ye are an elect race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, that ye may show forth the excellencies of Him Who called you out of darkness into His marvellous light.” (1 Peter 2.9)

It is forty years since that passage leapt at me, gripped me, mastered me, and for these forty years it has been with me; a growing sense of its glory and value possesses me; and it is my privilege to invite my brothers and sisters in the holy Faith to come to that familiar passage, and consider it with some care, with as much care, that is, as is possible in the brief space of four chapters ; and to consider it in the light of its context.

Iask you to observe, in the first place, that we have here Peter’s description of the Church of God. For rhetorical beauty it is unsurpassed in my judgment in the whole of the New Testament; but it is far more than a piece of rhetoric. If I do not degrade the Sacred Writings, I shall say it is a singularly clear, scientific description of the Church. I venture to think there is nothing more luminous, or radiant, or wonderful to be found in the whole of the New Testament; and I believe that to appreciate it is to understand at once the privilege and the responsibility of Churchmanship. In these days one supreme necessity of the hour is to rediscover the true function of the Church of God, and its place in human history.

Uur Lord used the word “Church” for the first time, according to the records, in speaking to Peter. He only used it twice; here in the 16th chapter of Matthew, and again in the 18th. Here He was speaking to Peter as the representative of the rest; and in Matthew 18, speaking to the group as they were gathered together, the nucleus of His Holy Church.

It is a significant fact, and I only mention it in passing, but neither in the words of Peter recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, nor in his Letters, is the word “Church” ever used. He never used the word in speeches preserved for us, or in letters which abide for us. Luke tells us in the Acts that he acted with the Church, and he tells us how the Church prayed for him; so that we may say that here, in the midst of this First Letter of his, there emerges suddenly this radiant passage than which, as I have said, there is nothing more wonderful, nothing more complete in its description of the Church of God to be found anywhere in the writings of the New Testament.

It is an interesting line for speculation as to how it is that Peter did not say more about the Church. Elvet Lewis, that great poet-preacher of Wales, once said that Jude had intended to write a treatise on salvation but was prevented. He tells us at the beginning of his letter--” While I was giving all diligence to write unto you of our common salvation”-that he could not do it, but had to write something else, because by the Spirit’s guidance Paul was already the writer of the great document on salvation. Be that as it may, I think Peter, the one to whom the first word was spoken about the Church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit knew that the mystery of the Church, and its interpretation, were not committed to him, but to Paul. Nevertheless, here, in this wonderful writing, addressing those who were of the Dispersion, largely Hebrew Christians unquestionably, but all of them Christians, and, consequently members of the Church, he suddenly drops into this marvellous description, rhetorically beautiful, scientifically accurate, of all the truth concerning the Church. He wrote to those who were scattered; he wrote also by the Holy Spirit to the Christians of 1937, for dates are human, principles are eternal.

In this chapter I propose that we consider this great statement in its setting and in its structure. It is well sometimes to see where we are going.

In chapter 3 I shall take the first two phrases of interpretation: “An elect race, a royal priesthood.” In chapter 4, I propose to take the second two phrases: “A holy nation, a people for God’s own possession.” In chapter 5, the great central declaration of why we are what we are: “Ye are . . . that ye may.”

Now for a few minutes let us take a very technical look at the passage in the light of its context. The verse opens with “but.” I want you to notice that that “but” cancels another “but,” and the other “but” is found in verse 7: “For you, therefore, which believe, is the preciousness; but for such as disbelieve.” Peter deals with such, tells the truth about them, and then he comes back cancelling the “but” of verse 7, with the “but” of verse 9: “But ye are” -in contradistinction to those referred to

after the first “but”- “Ye are an elect race.” And that “but” connects what we have here, with all that has gone before, and all that lies around it.

Look once more with me a little carefully at this- “But for such as disbelieve . . . but ye are.” There is a contrast, and that connects with the words found in verses 5 and 7. Let us look at these. Verse 5: “Ye also, as living stones, are built up a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” Now take the first part of verse 7 – “For you therefore which believe is the preciousness.” We must have those things in mind if we are intelligently to understand the thought of the Apostle here. The main argument gives the reason for what this chapter starts with.

Look back to the beginning now: “Putting away therefore all wickedness, and all guile, and hypocrisies,” and so on. That is the great appeal of the Apostle, and what follows gives the reason for the putting away of all those evil things. Why should sin be put away? Well, finally, because we are “an elect race,” we are “a royal priesthood,” we are “a holy nation,” “we are “a people for God’s own possession.”

Then we look once more at the opening of the chapter: “Putting away therefore . . .” Every intelligent student of the Bible knows that wherever we see a “therefore” we say “wherefore?” “Therefore” means that all that has to be said is dependent upon something that has already been said. So here again, we need a good deal more context than I have space to deal with; suffice it to say now that we need the whole first chapter. Then we see the results: “Putting away, therefore.” The “therefore” which answers the “wherefore” is found in chapter 1. Every preacher of the Word of God knows that he can never deal adequately with any text, and that for the reason that it demands the context.

My friend, my very dear friend, Dr. John Hutton, once said-and I commend this to all my brethren in the ministry- “If a man takes a text without the context it is a pretext.” That is a tremendous truth. But then if we are going to deal with any verse in the Bible the context is all the Bible.

At any rate here we do need chapter 1. In that chapter we find, first of all an introduction, the introduction of the Apostle to his readers. Then follows, in verses 3 to 5, a great doxology: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who . . . begat us again unto a living hope,” and so on.



hereafter comes a great parenthetical passage in verses 6 and 7, and certain injunctions, which, when we have read, we find that Peter was writing for the strengthening of those who were passing through a time of trial, and was urging them to steadfastness in the great forces of their life in Christ Jesus. Now that is where this passage occurs. Forgetting the local circumstances we are brought face to face with these essential things of the Christian faith, and of the Christian Church, and of Christian relationship within that Church. They reveal what was the source of strength for them, and it is a source of strength for us. This is all very technical, but it is important.



Now for a few moments passing from that subject of the setting of the declaration, let us look at its structure. What do we find in it? First of all, the description of an instrument. The Church is revealed here as a medium of manifestation, a vehicle of vision, an instrument of illumination. The Church is seen here purposeful-of which more anon. Then we have a description of the Church, a fourfold description: "An elect race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession." Then simply, if we have the description of the instrument, we have the simple declaration of the purpose for which that instrument exists in the world. Why this Church? Why this "elect race, this royal priesthood, this holy nation, this people for God's possession?" "That ye may show forth the excellencies, the praises" - the old word is a beautiful word, but "excellencies" is a little nearer the mark, perhaps. The instrument described exists in order that God may be revealed to the world.



Let us look at that a little more closely, considering what I venture to describe at the moment as the more complex structure, though it is not complex. If we take that statement, that wonderful statement, and ponder it, we shall find three things that are of value. First of all, the principle of the Church is revealed. Secondly, as we have said, and will show more fully, the purpose of the Church is unveiled; and, finally, the power of the Church is implicated.



Now I want to do with that verse what is apparently a very ruthless thing. I want to tear it to pieces. My comfort is that if we tear to pieces these great statements of Scripture they are still there when we have done our tearing. Some of you in studying Botany found that-perhaps you may be experts therein, I am not, but you cannot gainsay what I am going to say-the study of Botany necessitated the tearing to pieces of flowers. I think that is one reason why I never excelled in Botany; I hated doing so. But there are beauties in flowers which we cannot see until we have plucked them to pieces; then we discover the exquisite beauty that lies within every one of them. If we want to know the flower in the crannied wall, we must pluck it out of the cranny, and hold it in our hand, see it root and all, and all in all, and then we discover all its glories.

Asks you, then, first of all to leave out of this statement every descriptive phrase, the very things that lend glory to it. Feel your way into its simplest statement. What is it? Leave out those phrases that describe the instrument: "Elect race, royal priesthood, holy nation, a people for God's own possession"; and leave out what is said as to the purpose-to which we, of course, are coming back-of all those things.

Now what have we left? Not very much, have we now? Only the simple statement: "Ye are . . . that ye may." "Ye are" - never mind what. "That ye may" - what? Never mind what. The statement is a revelation of the principle that the Church of God is not an end, but a means to an end; that there is a meaning to its existence in the world; that when Jesus said, "I will build My Church," to this selfsame man, Peter, He was not speaking of the gathering out of an elect company while all the world should drift to darkness and the Devil. He was revealing the fact that He was creating an instrument.

There is the deepest principle in the life of the Church, that which we must never forget. She exists for a purpose. That may be said in some sense of every work of God. It may be a low level of illustration, but we can take the meanest flower that blossoms on the sod, and we can look at it, and say: "Little flower, ye are that ye may."

Dou are all familiar with Gray's "Elegy." Do you remember he said in that "Elegy:" - "Full many a flower is born to blush unseen." How true that is! There are myriads of them over these hills of ours. They are everywhere. "Full many a flower is born to blush unseen." And then he went on-and here I quarrel with him: "To waste its sweetness on the desert air." Never! He was simply thinking there was no man there to look at it, no woman to pluck it, no child to spoil it. No flower wastes its sweetness on the desert air. In the great economy of the universe of God, nothing walks with aimless feet in that sense. It has always been true; it is the rock basis of truth concerning God's ancient people, the Hebrew nation. It is because they forgot it that they perished as a nation, that they became a people scattered and peeled over the whole earth. "I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee and make thy name great . . . and in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed." That is God speaking, and revealing His purpose.

It is true of the Church. I am concerned in these chapters that we should recognise this principle. Where shall we apply it? To our Church. I am not talking now denominationally. I am not talking of the Church of which you are a member. What is the good of your Church? Well, we are having a good time; and we enjoy our fellowship. Is that all? Then write "Ichabod" across the

front door, and close it, and underneath the "Ichabod" write, "Business suspended here." What is the good of your Church? -"Ye are . . . that ye may."



h, wondrous Church of Jesus, purchased with His own blood, gathered into union with Himself! Why this Church on earth? "That ye may!" We shall come back to this for a more careful consideration subsequently.



e have not only that master principle revealed. Let us restore something we left out; not the descriptive phrases, leave them out still. Then what have we left? "Ye are . . . that ye may show forth the excellencies of Him Who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light." Think of it in our world to-day. We are hearing on every hand, hearing it in most unexpected quarters, that what the world needs is God. The world is waiting for the Word of God. How is the world to hear it? How is the world to find God? "Ye are" - whatever you are-that ye may reveal Him. If only that truth might grip our hearts as no utterance of mine can make it, as no intonation of my voice can accomplish-the Church exists for a purpose, and the purpose is the revealing of the excellencies of God!



hen the next cry comes out of the heart of every individual, and goes up from the consciousness of the Church itself. Who is sufficient for these things? How can the Church fulfil that function? How can the Church be the medium of manifestation, as I have said, the vehicle of vision, the instrument of illumination concerning God? How can it be done? We are told that we must organise. God forbid! The Church is cursed with organisation from end to end! How then? By a realisation, experimental and powerful, of the great facts of what the Church is in herself! Thus we have not only the principle that she exists for a purpose, not only the declaration of the purpose-the revelation of God-but the implication of the secrets of power. This we find in the description of the instrument, The Church is able to fulfil the purpose in the revelation of God because she is what she is.



ow we can restore the rest of our passage: "An elect nation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession." As an elect race the Church consists of those who are the kin of Christ, sharing His life. As the Church realises what it means to be a royal priesthood she is equipped for being the instrument of Christ. As the Church enters into all the values of the fact that she is a holy nation, she is revealing the Kingdom of Christ, the realm of Christ. Finally, summing up all the other things, as the Church is indeed a people for God's own possession, she reveals to the world the victory of Christ. Christ-Christ-Christ! But "God was in Christ," and it is through that revelation as I have said, that the Church will fulfil her great vocation in the world.



These are generalities. We are almost bound to consider the theme in these studies from the standpoint of generalities. I pray God it may apply to you and to me individually, as Christ will enable.



First heard it in America, you may know it, it is doggerel if you like, and it has been bandied about here and there, and yet, as God is my witness, I never hear it without feeling its searching power;

“What sort of a Church would my Church be,
If every Church member were just like me?”



h, the spacious glory of the ideal in this passage! Yet it is no use our seeing it and admiring it ; it is no use thinking we are all right because ” the Ark is here.” It is when we apply these things to our own individual lives, and put them in relationship thereto and thus see where we stand, that we are moving towards the fulfilment of God’s purpose.

CHAPTER III

The First Two Interpretations

L

et us preface our meditation by reading one or two sentences found in those intimate conversations of our Lord with His own disciples ere He left them on the earthly level. Therefore we turn to John 15.15 and 16: “No longer do I call you servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth; but I have called you friends; for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known unto you. Ye did not choose Me, but I chose you, and appointed you, that ye should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should abide; that whatsoever ye shall ask of the Father in My Name, He may give it you.”

T

hese are sentences, as I have said, from those wonderful final conversations of Jesus with His own disciples before He left them. He was looking with clear vision to all the future; they were still living in the midst of mists and mysteries. He was saying to them things which the Holy Spirit would bring to their remembrance after His bodily presence had passed out of their sight. In these words we find the background for our meditation.

T

he subject for our four meditations is found in one verse, 1 Peter 2. 9: “Ye are an elect race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, that ye may show forth the excellencies of Him Who called you out of darkness into His marvellous light.” The King James version is a great version. I love it with all my heart. It is indeed “a well of English undefiled.” Nevertheless some of those great translators knew their English better than their Hebrew or Greek. Therefore I am using the Revised Version.

I

n chapter 2 we looked at the setting of this statement in this wonderful letter, and attempted to observe its structure. There were three things we noticed, and I shall content myself with a reference to them, and pass on.

W

e saw that if we take that statement, and strip it of much of its glorious verbiage, and feel our way to the central sentence we find it in the words: “Ye are . . . that ye may.” In these words there is revealed the principle of the Church’s life. She exists, not as an end, but as a means to an end. When our Lord said to Peter at Caesarea Philippi, “Upon this rock I will build My Church,” He was indicating His intention and determination to create a medium of manifestation, a vehicle of vision, an instrument of illumination, in the interests of the world which God so loved” that He gave His

only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on Him should not perish, but have eternal life.” “Ye are . . . that ye may” is the principle.



hen we noticed that which is on the surface; that if the principle be that the Church exists for a purpose, the purpose is clearly revealed. “Ye are, . . . that ye may show forth the excellencies of Him Who called you out of darkness into His marvellous light.”



hen we looked once more, and asked the question: “Who is sufficient for these things?” What institution can be called to such a purpose as that? When Peter tells us the story of the Church in four phrases, we find implicated the secrets of power whereby she may fulfil her purpose; she is “An elect race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession.”



ow we take two of those phrases of interpretation, helping us to understand how the Church is to fulfil her vocation. She is “an elect race;” she is “a royal priesthood.”



e begin with the first of them: “An elect race.” I want to remind you first of the thought behind that word of Jesus which I read to you, when He said to that little group of His first disciples before He left them: “Ye did not choose Me, but I chose you.” For a moment I am not interested in the reason for His choosing. I ask you to remember, my fellow-students of the Word, that the word that Jesus used, when He said, “I chose you,” is the word “elect.” We should not be wrong if we read it, “I elected you.” I am not dealing with it now save as we bear it in mind.



wo things demand our attention in this first phrase—an adjective and a noun, “elect” and “race.” I am going to put special emphasis upon the noun; of course I am not going to leave out the adjective “elect.”



ow I go back to the beginning of the Letter, and I find Peter says: “Peter, an Apostle of Jesus Christ, to the elect, . . . according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ.” He was writing to people who were chosen out, who were elected, according to that foreknowledge.



We find, as we read the Letter, that there are certain sentences, showing how closely the thought of election is identified with the idea expressed in the word “precious” and “preciousness.” Let us compare two or three paragraphs in the 1st and 2nd Epistles where this great description of the Church is found. I go back to verse 4, and I read, “Unto Whom coming, a living Stone, rejected indeed of men, but with God, elect, precious.” The reference is to Christ. God’s election of Christ is based upon His preciousness. Then turn over to the 2nd Letter of Peter, verse 1, “To them that have obtained a like precious faith.” Then on to the 4th verse: “Whereby He hath granted unto us His precious and exceeding great promises.” Once again in 1 Peter 2.7: “For you, therefore, which believe is the preciousness; but for such as disbelieve,

“The stone which the builders rejected, “The same was made the Head of the corner.” I Then go back again and read: “Behold, I lay in Zion a chief corner stone, elect, precious.”

“The stone which the builders rejected,

“The same was made the Head of the corner.”

“For you therefore which believe is the preciousness.”



Let us gather up the thoughts suggested by those scattered sentences, and gain from them the main ideas.



We see in those verses 4 and 6 of the 2nd chapter of Peter’s first Epistle that Christ is described as “elect” - “precious,” that is, chosen by God. God’s election is based upon the preciousness of Christ. “Precious” is a very remarkable word, not so much from the standpoint of its etymology, or derivation, as from the standpoint of our use of it. There is a special value in it.



Peter speaks of those who exercise faith in Christ, as coming to a living Stone, and so as becoming themselves living stones. Now I am going to make use of the word “precious” in that connection, by way of illustration. “Living stones” are precious stones. What do we mean when we talk about “precious stones?” Well, it may be that some of you can look at your hands and see diamonds, rubies, sapphires! What then is a precious stone? In an ancient prophecy we find the phrase, “Stones of fire.” These are “precious stones.” What makes that stone, that diamond, that sapphire, that ruby, a precious stone? Why precious? Of course, precious may simply mean priceless. Yet there is a peculiar value that we have wrought into the word precious.



What makes a stone precious? I do not know that this is scientific; I am not very careful to know; but I suggest to you that a precious stone is an illustration of passion mastered by principle. Elements which in themselves would be fleeting and valueless are held together by some principle that makes them precious, priceless. Christ is a living Stone, elect, precious!



Some years ago that remarkable journalist, Mr. Gardiner, wrote a book, "Prophets, Priests, and Kings." It was a great book, for he had an almost inimitable skill in characterising certain personalities. Some of my American friends must let me refer to it on principle, not from any other standpoint. He wrote characteristically of William Jennings Bryan, that remarkable man who was loved by the Democrats of America, and contrariwise by the Republicans. Gardiner says of him this very remarkable thing. I am using it as an illustration. He said that he was "an elemental man, lacking preciousness;" a man of elemental strength, he went on to show, who lacked something that welded the elements into consistency and coherence and made them strong. I am not saying whether he was right, or no. Gardiner must have had the Biblical background in his thinking, or he would never have used that word "precious" in that way.



Peter, who wrote this Letter, was exactly that, until Christ met him. He was an elemental man, and he lacked preciousness. I am going to employ an Americanism—a great soul ever "slopping over." Jesus met him, and said, "Thou shalt be rock!" He turned him from a shifting, elemental personality into a living stone, precious. And what was it that did it? If you say, "The influence that Christ exerted upon him," you are giving a very partial answer; but I am not quarrelling with it. There is more than that to be said: "Unto Whom coming, a living Stone, . . . elect, precious," that is, on the basis of His absolute preciousness to God.



Christ was the one Person, may I reverently say, in all human history, in Whom all the elemental things of human nature (not fallen human nature) were welded into strength and purity and beauty and uprightness and glory. He was precious, and therefore elect.

"Ye are an elect race." And why? Because "for you therefore which believe is the preciousness." Here the King James Version has missed the point, and yet we have loved it so much all our lives: "Unto you that believe He is precious." That is very beautiful and very true, but it is not what was written by Peter. He is precious to those who believe. Oh, how precious!

“Jesus, the Name high over all,
In hell, or earth, or sky;
Angels and men before it fall,
And devils fear and fly.

“Jesus! Oh, the sweetness
Of the soft love sound!
How it thrills and trembles
To creation’s bound!”

He is precious to me, but that is not it. The statement of the Apostle is that all in Him, which made Him elect and precious to God, is ours. It is made over to us as we believe. “For you therefore which believe is the preciousness.” If we can climb the heights, and plumb the depths, and encompass the vastness of the things which constitute the preciousness of Christ, then pause and consider and remember this, that all those things are made over to the believer in Christ; they are at his, or her disposal; they are at the disposal of the Church; they belong to the people of God. “For you therefore which believe is the preciousness.”

“An elect race.” Here again the Revisers have changed a word; I do not know if they have improved it in this case at all. “A chosen generation.” I rather like “generation” here, and yet “race” has its value. Here again we come down to technicalities. What is a race? Let me say that the word “race” connotes life always. We have constantly in our English language taken hold of words from other languages and embodied them in our own, until we think they are English.

You all know the word gels; you remember at school you learned about certain genera. Well, genus is the Latin form of the Greek word, genes. “Ye are an elect genes-race.” That word in the New Testament is translated variously, but always there is the same idea lying behind it. The word is translated as here, race, kindred, stock, offspring, countrymen. Behind every one of them is this thought of a life principle, and it always refers to a life principle common to all referred to.

Iwant to illustrate that, but I am a little nervous lest you should think me irreverent. However I will dare it. You learnt about the feline race when you went to school. What do you mean? Cats! And about the canine racedogs. And about the bovine race-cattle. And the equine race-horses. And the human race. Now to take one of those. What do you mean by the canine race? All those that share a quality of life, peculiar to that race, not shared by any other. A member of the canine race is the dog, of which there are various species. The St. Bernard is a dog; so is the Pekinese, though you might hardly think so! There is a quality of life that links the Pekinese with the St. Bernard. We have yet to find the scientific explanation of that; but the fact remains they all share the same quality of life. Then there is the human race, not simian, but consisting of all those beings-black or white, red or yellow-who share the same peculiar quality of life which makes them men and

women. “Ye are an elect race.” This reveals the very foundation of Christian experience, and of the fact of the Holy Church of God. It is constituted of those who live, and whose life is characterized by similarity; all the same race. “Ye are an elect race,” chosen because precious, and precious because living one life, God’s life, as placed at our disposal in Christ.

M

ade “partakers of the Divine nature,” says the second Epistle; and we are made partakers of the Divine nature because we share the life of Christ. That is what the new birth is. It is not making up our mind that we will turn over a new leaf. It is not facing our own sins, and struggling and wrestling with them until we come out on the winning side. It is being born anew. It is receiving the gift of the Christ-life by the ministry of the Holy Spirit: “Elect . . . according to the foreknowledge of God;” being set apart by the Holy Spirit through faith that is in Christ Jesus. The Church consists of such as by faith receive His life, and, therefore, His preciousness, and, therefore, His election. “An elect race.”

S

o we pass to the second of these interpreting phrases-“a royal priesthood.” Here again we have adjective and substantive. I am, for the moment, more deeply interested in the adjective than in the substantive. In the 16th of Matthew, Peter is speaking. I have no authority for saying it, but I think he was looking straight into the eyes of Jesus, and he said to Him, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God!” We must not forget that this was a Hebrew speaking. When he said, “Thou art the Messiah,” he was employing a term that marked a twofold fact as revealed in all the predictions of the past concerning Messiahship.

T

he Messiah, according to the sacred writings, was One Who should wear a crown of kingship, but His crown would take the form of the mitre of priesthood. The Messiah, according to all those ancient foretellings, was One Who should wear the ephod of priesthood, but it would be purple as the insignia of royalty-King and Priest, Priest and King. But the time had passed; Peter had gone through great experiences when he was writing these Letters.

H

e now said to those who were of the Dispersion, and finally to the Church : You are a royal priesthood, royal, kingly, sharing the kingly note and character. This is the only time in the New Testament where we have that adjective used in that connection. It is the only occasion on which we read of a royal priesthood. The thought is that of the right of priesthood, that in which the priesthood finds its right as it is revealed in the Apocalypse, where we read that “He made us to be a kingdom, to be priests unto His God and Father; to Him be the glory for ever and ever.”



hen we come to the idea of priesthood. We confine ourselves exclusively to the outlook found in the New Testament. What is this Peter said? “Ye also, as living stones, are built up a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”



ehind the conception of priesthood, whether it be true or false, there is always one thought that of the right of access to God. All priesthoods of pagan religions consisted of those who claimed to be an order that had the right to reach God on behalf of their fellow-men. That is the underlying idea--getting near to God, coming to God. Peter says concerning us, that as living stones we constitute a holy priesthood.



ere are those who have the right of access to God, and for one purpose, the offering of spiritual sacrifices. What does that mean, offering spiritual sacrifices? Prayer? Yes. Praise? Certainly. But it means something else. It means that as a result of our priesthood we are able to come to God, bringing with us those won for Jesus Christ, presenting them to Him. That is what Paul meant when he spoke of the offering up of the Gentiles to God as the result of his ministry.



o we come back to our word, “royal.” Why royal? Because we have been made living stones, sharing the very life of Christ, therefore we are royal. Our access to God is not the access granted to those who hold office.



remember during the days of the War, when I was at Westminster in the earlier period. Right opposite our Church is Wellington Barracks, the headquarters of the Guards. During the time that I was there the then Prince of Wales, was in training. I lived close to the Palace, and I saw during that period men coming up to the gates, challenged, and admitted. The Prime Minister, the Minister of War, great generals, all of them were admitted upon the basis of the fact that they held office.



ne day I happened to be crossing at the end of Birdcage Walk, and I saw the young Prince of Wales, as he then was, his drill for the morning over, coming out of the gates. He crossed the road unattended and unguarded; and he went into the gates of Buckingham Palace. No one challenged him; he went right into the Palace. What right had he to go? His royal rank. He was the son of the king, and no one could challenge his right.



We are a royal priesthood; we have access to God, because we can claim kinship with Christ. No one has any right to challenge you as you enter into His presence. I was there at Westminster all through the War; I am there once again, by some mystery of God's overruling governance that I do not understand. From the standpoint of Free Church life the king is in my parish. I am at peace with the king. But I do not call upon him, for I have no right of entry. But I have a right of entry into the presence of the King of kings, and my right of access is based upon my relationship to God's Son.



In closing, let me remind you that priesthood has a double function for us. It is eucharistic. I love that word. I would always use it if I had my way at the Communion, because it means "the giving of thanks." It may mean other things to other people. The royal function of our priesthood is first worship and then intercession; and intercession breaks into two parts. The priest is first one who intercedes with God on behalf of men; and then one who goes out to intercede with men on behalf of God.

"Ye are a royal priesthood" on the basis of relationship, on the terms of equality, which could not be but by reason of the wondrous grace of God. And so we offer Him spiritual sacrifices; and ever receive from Him, so that the Church is not only an elect race, the kin of Christ, but a royal priesthood, the instrument of Christ for this world.

CHAPTER IV

The Second Two Interpretations

Let me briefly recapitulate the ground over which we have passed in our consideration of the passage (1 Peter 2. 9). We discovered, first, the underlying principle in the simple words: “Ye are . . . that ye may.” Whatever the Church is, she exists for a purpose. We saw also the simple and clear statement of what that purpose is. “Ye are . . . that ye may show forth the excellencies of Him Who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.” Finally we suggested that the power in which the Church should be able to fulfil her purpose, upon the basis of that principle, is revealed in the descriptive phrases of what she is in herself.

We have considered the first two phrases of description-“an elect race;” “a royal priesthood.” I want to say here that these descriptive phrases must be taken in the order in which they occur. We cannot misplace them and consider them intelligently. We cannot begin at the end. As we said at first, this is not merely a piece of fine rhetoric, it is a scientific description.

The Apostle begins with the first stage: “An elect race.” There are some books that claim to be books on religion which have misappropriated the word “Christian” and the word “Science.” In them we can begin anywhere. We can begin at the end and go backward, the meaning is the same; which means that there is no meaning in the writing! We cannot do that with the Word of God, and certainly we cannot do it here.

“An elect race “-postulates life, and implicates that common quality of life possessed by those who are members of the holy catholic Church ; chosen on the basis of preciousness derived from Christ Himself. “A royal priesthood”-reveals the right of access to God of those who share this life. They are made partakers of the Divine nature, and so have a kingly right of entry into the presence of God Himself.

Now we proceed to take the next two phrases of the description: “A holy nation;” “a people for God’s own possession,” or as the King James’ version renders it, “a peculiar people,” thus missing much of the force of the Apostle’s word.

Let us first look back, for our mind is arrested by that word “ nation.” We will read something found in the Gospel according to Matthew, which is in very close connection with something found

in the context of the passage we are considering. We find, in the 21st chapter, the rulers gathered together with Jesus in their midst. He is seen in strange and august and kingly majesty. They are approaching the culminating action on their part as they rejected Him. Our Lord has done a marvelous thing. He has been uttering parables; that is, He told them some stories, and then asked their opinion upon them, as stories. They were intelligent men, and they gave their opinion; and presently they found out that He had been meaning them ; and He had compelled them, in that hour, to find a verdict against themselves.

F

or instance, He told them the story of a vineyard, and when He had finished, and had described the failure of those who were responsible for the vineyard, He asked them: “When, therefore, the lord of the vineyard shall come, what will he do unto those husbandmen?” They said at once: “He will miserably destroy those miserable men.” They were captured by the story; they saw the iniquity of the thing described; they were so emphatic about it that they used that adjective twice, “miserable.” “He will miserably destroy those miserable men, and will let out the vineyard unto other husbandmen, which shall render him the fruits in their seasons.” Presently He said to them: “Did ye never read in the Scriptures:

“The stone which the builders rejected,

“The same was made the head of the corner;

“Therefore, say I unto you, the Kingdom of God shall be taken away from you, and shall be given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof. And he that falleth on this Stone shall be broken to pieces; but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will scatter him as dust. And when the chief priests and the Pharisees heard His parables, they perceived that He spake of them.”

T

hat is all I want at that point. Now turn to Peter: “For you, therefore, which believe is the preciousness; but for such as disbelieve,

“The stone which the builders rejected,

“The same was made the head of the corner,

“And a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence;

“For they stumble at the Word, being disobedient, whereunto also they were appointed. But ye are an elect race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession.”

T

he close relationship between the passage read in Matthew, and the apostolic teaching found in this Letter is self-evident. I go back to these solemn words of Christ, words than which none more solemn ever passed His holy lips, when, in the presence of the rulers of the nation, He excommunicated that nation, that is, not from the possibility of salvation individually, but from the sacred office for which it had been created, and which, in the purpose of God it had been supposed to fulfil through all its history.



That nation was created in order that it might be a blessing to all the nations. "I will bless thee and make thy name great." "I will make of thee a great nation . . . and in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed." Such a word was spoken to the father and founder of the national life, under the government of God; and through all its history, rising and falling, that had been its office in the Divine purpose and economy. But the hour had come when the nation was rejected from that office.



Our Lord stood in the midst of the rulers, and said : "The Kingdom of God shall be taken away from you, and shall be given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof."



The nation had failed to fulfil its obligations; and there was this culminating act of failure approaching as it was rejecting Him. "The Stone which the builders rejected." Mark the force of that ; an old, tried, and commonplace word; but do remember it. The experts rejected the Cornerstone. What should happen but that the whole superstructure should fall to pieces in that hour. That nation, as the depository of the Kingdom of God, was solemnly rejected. "The Kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and shall be given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof."



Now I come back. Peter having spoken of the Church as an "elect race," "a royal priesthood," uses these words, "a holy nation." We glance back once more. In Matthew we find our Lord, in the course of those wonderful discourses which we describe, accurately, as the Olivet prophecies, saying: "This Gospel of the Kingdom -this good news of the Kingdom- "shall be preached in the whole world for a testimony unto all the nations." All nations are in view, and the declaration is made that this Gospel is to be preached for a testimony to them.



Once again I pass on, and I hear Him saying, "Go ye, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptising them into the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost." "Make disciples of all nations" is not a strictly accurate translation, in spite of our universal acception of it. It is not what our Lord said, as recorded by Matthew. There is no substantive at all. What He said was: "Go ye, therefore, and disciple all nations."



We can disciple a nation without making disciples of its people. We can bring them under the influence of the King, as to His Kingdom. That is the commission in Matthew; but not in Mark; he has another phase; and so has John, I commend you to take time to consider the fourfold

commission in the four Gospels. His people are to disciple the nations; it is the nations for which they exist. It is to a nation having responsibility for the nations that Peter is referring, and that our Lord was referring, when He said: "The Kingdom of God shall be taken away from you, and shall be given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof."

If we want to know what the fruits are we go back to Isaiah: "Let me sing of my wellbeloved, a song of my beloved touching His vineyard." Our Lord quoted the essence of that song on this very occasion. They had failed; God had looked for righteousness, and, behold, oppression. Christ said: "There shall be a nation that shall bring forth those fruits, 'a holy nation.' "

In the Church of God the fulfilment of the intentions of God is to be enacted. That is the sense in which it is a holy nation. I am concerned with what is the burden of the thought, that this elect race, this royal priesthood, this people sharing the mysterious, glorious preciousness of Christ, and having the right of access to God, is to be among the nations a nation of witness. This nation has no earthly capital. This nation has no earthly army. Whenever an army has been raised to save it, its efforts have failed. This holy Church of God is a nation.

We call to mind another very familiar passage; I commend it to you for your thought at some other time. When Paul was writing to the Romans, among other things in the passage he said: "I am debtor, both to Greeks and to Barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish." What a great passage that is!

Have you noticed that he did not say: I am debtor to the Jew. He said, a little later on: "To the Jew first," and that was always true. But here he said: "I am a debtor to Greeks and to Barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish." He was looking at the Gentile world, the illiterate and the literate. Paul was a Hebrew of the Hebrews. Paul was a Greek by all his early associations and upbringing. Born in Tarsus, no mean city, Paul was a Roman citizen, as he claimed in his writings; Paul a Hebrew, Paul a Greek, Paul a Roman.

At this point he was Paul a Hebrew; and as a Hebrew he claimed that the first purpose of God in the Hebrew people was fulfilled in him as a Christian witness. He said, "I am a debtor to the outside world." He was writing as one who saw the Church fulfilling that responsibility in which his nation, according to the flesh, had failed and broken down. He said, "I am a debtor to the outside world."

In this connection Peter employed a very significant word. “A holy nation.” The holiness springs out of the royalty, and the royalty comes from the fact of the election. Let us tarry for a moment with that word holy. It is a word that means sanctified, separate, something that fills the soul with a sense of awe. Awe is not slavish fear. Awe is that which possesses the soul in the presence of something majestic, tremendous, (in that sense) awe-full How fearfully we abuse our English at times! Someone said to me: “It’s an awfully nice day!” The word holy then means that which fills the soul with awe, and inspires it to worship.

If we glance through Peter’s Epistles, and notice his use of the word “holy,” we shall discover something more of value in the use of the word. You will find in 1 Peter 1. 12 he speaks of “the Holy Ghost.” In verses 15 and 16 of that same chapter he says: “Like as He which called you is holy, be ye yourselves also holy in all manner of living; because it is written, Ye shall be holy; for I am holy.” In verse 5 of the 2nd chapter he speaks of “a holy priesthood,” and in 3.5 of “holy women.”

In the 2nd Epistle he refers to “the holy mount,” and speaks about “holy men of God.” Later he speaks of the “holy commandment;” and of the “holy prophets;” and then of “holy living.” Wherever that word “holy” is used by Peter in these two Letters-I make no wider statement for a moment-it is used in close connection, somehow, with the fact of God, and of relationship to God Who is Himself holy, and of the Holy Spirit of God.

The priesthood is holy to offer sacrifices to God; the women are holy because they hoped in God; the mount is holy because there was heard the voice of God. Holy men of God uttered the words of God and the commandments of God. The prophets are holy because they were the messengers of God. When he speaks of holy living he links it with the word “godliness.” Holiness is that character which results from close relationship with God. This, then, is a holy nation, in order to witness to God.

The word “nation” connotes two ideas those of government and mutual inter-relationship; and they are found in the Church of God. We have had two ideas of government in the history of nations, the monarchical and the democratic. During the past two decades we have seen both of them break down hopelessly in the history of the world.



ome of you in Sunday Schools may have seen Sunday School text-books in which they have traced the history of God's ancient people; and there is one section in which you find a heading such as this: "The Rise of the Israelitish People to Monarchy." You cannot possibly use that title without denying the essential revelation of the Old Testament. Israel demanded a king like the other nations. They were a Theocracy, a God-governed people. When Samuel, with a broken heart, went to God about it, God said to him: "They have not rejected thee; but they have rejected Me, that I should not be King over them." That was not a rise, but a fall. Their subsequent history shows what a fall it was.



wenty years ago there was a war which we were told was to make the world safe for democracy. Since then man has established some of the most appalling violations of the democratic principles that the world has ever seen.



he Church is a nation under one Throne and Government. Listen to Peter with the high priests, successors to, or some of the very men who had rejected Jesus. They said: "We straitly charged you not to teach in this Name, and, behold, ye have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and intend to bring this Man's blood upon us." Peter replied: "We must obey God rather than men." That is true about the Church. The Church of God is not a monarchy; not a democracy; certainly not a plutocracy; but a theocracy. She is a nation God-governed.



he Church of God is the depository of the Kingdom of God in the interests of the world. What a wonderful word that was which was uttered by Christ to those who stood round about Him: "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom."



he Church is a holy nation by submission to the Throne of God, and by a realisation of the benefits of its government. Here I want to say this- I may be challenged, but personally, I think it is here that the Church has most sadly broken down in revealing to the world the real meaning of the Kingdom of God in her corporate capacity. Oh, the foolishness of our divisions in the light of that! It is essentially true that "we are not divided; all one body we."



ixty years ago I stood listening to my father as he talked with a man whose name will be known to some of you even yet, Robert Chapman, that great saint, that wonderful soul. They were talking about the divided nature of Christendom, and they were lamenting it, and suddenly Robert

Chapman said to my father something, which, listening as a lad, I have never yet forgotten. "Yes, God made His Church one. He committed to us the earthen vessel, a representation of the unity, but He held in His own hand the golden bowl. We have smashed the earthen vessel, but the golden bowl is still intact in the hand of God."

Thank God, we believe that! "All one in Christ." One of the great things in a Convention is the recognition of that fact. But do not let us forget that we are a nation for the sake of the nations. Our business is to reveal to them the beauty and the beneficence of the Kingdom of God.

Let us glance briefly at what is, perhaps, the most wonderful thing of all. This elect race, this royal priesthood, this holy nation, is a people for God's own possession. We look at that 17th chapter of John in which our Lord, after His prayer concerning His relationship to His Father, and concerning those around Him, moved forward, and said: "Neither for these only do I pray, but for them also that believe on Me through their word." The whole catholic Church was in His mind. Read that last section, and as you read it, discover our Lord's thought concerning His Church and the purpose for it. Here the whole thing is summarised: "A people for God's own possession . . . which in times past were no people, but now are the people of God, which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy."

"A people for God's own possession." Here I want to content myself with saying one thing, and pressing it home. What do we mean when we speak of being possessed by God? What is the Divine possession? Well, you say, it means to belong to God. Unquestionably, but is that all? Is there not something in it infinitely more than that, far more profound? It means something more than being merely God's property. I may be His property, and He may be an absentee landlord, owning me as His property, and collecting the rent from me weekly when I go to Church. You see the absurdity of the idea! "A people for God's own possession." Daringly it may be, and yet resolutely, I take the exact opposite.

We read in the New Testament of those who were possessed by demons. Here we read of a people possessed by God. I know the Greek word is not the same, but it conveys the same thought. What was it to be possessed by demons? First of all, the demons had become the indwellers of a human personality, and they had, therefore, mastered the one so indwelt, and, finally expressed through the one so mastered, because indwelt, all the beastliness and abomination of their whole devilish nature. I take that as a picture. My missionary friends have seen it in China. I have seen it in London-human folk possessed by an evil spirit. The demon mastered everything, the intellectual, the emotional, the volitional nature, and there came the revelation of the nature of the evil one.



people God-possessed. What does it mean? One in whom God has taken up His abode; a temple of the living God, in whom God is Master of thought and emotion and will, therefore one through whom there shines out upon those who are round about the revelation of what God is in Himself. That is what the Church is to be. It is the medium of the revelation of God, a people for His own possession. One other word. That means a people in the possession of whom God gains something; and the people who are being thus possessed by God gain something. What does He gain? A medium of manifestation.



Forty years ago there was published what was called the Twentieth Century Version of the New Testament. I only remember it because a copy was sent to me in advance, and I looked it through; and there were many things which attracted my attention, and aroused my anger, and amused me. I am not talking of it as it is to-day! I came across this, and I wrote at once to the translator. They quoted that great passage of Paul: "That ye may know . . . the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints." They translated it: "How great a gain saints have in God." A terrible translation! No, God has an inheritance in the saints. God gains. If we give ourselves to Christ, then God enters in and indwells us, we become His possession, and in us He gains a vantage ground -in the home, in the place of business, in the social circle.



The Church is for the revelation of God, and the glory of His Name. That great phrase indicates the victory of Christ, in all its fulness, and in all its completeness- "An elect race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession."

CHAPTER V

The Ultimate Purpose

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he opening paragraph of Peter's Second Epistle is a wonderful condensation of the great theme we have been considering in the previous chapters.

“Simon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, to them that have obtained a like precious faith with us in the righteousness of our God and Saviour Jesus Christ. Grace to you and peace be multiplied in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord; seeing that His Divine power hath granted unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him that called us by His own glory and virtue; whereby He hath granted unto us His precious and exceeding great promises; that through these ye may become partakers of the Divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world by lust. Yea, and for this very cause adding on your part all diligence; in your faith, supply virtue; and in your virtue, knowledge; and in your knowledge, temperance; and in your temperance, patience ; and in your patience, godliness; and in your godliness, love of the brethren; and in your love of the brethren, love.

“For if these things are yours and abound, they make you to be not idle nor unfruitful unto the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he that lacketh these things is blind, seeing only what is near, having forgotten the cleansing from his old sins. Wherefore, brethren, give the more diligence to make your calling and election sure; for if ye do these things, ye shall never stumble; for thus shall be richly supplied unto you the entrance into the eternal Kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.”

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his paragraph would be a fitting end, without any note or comment, to our consideration.

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e turn once more to the description of the Church found in 1 Peter 2. 9.

“Ye are an elect race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that ye may shew forth the excellencies of Him Who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; which in time past were no people, but now are the people of God; which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy. ”

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n writing this the Apostle was evidently remembering the prophecy of Hosea, that marvellous unfolding of the heart and holiness of God, “Which in time past were no people (Lo-ammi) ; but now are the people of God (Ammi): which had not obtained mercy (Lo-Ruhama), but now have

obtained mercy (Ruhamah).” If you want thoroughly to understand Peter, study Hosea; and if you want to understand Hosea, study Peter.



As we come to the last of our meditations, I must not stay with any recapitulation, save to say this: having considered the instrument described in four pregnant phrases, it remains for us to consider the purpose of the Church as set forth, its responsibility.



What is the purpose of the Church of God, of that people described as “an elect race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession?” Why does the Church exist—from the standpoint of the mind and purpose of God? “That ye may shew forth the excellencies of Him Who called you out of darkness into His marvellous light.”

“That ye may shew forth”— exhibit-reveal. The root idea of the word used by the Apostle is simply to lead out into view, into visibility, The Church exists to lead out into visibility something, to reveal something what? The “excellencies of God.” I do not know really that it is an improvement upon the old version, yet I think it is a slight improvement—“the praises of God.” The word “praises” would rather suggest the result of the things spoken of. “The excellencies of God,” suggests facts in God. May I for a moment suggest another word: “That ye may shew forth the virtues of God.” That would not be strictly accurate, but it moves toward the interpretation. It is not always a safe thing to do, to interpret merely on the basis of etymology, but we should not neglect etymology. If we feel our way down to the root idea of this word rendered “excellencies,” “praises,” “virtues,” we find it means “lifting power.” That may seem to rob the statement of much of its beauty. But it does bring us face to face with one great fact concerning God, to which all facts contribute. The supreme idea is that the Church exists to reveal to the world the lifting power of God. The great fact in Deity, the facts which are those of supreme wonder and greatness in the presence of fallen humanity and the ruined race of men—all are employed as the lifting power of God. That is the supreme vocation of the Christian Church in the world to-day, to reveal to humanity sunk as it is in misery, seeking to find a way out by all sorts of methods of human cleverness but unable to lift itself at all; the Church is called upon to exhibit, to show forth, to bring into clear visibility all that in God which is supreme in the presence of all this human need—the lifting power of God.



Now how shall we understand that? We will confine ourselves to this description of the Church which we have attempted to consider in the foregoing chapters. We will ask another question: What are the excellencies of God exhibited through the Church? We find the answer by a further pondering of the fourfold description. I want to summarise them first of all; and then to touch upon each.

“An elect race” will exhibit to the world the excellencies of the creative power of God. The “royal priesthood” will exhibit the excellencies of the redeeming power of God. The “holy nation” will

exhibit the excellencies of the government of God. And, lastly, and finally, and inclusively, and exhaustively, a “people God-possessed” will reveal to the world the excellencies of His love. All these things constitute the lifting power of God. How is the world to know these things? The Church is the means through which they are to be revealed.

“An elect race” exhibits the excellencies of the creative power of God. We cannot stay in the country for any length of time, and revel in the sunlight glory of a day of brightness, or listen to the infinite music of the rain, without seeing everywhere evidences of the creative power of God. Behind every dazzling flower, and every magnificent hillside, and in all the placid beauties of the lakes, the creative power of God is revealed. But the creative power of God is not revealed so perfectly anywhere as in the Christian Church.

I am going to turn from Peter to Paul for a moment to illustrate what I am saying. To Paul was committed the mystery of the Church. The Colossian Letter, with the Ephesian Letter, constituted the high peak of revelation concerning the Church by the Holy Spirit, through Paul. In Colossians the subject is the glory of Christ as at the disposal of the Church. Listen to these two brief quotations. “In Him (the Son) dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead corporeally, and in Him ye are made full.” The two sentences form one statement. Paul had described the glories of the Son of God.

It is important to remember that we cannot stop at the Gospels if we want to know Jesus. That is the mistake many are making to-day. Dr. Martin Lloyd Jones said in my hearing quite recently: “No one understands the Gospels until he has read the Acts of the Apostles.” That is a great truth. No one can understand the Person of our Lord, if he neglects the interpretation of Him which came when the promise was fulfilled, when He gave the Holy Spirit to the Church.

In describing the Person of our Lord, Paul says that He is “the Firstborn of all creation.” And then, “In Him all things consist. And He is the Head of the body, the Church; Who is the beginning, the Firstborn from the dead.” (Col. 1. 17, 18).

The word “Firstborn” marks supremacy and finality. The Firstborn of creation, appearing in the wonder of His own personality, superior to the mysteries and marvels and glories and beauties of creation. The Firstborn of creation!

But when Paul had to refer to His relation with the Church, he had to add that thing that marks the difference-“Firstborn from the dead.” It is a more marvellous manifestation of God’s creative

power to bring life and beauty out of death than even out of the super-abounding power and glory of His spoken Word. “God said, Let there be . . . and there was.” That is a stupendous exhibition of creative power. Of what power? Christ’s. Firstborn! But Christ is the Firstborn from the dead, and the Church of God exhibits the matchless power of God in creation which brings life out of death. “An elect race” reveals that.



Something occurs to me here and now; let me refer to it. It has gripped me a thousand times in the course of my ministry. I am thinking of that wonderful poem by Mrs. Browning, entitled, “The Seraphim.” I am not going to recite it, because I cannot recite; but I know its meaning. Mrs. Browning describes the seraphim watching the work of the Son of God on earth. And at last, seeing whereunto the thing was moving by the mystery of the Incarnation, and ultimately by the Cross, one seraph looks at the hosts of ransomed souls, at the Church, and says:

“Hereafter shall the blood-bought captives raise
Their passion-song of blood.”

And the other replies:

“And we extend
Our holy vacant hands toward the Throne,
Crying, ‘We have no music.’ ”



Are we inclined to call that hyperbole? It does not even begin to touch the wonder of the fact that the angels will never sing as the Church of God will sing. No angel will ever be able to chant that solo, “He loved me, and gave Himself for me.” We can sing that, for out of death we have found life. We show forth that creative excellency of God by being what we are. As believers in Jesus Christ, and sharing His preciousness, we show this excellency of God.



And so the “royal priesthood” exhibits the excellencies of God in redeeming power. How has this thing come to pass, that out of death this new life is being manifested by the creative power of God? Acting in one way, in redemption! There we bow our heads, for we are in the presence of the Cross with its unfathomable mystery.



I have been trying to do my work for a good many years, and I have found no subject so fascinating and so compelling as the Cross. I think I may say in the presence of my brethren that I have read, so far as I can, every great book that has been written on the Cross, including that which to me is the greatest of all, Dr. Denney’s book on “The Death of Christ,” and I have put everyone

down, and I have said, "Yes, thank God; that is it, so far!" But there is always something beyond, something elusive, some great mystery, some unfathomable wonder.

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o you suppose that after a confession like that I am going to try to interpret it to you now? No! When I see a company of men and women who were lost, and now are found, who were dead and are now alive, passing into the presence of God by regal right ("a royal priesthood"), interceding there, talking with God face to face, without fear, I tell you I know that that Cross, which all human attempts to understand is foolishness, is, nevertheless, the wisdom of God. So the Church exhibits His glory in redemption, in the exercise of its royal priesthood.

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he "holy nation" exhibits the excellencies of God's government. If the world is to see what it means to be God-governed she must look to the Church. We almost tremble as we say it. The purpose of the Church is that in every member there should be a revelation to the world of what it means to be able to say: "Other lords have had dominion over us; now we know no other Lord but Thee."

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n your life and mine, in the life of the Church everywhere, there ought to be—shall I say there is?—a revelation of the beauty, and the beneficence, and the breadth of the government of God, Whose Throne is lifted high. How we thank God that there is a Throne that has never been empty; a Throne that has never trembled; a Throne that has maintained its rule over human affairs, overruling the wrath of men and making it to praise Him. The government of God is to be exhibited in its glory by the "holy nation."

"A people for His own possession." A people God-indwelt, who go out into the world and reveal the love of God, as it is manifested in their relationships. How one trembles here, because one knows how one has personally failed! Yet what they said of the early Christians was the sign-manual of the fulfilling of their vocation, "See how these Christians love one another!"

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t is the love of God shed abroad in the human heart that is to find its manifestation through the Church. In her outlook upon the world, in her activity in the world, in all she says and does, the love of God should be forever shining. That is the purpose of the wondrous Church of God. A race elect; a priesthood royal; a nation holy; a people God-possessed, in order that God may be revealed in all His excellencies.

Let me pause here and say this: the ultimate sphere of the Church's service is not in this world at all; it lies out beyond. That is a very fascinating theme. I commend you to think of the Ephesian Epistle in which Paul shows what is the final vocation of the Church of God. It is not on earth.

I am not saying that the Church has no vocation on earth. She has. But her earthly vocation will only be fulfilled as it should be, when she realises that the ultimate meaning of the Church of God lies out in the ages to come. In that Ephesian Letter, the Apostle shows that the Church is to be the means of revealing to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places the wisdom of God; and that the Church is to be the medium of revelation in the ages to come, of the grace and goodness and redeeming mercy of God.

Moody once said: "Some morning you will see in the newspaper, 'Moody is dead.' Don't believe it! I shall never be so alive as I shall be in that morning." By and by somebody will say of every one of us, "She is dead-He is dead." Don't you believe it! We shall have gone on to the higher service, gone to the fulfillment of the vocation of the Church.

All ages proceed out of the mystery of the Divine Being, from the womb of Deity; and they shall listen to the passion song of the Church as she reveals the heart of God in the midst of the universe of God.

It is that fact that ultimately creates urgency in the present. Some of us have heard in recent years-I do not think I hear it so much as I did-that those of us who believe in the Evangelical faith in all its fulness, are "otherworldly." Have you ever heard that? Well, thank God, we are! And when the Church of God ceases to be "other-worldly" she has lost her power to touch this world with transforming power. It is the power of the world to come that gives urgency to our present responsibility. For now we are as lights shining in a dark place, and we listen once more, in that sense, to the words of our Blessed Lord Himself: "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in Heaven."

Let me for a few moments seek to gather up some of the great facts with which this word, through the Holy Spirit, by the Apostle Peter, has brought us face to face.



First remember that ignorance of God is the cause of human sin in its continuity, according to our Biblical history which we do most surely believe. It was not ignorance of God which was the cause of the origin of human sin. For those two walked with God in the garden “in the cool of the day.”



Their sin was not the result of failure to know. Their sin resulted from listening to the slander of God, blasphemy against the truth concerning Him, and the result was ignorance; and that ignorance is the cause of human sin in its continuity, and, therefore, is the cause of human misery. Yes, “where there is no vision the people perish;” or, as I like to render it, “the people cast off restraint.” They have not seen God; they are ignorant of Him; they do not know Him. That is the interpretation of human misery.



The first value- I do not say the final one - of the Incarnation was bringing God into visibility. “No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son which is in the bosom of the Father, He hath exegeted Him, declared Him.” The Son is the exegesis of God, speaking out of His heart. That is the story of the Christian Church. What makes you a Christian? You see God in Christ through the Incarnation. The Church of God continues the Incarnation in that sense. Every member of the Church of God is a new-born soul; and in Christ he has become a new creation. So God is to be seen through the Church.



Generalities may fail to produce a personal appeal. We may have gained something; we may have gained a clearer apprehension of the meaning of the Church. But let me end this series of Bible meditations on the personal note. Are you a member of that Church? If you are not, what I am now going to say has no meaning for you. If you are not a member of the Church, if you have not been born again, and if you are not sharing the very life of the Son of God, what I shall now say can have no application to you. But let that be granted.



Then let us ask four questions as we close. I am going to answer them for myself; I am not going to answer them for you. And don't you answer them for your neighbour. But here they are:



How far am I revealing the excellencies of God in creation in my life?

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ow fully am I exercising the priestly function, the right to the exercise of which is created by my new birth, the kin of Christ as Son of God; how far am I prevailing with man and with God in intercession?

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ow fully do I reflect the perfection of the government of God, in the way of my behavior in this world?

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n what measure do I reveal the love of God, and the compassion of His heart, as I move about in the world?

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propose that you and I should get alone, and shut out parents, wife, child, friend, comrade, and ask those questions.

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mmediately following the passage which we have been considering, Peter said: "Beloved, I beseech you as sojourners and pilgrims, to abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul ; having your behaviour seemly among the Gentiles ; that, wherein they speak against you as evil-doers, they may by your good works, which they behold, glorify God in the day of visitation."

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n the light of this vision of the Church, and of my relationship to it, and the responsibility which falls upon me, I ask: "Who is sufficient for these things?" And I return to the things we have already considered, and I remind you of what the Holy Spirit, by His servant, Peter, teaches us. "For you, therefore, which believe is the preciousness."

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ll the virtues and the victories radiantly revealed in Christ, through Whom God was manifested, are ours; they are at our disposal. "For you, therefore, which believe is the preciousness."