

The Wicket Gate Magazine

A Continuing Witness



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Secret Disciples?

(The Pastor's Letter February 1976)

The Pastor's Letter February 1976

I was recently reminded of a group of people who existed in the early days of the reformation and who were derisively known as Nicodemites. The name probably speaks for itself. They were those who were deemed to be neither one thing or the other in religious matters, and so, were looked on as worthy descendents of that Pharisee who first came to Jesus by night and hear the indisputable terms of salvation, "Ye must be born again."

Nicodemus, with his religious counter-part Joseph of Arimathaea, has had a very bad press from the Christian church over many years, as the misuse of his name for those people mentioned above shows. And like so many other issues, what begins with a misunderstanding of one particular incident or phrase in the Word of God, very soon develops into an accepted piece of theological orthodoxy very hard and difficult to budge. So, it has become common-place for us today to hear of some people being referred to as "secret" disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. Those people who show some kind of a religious interest, but who have never really made any public declaration of their faith, but who still ought to be looked upon as "secret" disciples of the Lord, and so, truly born again and surely bound to inherit eternal life at the last.

Now, we are quite prepared to acknowledge that there *may* be such people; (ultimately, "The Lord knoweth them that are His.") But, to create a distinctive grouping under such a title seems to us to be very precarious to say the least, and has little or no warrant from the scriptures whatsoever. "Oh," says someone, "but what about a man like Nicodemus? Or that other man, Joseph of Arimathaea? Does not the Bible even say that Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, 'but secretly for fear of the Jews'?" Indeed it does say that. But far from Joseph of Arimathaea (and Nicodemus too) being a case in favour of our present-day category of "secret" disciple, both these men and their cases absolutely militate against any such grouping. And what, in

fact, the cases of Joseph and Nicodemus should do, is shout out a warning note in the ears of any who would set their hope of eternal life on any such imagined category of saved and redeemed souls within the fulness of the context of the whole word of God rightly divided.

You remember the incident involved? It is in the nineteenth chapter of John's gospel and at verse thirty-eight: "And after this," it says, "Joseph of Arimathaea, being a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, besought Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus: and Pilate gave him leave ... And there came also Nicodemus, which at first came to Jesus by Night ..." and so forth. There is the phrase, "a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews;" That is what has given rise to the category of "secret disciple" within the Christian church. But, just who was this Joseph of Arimathaea in the first place? There are quite a few references to him: he was "a good and just man," we are told; he had "not consented to the deed of counsel" of the other members of the Sanhedrin; he was "an honourable counsellor;" he "waited for the kingdom of God."

Now, it's that last-mentioned phrase that is probably the all important one. Joseph of Arimathaea belonged to that class of people such as devout old Simeon who "waited for the consolation of Israel." In other words, his eyes were ever towards the coming of the promised Messiah. And, obviously, when this Man, Jesus of Nazareth, appeared on the scene, Joseph of Arimathaea began to look on him with expectant heart, and the thought more and more formed itself in his mind that, perhaps, this was He of whom the prophets spake. He didn't express his thoughts and his hopes, of course: he kept them to himself. In other words he entertained them *secretly* – he was "a secret disciple," *Until!* Until what? My friends until the Cross; until the Cross.

Don't you remember the words that begin verse thirty-eight of John chapter nineteen? "And after this," it says, "Joseph of Arimathaea ..." After what? After the cross. And above all, after all that the cross has set so clearly before us in that chapter 19 of John's gospel. Read the numerous references to the fulfilment of scripture in the crucifixion of this Jesus of Nazareth on that cross: - the parting of the garments, the

cry, "I thirst," the futile attempt to break His legs because not a bone of Him should be broken, the opening of the fountain in His riven side. John rightly sees the Law and the prophets fulfilled. But John wasn't the only one who stood by and realised with burdened, and yet with joyful, heart that this was, indeed, the Christ, the Son of the living God. Dear old Joseph saw it, too. And, my friends, when he saw it, then he was a secret disciple no more; and in he went to that ruthless ruler of Jerusalem, Pontius Pilate, and performed one of the greatest gospel exploits left on record, when he begged the body of the Lord that he might take it away and lay it in his brand new tomb. Is this secret discipleship? Then, would that all the Lord's people were secret disciples! But, surely, the issue is clear, Joseph's secret discipleship is before the cross. We live in a post-crucifixion age; can a man or a woman once see the Cross, and the One who "was there put to shame" for them, and not express the salvation that the sight has imparted to their souls? Surely, such an idea must be held up to question.

Bear in mind, of course, we are not here dealing with the *degree* of witness or testimony that any one particular Christian might have over and above another. Some people have a ready out-going spirit, even in the things of their salvation, while others have a quieter and retiring disposition. But for a person to be born again of the spirit of God and not so much as even utter one cry of life seems to be a condition that finds no grounds in the Word of the Lord at all, and most certainly in that previous incident concerning that man Joseph of Arimathaea.

Look at his situation again. As we say, mark his description as one who was looking for the kingdom of God. And as this prophet of Nazareth preached, and ministered, and performed great works in the midst of the people over that three year period of his life, this Joseph looked on in silence and secretly committed his heart to the hope that this was He who should come. But, one thing was yet needed: for those of Israel who really knew the Word of God aright, "the Christ must first suffer, and then enter into His glory." And as that suffering had not yet come about in the fullest sense, Joseph of Arimathaea must still only have secret hopes and secret thoughts concerning this Man in their midst. Until! Until, my friends, he saw Him "lifted up from the earth" – bruised, and bleeding, and despised and rejected of

men – and then he knew of a surety that this was the Lamb of God who taketh away the sin of the world.

There could be no secret discipleship now. Now, he could echo the words of old Simeon, "mine eyes have seen Thy salvation;" and now, he enters into the hall of Pilate and puts his life in the balance when he begs the body of the Saviour.

The same applies to Nicodemus. Was he not party to that request to Pilate that night, and the burial which followed? Of course; for now he had seen what Christ pointed him to that night when he had first approached the Saviour and had heard those words about the conditions for entering into the kingdom of God. And not only that, but had been pointed to the very sight that would bring that salvation to the hearts of men and women: - "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life." Now Nicodemus beheld that sight that had been set before his mind's eye on that memorable night, and the sight found ready expression in his actions which followed, which were far from secret – as far from secret as his partner in the deed, that rich man from the region of Arimathaea.

Again, we press the warning on any who are resting the hope of their soul's salvation on such a questionable foundation. When Joseph, and Nicodemus, too, saw the cross in all its fulness to their hearts, their secret discipleship was gone. Don't stop short with either of those men's lives: the Saviour whom, *for a time in that age before the Cross*, they followed secretly, was the Saviour whom they acknowledged openly, once that Cross was uplifted before their eyes. "Go and do thou likewise," for we know of no other foundation on which to set a man or a woman's hope.

Yours sincerely
W. J. Seaton

Spurgeon's Eccentric Preachers

Part 5 – Causes of Eccentricity.

We have continued talking about eccentric men, but we have not yet decided what it is which makes a man eccentric. Let us now come to the point.

Some ministers have been reckoned eccentric simply and only because they have been natural. They have been themselves, and not copies of others: what was in them they have not restrained, but have given full play to all their powers. Take for instance John Berridge.

Berridge was quaint by nature. In the former lecture I quoted purposely from his letters rather than from any of his sermons or didactic works because in a letter you see a man at ease. Berridge could not help being singular for the form of his mind led him in that direction and his bachelor life helped to develop his idiosyncrasies. His quaintness was all his own, and you see it in his household arrangements, as, for instance, when he says to a friend: "I am glad to see you write of a visit to Everton: we have always plenty of horse provender at hand; but unless you send me notice beforehand of your coming you will have a cold and scanty meal; for we roast only twice in the week. Let me have a line, and I will give you the same treat I always gave to Mr. Whitefield, an eighteen-penny barn-door fowl; this will neither burst you nor ruin me; half you shall have at noon with a pudding, and the rest at night. Much grace and sweet peace be with yourself and partner; and the blessing of a new heart be with your children. With many thanks, I remain your affectionate servant, J.B."

Nor is it less manifest in his hymns, even the most sober of them, as for instance in the well-known verse where he speaks of the saints in heaven and cries -

"Ah, Lord, with feeble steps I creep,
And sometimes sing and sometimes weep;
But strip me of my house of clay,
And I will sing as loud as they."

We are not likely to censure the good man for his oddities more severely than he does himself, for in another of his pieces he writes -

"Brisk and dull in half an hour,
Hot and cold, and sweet and sour,
Sometimes grave at Jesus' school
Sometimes light and play the fool."

"What a motley wretch am I,
Full of inconsistency!
Sure the plague is in my heart,
Else I could not act this part."

Rowland Hill, again, was odd by nature and though he put great constraint upon himself his oddity would break out.

Cold-hearted professionals follow each other in one line, like those caterpillars which I have seen at Mentone, which made a procession head to tail in a straight line, till you half fancy it is only one single insect; but the man who serves his God with his whole heart is apt to forget his surroundings, and to fling himself so completely into his work that the whole of his nature comes into action.

Some men have been dubbed eccentric because they have been more truthful than their fellows.

Edward Taylor presided at a prayer meeting among his sailor converts, and a great man from the City came in to honour the poor people with his presence and to patronize their missionary. He made a speech, in which he extolled the kindness of the wealthy Christian people of Boston in helping to build Mr Taylor's chapel, and assisting in his support. He praised these superior people for their great consideration of poor degraded sailors; and he gave the audience a sufficient allowance of condescension to last them for the next six months at the

least. As soon as the great man had finished, Mr. Taylor quietly asked, "Is there any other old sinner from up town who would like to say a word before we go on with the meeting?" The eccentricity of that expression lay in the truthfulness which thus rebuked the impertinence of the speaker.

Good Mr. Grimshaw of Haworth once displayed his eccentricity when Mr. Whitefield was preaching in his church. Whitefield in his sermon having spoken severely of those professors of the gospel who, by their loose and evil conduct, caused the ways of truth to be evil spoken of, intimated his hope that it was not necessary to enlarge much upon that topic to the congregation before him, who had long been privileged to listen to the earnest addresses of such an able and faithful preacher. Up gets Mr. Grimshaw and says in a loud voice, "Oh! Sir, don't speak so; I pray you do not flatter them. I fear the greater part of them are going to hell with their eyes open." Very different from the smooth-spoken flatterer who did not desire the visit of an evangelist, because such people were only fit to preach to the wicked, and he was not aware that there was one such person in his parish.

Matthew Wilks was remarkable for hatred of the flattering terms which certain unctuous brethren would every now and then lavish upon him. "There," said he, "I have been much pleased with my people's prayers tonight. No stuff, no flatter, no speaking of me as a dear, venerable saint until I almost go into hysterics. Saint, indeed! Poor worm! I can scarcely refrain from speaking aloud, when such language frets my ears."

Now in these cases the eccentricity lay in plain speaking, and this is an order of eccentricity of which we cannot very well have too much, if it be accompanied by sincere affection and tempered with gentleness. But of this I feel quite sure, that if any man will make up his mind that he will only say what he believes to be strictly true, he will be thought odd and eccentric before the sun goes down.

Certain preachers have been very eccentric because they have been manly, too manly to be hampered by the customs and manners of the period. They have broken through one and another of the rules which have been constructed for the propping up of mannikins, and have

behaved themselves as men. Mr. Binney was often thought eccentric for nothing else but his boldness and freedom from pulpit affections. True-hearted men are not readily held in by the cramping-irons of childish fashion, but they are of the mind of Matthew Wilks who said, "Flesh will cry out, 'what will men say?' but a sanctified conscience will cry, 'What will God say?'"

Gleanings in the Psalms

(Psalm 71)



This Psalm is anonymous, and is, therefore, attributed to some writer other than David. But, I am satisfied with the opinion of Calvin and the older expositors, that it is from David's pen, and is the plaintive song of his old age. It shows us the soul of the aged saint, darkened by the remembrance of his great transgression, and by the swarms of sorrows with which that sin filled his later years. But he find comfort in reverting to the happy days of his childhood, and especially to the irrevocable trust which he was then enabled to repose in God. Like Paul, David takes a retrospect of the Lord's dealings with him from the beginning; and, in effect, declares with the dying apostle, "I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and may persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day." But there is this notable difference between the two that while Paul gathered confirmation of his faith from the experience of a thirty years walk with the Lord, David's experience stretched over more than twice so many years; for it began with his childhood.

William Binnie

Verse 1. "In thee, O Lord, do I put my trust; let me never be put to confusion." The great foundation on which David builds his "trust" in God is expressed in verse 3 – "Thou hast given commandment to save me." Once he remembers that his salvation in all things is the Lord's "commanded" purpose for him, then, he has every confidence to come before the Lord in prayer. It is exactly the

sentiment that underlay all the prayers of a saint of the past who said that all his daily routines were sanctified to him when he remembered the one great fact of his life – "My God, My God, I am nothing; but I am Thine."

Verse 3. "Be thou my strong habitation, whereunto I may continually resort ... " There is a way to our "strong habitation", and we know the way. There is a door, and we have the key. No sentinel keeps us back; the dwelling is our own, and who dares to forbid us all its accommodations and contents? Kings, no matter how willing, cannot always be approachable. But the King of Kings allows us to come boldly to the throne of grace, and enjoins us in everything, by prayer and supplication, to make our requests unto Him.

William Jay

Verse 5. "For thou art my hope, O Lord God; thou art my trust from my youth." The remembering and acknowledging of God in youth will be great satisfaction in old age. David could confidently plead with God for deliverance out of the hand of the wicked, "For," saith he, "... thou art my trust from my youth up." When the proconsul bade Polycarp deny Christ and swear by the Emperor, he answered, "Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He hath never wronged me yet; and how can I deny my God and my Saviour?" Jacob could say, "God hath fed me all my life long unto this day ... and shall I now turn my back on Him?" Where shall we go to find ourselves another master? "Thou only hast the words of eternal life." He that has been the stay of my youth, shall be the staff of my age. I may venture my soul upon His promise, for He hath maintained me by His providence."

From Oliver Heywood

Verse 6. "By thee have I been holden up from the womb: thou art he that took me out of my mother's bowels: my praise shall be continually of thee." He did not, like other men, recognise the hand of God only when it became manifest in his life in an extraordinary manner; but his eye of faith regards the ordinary works of God as miracles. The translation from his mothers womb to the light of day is to him an object of praise. And, really, is not that preservation of the embryo, in its narrow confines, a miracle? Is not the reason for our

finding so little to praise, to be sought in our having no eyes for His daily miracles? The psalmist *has* eyes for the daily miracles of the Lord; and therefore, his mouth is full of the daily praises of the Lord.

Augustus Tholuck

Verse 9. "Cast me not off in the time of old age; forsake me not when my strength faileth." David, mindful of the noble actions which through God's assistance, he had achieved in his youth, beseeches Him not to desert His servant, when persecuted by the rebellious son in his old age. The weakness and temptations peculiar to that time of life, render that petition necessary for all to make, before we are overtaken by it. The Church findeth but too much occasion to make the same plea, now that she is sunk in years. Faith languishes, charity waxeth cold, and the infirmities of a spiritual old age could come upon her fast.

George Horne

Verse 9. "... in the time of old age ..." When John Newton reached and passed, his eighteenth year, he would often complain about his failures in memory; "Yet," said he, "*Two things* I do remember: I am a great sinner, and Christ is a great Saviour."

To be continued.

BOYS AND GIRLS PAGE

Dear Boys and Girls,

Remember the story we had in the last issue of the magazine about the Italian boy who did what he could with what he had to make his friend happy? I said that in the Bible we read of many people who did what they could – not just for their friends, but for the glory of God. One such person was a humble widow woman; we read about her in 1st Kings Chapter 17: -

During a drought and famine in the land of Israel, Elijah, God's prophet, was told by God to go to the city of Zarephath and there he would find a widow woman who would look after him. Off went Elijah, and when he reached Zarephath, sure enough, just at the entrance of the city, there was a widow woman gathering sticks. Elijah went up to her and said, "Fetch me a little water that I may drink, and a bit of bread too, please!" The widow woman said, "All I have is a handful of meal in a barrel and a little oil in a cruse. I was just gathering these sticks to light a fire to cook the meal for my little boy and myself, and we would die, for we have nothing else."

Elijah said to her, "fear not to go and do as you have said but make me a little cake *first*, then one for your son and yourself." Then Elijah said an amazing thing: he said that God would not allow the meal nor the oil to finish until He would send rain back on the earth. Just think, boys and girls, the widow woman didn't question God's words for one minute, but she did what she could. She made the cake for Elijah, and then for her son and herself. And she made cakes for them every day until the famine was over in the land of Israel. None of the meal nor the oil ran done for all those days just as God had said.

Wasn't that a wonderful miracle boys and girls? But you see how the poor widow woman took God at His word and proved that God is faithful to His word. She didn't have much, but what she had she gave to God to use in that miracle. Here's how the great hymn-writer John Newton puts it: -

"By the poor widow's oil and meal
Elijah was sustained:
Though small the stock, it lasted well,
For God the store maintained."

I hope you will learn to believe God's Word and trust in Him and believe His promises, for they will all come to pass in God's time.

Sincerely,
Mrs Seaton

The "Long Time"



It is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself who has given us these words in one of His parables. He says: "After a long time the Lord of those servants cometh, and reckoneth with them." (Matthew 25 verse 19.) This, while in one place He speaks of the "little while." in another He speaks of "the long time." Little, yet great; short, yet long; both are true; and it is this double expression that makes up the full character of man's condition here, as preparing for the great day of the Lord.

From the day when the Master left the earth and went up to the Father, to the day when He shall come again in His glory to sit on the awful throne before which all nations shall be gathered, is, in one sense, a long time, as men reckon years and ages. But in another sense, it is but a little while, if we reckon time as God reckons it, and compare it with the vast eternity in which it is to be swallowed up.

Life is a vapour, and that is little; life is a journey, and that is long. Life is a handbreadth, and that is little; life is a period made of many days, and weeks, and months, and years, and that is long. Life is a post, and that is swift; life is a pilgrimage, and that is slow. Life is like the eagle hastening to its prey; life is a time of sojourning. Life is a weaver's shuttle; life is fourscore years.

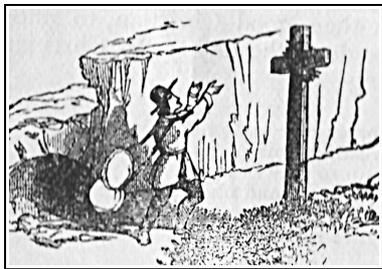
God gives us time enough to turn and live. When a teacher sets a task of a few pages to his scholar, and says, "I give you a week to do it in," he allows him a long time; for the task is one which might be done in an hour. So, when God says, "Seek ye Me, and ye shall live," or "Acquaint thyself now with God, and be at peace," and gives us a lifetime for this, He is giving us "a long time."

We delay, and linger, and loiter, so that year after year passes by, and we are no nearer God than at the first. But our delays do not change the long time. We make it a short one by our foolishness; but it was really a long one for the thing that was to be done – to take the single step that was to bring us to Christ and place us beneath the shadow of

His cross. For that there was time enough, even in the shortest life, so that no one can say at last, "I had no time given me to prepare for eternity, and I was hurried to the grave without time to seek the Lord." "And I gave her space to repent," are the warning words spoken to sinners. Space to repent is the message still! Repent is the burden of all exhortation, and this God follows with, "I gave you space to repent."

(H. Bonar).

Bunyan's Blessed Cross.



He ran thus till he came to a place somewhat ascending; and upon that place stood a cross, and a little below, in the bottom, a sepulchre ... Then he stood awhile to look and wonder; for it was very surprising to him that the sight of the Cross should thus ease him of his burden. He looked therefore, and looked again, even till the springs that were in his head sent the water down his cheeks Then Christian gave three leaps for joy and went on singing -

"Thus far did I come laden with my sin;
Nor could aught ease the grief that I was in,
Till I came hither: what a place is this!
Must here be the beginning of my bliss?
Must here the burden fall from off my back?
Must here the strings that bound it to me crack?
Blest cross! Blest sepulchre! Blest rather be
The Man that was there put to shame for me."

(From the Pilgrim's Progress)