



If Thy presence go not with me, carry us not up hence. (Exodus 33:15)

THE REAL SPIRITUAL PRESENCE OF CHRIST Part II, by J.C. Ryle, Late Bishop of Liverpool

NOTE: This is the second part of a three part series by Bishop Ryle (May 10, 1816 to June 10, 1900) on the Presence of Christ to the Christian. Bishop Ryle was one of the greatest biblical teachers to come out of the Reformation Church of England and one from whom I have learned much of encouraging truth. (J. Ogles)

In considering this branch of our subject we must carefully remember that we are speaking of One who is God and man in one Person. We are speaking of One who in infinite love to our souls, took man's nature, and was born of the Virgin Mary, was crucified, dead, and buried, to be a sacrifice for sins, and yet never ceased for a moment to be very God. The peculiar "presence" of this blessed Person, our Lord Jesus Christ, with His Church, is the point which I want to unfold in this part of my paper. I want to show that He is really and truly present with His believing people, spiritually or after the manner of a spirit, and that His presence is one of the grand privileges of a true Christian. What then is the real spiritual "presence" of Christ, and wherein does it consist? Let us see.

- (a) There is a real spiritual presence of Christ with that Church which is His mystical body, the blessed company of all faithful people. This is the meaning of that parting saying of our Lord to His Apostles, *"I am with you always, even unto the end of the world"* (Matt. xxviii. 20). To the visible Church of Christ that saying did not strictly belong. Rent by divisions, defiled by heresies, disgraced by superstitions and corruptions, the visible Church has often given mournful proof that Christ does not

always dwell in it. Many of its branches in the course of years, like the Churches of Asia, have decayed and passed away. It is the Holy Catholic Church, composed of God's elect, the Church of which every member is truly sanctified, the Church of believing and penitent men and women,—this is the Church to which alone, strictly speaking, the promise belongs. This is the Church in which there is always a real spiritual “presence” of Christ. There is not a visible Church on earth, however ancient and well ordered, which is secure against falling away. Scripture and history alike testify that, like the Jewish Church, it may become corrupt, and depart from the faith, and departing from the faith, may die. And why is this? Simply because Christ has never promised to any visible Church that He will be with it always, even unto the end of the world. The word that He inspired St. Paul to write to the Roman Church is the same word that He sends to every visible Church throughout the world, whether Episcopal, Presbyterian, or Congregational: “*Be not high-minded, but fear . . . continue in His (God's) goodness, otherwise thou also shalt be cut off*”¹ (Rom. xi. 20-22).

On the other hand, the perpetual presence of Christ with that Holy Catholic Church, which is His body, is the great secret of its continuance and security. It lives on, and cannot die, because Jesus Christ is in the midst of it. It is a ship tossed with storm and tempest; but it cannot sink, because Christ is on board. Its members may be persecuted, oppressed, imprisoned, robbed, beaten, beheaded, or burned; but His true Church is never extinguished. It lives on through fire and water. When crushed in one land, it springs up in another. The Pharaohs, the Herods, the Neros, the Julians, the bloody Marys, the Charles the Ninths, have laboured in vain to destroy this Church. They slay their thousands, and then go to their own place. The true Church outlives them all. It is a bush that is often burning, and yet is never consumed. And what is the reason of all this? It is the perpetual “presence” of Jesus Christ.

- (b) There is a real spiritual “presence” of Christ in the heart of every true believer. This is what St. Paul meant when he speaks of “*Christ dwelling in the heart by faith*” (Ephes. iii. 17). This is what our Lord meant when He says of the man that loves Him and keeps His Word, “*We will come unto him, and make Our abode with him.*” (John xiv. 23). In every believer, whether high or low, or rich or poor, or young or old, or feeble or strong, the Lord Jesus dwells, and keeps up His work of grace by the power of the Holy Ghost. As He dwells in the whole Church, which is His body,—keeping, guarding, preserving, and sanctifying it,—so does He continually dwell in every member of that body,—in the least as well as in the greatest. This “presence” is the secret of all that peace, and hope, and joy, and comfort, which believers feel. All spring from their having a Divine tenant within their hearts. This “presence” is the secret of their continuance in the faith, and perseverance unto the end. In themselves they are weak and unstable as water. But they have within them One who is “*able to save to the uttermost,*” and will not allow His work to be overthrown. Not one bone of Christ's mystical body shall ever be broken. Not one Lamb of Christ's flock shall ever be plucked out of His hand. The house in which Christ is pleased to

dwell, though it be but a cottage, is one which the devil shall never break into and make his own.

- (c) There is a real spiritual “presence” of Christ wherever His believing people meet together in His name. This is the plain meaning of that famous saying, *“Wherever two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them”* (Matt. xviii. 20). The smallest gathering of true Christians for the purposes of prayer or praise, or holy conference, or reading God’s Word, is sanctified by the best of company. The great or rich or noble may not be there, but the King of kings Himself is present, and angels look on with reverence. The grandest buildings that men have reared for religious uses are often no better than whitened sepulchres, destitute of any holy influence, because given up to superstitious ceremonies, and filled to no purpose with crowds of formal worshippers, who come unfeeling, and go unfeeling away. No worship is of any use to souls at which Christ is not present. Incense, banners, pictures, flowers, crucifixes, and long processions of richly dressed ecclesiastics are a poor substitute for the great High Priest Himself.

The meanest room where a few penitent believers assemble in the name of Jesus is a consecrated and most holy place in the sight of God. They that worship God in spirit and truth never draw near to Him in vain. Often they go home from such meetings warmed, cheered, stablished, strengthened, comforted, and refreshed. And what is the secret of their feelings? They have had with them the great Master of assemblies, even Christ Himself.

- (d) There is a real spiritual “presence” of Christ with the hearts of all true-hearted communicants in the Lord’s Supper. Rejecting as I do, with all my heart, the baseless notion of any bodily presence of Christ on the Lord’s table, I can never doubt that the great ordinance appointed by Christ has a special and peculiar blessing attached to it. That blessing, I believe, consists in a special and peculiar presence of Christ, vouchsafed to the heart of every believing communicant. That truth appears to me to lie under those wonderful words of institution, *“Take, eat: this is My body.”*

“Drink ye all of this: this is My blood.” Those words were never meant to teach that the bread in the Lord’s Supper was literally Christ’s body, or the wine literally Christ’s blood. But our Lord did mean to teach that every right-hearted believer, who ate that bread and drank that wine in remembrance of Christ, would in so doing find a special presence of Christ in his heart, and a special revelation of Christ’s sacrifice of His own body and blood to his soul. In a word, there is a special spiritual “presence” of Christ in the Lord’s supper, which they only know who are faithful communicants, and which they who are not communicants miss altogether. After all, the experience of all the best servants of Christ is the best proof that there is a special blessing attached to the Lord’s Supper. You will rarely find a true believer who will not say that he reckons this ordinance one of his greatest helps and highest privileges. He will tell you that if he was deprived of it, he would find the loss of it a great drawback to his soul. He will tell you that in eating that bread, and drinking that cup, he realizes something of Christ dwelling in him; and finds

his repentance deepened, his faith increased, his knowledge enlarged, his graces strengthened. Eating the bread with faith, he feels closer communion with the body of Christ. Drinking the wine with faith, he feels closer communion with the blood of Christ. He sees more clearly what Christ is to him, and what he is to Christ. He understands more thoroughly what it is to be one with Christ and Christ in him. He feels the roots of his spiritual life insensibly watered, and the work of grace within him insensibly built up and carried forward. He cannot explain or define it. It is a matter of experience, which no one knows but he who feels it. And the true explanation of the whole matter is this,—there is a special and spiritual “presence” of Christ in the ordinance of the Lord’s Supper. Jesus meets those who draw near to His table with a true heart, in a special and peculiar way.

- (e) Last, but not least, there is a real spiritual “presence” of Christ vouchsafed to believers in special times of trouble and difficulty. This is the presence of which St. Paul received assurance on more than one occasion. At Corinth, for instance, it is written, *“Then spake the Lord to Paul in the night by a vision, **Be not afraid, but speak, and hold not thy peace: for I am with thee, and no man shall set on thee to hurt thee**”* (Acts xviii. 9, 10). At Jerusalem, again, when the Apostle was in danger of his life, it is written, *“The night following the Lord stood by him, and said, Be of good cheer, Paul: for as thou hast testified of Me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also at Rome”* (Acts xxiii. 11). Again, in the last epistle St. Paul wrote, we find him saying, *“At my first answer no man stood with me, but all men forsook me: I pray God that it may not be laid to their charge. Notwithstanding the Lord stood with me and strengthened me”* (2 Tim. iv. 16, 17).

This is the account of the singular and miraculous courage which many of God’s children have occasionally shown under circumstances of unusual trial, in every age of the Church. When the three children were cast into the fiery furnace, and preferred the risk of death to idolatry, we are told that Nebuchadnezzar exclaimed, *“Lo, I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire, and they have no hurt; and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God”* (Dan. iii. 25). When Stephen was beset by bloody-minded enemies on the very point of stoning him, we read that he said, *“Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing on the right hand of God”* (Acts vii. 56). Nor ought we to doubt that this special presence was the secret of the fearlessness with which many early Christian martyrs met their deaths, and of the marvellous courage which the Marian martyrs, such as Bradford, Latimer, and Rogers, displayed at the stake. A peculiar sense of Christ being with them is the right explanation of all these cases. These men died as they did because Christ was with them. Nor ought any believer to fear that the same helping presence will be with him, whenever his own time of special need arrives. Many are overcareful about what they shall do in their last sickness, and on the bed of death. Many disquiet themselves with anxious thoughts as to what they would do if husband or wife died, or if they were suddenly turned out of house and home. Let us believe that when the need comes the help will come also. **Let us not carry our crosses before they are laid upon us.** He that said to Moses, *“Certainly I will be with thee,”* will never fail any believer who cries to Him. When the hour of special storm comes, the Lord who walks upon the waters will come and say, *“Peace: be still.”* There are thousands of doubting saints continually crossing the river, who go down to the water in fear and trembling, and yet are able at last to say with

David, *“Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for Thou art with me”* (Psalm xxiii. 4).

This branch of our subject deserves to be pondered well. This spiritual presence of Christ is a real and true thing, though a thing which the children of this world neither know nor understand.. It is precisely one of those matters of which St. Paul writes, *“The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness unto Him”* (1 Cor. ii. 14). But for all that, I repeat emphatically, the spiritual presence of Christ,—His presence after the manner of a Spirit with the spirits of His own people,—is a thing real and true. Let us not doubt it. Let us hold it fast. Let us seek to feel it more and more. The man who feels nothing whatever of it in his own heart’s experience, may depend on it that he is not yet in a right state of soul.