

98 ".... those who are without "

On several occasions in the New Testament Epistles we come across the phrase "those who are without" (KJV), referring to those people who are not members of the Christian Church, the body of Christ. In these days when the Christian Faith is ignored by so many people, it is timely for us to remember the great division that exists in the Lord's sight between those who are "within", and those are still "without".

They are without in two different senses. First, they are without in the sense of lacking all the blessings so freely given by God the Father to those who accept the Person and Lordship of His Son Jesus Christ. As Christian people we are so used to hearing mention of these blessings that it is easy for us to lose that ever-fresh wonder at just how blessed we are in Christ! For we are given peace with God, forgiveness of our sins, eternal life, assurance, hope, purpose, perspective. We are given the Word of God, the indwelling Holy Spirit, the fellowship of the Church, and even the intercessions of the Lord Jesus Himself and the Holy Spirit (Romans 8.24, 25, 34); and all those blessings are just "for starters"!

Those who are as yet "without" have none of those blessings. Of course they can experience times of happiness and fulfilment, but beneath the surface of their daily lives there lurk those old questions, fears and doubts. At the heart of everything is the main question of all - "Just what is the point of all this?".

But there is more to their being "without" than that. They are not just lacking the many blessings given in Christ, they are also "without" in the sense of location, being outside, beyond, apart, separated.

Those parables come to mind that are all about the intense concern of the One who searches for the lost - the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son (Luke 15). In each case when the lost is finally found, rejoicing breaks forth - it's party time! (verses 7, 9, 22-24). Just so does the Lord Jesus emphasise the Father's concern for the lost - those who are "without". Unfortunately such folk make up the great majority of the people amongst whom we live. Think about it.

We were thinking last time about our responsibility to "hold forth the word of life", without apology, pleading or grovelling, for what is being held forth is immensely precious for any who will yield and accept. As we link that "holding forth" with this week's phrase, "those who are without", we see our task of witnessing in fuller context. The harvest of souls matters! There is a priority about it, and an urgency

too - and the Lord has entrusted people like us with a key role to play in bringing in that harvest.

In the references in the Epistles regarding "those who are without" we are given simple, practical guidance from the Lord (for example I Corinthians 5.12-13 / Colossians 4.5 / I Thessalonians 4.12). It is a reminder that what we are, as opposed to what we may happen to say we are, is what really counts in the eyes of others. Do they see in us people whose faith "adds up", makes sense, rings true? Or do they see something else? - perhaps smacking of hypocrisy or self-righteousness? I am sure at times sadly they do, in which case we return to the Lord in repentance, receiving His Christ-won forgiveness afresh. We then set out once more on the precious, vital task of "holding forth the word of life" to "those who are without".

For when the lost are found - when those who are without become those who are within - it's party time!

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