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The Remnant: Thinking Rightly About Christ's Church

If you were here Christmas Eve, you heard J.C. Ryle say this as we read his Christmas tract, *What Think Ye of Christ?* -

The thoughts I am going to describe are not the thoughts of many. I admit this most fully. It would be vain to deny it. *The number of right thinkers about Christ in every age has been small.* The true Christians among professing Christians have always been few. If it were not so, the Bible would have told an untruth.

"Strait is the gate," says the Lord Jesus, "and narrow is the way that leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it. Wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat."

"Many walk," says Paul, "of whom I tell you, even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ; whose end is destruction." (Matt vii. 13, 14. Phil. iii. 18, 19.)

In our day, as in the history of the church, we see large entities consisting of thousands of people that claim to be Christ's church. Their members claim to be Christians. Their leaders claim to be spokesmen for Christ. To question their claims is to be regarded as a fool or even as an enemy of God and it is to invite being cast out of such a place.

What I would like to do this morning is to demonstrate to you from Scripture that Ryle is exactly correct. *The number of people who think rightly about Christ in every age has been small.* The number of people who *claim to think rightly about Christ is always quite large, but their claims are false.* In other words, *I want to demonstrate to you that if we are going to think rightly about Christ's church, then we must understand that it is and*

always has been, a remnant. In this world the real church is always the minority, not the majority. It is a minority not just of the entire world's population, but it is a minority, a remnant, of those who claim to be Christians. To think otherwise is to think wrongly and dangerously about Christ's church. Many true Christians have struggled and been confused and discouraged because they have not understood these things.

The true church is a *remnant*. Let's define the term. Here is the dictionary entry:

a small remaining quantity of something. Synonyms include,

- Remains
- Leftovers
- Scrap
- Fragment
- Shred

And even – get this! – even the google dictionary gets it:

- In Christian theology, a small minority of people who will remain faithful to God and so be saved

There will be myriads of the redeemed in the new creation. People from every tribe and tongue and nation. Nevertheless, they are a remnant, a

fragment of humanity and in particular, a fragment of those who claimed to belong to Christ but who were hypocrites and counterfeits:

Mat 7:22-23 On that day **many** will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' (23) And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'

The Apostle Paul states it plainly, referring to Isaiah:

Rom 9:22-27 What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, (23) in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory— (24) even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles? (25) As indeed he says in Hosea, "Those who were not my people I will call 'my people,' and her who was not beloved I will call 'beloved.'" (26) "And in the very place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' there they will be called 'sons of the living God.'" (27) And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: "**Though the number of the sons of**

Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved,

Therefore, we must understand this very clearly – *in any given age or era, the number of the true sons of God is small in comparison to those who claim to be His people.*

Rom 2:28-29 For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. (29) But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.

Let's continue to think about this. Think for instance, of the people of God in Noah's day:

1Pe 3:18-20 For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, (19) in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, (20) because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, **that is, eight persons**, were brought safely through water.

2Pe 2:5 if he did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a herald of

righteousness, with seven others, when he brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly;

Heb 11:7 By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household. By this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.

How many people were the people of God in Noah's day? How many had genuine faith? *Eight*. That was, you might say, the church. Eight. A remnant. The leftovers. A scrap.

And consider the number of real believers in the days of Israel in the wilderness:

1Co 10:1-6 For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, (2) and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, (3) and all ate the same spiritual food, (4) and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. (5) Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness. (6) Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not

desire evil as they did.

How many were false Israelites? Most of them. That is an understatement. We can think of Joshua, Moses, Caleb...as true people of faith, but that is about it.

And then think of Israel again in Elijah's day and the Apostle Paul's comment upon it:

Rom 11:2-5 God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he appeals to God against Israel? (3) "Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life." (4) But what is God's reply to him? "I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal." (5) So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace.

You see then that the true church is the product of God's *election*. The elect are the remnant. There are millions and perhaps billions in the history of the church who claim to be true Israelites but they are not the product of God's electing grace. In fact, they are the enemies of Christ's real church.

Let me at this point answer an objection that we can expect to hear. It goes like this:

So you are saying that you alone are left. That you alone and your little group are the only real Christians, the only real church? That makes you some kind of a cult, right?

That is somewhat how it seemed to Elijah, right? "They have killed your prophets and I alone am left." He thought that was the case but it turns out that it wasn't. He was not the only one left. There was a remnant of 7,000 genuine people of God. *Note: the remnant is not visible. At least not in its entirety. Elijah could not go to a certain locale and see these 7000. And neither can we see the true church today as a whole.*

But the point we make here in answer to our objector's charge is this: *we are not claiming that we alone are the remnant, the only true church. We are simply stating the truth that God's real people are a remnant among that which is the visible church. And we hope that we are a part of that remnant. It is a creation of God, not of man, a product of His grace alone not of man's doings.*

Consider Jesus' experience and teaching on this subject. As J.C. Ryle pointed out, Jesus said:

Mat 7:13-14 “Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. (14) For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, **and those who find it are few.**

Luke’s account of this teaching adds another very interesting detail:

Luk 13:22-24 He went on his way through towns and villages, teaching and journeying toward Jerusalem. (23) **And someone said to him, “Lord, will those who are saved be few?”** And he said to them, (24) “Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able.

Where the true gospel is preached and believed, you will always hear this objection to it – *if what you are saying is true, then hardly anyone is going to be saved.* If on the other hand our “gospel” is a message that sets sinful people at ease, or that makes the masses of religious people sitting in pews to feel quite comfortable about themselves, then we can know that it is a false gospel. Rather, Christ’s real Word challenges us all in this way:

1Co 10:11-12 Now these things

happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. (12) Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.

What else do we see in Jesus’ teaching and experience?

Joh 6:60-66 When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?” (61) But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this, said to them, “Do you take offense at this? (62) Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? (63) It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. (64) But there are some of you who do not believe.” (For Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray him.) (65) And he said, “This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.” (66) **After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him.**

When Verla and I were at our first church, we were with a home missions organization. I remember the director stating the mission’s philosophy that

when we went to a new church we were to consider it a mission field because most of the people there were not saved. That part of his advice was true. *However*, his position was that if we just went and won the favor of those people and loved them enough, they would keep coming to church and be saved. And it was clear that in his thinking *if those were not the results, then we had failed. We had done something wrong.*

But what do we see in Scripture? Is that the experience and theology of Jesus? Of Paul? No. In fact, real success in Christian ministry is also seen when hypocrites and hardened sinners *leave*. What is left? A remnant.

I remember years ago in this church having to deal with a particularly wicked lady who had been allowed to exercise control of others through her threats and anger outbursts. We confronted her and ultimately she stormed out, never to return. And I can remember several men on the church board at that time (who as it turns out were not real Christians themselves) being very critical because “now we have caused her to leave the church.”

And what was Paul’s experience? Did he enjoy large followings? Do we find in his teachings that success in preaching the gospel and serving Christ is evidenced by large

followings? Did Paul teach us that we must assume most people who claim to be Christians are? Did he teach that the church is large?

2Ti 4:9-17 Do your best to come to me soon. (10) For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. (11) Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry. (12) Tychicus I have sent to Ephesus. (13) When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments. (14) Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds. (15) Beware of him yourself, for he strongly opposed our message. (16) At my first defense **no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me.** May it not be charged against them! (17) But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth.

And again:

2Ti 1:13-16 Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. (14) By the Holy Spirit

who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you. (15) You are aware that all who are in Asia turned away from me, among whom are Phygelus and Hermogenes. (16) May the Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, for he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains,

Think of the description of the saints given in Hebrews 11, and the experience of the Psalmist. Did they enjoy large crowds of faithful people around them?

Psa 31:9-13 Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am in distress; my eye is wasted from grief; my soul and my body also. (10) For my life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my iniquity, and my bones waste away. (11) Because of all my adversaries I have become a reproach, especially to my neighbors, and an object of dread to my acquaintances; those who see me in the street flee from me. (12) I have been forgotten like one who is dead; I have become like a broken vessel. (13) For I hear the whispering of many— terror on every side!— as they scheme together against me, as they plot to take my life.

Psa 22:6-7 But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by mankind and despised by the people. (7) All who see me

mock me; they make mouths at me; they wag their heads;

And then of course we could consider church history after the Apostles and after the close of the New Testament canon. Where was the real church then? Rome rose up in power and earthly glory with millions and millions of followers who called themselves Christians. But Rome is no true church. Rome persecuted and killed the real people of God. The Reformation was bathed in the blood of Christ's real people.

Therefore, let us be wise in these things. *Most people who profess to be Christians today, are not.* If we do not understand this, if we are not wise about this matter of Christ's people being a *remnant*, then we are going to go wrong at many points. We will think that Christians are people who can be habitually and characteristically *mean, and cruel, unloving, selfish, abusive, worldly....* We will have to tweak and twist Scripture to make it fit our notion that there are many, many real Christians and most local churches are surely filled with saints.

And we will be *discouraged*. We will be *blamed and shamed and guilty*, charged with being too judgmental and unkind ourselves because we point to Scriptures like this one:

1Jn 2:3-5 And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. (4) Whoever says “I know him” but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, (5) but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him:

1Jn 2:9-11 Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. (10) Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling. (11) But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes.

1Jn 2:15 Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.

If these truths were believed and applied, then the ranks of local churches today would be immediately thinned. What would be left? *The remnant*. And we would be accused of destroying the church!

Now, one final point as we close. Here it is:

The remnant is entirely and solely the product of God’s grace.

Rom 9:27-29 And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: “Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved, (28) for the Lord will carry out his sentence upon the earth fully and without delay.” (29) And as Isaiah predicted, “If the Lord of hosts had not left us offspring, we would have been like Sodom and become like Gomorrah.”

If you are a Christian, the only reason you are, the only reason that you are not like the evil people of Sodom and Gomorrah destined for destruction, is because the Lord has left us as His offspring. That is the only reason 8 people were saved in the ark, it is the only reason any Jew in the wilderness saw the promised land, and it is the only reason there is a remnant today.

And the gates of hell shall never overcome that remnant.