

EZEKIEL 18:1-20  
SOUL COMPETENCY  
A DISTORTED FOUNDATIONAL TRUTH


“The word of the LORD came to me: ‘What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, ‘The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge?’ As I live, declares the Lord GOD, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. Behold, all souls are mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine: the soul who sins shall die.

“‘If a man is righteous and does what is just and right—if he does not eat upon the mountains or lift up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, does not defile his neighbour’s wife or approach a woman in her time of menstrual impurity, does not oppress anyone, but restores to the debtor his pledge, commits no robbery, gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with a garment, does not lend at interest or take any profit, withholds his hand from injustice, executes true justice between man and man, walks in my statutes, and keeps my rules by acting faithfully—he is righteous; he shall surely live, declares the Lord GOD.

“‘If he fathers a son who is violent, a shedder of blood, who does any of these things (though he himself did none of these things), who even eats upon the mountains, defiles his neighbour’s wife, oppresses the poor and needy, commits robbery, does not restore the pledge, lifts up his eyes to the idols, commits abomination, lends at interest, and takes profit; shall he then live? He shall not live. He has done all these abominations; he shall surely die; his blood shall be upon himself.

“‘Now suppose this man fathers a son who sees all the sins that his father has done; he sees, and does not do likewise: he does not eat upon the mountains or lift up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, does not defile his neighbour’s wife, does not oppress anyone, exacts no pledge, commits no robbery, but gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with a garment, withholds his hand from iniquity, takes no interest or profit, obeys my rules, and walks in my statutes; he shall not die for his father's iniquity; he shall surely live. As for his father, because he practised extortion, robbed his brother, and did what is not good among his people, behold, he shall die for his iniquity.

“‘Yet you say, “Why should not the son suffer for the iniquity of the father?” When the son has done what is just and right, and has been careful to observe all my statutes, he shall surely live. The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself.”<sup>1</sup>

 Soul competency is foundational to Baptist life and theology. I do not contend that Baptists are alone in believing this truth; however, it is essential to a Baptist understanding of the doctrines of anthropology, ecclesiology and soteriology. Soul competency is essential for our teaching concerning man, church and salvation.

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the **Holy Bible, English Standard Version**, © 2001, Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All Rights Reserved

Nowhere is this essential, though neglected, doctrine more clearly presented than in Ezekiel's prophecy. Instead of serving as an esoteric philosophy or as mere arcane sophistry, the doctrine of soul competency is a statement of immediate application in this day. In an era that witnesses multiplication of victims and creation of excuses for every situation, the doctrine of soul competency needs to be presented from every pulpit. This neglected truth needs to be trumpeted by every preacher that wishes to be called Baptist and embraced by everyone who would claim the honoured name of Baptist.

Indulge me briefly as I express my concern. I fear that Canada is becoming, or even has become, a nation of victims. A major industry has sprung up both to create and to care for victims. Instead of striving to excel, too many of our fellow citizens are encouraged to excuse mediocrity through claiming victim status. Thus, one may be a victim of race or culture, a victim of social class or economic conditions, a victim of gender or choice, and this victim status excuses every failure and each act of irresponsibility. The doctrine of soul competency will go a long way toward destroying the cult of victimology. This is one major reason I believe the teaching needs again to be presented among the churches of our Lord.

It is interesting to note that the occasion for the presentation of this particular teaching through the weird and wonderful prophet Ezekiel was a proverb which demonstrates that the cult of victimology is at least as old as the conquest of Israel. The Jews had been conquered by the Chaldeans, and deported to Babylon. In Babylon, the conquered people repeated an old saw: "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge" [EZEKIEL 18:2]. You will also find this same proverb in Jeremiah's prophecy. "In those days they shall no longer say:

‘The fathers have eaten sour grapes,  
and the children's teeth are set on edge.’

“But everyone shall die for his own sin. Each man who eats sour grapes, his teeth shall be set on edge” [JEREMIAH 31:29, 30].

The people were using this proverb while whimpering that they were being punished for the sins of others. They declared their innocence! They moaned that their forebears were guilty of dishonouring the Lord God. The people, exiled because they had forgotten their God, excused themselves, insisting that they bore no responsibility for sin. God, through the prophet, corrected the people.

It is true that in the Decalogue, God warns mankind of the consequences of sin. “You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments” [EXODUS 20:4-6].

Note that God threatens to visit the sins of the fathers on the children for generations to come. This is, of course, the commentary on the Second Commandment. The Talmud interpreted this as signifying that only if the children followed their fathers' sinful example, would they suffer for the sins of their parents as well as for their own.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Fredk. A. Tatford, **Dead Bones Line** (Eastbourne, UK, Prophetic Witness Publ. House, 1977) 101

The exiled Jews were convinced of their own righteousness. They considered themselves better than their predecessors. They attributed their present condition to misjudgement on the part of the Lord God. The proverb was tantamount to a pernicious accusation that God was incompetent, or perhaps even unjust! They were in effect, claiming that God was guilty of punishing the innocent instead of the guilty.

**A STATEMENT OF THE DOCTRINE OF SOUL COMPETENCY** — “You say, ‘Why should not the son suffer for the iniquity of the father?’ When the son has done what is just and right, and has been careful to observe all my statutes, he shall surely live. The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself.”

The principle of soul competency could well be restated by the words of the text, “The soul who sins shall die.” The doctrine of soul competency is a stark reminder that each individual is responsible before Holy God for his or her faith, or for his or her lack of faith, as well as for all actions performed by the individual. Though the Spirit of God may call an individual to faith in the Risen Son of God, it is the responsibility of each individual to respond. One cannot shirk responsibility for what is believed by claiming that another individual has been offensive. Neither can any person attempt to pass responsibility for failure to believe to another individual. Therefore, the fact that one has believing parents is of no value before God. Likewise, the fact that one has unbelieving parents is of no consequence. God has no stepchildren. Either one is born from above and into the Family of God, or one is eternally lost and separate from God.

Soul competency is based on the premise that all persons have an inalienable right of direct access to God. The principle insists that the human soul has direct, unmediated access to God.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps you will recall the statement asserting Christ’s role as mediator for each individual. “There is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all” [1 TIMOTHY 2:5, 6]. We may not pray to saints or to Mary, but each person must give an account to God for his or for her own life. Each individual shall assuredly “give account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead” [see 1 PETER 4:5].

Restating the doctrine, soul competency asserts that all persons created in the image of God stand in a unique and inviolable relation to their Creator and, when made alive by divine grace, each is fully “competent” or capable of responding to God directly. Soul competency means that every individual is responsible to God. This is the first principle of New Testament law—to bring each naked soul face-to-face with God.

Whenever a Baptist preacher presents the message of life in Christ, he depends upon two great truths—religious freedom and soul competency. The individual is free to respond, or not respond, and therefore the preacher can but urge the individual to receive the message of life. Likewise, as the preacher declares the truth of God’s salvation, he knows that the individual is competent to receive the message. Soul competency teaches us that each individual has the inherent capacity to seek and to obey God. The doctrine of soul competency further suggests the right and responsibility of every person to deal directly and personally with God without human imposition or interference of any kind.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> R. Stanton Norman, **More Than Just a Name** (Broadman and Holman, Nashville, TN, 2001) 137

<sup>4</sup> Norman, *op. cit.* 136

Unlike most other religions, the Christian Faith demands that individuals be held accountable for themselves. As an example of the contrary view, Islam teaches class responsibility. One who holds individuals personally responsible for their acts may murder. For example, such a person may kill the landlord or an employer. An individual who believes in class guilt, however, will believe himself or herself justified in killing any and all landlords or any and all employers—even ones the individual has never met. The “idealist” may therefore kill absolutely blameless people who happen to belong to a “guilty” class. Thus, it is apparent that doctrine influences the conduct of every individual’s relationship with others.

What does “class guilt” mean? A class is nothing more than an arbitrary grouping of people that serves the agenda of the person doing the analysis. The last few decades have seen a surge in the political division of people according to classes in order to ascribe collective guilt or collective victim-hood. This rise in the concept of “class guilt” mirrors the decline of Christian influence in western society, and particularly does it reflect the absence of this Baptist principle of soul competency in western society.

According to proponents of class guilt, men subjugate women, whites exploit minorities, wealthy people oppress the poor, guns are the cause of death. This distorted worldview becomes the basis for a vast array of evils. Practically speaking, the concept of class guilt is nothing less than a political expression of the cult of the victim, thus serving to justify perpetuation of evil against those who are deemed oppressors, and thus offensive. The relevant political factor has become, what class do you belong to? Thus, Muslims can kill Jews and feminists can hate males and the poor can rage against the rich and labour can anathematise management. The result is anything but righteous. The assignment of “class guilt” is ungodly; it has no place in the life of any Christian.

There is one further issue related to this doctrine of soul competency; it is that another doctrine is often confused with soul competency. The doctrine of the priesthood of the believers is frequently spoken of as though it and soul competency were one and the same truth. The doctrine of soul competency is not the same as the doctrine of the priesthood of the believers, though both are important, historic Baptist principles.

Soul competency is closely related to the doctrine of soul liberty, or religious freedom, which were addressed at length in previous messages. Soul competency serves to underpin the biblical teaching of the priesthood of the believers. However, note that soul competency applies to every soul alike—it is a universal truth applicable to each individual in this world. The doctrine of religious freedom is likewise a universal truth applicable to all mankind. In contradistinction, however, the priesthood of the believers is a teaching that has immediate relevance solely to a church of believers. The priesthood of the believers is restricted to those who united as a congregation of regenerate people.

Unthinking individuals often speak of *the priesthood of the believer*. The term, employed in the singular, is errant. The Reformers, and assuredly Baptists, who have championed the concept, speak of *the priesthood of believers*. In others words, the priesthood of believers does not mean, “I am a priest. I can believe anything I want to.” It means rather, “As a priest in a covenanted community of believers, I must be alert to keep my congregation from departing from ‘the faith once and for all delivered unto the saints’” [JUDE 3].<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Timothy George, *The Priesthood of All Believers and the Quest for Theological Integrity*, [http://wwwFOUNDERS.org/FJ03/article1\\_fr.html](http://wwwFOUNDERS.org/FJ03/article1_fr.html), accessed 22 January 2012

The priesthood of believers was a cardinal principle of the Reformation. It was used by the Reformers to buttress an evangelical understanding of the church as set against the clericalism and sacerdotalism of medieval Catholicism. In modern theology, however, the ecclesial context of this principle has been almost totally eclipsed. For those who first articulated this doctrine, the doctrine was never intended to be presented to condone the existence of a lonely, isolated seeker of truth; rather, the priesthood of believers was a doctrine which portrayed a band of faithful believers united in a common confession as a local, visible congregation of believers.

**THE DOCTRINAL FOUNDATION FOR SOUL COMPETENCY** — “Behold, all souls are mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine: the soul who sins shall die.” Some Baptists contend that the doctrine of soul competency is derived from the doctrine of congregational church government.<sup>6</sup> The teaching of a regenerate church membership is also cited as a foundation for soul competency.<sup>7</sup> Others have argued that the doctrine of biblical authority is the foundation for this truth of soul competency.<sup>8</sup> Though a strong argument may be advanced for each of these positions, I suggest that a reading of the text makes it clear that the teaching rests firmly upon the concept of God’s character. Thus, though soul competency is a Baptist distinctive, it is more accurately said to be a Christian distinctive that has been tragically neglected within modern communions.

If man is simply the product of time and chance, this teaching has no foundation. However, the Bible is quite pointed in teaching that God created mankind. Job, pleading for a respite from suffering, reminds God:

“Your hands fashioned and made me,  
and now you have destroyed me altogether.  
Remember that you have made me like clay;  
and will you return me to the dust?”

[JOB 10:8]

The position of the suffering saint is iterated by the younger, though wiser, Elihu.

“The Spirit of God has made me,  
and the breath of the Almighty gives me life.”

[JOB 33:4]

Many of you who share this service at one time of another memorised the **100<sup>th</sup> PSALM**. The Psalmist, rejoicing in the knowledge that he belongs to the Living God, exults:

<sup>6</sup> T. T. Eaton, **The Faith of Baptists** (Louisville: Baptist Book Concern, 1903) 17, cited in Norman, op. cit., 138

<sup>7</sup> T. T. Eaton, **Baptist Why and Why Not** (Nashville: Baptist Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1900) 276-78

<sup>8</sup> Benjamin O. True, **Baptist Principles Reset** (Richmond, VA, Religious Herald, 1902) 232-41, cited in Norman, op. cit. 138

“Know that the LORD, he is God!  
It is he who made us, and we are his;  
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.”

[PSALM 100:3]

Each of these passages unite to speak of the fact that God has made us. We are the product of His hand; He created us.

In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul poses the question, “Who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is moulded say to its moulder, ‘Why have you made me like this’” [ROMANS 9:20]? Not only does he assert that God has made us, but he is emphatic that we have no right to complain about what God has done.

The point of this excursus is to emphasise the truth revealed in our text. God claims all souls because He created all things. The Preacher, in ECCLESIASTES 12:1-7, points each reader to remember individual responsibility to God. “Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say, ‘I have no pleasure in them’; before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain, in the day when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those who look through the windows are dimmed, and the doors on the street are shut—when the sound of the grinding is low, and one rises up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low—they are afraid also of what is high, and terrors are in the way; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along, and desire fails, because man is going to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets—before the silver cord is snapped, or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher is shattered at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern, and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.”

If I am just an evolutionary accident, a fortuitous combination of cosmic dust, then I have no accountability to anyone except myself. If, on the other hand, God gave me life, I am responsible to Him. I am responsible for what I do with my life and I am responsible for how I treat my fellowman. I am responsible to honour God and I am responsible to glorify His Name. Deriving life from God, I must answer to Him also.

The doctrine of soul competency transforms my existence, founded as it is upon the truth of God’s creative work. I have purpose and I have responsibility. Those who foolishly think that they need not give an answer to God must one day awake to the awful realisation that they shall appear as open books before Him. Paul states that as Christians, “We are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. For we must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil” [2 CORINTHIANS 5:6-10].

Where is the comfort in the neo-orthodox doctrine of evolution? Where is the comfort in the teaching that we have no responsibility? When a loved one passes away, shall we say, “It is survival of the fittest? I’m glad she is gone. She was unsuited for this life and the sooner she died the better the race is.” Is there comfort in such a position? Can you actually find comfort in denial of personal accountability before God?

The comfort we seek when a loved one passes out of this life is the comfort that his life had purpose and that his life was valuable precisely because he was accountable to Holy God? There is comfort in the thought that our loved ones are precious before the Lord, and that we are precious in His sight. The evidence that we have worth and value is witnessed in the teaching that each soul must give an account to Him who gives life. Therein is real comfort—especially if we respond with wisdom to that teaching.

**APPLICATIONS OF THE DOCTRINE OF SOUL COMPETENCY** — “If a man is righteous and does what is just and right—if he does not eat upon the mountains or lift up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, does not defile his neighbour’s wife or approach a woman in her time of menstrual impurity, does not oppress anyone, but restores to the debtor his pledge, commits no robbery, gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with a garment, does not lend at interest or take any profit, withholds his hand from injustice, executes true justice between man and man, walks in my statutes, and keeps my rules by acting faithfully—he is righteous; he shall surely live, declares the Lord GOD.

“If he fathers a son who is violent, a shedder of blood, who does any of these things (though he himself did none of these things), who even eats upon the mountains, defiles his neighbour’s wife, oppresses the poor and needy, commits robbery, does not restore the pledge, lifts up his eyes to the idols, commits abomination, lends at interest, and takes profit; shall he then live? He shall not live. He has done all these abominations; he shall surely die; his blood shall be upon himself.

“Now suppose this man fathers a son who sees all the sins that his father has done; he sees, and does not do likewise: he does not eat upon the mountains or lift up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, does not defile his neighbour’s wife, does not oppress anyone, exacts no pledge, commits no robbery, but gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with a garment, withholds his hand from iniquity, takes no interest or profit, obeys my rules, and walks in my statutes; he shall not die for his father's iniquity; he shall surely live. As for his father, because he practised extortion, robbed his brother, and did what is not good among his people, behold, he shall die for his iniquity.”

Can we Christians trust one another in the spiritual realm? Dare we believe that each of us, from the newest member of the congregation to the oldest saint among us, is able to determine the will of God for himself or for herself? The heart of Baptist practise is squarely dependent upon the doctrine of soul competency. This is especially true if we combine the teaching with the truth of the priesthood of the believers, a doctrine which we have not considered in detail at this point.

There is a tendency among Christians to rank worthiness for service on the length of time that one has been a Christian. However, it matters not how long you have been on the journey; what matters is how far you have come. The number of days you have professed Christ is of less value than the progress you have made in living by the truth.

There are people who have been professing Christians for decades who have no business in leadership since they show little Christian grace and give no evidence of growth in Christian character. There are others, who though young in the Faith, have made great strides and to whom we intuitively and naturally look for leadership. The doctrines of soul-competency and the priesthood of the believers impel us to make such distinction. One does not become a leader among Baptist people simply because his or her name has been on the church roll for a long time.

God calls us and assigns us as individuals to His service and for His glory. Christians are undoubtedly familiar with Paul's teaching in **1 CORINTHIANS 12:4-7, 11**. "There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good... All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills."

There are no inferior Christians, since each has been gifted by God as God Himself determines. The gifting of God is for the common good. Thus, each Christian gives an answer to God for his or her service, though the service is performed for the benefit of the entire body.

Soul competency carries three significant implications that are vital in providing for a healthy congregation—*soul competency suggests that individuals can enjoy personal, unmediated fellowship with God; soul competency also entails the individual right of free access to the Bible and the right of private interpretation; and finally, soul competency undermines the distinction between clergy and laity and drives the church to congregational polity.*<sup>9</sup>

Christ does not force His affections on any individual. Thus, each person is free, and in his freedom, man is responsible before God. Christ's callings and interactions with His holy people revolve around soul competency. Not only is each individual competent before God to carry out the ministry God has assigned and equipped them to perform, but as individuals we are competent to join together voluntarily for corporate worship and ministry as a congregation.

Church members have the ability to decide whether they wish to unite with the congregation or to refuse to unite with the congregation, just as the congregation has the right to accept or reject those who seek to join or labour therein. Soul competency teaches that as Christians, we have the freedom to assemble voluntarily with others who share our convictions. This understanding does not give us a license for doctrinal laxity, but the implication of this truth is that we, as a congregation, have the right and the responsibility to discipline members who err doctrinally or live immorally.<sup>10</sup> This truth is too frequently neglected, even among otherwise sound congregations, in this day. Soul competency demands that we hold one another accountable before God to hold to biblical truth and convictions.

More pointedly, the doctrine of soul competency is a teaching that finds application in our message of life. You will recall that I stressed that the teaching is a universal truth with application for all mankind. I have made application to those who are Christians, urging you who hold this conviction to treasure this precious doctrine and the impact it has on the distinctive form of church we enjoy as Baptists. The emphasis upon freedom and responsibility is precious indeed, and shall no doubt grow increasingly precious with the passage of years.

Honesty compels me to remind those who stand outside the Faith of Christ the Lord that the same teaching which confers liberty upon us confers responsibility for what we do with the knowledge of Christ the Lord. I now must speak directly to you who have yet to respond to the call of God.

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<sup>9</sup> P. Lovene, **Distinctive Baptist Principles**, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Rev. (Chicago, Baptist Conference Press, 1950) 12-13, cited in Norman, op. cit. 140

<sup>10</sup> See Norman, op. cit., 135-142



Each individual must inevitably deal directly and personally with God. Soul competency is divinely bestowed on each individual. You, as an individual, must use your competency or misuse it. You alone assume the consequence of your choice; but you do not have the right to decline to choose. Through the preaching of the Word, through the encouragement of the Spirit and the prayers of God's people, we may unite to help you choose, but the choice is yours alone.

Many of you, perhaps even most of you, have entered into Christian experience at some point. For the remainder, there comes a sacred moment and a holy place in life when you must act independently and directly with God. No individual, however godly, may intervene at this junction. No person, however concerned, may serve as an intermediary at this point. The competency of your soul demands that you must answer Almighty God.

Listen to the plea that has been issued by the Apostle in **2 CORINTHIANS 5:17-6:2**. "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

"Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. For he says,

'In a favourable time I listened to you,  
and in a day of salvation I have helped you.'

"Behold, now is the favourable time; behold, now is the day of salvation."

What have you done with the knowledge of Christ? How have you responded to the call of God? Make no mistake, God does call each individual; and as He calls, you must give your answer. I urge you to answer in the affirmative. This is the call of God, "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved." The passage concludes with the promise voiced by Joel, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" [**ROMANS 10:9-13**].

Be saved today. This church invites you to respond to God's gracious call. Stepping out of the seat and into either of the aisles, come; take the Preacher by the hand. "Here I am, Pastor, one somebody. I have trusted Christ as Lord." Or, perhaps a family, "Here we are, Preacher, coming to put our membership in the fellowship of this church." Perhaps it is time that you took a stand for Christ and for His cause as He calls us to do. "Here I come, Brother Mike, obedient to Christ in baptism."

Join us in this great work and in this great cause of glorifying Christ and serving Him. Come, while we stand. May angels attend you in the way. Amen.