

THE SURPLICE :

WHO IS TO WEAR IT, AND WHEN?

You have doubtless heard of the great agitation about the use of the Surplice by the Ministers of the Establishment. It may appear to you strange that such a stir should arise about a thing so trivial as the use of a white or a black gown in preaching. Or perhaps you feel alarmed, lest the adoption of the Surplice in preaching should only be the first step towards restoring the superstitions of Popery.

Now I wish to suggest to you another question—and one which deeply affects your ability to form a right judgment in this controversy—Are you entitled to wear a Surplice yourself? You may be surprised at this question, but I think I can show you, that unless you are entitled to wear one, you will never be able to stand in the presence of God, or to form a right judgment on any subject connected with His truth.

But what is a Surplice? It is a loose flowing white garment, worn over all the other garments, so that the person who wears it is completely clothed in white. It is no doubt borrowed from the garments which God commanded to be worn by Aaron and his sons the priests of Israel (Lev. xvi. 4). So that it is properly a priestly garment—and indicates that the wearer stands in a place of special nearness to God. It is for this reason that some are in our day so anxious to enforce its use. They desire in every way to claim priestly sanctity and influence.

But to turn again to the question—Are you entitled to wear a Surplice? For if not, as I have said, you cannot stand in the presence of God.

Now to make this clear, let us turn to the New Testament, and to the Book in it which is most neglected—the Book of Revelation. This book opens heaven to us, and shows us guilty sinners who have got there—this Book speaks more than all the other Books in the Bible of the Lord Jesus as the Lamb, and it tells us of the downfall of Satan and of the final victory and glory of the weakest saints—And yet, strange to say, this Book is so neglected, that if the morning and evening services were read in the Establishment every day throughout the year, you would only hear three chapters of this Book once, while all the rest of the New Testament would be read through three times! Now in the fourth chapter of this Book we read that the apostle John, in a vision, saw a door opened in heaven, and he heard a voice saying “Come up hither.” “And immediately,” says he, “I was in the Spirit, and behold a throne was set in heaven, and one sat on the throne, and he that sat was to look upon like a jasper and a sardine stone: and there was a rainbow round about the throne, in sight like unto an emerald; and round about the throne were four and twenty elders sitting, *clothed in white raiment*” (habited as priests) “and they had on their heads crowns of gold” (the insignia of royalty).

In the next chapter he says “I beheld, and lo, in the midst of the throne and of the four living creatures, and in the *midst of the elders* stood a LAMB AS IT HAD BEEN SLAIN.....and they” (the living creatures and the elders) “sang a new song, saying, thou art worthy to take the book and to open the seals thereof; for thou wast slain, and hast *redeemed us to God* BY THY BLOOD out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation.”

Here then we see that the *white robed elders* are able to sing the new song, because redeemed to God by the blood of the Lamb. This very distinctly shows us that those who wear white garments before the throne of

God are persons who value and triumph in the precious blood of Jesus.

But it may be supposed that these heavenly elders clothed in white, only represent those whom men here below call priests or clergy, and so the question may still be asked, How can I, a private person and a guilty sinner, have a *white robe*? Let us now, therefore, turn to the seventh chapter of this same Book. There we find another vision. "After this I beheld, and lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, out of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed *with white robes*, and palms in their hands; and cried with a loud voice, saying, SALVATION TO OUR GOD WHO SITTETH UPON THE THRONE, AND UNTO THE LAMB."

Now surely there can be no doubt that this *vast white robed multitude out of every nation* represents the whole family of the redeemed. They all stand in equal nearness to the throne and to the Lamb—all clothed in the same white clothing—all with palm branches in their hands, the emblem of victory—all sing the same song:—that song which ascribes salvation to God and to the Lamb. They make no mention of their own works, or of any office they have borne on earth, but with one soul and one voice they magnify the exceeding riches of the grace of God—that grace which had brought them where they stood. This, then, is a *surpliced* multitude. Each one of that innumerable host wears the white robe. No one from any nation, or any kindred could stand amidst that blessed company unless clothed thus in white. The title to wear the surplice is therefore, when thus viewed, a deeply important question. For may we not truthfully say that *no one will stand before the throne of God and before the Lamb, to sing the song of redemption, but those who are entitled to wear the white robe, or surplice?*

Now, then, the great question comes—How did this vast multitude obtain their white robes?

This question is asked and answered in the same chapter. "What are these which are arrayed in white

robes, and whence came they? And I said unto him, Sir, thou knowest. And he said to me, these are they which came out of great tribulation, and have *washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb*. THEREFORE are they before the throne of God, and serve Him day and night in His temple."

Thus we learn how they got their white robes—they had washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb. We learn also that this multitude had come out of this earth where the tribulation had been. And we also learn that it was wholly on account of having these blood-washed robes, that they stood before the throne: No fuller on earth can give us garments clean enough and white enough for God. God has opened a fountain, a fountain of blood, a fountain whose spring was the side of His own Son, and whosoever washeth therein is without spot in the sight of God! The host around the throne are those who have washed in that fountain. Thus they got their white robes.

In the very opening of this Book the redeemed ascribe their salvation to the Lord Jesus Christ, saying, "Unto him that loveth us, and hath washed us from our sins in his own blood, and hath made us kings and priests unto God and His Father." Here they say, *He hath washed us*, in the other passage they are described as having *washed their robes*. The grace and love of the Lord Jesus in giving Himself for them is the thing they mention in the former passage; their use, by faith, of His atoning blood is the thing mentioned of them in the latter. A believer would delight to speak of the Lord's rich love in cleansing him with His own blood—though you, in speaking of that washed one, would very properly say, he has washed his robe in the blood of the Lamb. For what grace gives, faith receives and uses.

Both passages therefore agree in this, that the blood of the Lamb alone can make the guilty sinner clean. Unless washed therein he cannot have on God's white robe.

Remember that when God looks at men He sees

them unclean; their garments are, in His sight, not only ragged, and so do not conceal their nakedness, but they are filthy also. As soon as man sinned he felt this, and vainly sought to remedy it, but he had no proper covering until God gave him coats of skin (Gen. iii.) When the prodigal was met by his father, clothed no doubt in tattered and defiled garments, it was his father himself who said, "Bring forth the best robe and put it on him" (Luke xv.) In all this we see the act of God; He justifieth the ungodly.

And faith is that which receives the testimony of God to the value of the blood of Jesus Christ His Son. Faith sets to its seal that God is true. Faith is not a mere feeling, or a notion; faith credits God. Faith reckons that God is able to do what the sinner himself cannot do, even to make the sinner clean—and clean enough for God. And it believes that the only means by which God so cleanses sinners is by the blood of the Lamb. It was therefore by faith in God's testimony to the cleansing efficacy of the blood of Jesus that these had washed their robes and made them white.

All this, then, teaches us how a guilty sinner can have title to wear a white robe. If he sees his sin and guilt—if he feels that this makes him unfit for the company of the blessed and holy God—let him turn his eye to Calvary; let him look at the blood of Jesus shed there; and let him, with gratefulness and joy, believe what God Himself declares about the purging power of that blood. In that blood alone is there remission of sins. It alone can wash out the stain. And the moment a sinner believes this, the moment he trusts to that blood alone, he is washed, and clean washed too, in the sight of God. That blood cleanses the person—it also washes his garments. In a word, he that washes in that blood is clean. And he washes in it, who trusts thereto.

FAITH IN THE PRECIOUS BLOOD OF THE LAMB, IS GOD'S OWN WAY, AND GOD'S ONLY WAY, FOR GIVING TO A GUILTY SINNER THE GARMENTS OF SALVATION.

Every attempt to procure a white robe by any works

or service of your own, will only issue in terrible disappointment—for at the end such a person will be found without the wedding garment, and will have his home with the hypocrites! The white robe cannot be procured by our prayers, or alms-deeds, or fasting—but only by faith in the blood of the Lamb. Men find it hard to think this. But the great question is, How do we look in God's sight? What is His estimate of us? And He has declared that when a sinner, however depraved or guilty, trusts in the blood of Jesus, that sinner is instantly clean, and without charge in His sight. Such a change passed on the dying thief; and therefore Jesus, who saw the reality and the extent of that change, said to him, "To-day shalt thou be with me in paradise!"

Is your eye beholding the Lamb of God—even Jesus the Son of God? Then, according to God's testimony, you are beholding the taker-away of sin, and the righteousness and the salvation of God. And if your soul owns Jesus as this—if you have welcomed and have trusted him as the Saviour—then has the righteousness of God come unto you, and you, even you are clothed in a white robe. The surplice of God's providing and of God's giving is your's, is upon you; and you are thus without spot in the eye of God.

For when and where did that vast multitude before the throne get their white robes? Were they arrayed in them as they entered into heaven? or after they had reached the throne? No. They, every one of them, had those robes, and wore them here on earth. It is here on this earth—in this defiled and evil world—that these fair garments are obtained and first worn,—though they are garments fit to wear before the throne of the Holy One on high. The moment when a poor guilty sinner, like you or I, trusts to the blood of Jesus, is the moment at which he is thus blessedly arrayed. Men's eyes see this not—they see not as God seeth. The believing sinner himself may only very dimly see, and hesitatingly acknowledge the wondrous change which has passed upon him; but God, from that moment, looks on him according to the cleansing efficacy of the one

offering of Jesus, and consequently God pronounces him clean. It is therefore a wonderful fact, that there are **ON THIS EARTH** a *white-robed multitude*. Not congregated in one vast family indeed, as they will be in heaven, not in fulness of joy, singing their new song, or waving their palm branches, as they will above, but scattered from pole to pole, groaning and travailing often amidst the tribulation; still they *are* washed, they *are* sanctified, they *are* justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God. God *hath* made Christ to be unto them wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption.

The eye of God sees such persons on this earth. And His eye rests with delight on them. He knows what they are in themselves—what their history has been—what their guilt—but He sees that they have washed in the fountain for sin and uncleanness, and He pronounces them to be without spot. And it is the privilege of such to say, “It is God that justifieth—who is he that condemneth?”

Do not think, therefore, that God’s white robe is only to be had in heaven. It will be worn there—and worn there for ever; but if not got on earth, you will never, never have it. That fair and beauteous garment is put by God Himself on every sinner who flees for salvation to the cross of Jesus, and then that sinner wears it for ever, whether on earth or in heaven, as a witness of where he has been, and of how perfectly clean he has been made!

And so you see God’s surplice is not a garment to be put on and off. It is never taken off, when once put on. It is not a garment to be used occasionally. It does not belong to few among the children of God. It is worn by all who trust in the blood of the Lamb—it is worn by all such at all times. God who knows the value and the preciousness of the blood of Jesus, always regards believers according to the perfect cleansing of that blood. Hence they always appear before God in the same white robe. To dispute this, would be to disparage the value of the blood of the Lamb. The ways of believers, it is

true, constantly need cleansing ; and to this end there is the priestly ministry of Jesus in heaven, and the word and the Spirit here, and all the discipline of the Father. And they are indeed bidden to keep their garments unspotted from the world. But as to acceptance and the forgiveness of sins, believers have an unchangeable cleanness in the sight of God ; He sees them ever according to the comeliness He Himself has put on them ; yea, according to the delight of His own heart in the perfect result of His own grace towards them.

Blessed indeed is it to be thus clothed in white by God Himself, and thus permitted in such perfect confidence to walk with the Lord ! What nearness to the Lord the blood of Jesus gives ! what confidence in His presence ! For the white robe is indeed a priestly garment—its purity fits the wearer to enter and worship in the holiest of all. This white robe which, so to say, is put upon us at the cross, makes us meet to stand immediately before the throne. It entitles the wearer to stand in that high and holy place ! If you have on this robe, you are privileged even now, to take this high standing—“you who were once far off, *are brought nigh by the blood of Christ.*” You, who only thought of God as a judge, and who shrunk away from His eye, can now enter boldly into the holiest of all *through the blood of Jesus.* The white robe—God’s surplice—is your title to admission into the greatest possible nearness to God, and that at all times !

Let believers remember this. And let them constantly use this liberty wherewith Christ has made them free. Then they will experience more and more the value of the blood of the Lamb. They will daily and hourly test its value,—and thus even now sing that new song which grace has put into their lips, and which those lips shall utter before the throne for ever.

And now I would ask you, if through the precious blood of Jesus you know what present access into the holiest is, I would ask you to survey, from that holy sanctuary, this controversy which is raging here beneath about the surplice and such like matters. How does

this controversy appear from thence? How is it estimated there? Let us, for a moment, contemplate this controversy from the holiest of all.

It is generally allowed that there is, in the present day, a question at issue beyond that of the use of the surplice in preaching. The real battle of the surplice was fought in 1662, when from fifteen hundred to two thousand of the beneficed clergy were obliged to give up their preferments, because refusing compliance with the Act of Uniformity, which Act is substantially the basis of the Establishment of the present day. As a matter of principle, the surplice is certainly worn much more offensively when the priest *stands* and pronounces the absolution, the people *kneeling*, than it would be in the pulpit; but persons are accustomed to the former use of it, and it does not offend them.

But the real question, as far as the truth of God is concerned, is, *What is the basis of the Establishment?* Is it a system of ordinances prescribed by human authority? or is it faith wrought in the heart by the Spirit of God, leading to simple dependance on the blood and righteousness of Christ? On the one hand we see a large influential body, of a superior order of mind, taking their stand on the Ritual, and most *dishonestly* attempting to explain away the doctrinal articles to which they have subscribed. On the other, a number of godly men, and zealous preachers of the gospel, exceedingly fettered in their ministrations, when pressed by their opponents with the plain declarations of the Ritual. Now what must an honest looker-on gather from this? That the Establishment has in it two incompatible elements—scriptural Articles and a Ritual (according to Mr. Ward) derived from the Romish missal. The attempt to harmonize these two elements has been made by both parties, and failed. But then who has the advantage? Doubtless the Ritualists. None but those who are really spiritual, can judge whether what they hear be the truth of God; nor is any care taken that it shall be preached. But it does not require the possession of the Spirit to judge whether there be strict adherence to the

words of a Ritual, or a system of ordinances, or the use of certain vestments; human courts are quite competent to take cognizance of such matters. This gives the Ritualists an immense advantage, and to such Bishops as uphold uniformity, immense power against the truth.

As to the issue of the controversy, humanly speaking, a few words will suffice. The genius of the age in which we live is entirely against independent ecclesiastical authority; and doubtless the civil courts will be exceedingly jealous of any thing that would affect the property of a *beneficed* clergyman. A godly curate must expect nothing but the withdrawal of his licence, if he refuses to conform. The pastoral letter of the Bishop of Exeter is not law. If the Archbishop of Canterbury convenes the Bishops of his province together, they may advise, but still their advice is not law. For the Bishop of Exeter has himself reluctantly allowed that the Church of England has not the power of synodical action. The Houses of Convocation cannot meet together without the will of the Sovereign. Humbling indeed to the Establishment, but happy for the nation, so far as the truth of God is concerned.

A case may arise, and bring into collision the civil and ecclesiastical courts in this country, as has been the case in Scotland—the supremacy of the civil will be asserted and maintained. The wise statesmen seize their opportunity for more effectually controlling the Establishment; and under the colour of relieving it from episcopal arbitrariness, will, by some modification of the act of uniformity, or by some reform in the ecclesiastical courts, or by some definite discipline, get Archbishops, and Bishops, and Clergy more entirely to work under them. The assertion of independent ecclesiastical jurisdiction will not be allowed, because it is unmanageable. This, humanly speaking, is the safeguard against the *outward* aggressions of Popery. Its main pillar is the supremacy of the ecclesiastical power above the civil; and this its independent jurisdiction it has never given up. In this there has been consistency. But many are aware that all the soul-destroying errors of Romanism

may find shelter under an act of uniformity. And if the Government interferes, it can only act in one way. It may relax rigid adherence to the Rubric, and provide for uniformity on some more comprehensive basis. But if God's principle is unity in the Spirit, by presenting one central object, even the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ, then any act of uniformity, however well intentioned, will always be opposed to it, because presenting a system of ordinances to be bowed unto. The rising generation of Oxford and Cambridge, will in all probability, be scattered throughout the rural population, leading them to Churchism without Christ, blind leaders leading their blind followers into the ditch together with themselves. And those who really are ministers of Christ will find themselves in bonds; not the honored bonds arising from faithfulness to Christ, but in the wretched yoke of traditionary ordinances, contradicting the very blessed truth their own lips proclaim!

'Surely the godly ministers and godly members of the Establishment do need the prayers of all christians, that they may be guided aright in their present crisis. And may this question rest solemnly on all our hearts—Is it unity in the Spirit, or uniformity, for which we are to contend—and can the two be maintained together?

"The kingdom of God is not meat and drink, but righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost—and he that in *these things* serveth Christ, is well pleasing to God and approved of men." Surely there is no more sanctity in a vestment than in meat and drink. Christ is not served by the one any more than by the other. Surely as clothed in the surplice of God's providing, the blood-cleansed robe, we can only be humbled before God that such vain trifles should be occupying men's minds, instead of the solid truth of "the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God."

Meats and drinks caused divisions in the early Church, because men would contend for *uniformity in eating*; the albe and the surplice now create contention, because men will enforce *uniformity in clothing*. But, as has been said, deeper things are at stake now than any such

trivial details. It is impossible not to see that the very foundations of the system of national Christianity are being laid bare—and many eyes will see their rottenness.

May all of us who know Christ, feed more and more on Him, and so prove that His flesh is meat indeed and His blood drink indeed. May we know too, that as believers in Him, we have put on Christ Jesus; and as we always appear before God in all the comeliness which He Himself has put on us, may we practically put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh to fulfil the lusts thereof.

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