

GREAT RESOLUTIONS

Program Thirty-Seven

Robert Govett – A Pursuer of the Truth

The history of the church from the second century onward shows that as time went on she lost her original purity and became more and more degraded. Although there was always a faithful remnant who sought to walk in the light, overall, many precious truths and practices revealed in the Scriptures were lost or distorted as traditions and the teachings of men took precedence over the Word of God. During the Middle Ages, especially, ignorance, hypocrisy, and corruption reigned, not God's Word. The Scriptures were literally locked away from most people during that time, also aptly referred to as the Dark Ages.

But “out of darkness, light shall shine” (2 Cor. 4:6). In His wisdom and love, the Lord was brooding over the darkness and preparing chosen vessels to begin to recover lost truths and to usher people back to the light of the Scriptures and to the proper experience of Christ as life and to the many rich aspects of full salvation as conveyed in His Word. This work of recovery has been continuing

through the centuries. Some of the vessels used by the Lord in his recovery were John Wycliffe, John Huss, Martin Luther, Count Zinzendorf, John Nelson Darby, George Mueller, Margaret Barber, Watchman Nee and Witness Lee.

Robert Govett was a vessel used by the Lord to recover Bible truths during the nineteenth century. While some of his countrymen, such as Hudson Taylor and C. T. Studd, carried the gospel light to foreign lands, Robert Govett remained in England and released the riches of Christ at home in his native land. Although most Christians have never heard of Robert Govett, his contribution to the church has been significant, and his teachings have had a profound impact on many seeking believers.

Robert Govett was born in 1813, in Staines, Middlesex, about 30 miles outside of London. Not much is known of his early life, but we do know that he excelled in his education. After earning BA and MA degrees at Oxford University and Eaton College, he was ordained a priest in the Anglican church (also known as the Church of England) in 1837. Soon after, he began to serve as



a curate to a congregation in Norwich, approximately 100 miles northeast of London, where he assisted in various ministerial and pastoral duties.

An Unashamed Workman

Upon taking up his responsibilities, Govett started to announce Christ and proclaim the truth energetically and with clarity. Many began to take note and were attracted to his preaching and teaching. He became known as one who could present the truth in a very clear and logical manner.

Govett endeavored to always come to the Scriptures in a fresh light. As he grew in the Lord, he was enlightened to see the errors of the current theology of his time. This released him from prevailing denominational views and interpretations and strengthened him to remain faithful to the Scriptures alone.

Govett was diligent to present himself approved to God as an unashamed workman who cut straight the word of the truth (2 Tim. 2:15). He taught clearly and plainly, without using the flowery language that was in vogue in those days. If he could not understand a passage, he was humble enough to admit it and would not offer a superficial explanation. Bible scholar Cyril Barber noted that Govett “possessed a well-ordered, disciplined mind and could trace a theme through Scripture with unerring logic.” The English preacher Charles Spurgeon testified of Govett: “In all my life I have discovered no other author so exactly aware of what God has said; and who is able to make it clear in plain and simple language.” Spurgeon added that Govett “wrote a hundred years before his time, and the day will come when his works will be treasured as sifted gold.”

STANDING FOR THE TRUTH

True Baptism

One truth Govett examined shortly into his service was

the matter of baptism. The Anglicans in Govett's time (and today) practiced what they called baptism by sprinkling or pouring water upon babies' heads. According to church tradition, anyone born of British parents would automatically become a member of the Anglican Church by being thus "baptized" and registered as a church member. The practice of infant baptism by sprinkling was very prevailing in Britain at Govett's time.

Early in his ministry, Govett witnessed an adult baptism by full immersion. His study of the Word convinced him that this was a valid practice and within a few days he decided to be baptized by immersion himself.

The Greek word *baptizo* found in the New Testament means "to immerse." This corresponds with the teaching of Paul that through baptism we are buried with Christ and raised with Christ (Rom. 6:3-4). Mark 16:16a says, "He who believes and is baptized shall be saved. Believing is synonymous with receiving as in John 1:12. When a person is of an age to understand and believe the gospel, he or she can receive Christ and be born anew, thus becoming a child of God. Baptism is then a public affirmation of this divine birth. Witness Lee explains this in a footnote to Mark 16:16. To quote in part: "To believe and to be so baptized are two parts of one complete step for receiving the full salvation of God. To be baptized without believing is merely an empty ritual; to

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Through his study, Govett came to know that there is no such thing as infant baptism in the Bible. He realized that infants do not have the capacity to believe; hence they are not qualified to be baptized. Consequently, by 1844 Govett felt he could no longer in good conscience support or participate in the practice of infant baptism, and informed the bishop of the Church of England of this decision. His stand was met with a strong negative reaction: the bishop revoked his license to function as a curate and Govett was barred from continuing with his ministerial duties. He began to be shunned and criticized by many. Even his family was unhappy with his decision. Although he was not sure how he would support himself, Govett bore the Lord’s reproach and was willing to pay the price of going ‘outside the camp’ of religion.

Separating from Denominations

Govett based his teachings on the Scriptures alone. Whenever the Lord brought him into the light of some truth, he endeavored to respond and obey. He was often heard to ask, “What saith the Scriptures?” When the answer was found – that was final. He would adjust his views according to the revelation he received from the Word and would begin to practice according to the new light he had received. This process would occur repeatedly throughout his life as he re-examined many teachings and doctrines. Christian author Randal Kulp noted that “Though at times this meant being ostracized by those within Christianity who had allowed tradition to settle in and take over where once the life of the Head through the

guidance of the Spirit existed, he was willing to pay the cost.”

After being disbarred from his position in the Anglican church, Govett began a work at Victoria Hall in Norwich where he continued to pastor a number of his followers who believed as he did.

They met in a manner somewhat similar to the Plymouth Brethren, although Govett remained independent and did not join with



the Brethren. Within a few years, Govett, while functioning as the pastor of this congregation, baptized several hundred believers, all of whom left the Anglican church. In 1854 Govett opened Surrey Chapel in Norwich where he ministered until his death in 1901. The congregation was not affiliated with any denomination, but was registered simply as “Christian” or “undenominational.”

Although it cannot be said that Govett or his student, D.M. Panton, were completely clear regarding the proper practice of the church life, they were clear regarding the evils of denominationalism. Govett saw that denominations divide the Body of Christ and that division is condemned in the Scriptures (1 Cor. 1:11-13). Govett formally left the Church of England in 1878. Breaking from the Church of England was not an easy stand to take and it was taken at a cost. The Church of England was one of several “state” churches that formed after the time of the Reformation.

Watchman Nee commented regarding the state churches “any political power will only damage the church. The national churches are partnerships between politicians and believers.” (CWWN, Set 3, Vol. 57)

Because Luther and other reformers were short of vision and knowledge of the church, they mistakenly joined to the government to form state churches. Although many could not go along with the Roman Catholic Church, they still were not clear as to what the church was. Although some matters of truth, like justification by faith, were clarified during the Reformation, Bible teachers were still not clear with regard to the church. The problem of division in the denominations only multiplied.

Govett’s obedience and stand for the truth issued in misunderstanding and ostracism. He and others were considered dissenters from the Church of England, and guilty of the serious sin of schism. Govett answered this charge in his article “Are Dissenters from the ‘Church of England’ Guilty of Schism?” His conclusion was rather simple: “that the ‘Establishment’ [of the Church of England] is not a church. It is not God’s elect, new-born of the Holy Ghost; it is the population of England, born of the flesh, and claimed to be Christians, without faith. We need, then, go no further. It is not a church. There is no schism, then, in leaving what is not Christ’s church (2 Tim. 2:22, Eph. 1:1, Heb. 10:25). Obedience to Him teaches us to assemble with those that are His.”

Conclusion

Although Govett was assured in his stand for the truth with regard to the church, he still longed for the proper expression of the church in oneness. He declared to fellow dissenters, “While our position of separation from that [the

Church of England], and every other national and worldly system, is wholly right on Scriptural grounds, are we justified, or must we not rather plead wholly guilty, when we look at the divisions which in every city reign among those who are children of God? Of old there was but one church in a city; it was a united body, assembling in one place (1 Cor. 1:2; 1 Thess. 1:1; Rev. 2:1. etc.). Now we have many Lord's tables, many party names, much separation of spirit one from another. The Lord give us that oneness of heart which would be so glorifying to Him! Can nothing be done to produce this? At least we may pray for it, and seek to love and own those that are Christ's, however they may differ from us."

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Later the Lord would release further light concerning the proper ground of oneness among the believers in the church through Brother Watchman Nee.

Thank the Lord for the example of brother Robert Govett and his faithfulness and obedience to the light of truth that was revealed to him. He knew the desire of our Savior God – that all men would be saved and come to the full knowledge of the truth (1 Tim. 2:4) and was diligent to earnestly contend for the faith once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 1:3).

Marty Robert and Bill Lawson

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