

John Johnson

{1706 – 1791}

During a half-century commencing in or about 1740, one John Johnson, the minister of a small and despised sect of 'high grace' believers, holding forth the faithful Word, as he had been taught and invigorated by the Spirit of Divine Prophecy to set forth the Testimony of Christ, in a way more in Gospel Harmony with Holy Scripture, which brought him into conflict with all who were in ways inclined to discredit the Person & Work of Christ. "The work of the Ministry," said Johnson, "appointed by Jesus Christ, and given in Commission to all his faithful messengers, is to preach Glad Tidings; freely to publish Grace, Peace, Salvation, and Eternal Life alone through his Name; or to testify the Gospel of the Grace of God, and no other thing." And in this calling Johnson demonstrated great power and much vigor in the promulgation of these Glad Tidings of Life and Salvation by Jesus Christ alone. His remarkable influence was not confined to the pulpit; as he had much literary activity. He wrote many letters which were so full of matter as to be almost full treatises in themselves, and in addition published numerous pamphlets and several books. Neither Johnson nor his followers claimed any special illumination or any mission beyond that given to all true believers to proclaim the Gospel of God's Grace in Christ. They sought to develop their doctrines from the Scriptures and the Scripture alone, and to renounce and disregard, so far as possible, all traditions, peculiarities, glosses, and commentaries, both of churches and individuals which were not based upon or did not proceed from the same source - the Bible.

John Johnson {1706–1791,} whose name has been removed from any historical accounts as pertaining to what is known as 'church history;' and even those with specific historical accounts of such who may be labeled as 'Baptist,' scare, {if at all,} make any mention of him; and when they do it is with the utmost contempt. Johnson was a English Particular Baptist Minister who was born at Lostock, near Manchester, England in March 1706. Lostock was a very small place, its population not exceeding a thousand. It had a limited coal mining industry but was chiefly agricultural in character. His parents were humble and hardworking people, who raised their son in a conscientious manner, directing him to respect the Scriptures, and to follow on in an industrious way, wherever the Lord would direct his paths. In a letter to a friend he says, "what can you propose from a correspondence with a person brought up in an obscure way, in a very mean employ, and who never had the advantage of learning, business, books, or conversation to improve his genius or refine his taste, or any other thing that constitutes or improves the scholar or

the gentleman? I only learned to read from my parents in a country way, and never went to school, except for a few weeks to learn the use of the pen."

A part of Johnson's early experience, we may quote from a letter which he wrote very late in life, in answer to an inquiry as to his manner of worshipping God before the Lord had brought them out of darkness. He says, "to this I cannot make reply. I was so young at the time, and it is so long since that I do not well remember. I was under the operation mentioned, Romans 7, 9 - 10, and at that time I was not fifteen years of age; but I can remember that I never was taught to profane the Holy Name by a rambling over prayers as children commonly do. I remember once my Father pointing me to Matthew 6, verses 9-13, {that which is often referred to as the Lord's prayer,} and bidding me to get it by heart, but that I did not need for I had it by heart long before, by hearing other children profane it. I cannot say that I ever thought praying to be serving God, but I thought it to be a thing necessary, and I thought I would study the Psalms to see how David prayed. But when my eyes were opened I then saw that whatever I had done was simply amusement."

He made a confession of Christ, and was baptized in March 1720, in connection with a Baptist Congregation and then united with a small Calvinistic Assembly of believers at Warrington, soon thereafter. It appears that he was only about twenty years of age when the assembly of which he was a member perceived that he was being "separated unto the Gospel of God" for the Ministry of the Word, and thus he commenced his labors as a Minister of the Gospel around 1726, although from 1728 until his move to Liverpool he was an itinerant preacher, and not attached to any particular congregation. The doctrinal conclusions at which Johnson had arrived by the time he had reached 34 or 35 years of age, and before he was called to Liverpool, were never essentially departed from or varied except in one or two instances which he refers to in his letters, and they were held and promulgated by him with the tenacity, perseverance, and energy which were his characteristics. He soon found that the forcefulness of his arguments, his refusal to bow to any creeds or confessions, and his faithfulness to the Holy Scriptures led him into difficulties and caused unpleasantness with other ministers and that {to use his own language} he became to them a speckled bird.

Johnson was always receptive and open to fair argument and criticism, and ready to give to any earnest inquirer the basis of his belief, in much detail if necessary. "Search the Scriptures," was his constant cry to all. He was maliciously accused of a number of doctrinal, or rather creedal {as pertaining to the accepted creeds or received notions of men destitute of the Truth} deviations from conventional orthodoxy, even the denial of certain aspects of Trinitarian Truth. Perhaps it may be well here to quote Samuel Fisher {who knew Johnson personally, and wrote a short biography of his life, which he attached the two volume set of Johnson's Letters, which Fisher had published in 1796} whose well measured opinion of Johnson's

view on the Trinity may give us a glimpse of Johnson's yearning to test all things by the Word of God. Fisher writes that Johnson "deemed the doctrine of the Trinity in Unity and Unity in Trinity as the Glory of the whole Gospel and the foundation of all evangelical Truth. He, however, highly disapproved of what some writers had said about eternal filiation and eternal procession as obviously militating against the Divine Unity, and an attempt to explain what is infinitely above the comprehension of every created mind. He always chose to speak of the Three as their distinct characters are now made manifest in the dispensations of his Grace. The Father God indivisible - the Son God manifest in the flesh - the Holy Ghost God dwelling with and in his people, &c. In a word his judgment was that in the immensity of Jehovah's Nature there is such a distinction as is improved by the terms Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but that it is the excess of arrogance for any man to attempt to define it by reason or to trace it to its origin. It is a Truth clearly stated as a matter of fact; but too sublime for human investigation."

About 1741 he was appointed pastor of the Byrom Street Baptist Chapel, Liverpool, but left about 1747-8 in consequence of his doctrinal views having rendered him obnoxious to a section of the congregation. His supporters built a new chapel in Stanley Street, opened in 1750, and he remained with this congregation until his death.

By 1757 Johnson became a leader amongst a number of 'high-Calvinist' churches in the Lancashire and Yorkshire Associations, and his influence was such that his supporters were often dubbed Johnsonian Baptists. He married about 1740, and he and his wife had three children, born between 1741 and 1744. We do not know the maiden surname of Margaret his wife, nor any particulars about her prior to her marriage, but we know from one of Johnson's letters, written long afterwards, what were his requirements, which we trust were fulfilled in the lady of his choice. He wrote, "When I was young I earnestly prayed to the Lord to guide and direct me either to a single or married state as might be most to his glory. At length I came to this determination that I did not see that I was called to any work or fixed in any station with which a married state might interfere to hinder my usefulness, and that it would really be more to my comfort. Then I directed my prayers to my God if it was his pleasure to point out and give me a wife. Marriage is the most awful concern that any man can engage in of anything material and earthly."

According to one source, Johnson was a vigorous pastor and preacher, with much originality of mind, unafraid of controversy; he was of medium height and short-sighted; his manner in the pulpit was solemn and majestic, but he used plain language. He attacked Arminians, Anglicans, Methodists, and other Baptists in print, entering into dispute with a number of men, including a few with whom he shared similar views regarding the sovereignty and absoluteness of Divine Grace, like the Particular Baptist author John Brine, who wrote a short treatise {it's

interesting that Brine in his preface to his work refers to Johnson as "a friend,"} against Johnson in 1755, entitled, "Some Mistakes in a Book of Mr. Johnson's of Liverpool, Entitled, 'The Faith of God's Elect,' Noted and Rectified." Brine accused Johnson of holding to the following tenets: I. That Grace and Glory might have taken place upon God's Elect, on the Ground of Adoption, without the Intervention of Sin, and Salvation from it. II. That Adam was called earthy, in respect to his Mind, as well as his Body; or that the Apostle called him earthy, in Relation to his Person, and Nature. III. That Grace in the Hearts of the Saints is not a new Creature. IV. That Faith, though it hath Activity is not an Act. V. That Faith is not, nor can be a Duty. VI. That Faith is not purchased by Christ. VII. That Ministers are not commissioned to preach the Law. VIII. That they are not to admonish Sinners to leave their Sins, and amend their Lives. To this Johnson replied in a long {115 pages total} and able defense of his sentiments in a treatise entitled "Evangelical Truths Vindicated." Herein he sought to re-enforce his doctrinal positions, and to use his own language, to declare: "I. The freeness and sovereignty of Grace, to be above all influence, incapable of being purchased by any price, or being promoted or impeded by sin. II. The precious Faith of the saints, to be a participation of the Divine nature, superior to the nature or to the work of any creature. III. The preaching of the Gospel, to be a message of pure Grace; in subserviency whereunto the Law is to be opened in its clearest light, but the Gospel alone to be preached.

As in all men's writings, prayerful vigilance is desired as one searches Johnson's vast array of spiritual truth, as set forth in his copious productions, for it would seem, that he came to a few odd doctrinal conclusions; but overall, he never deviated from the Pure & Essential Gospel of God's Free & Sovereign Grace in Christ, Divine Imputation & Redemption Fully Accomplished at the Cross & Effectually Applied by the Spirit in Conversion. Johnson's exclusive devotion to the Holy Scriptures distinguishes him from the mass of teachers. He looked upon the Book as the treasure house in which the king's jewels were kept, and that it was his duty and pleasure, as one of the Divinely appointed guardians, to keep such jewels intact and free from the touch of sacrilegious hands. He counted and studied and polished them so as to preserve them from dust and rust and defilement of every kind.

Let us hear what Johnson had to say in justification of his mode of preaching and teaching. "What is my concern? What is my desire? Only that I may be faithful to Him that sent me and to every soul to whom I am sent. And I cannot possibly be faithful without using hard sayings and so must be accounted harsh, censorious, and uncharitable. When the Lord was pleased to call me out of darkness, he did not call me asleep, but gave me life from the dead, and now I have been exercised in his school above fifty years. I do know the difference of the two seeds, Christ and Belial, light and darkness, life and death, flesh and spirit, and forasmuch as I

certainly know that descriptions are almost universal among the religions of the world I cannot be faithful unless I point out their deceptions. I do not name the persons, but I often name the things in such a light that the persons know it themselves that are described; so they know it is spoken against them. And when a hypocrite hears a hypocrite described he knows that he is that hypocrite, but he rages to hear his nakedness discovered, and thinks to deaden the noise of his own conscience by crying out horrid, cruel, censorious, presumptions, assuming the judgment seat, &c. And these clamors frequently have the desired effect, the ringing of the bell when the bees swarm. But who shall give account to Him that is ready to judge the quick and the dead? I hope to live and die pure from the blood of all men which I cannot do if I do not point out the diabolical delusions with which I know they are bewitched. My Lord spoke out without reserve and they cried out against Him, and so did his servants till men gnashed on them with their teeth. All persecution that ever was, was not simply for confessing the true God, but testifying against the false. The life of the Gospel cannot be preached without the two-edged sword which makes Christ's ministers hated of all men for his Name's sake."

Again, in a letter to a friend, Johnson says, "the man that writes upon Divine subjects with a righteous intention, contends not for victory but for Truth; and if himself is in a mistake, is willing that his own mistakes may be discovered. The end is only to point out where the Truth is, in a clear a light as we can; that those who are attentive to know it, may judge for themselves. I never expect the Truth of Christ to meet with general approbation; or that the religious world should either embrace or understand it; only to help some few, whose hearts the Lord shall be pleased to open, to attend to it.

Johnson died on 20 March 1791, aged 85. Samuel Fisher preached the funeral sermon and wrote an account of his life, appended to the two volumes of Johnson's Original Letters published in Norwich in 1796 and 1800.

The Following is an extensive list {not in any necessary order} of Johnson's Writings, most of which were published during his lifetime:

1. The Advantages and Disadvantages of the Marriage State. London, 1758. 24pg.
2. Address to the Quakers. 1762. 74pg.
3. A Scriptural Illustration of the Book of the Revelation, &c. Warrington, 1779. 514pg.
4. Dissertation on the Eternity of God.
5. The Divine Authority of the Holy Scriptures. 92pg.
6. Divine Prescience. 1763.

7. Divine Truth; being a Vindication of the Three Immutable Attributes of the true God: viz. Essential Holiness, Universal Goodness & Sovereign Grace. 228pg.
8. The Door of Knowledge Opened in a Spiritual Campaign.
9. The Election of God undisguised; or the Reproach rolled away from the Doctrine of Sovereign Grace; where the "Thoughts on God's Decree" {A poem by a Yorkshire Methodist} are Dissected and Exposed. Liverpool. 52pg.
10. Enigmatical Question relating to things Sacred and Divine; proposed and answered by John Johnson. London, 1755.
11. The Evangelical believer's Confession of the Son of God; or Christ Acknowledged in the Ordinances of the Gospel, &c. Liverpool, 1781. 114pg.
12. Evangelical Truths Vindicated in an Epistle to the readers of Mr. John Brine's pamphlet &c. Liverpool, 1758. 89pg.
13. The faith of God's elect; or the life of Jesus manifest in his saints. Liverpool. 1754. 268pg.
14. Jesus the King of kings. A sermon preached at Liverpool on the coronation of George III. London, 1762. 40pg.
15. The Love of God. A sermon preached at the funeral of Mr. S. Hunter &c. Liverpool. 1758. 67pg.
16. A Mathematical Question, propounded by the vicegerent of the world; answered by the King of glory. {A discussion of sin.} 106pg.
17. Nature and Constitution of a Church. 16pg.
18. An Occasional Review of {the prebendary of Litchfield's sermon and address to people called Quakers} with a more mature examination of the remarks of S. Fothergill and J. Phipps. London, 1762. 74pg.
19. The Riches of Gospel Grace opened in twelve discourses on the following interesting subjects of the New Testament. Warrington, 1776. 2 vols.
20. The River of God enriching his Church; or, the streams of Divine Grace flowing through Christ to his people, &c. Dublin.
21. The Triune God elucidated by the express Testimony of Divine Revelation &c. Dublin.
22. A serious address to Samuel Fisher of Norwich, concerning the errors charged upon him by the fictitious Quaker, &c. London, 1773. 56pg.
23. A short account of Ann Rogers. By John Johnson 1793. 11 pg.
24. Fisher, Samuel: The Christian warfare; or the character of a gospel minister; represented in a sermon, occasioned by the death of Mr. John Johnson, of Liverpool; as delivered in St. Margaret's chapel, Norwich; April 10th, 1791. With some additions. Liverpool.
25. Fisher, Samuel: Original letters in two volumes. To which is prefixed a succinct account of his life and writings, by the editor. Norwich, 1800. 825pg.