

**TRUE EVANGELISM,  
and Other Addresses**



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# TRUE EVANGELISM

Scriptures read: Luke 24:45-49; Mark 16:14-16; Matt. 28:16-20; 1 Cor. 1:18-24; 2:1-6; 1 Thess. 1:5-7; 2:13.

Whatever else might be said of the assemblies which are professedly gathered unto the name of the Lord Jesus Christ alone, it is generally acknowledged that these two things characterize them all: (1) that they are, by the grace of God, free from every taint of modernism, and, (2) that they maintain a pure gospel testimony. We may heartily thank God that it is so, without any spirit of self-congratulation, but we may well be on our guard also, lest the enemy find a way of corrupting either the doctrine or the method of working. I suspect it may be easier to do the latter than the former, although there is a definite connection between the two.

We are living in a day when evangelistic campaigns have become popular, when conversion has been made "easy" for great masses of people, and we read of thousands being "swept into the kingdom of God." But the question must arise in the minds of all sober-thinking Christians: How much of all this is the real working of the Spirit of God? And another question is: To what extent may modern methods be employed in the work of the gospel, without violating those scriptural principles by which every true servant of Christ desires to be governed?

I propose, therefore, to bring those principles to your notice, and to consider their bearing on the work of evangelism.

Let me first state that the object of all evangelism is to bring men truly to Christ for salvation—and not only for salvation, but for discipleship. The object should never be to merely obtain professions of faith, or to make church members. Our aim must be the true spiritual conversion and regeneration of our hearers.

It is of the utmost importance, therefore, to ask ourselves what is involved in a work of genuine conversion. Scripture bears abundant testimony to the fact that the converting of the soul to God is a divine work. It is by the agency of the Spirit of God, and the means employed is the Word of God, which is "quick and powerful." Let us dwell a little on this.

It is said in Acts 15 that God is taking out from among the nations a people for His name. God himself is the doer of that work, and He is doing it by means of the preaching of the gospel. It was He who provided salvation by the giving of His Son. Man's part—to his shame be it said—was to provide the occasion for it, by his sinfulness; but salvation has been provided by God alone. Christ's death is the only

answer to man's sin, and in that death a full atonement has been made. We may well rejoice in the knowledge of this, but God's work did not finish there. The gospel feast has been provided, but men must be brought in to partake of it.

In this connection let us remember the three parables of Luke 15. The first tells us of the work of the Saviour: the Good Shepherd undertakes to recover the sheep that was lost. In the second, the work of the Holy Spirit is portrayed: the woman with her candle and broom representing that activity in the soul when the light of God is applied to the conscience, and error and misconception are swept away. In the parable of the prodigal, it is the Father's reception and forgiveness of the repentant one that is emphasized; but there could have been none of this, if the previous activity had not been engaged in.

If we think of conversion as a new birth (John 3), we are immediately brought to realize that it is an operation of God's Spirit. The picture of it is the first picture provided in Scripture. After the original work of creation, the earth was found to be "without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters." So also is the movement of the Spirit of God in the soul. It is a mysterious work, and none may analyse it, yet we know this much: it is brought about by the application of God's truth to the conscience. We are "born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the Word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever." (1 Pet. 1:23.) Again, in John 1:13 we are told that those who become children of God through receiving Christ (ver. 12) are those who have been born, not because of any activity of man, but of God. Still, there is the believing on His name, which presupposes the preaching of the gospel.

In the scriptures read from Corinthians and Thessalonians we see a similar truth. The Thessalonians "turned to God from idols, to serve the living and true God," but it was because the gospel came unto them "not in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost." And they received it "not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God," and this word wrought effectually in them. That word had nothing to borrow from men. It was God's word, living and powerful, and it wrought effectually in all who believed.

The consideration of this should bring us to the conclusion that in all true evangelism the great desideratum is to present the word of God, the word of the truth of the gospel, having confidence in its efficacy to convict the conscience, convince the mind, and captivate the heart.

That word is "the word of the cross." It can never be a popular gospel, for it is the message that emphasises the sinfulness of man in all

its hideousness, and demands that there be a true repentance of it. It announces, too, the fact of Christ' being made sin for us, and His dying, the Just for the unjust, to bring us to God. It calls us out from the world, and from all worldliness and pride and vanity, to become humble followers of the One who went forth bearing His cross. It is a word utterly unacceptable to any man, unless the Spirit of God operates to convince and convert him. To bring souls to the point of giving mere mental assent to a doctrinal proposition, or of responding emotionally to an appeal for decisions, instead of bringing them into vital contact with Christ, is not the true work of God.

Paul was very conscious of this at Corinth. He trusted not "in excellency of speech or of wisdom," but preached "Christ crucified," as the power of God. He was in fear and trembling lest the true word of God should be replaced by any persuasive words of his own, and souls be made to rest on human wisdom instead of divine revelation. It seems that the apostle was very aware of the possibility of producing spurious conversions. He knew that nothing but a work of God in the soul would produce permanent results.

This is where much present-day evangelism fails. Instead of entertaining such a fear of producing spurious results, there is an inordinate desire to obtain professions of faith, and people are invited to hold up their hands, stand to their feet, or make some other visible manifestation, as a sign of their acceptance of the gospel. The adoption of such methods reveals, it would seem, a desire to make conversion more easy; but, after all, conversion is either a divine work or it is nothing. If the Holy Spirit has wrought in the soul, if repentance has been produced, and faith in Christ exercised, this will doubtless lead to a spontaneous confession with the lips. But why call for an outward sign which may not, and frequently does not, correspond to the reality of true conversion? Surely the apostle would have repudiated such a procedure, and so should we, for conversion to God is the same experience in the twentieth century as in the first.

We may well stop and ask ourselves the question: Just what is that supernatural experience of conversion? And from the testimony of Scripture concerning it, we may answer as follows:

(1) It means repenting and turning to God. This means that the sinner is brought to realize that he is guilty and lost, that he accepts God's verdict against him, and that he abandons all thought of justifying himself. (2) It means believing the message of the gospel. This includes believing the testimony of Scripture as to the person of Christ: who He is—His deity, His pre-existence, His coming into the world as Man, His sinlessness—and then His giving Himself as a sacrifice for sin. It also includes belief in His resurrection and exaltation at God's right

hand, and His ability to save to the uttermost all who come to God by Him. (3) Conversion also means accepting or receiving Christ as Saviour. That means that I not only recognize His ability to save, but I definitely commit myself to Him. (4) It also means depending on His finished work for salvation. We recognize the value of His sacrifice, we believe the testimony of God's Word about it, and we present that as our only plea before the bar of divine justice. (5) And finally, it means that such is our confidence in Christ, that we no longer entertain any doubts as to our personal salvation but gladly confess Him before men as the One whom we know to be our Saviour and Lord.

The evangelist who has any conception of the greatness of the divine miracle of conversion can never be satisfied with any kind of imitation. But it is to be feared that many preachers today have not only a defective theology with regard to the nature of the new birth, but also a careless attitude toward the possibility of doing incalculable harm to souls, by leading them into an artificial experience, which, instead of carrying them nearer to the kingdom of God, might conceivably cause them to become utterly careless as to their true standing before God. There are all too many hypocrites in Christendom already, without our contributing to the making of them.

Let us turn now to the three passages we have read from the Gospels: passages which contain our Lord's instructions to His apostles and to those who would succeed them in the apostolic or evangelistic ministry. Whatever may be faulty in the thinking of man, we may be sure that our Lord's instructions were given in the language most suited to the purpose for which He spoke.

In Luke the word is that it was necessary for Christ to suffer and to rise the third day, "and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name among all nations." Consider the words carefully. The death and resurrection of Christ having been accomplished, and salvation being provided, it remained that this salvation be taken to the nations in the message of the gospel. But observe how the Lord expresses it. It was necessary, He says, "that repentance and remission of sins be preached in His name."

Is this what we preach today? Is our preaching characterized by a solemn call to repentance, with a view to the obtaining of the forgiveness of sins? We must remember that the sin question remains for every unconverted man and woman, and will remain, until true repentance is produced. Repentance, which is the forming of a right judgment of oneself, in view of one's sins, and also in view of God's goodness, is an essential condition for obtaining forgiveness. The sinner's former thoughts and judgment of himself must be abandoned and God's verdict accepted. But to this end the light of God's truth

must be brought to bear on the conscience. In no other way can repentance be produced, and this shows us the necessity of a heart-searching ministry that will make the sinner conscious of his guilt and of his need of salvation.

The first of our Lord's parables in Matt. 13 teaches us that the good seed of the gospel will not bear fruit in any kind of soil. There must be the preparation of the soil to receive the seed. The stony-ground and thorny-ground hearers are comparable to the many who make a profession of faith without having experienced any true conviction of sin or true repentance. Paul knew that his business was to testify "repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ." This is a very different kind of message from the modern one which asks people to give their hearts or lives to Jesus, or to signify by some gesture that they want to follow Him.

The word in Mark 16 is in the form of a command to go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. And it is said that the attitude of the hearers toward that message would determine their destiny. Those who believed and were baptized would be saved; those who disbelieved would be condemned. The consideration of all that is involved in this solemn declaration will prevent our having any light thought as to the work of evangelism. Well may we exclaim with the apostle: "Who is sufficient for these things?"

The preaching of the gospel is a solemn business, and great is the responsibility of everyone who stands up in Christ's name as a witness to His truth. He is a saviour of life unto life in those that are saved, and of death unto death in those that perish. His business is to bring the sinner face to face with his responsibility, and then point him to Christ. If he does this faithfully, earnestly, and lovingly, he has completed his task. For if the gospel does not produce repentance and faith, nothing else will. Appeals for "decisions," when the gospel message has not smitten the conscience or melted the heart, must be productive of artificial results. Let us preach the word then, confident that faith will come by the hearing of it, and not otherwise.

There is nothing more wonderful than the word of the cross faithfully and earnestly presented. Yet much of present-day preaching is anything but that. With many, evangelism is no more than a constant preaching about hell. Now let me not be misunderstood. I believe in hell and all God's Word says about it, and in the preaching of the gospel there is room for the element of warning, in view of the wrath to come. Let us do it earnestly and tenderly. If we speak of hell, let us do it with a sob in our throat, not in a harsh and uncouth manner, for this would only reveal how little we understood or believed it ourselves. But when we have given our faithful warning, let us



remember that what we have still to give is the gospel. That warning was not the word of the cross, or God's good news to the sinner.

We have known other evangelists who did little else than entertain their hearers with conversion stories. Now a good illustration may be very useful in its place. Our Lord used parables in this way, as illustrations of spiritual ideas. But these should never take the place of the message. It is the gospel alone that has converting power, and that gospel is the word that tells us the meaning of Calvary.

If you would break the sinner's heart and bring him to the Saviour, you must lead him to the cross. And there is a way to the cross from every text of the Bible. Whatever your starting point may be, whatever your special text or subject, remember that your terminus is the cross. You must lead your hearers to rest by faith on the finished work of the Saviour.

And when you so preach Christ, be sure that your own soul is captivated by the truth you set forth. Paul says in Romans that he served or worshipped God in his spirit in the gospel. That I take to mean that as he proclaimed "the gospel of God concerning His Son," his own heart was so enraptured by the glory of it that his spirit went up to God in worship. Avoid professional preaching. Do not say things just because they come to mind or because you have said them many times before. It is easy to preach like a machine-gun if you allow your tongue to go ahead of your heart. Say only what you feel, and say it in a dignified and warm-hearted way. Speak to the consciences and hearts of your hearers, and be sure that you speak to them of the Saviour.

Among the Galatians Paul set forth Christ graphically, as though crucified among them. And as he did so he travailed in birth for them. Is it any wonder that souls were saved through his preaching? Elsewhere he speaks of his gospel ministry as an opening of blinded eyes to behold the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, or as an ambassador's ministry of reconciliation, or a making known of the unsearchable riches of Christ. For him it was ever a glorious ministry, to be undertaken with fear and trembling, lest he should fail to glorify God and deliver souls. Go then and preach this gospel of the cross, and as you uplift Christ, souls will be attracted to Him and become His true disciples.

Now, finally, let us consider the words of our Lord's commission, as found at the end of Matthew's Gospel. They are words of absolute authority, and they constitute Christ's marching orders for all His true servants. First He announces that all authority is given unto Him in heaven and on earth. It is as though He said: "All heaven is ready to obey Me; angels and archangels await my command; but the command

that *they* would gladly obey, I give to *you*: Go ye, therefore." Can any professed servant of Christ dare to ignore or modify the terms of this solemn charge? The terms are these: (1) Make disciples of all nations; (2) baptize them in the triune name of God; and (3) teach them to obey all things. And the promise that follows, "Lo I am with you always, even unto the end of the age," should help us to realize that these instructions are valid and binding throughout the present Christian era. Yet how feebly have they been obeyed.

It is quite common in our time to hear of great evangelistic campaigns in which there has been an attempt to follow the lines of our Lord's commission. The evangelist has been satisfied to obtain a large number of decisions or professions; yet in doing so he has scarcely begun to obey the Lord's command. In the first place the command was to "make disciples" (the word *matheteusate* has this meaning). Undoubtedly the making of disciples was to be accomplished by the preaching of the gospel, but it was to be the effectual preaching of the gospel, producing true conversions. Secondly, the command was to baptize the converts in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And thirdly there was the subsequent responsibility to give to the converted and baptized ones the necessary instruction as to their future obedience in the things of the Lord.

These instructions were faithfully carried out by the apostles, as the books of the Acts testifies. These faithful men so preached that many believed and were added unto the Lord. As many as believed were baptized, but the apostles did not only leave baptized believers behind them. They saw to it that the converts were gathered together in assembly capacity for their obedience to the Lord's commands, and for the maintenance of their fellowship and testimony. And so in every place Christian assemblies were raised up and ordered according to the apostolic instructions, and according to the Lord's plan.

True evangelism, then, contemplates not only the winning of true converts, but the setting of these converts in the path of discipleship. Baptism is itself the badge and pledge of discipleship, and in Scripture it is set in the closest association with conversion. The linking of converts with local assemblies of believers is also of the greatest importance, and it is the evangelist's duty to establish the principle of authority—the Lord's authority in the life of the believer—and the believer's obligation to be subject to the word of the Lord in all things. We dare not divorce the things which the Lord has joined together; for if we do not carry out all the terms of the great commission, that commission does not have authority for us, and even the part which we appear to do is not done in obedience to His word.

All of which will have repercussions at the judgment seat of Christ.

# CHRISTIAN BAPTISM

Scriptures read: Matt. 28:16-20; Mark 16:14-16; Acts 2:41-42;  
Romans 6:1-11; Col. 2:8-12; 1 Peter 3:18-22.

We have begun by reading again the words of our Lord's commission to His disciples immediately prior to His ascension, and you will remember that at the close of our address on evangelism we sought to emphasize the principle of authority. It is doubtful whether anything in the life of a believer can be of greater importance than his recognition of Christ's lordship and authority. The new convert's first concern ought to be to place himself entirely at the disposal of his Lord and Master, asking the question that Saul of Tarsus asked: "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" And if he does ask this question sincerely, he will probably receive the same answer that Saul received: "Arise and be baptized." (Acts 9:6; 22:16.)

There are some things that I wish to say about baptism that may appear to be very simple, but it is often the simplest things—the things that should be self-evident—that are overlooked. In many modern writings on the subject it will be found that elaborate theories have been devised, while plain facts have been ignored.

First of all, let me say this: that baptism, as found in Scripture, always stands at the threshold of Christian experience. That is to say, it is always connected with the work of evangelism, and is mentioned in relation to the conversions resulting from that work. It is never mentioned, for example, in connection with the birth of infants.

So we read in Acts 2 that "they who gladly receive his word (the gospel preached by Peter) were baptized." In chapter 8, the Samaritans who believed Philip preaching the things concerning the kingdom of God, and the name of Jesus Christ, were baptized, both men and women. In chapter 10, Peter preaches to the Gentiles in the house of Cornelius, and it is those who believed and received the Holy Spirit whom he commands to be baptized. So also in chapter 16, the Philippian jailer with all his house hears the word of the Lord, and when he and all his have believed, they are baptized. And so on.

But there is something even more important than the order observable in apostolic practice. Baptism is a divine institution, and Christian baptism should always be thought of as something which the Lord Himself commanded. It is here that the principle of authority is of special importance to the evangelist. How can he teach new converts to "observe all things" whatsoever the Lord commanded, if he does not himself show them the example by carrying out His command in relation to baptism?

The only command to baptize is the one included in the Lord's commission as recorded in Matt. 28. It is very important to observe this. In the book of the Acts and in the epistles we may learn how the apostles and others carried out the terms of the commission, but the commission itself is our only word of authority for baptizing. So that if we baptize at all, we must do it in accordance with that command.

Even Paul, though he received a special commission at the time of his conversion to go to the Gentiles "to open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God," did not receive any special command to baptize. Yet he did baptize, as we shall presently see, for he knew the Lord's commission of Matt. 28 was valid for him and for all.

What, then, is the command? It is first of all a command to evangelize, as we have already seen. For there never would be occasion to baptize anyone, apart from the work of evangelism. This should be plain and simple enough for anyone to see, but there are those who will cavil at it.

Some have tried to evade the plain meaning of the commission by playing with the word *matheteusate*. It is unfortunate that this word should have been rendered "teach" in the Authorized Version, but all the accurate versions (J.N.D., R.V., Newberry, etc.) have translated it "make disciples." And the making of disciples could only be accomplished by the preaching of the gospel.

This is very evident if we compare Matt. 28 with Mark 16. In the latter passage the Lord says: "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved." While the language is different (for the words were spoken on a different occasion), there is a definite correspondence of thought. The gospel was to be preached in all the world, or among all the nations; disciples were to be made by this means, that is, converts or believers; and these believers were to be baptized. This simple comparison of scripture with scripture makes it quite impossible for us to accept theories that have been put forth by some writers whose aim has been to make baptism applicable to others than those who have heard and accepted the gospel. "There is not a word about believing," they tell us naively, "in Matthew 28." Of course there isn't. But there is the corresponding word "make disciples," which means bringing them to the faith, as a comparison with Mark 16 plainly shows.

Who, then, are to be baptized, according to the commission of Matt. 28? Plainly those who have been made disciples. "But," we are told, "the antecedent of 'them' is the nations'." Are we then to baptize the nations as such? That has been the policy of the Roman Catholic Church, and as a result Christendom today contains millions

of baptized pagans. But was that what the Lord contemplated when He said: "Go ye, therefore, make disciples of all the nations"? Clearly not. The object of the apostles was not merely to make professing Christians, but to make disciples, and, having made them, to baptize them. "He that believeth and is baptized" can never be construed to mean: he that is baptized with a view to believing.

In the commission given by the Lord we have, then, authority to baptize believers or disciples, and none others. It would be surprising, therefore, if we were to find in the book of the Acts or in any of the epistles that the apostles had gone beyond the terms of the commission and baptized any but converts. There was of course the possibility of being deceived, as in the case of Simon Magus and others, and this possibility exists today. But this is a very different thing from baptizing those who have made no profession of faith.

A careful reading of the New Testament will reveal that, consequent upon the preaching of the gospel, the uniform practice was that as people were converted to God they were baptized. We have already seen several examples of this, and others may be added. The eunuch in chapter 8 of the Acts, and Saul of Tarsus in chapter 9, were both baptized after conversion.

In Acts 19 Paul found "certain disciples" at Ephesus who had been baptized with the baptism of John, and he thereupon gave them further instruction to bring them into the proper light of Christianity and to faith in the Saviour. On their reception of this truth, these disciples were baptized as Christians.

But it will be objected that the apostles baptized whole households, and we are not to suppose that all the members of these households were necessarily converted. Well, if we had no information on the subject, I should say that we had every right to suppose that the apostles obeyed the command of the Lord and baptized only believers or disciples. But we are not left to supposition, for we are told distinctly enough that these households were composed of believers. Of the Philippian jailer we are told that he rejoiced, "believing in God with all his house." A previous verse tells us that the word of the Lord had been spoken to all of them. The same chapter tells us of Lydia, who was baptized, "and her household"; and the last verse of the chapter tells us that the members of her household were "brethren." So also we read in 1 Cor. 1:16 that Paul baptized the household of Stephanas; but in the sixteenth chapter of the same epistle we are told that these were the "firstfruits of Achaia," that is to say, the first converts, and also that they had addicted themselves to the ministry." So if we were asked: "Do you believe in the baptism of households?" we should answer: "Certainly, provided they are believing households, like

those spoken of in Scripture.” Unfortunately, we do not see so many households converted today, for it is seldom that the first impact of the gospel reaches all the members simultaneously.

I would now ask you to consider the importance of baptism, as witnessed by the fact that it occupies a central place in the terms of the apostolic commission. Our Lord sent His messengers into all the world to evangelize and so make disciples, and we all realize the importance of that. He also commanded them to teach the converts to be obedient in all things, and I trust we shall see the importance of that too. But between these two parts of the commission stands the command to baptize the converts. Surely there was divine wisdom in the placing of it just there. Let us never try to put it somewhere else. As I said at the beginning, it stands at the threshold of Christian experience and was intended to be the accompaniment of every genuine experience of conversion.

Being, moreover, an institution or ordinance of the Lord, and standing in such an association, baptism cannot be supposed to be of trivial significance. We shall not have to depend on inferences or deductions, to arrive at its meaning. As there is a plain command, and plain examples, so there will be plain doctrine concerning it. And we shall lose a great deal if we miss its true and proper significance.

One of the biggest blunders of Christendom has been to attribute to baptism a vital regenerative power; the true regenerating experience of conversion being unknown. It was this false notion that first prompted people to have their children baptized, in the days when Tertullian protested against it. Other theories are that by baptism children are brought into the kingdom of heaven, or into the new covenant, or into a sphere of privilege or profession.

It is spoken of as an initiatory rite, but we may ask: Into what does it initiate? We may speak of initiation if Christianity is a mere religion, and not a vital experience. We may speak of a sphere of profession, if it is legitimate for anyone to profess Christianity without becoming a Christian. As for a sphere of privilege, we may ask what are the privileges of baptized children? It is undoubtedly a privilege to belong to a Christian family and experience the nurture and admonition of the Lord, but that is true without baptism. Children of believing parents are said to be holy, in a relative sense, but that is not on account of baptism, but on account of the relationship. Baptism is never mentioned in such a connection.

It has also been taught that children should be baptized because “of such is the kingdom of heaven.” If this is true, it is true of all children and not only of those who have believing parents. But Christ did not say to baptize such, but to suffer them to come to Him.

If it is said that parents have their children baptized because they have faith that these children will be eventually saved, we reply that they can have that faith without doing something which the Lord never commanded. If they think that by means of such premature baptism the children are put into a special class towards which God's grace will be made more available, we would remind them that God's grace is available to all men alike. And as regards children, we should have a poor conception of God's character if we supposed Him to be influenced in His attitude towards them by the fact of their having or not having been baptized. For it is not only believing parents who have done this, but millions of superstitious Romanists and others throughout the world who never knew what the gospel was, and much less the meaning of baptism.

All such theories and practices tend only to make young people less conscious of their need of individual conversion, which is the true starting point of Christian experience. And doubtless this was the enemy's object in sowing the tares of false doctrine in relation to baptism. Another harmful effect is that the true significance of the ordinance is weakened for many, because of its indiscriminate application to all kinds of people, and because of the many and various theories that have gathered around it.

It may be well to say just a word here also as to the mode of baptism. Authorities of all kinds acknowledge freely that the meaning of the word *baptizo* is to dip or immerse. In Luke 16, for instance, the rich man prays that Lazarus may be sent "that he may baptize the tip of his finger in water." Baptizing and sprinkling are two distinct actions, as may be seen in Lev. 14:16. When baptism is understood to signify burial and resurrection, as we shall presently see, it will be evident that immersion is the only appropriate mode. Sprinkling is well known to have been a heathen rite of initiation in the Chaldean mysteries, and Rome copied it from there.

A defence for the practice of pouring (or effusion) has been sought for by appealing to the fact that the baptism of the Spirit was a pouring out of the Spirit. But we must remember that water baptism is never said to be a type or figure of the Spirit baptism, but of our burial with Christ. The baptism of the Spirit, as far as we are concerned, refers to our being put by the Spirit's action into the body of Christ.

It remains for us now to see what is the meaning and purpose of baptism. To this end, we shall keep specially in mind the scriptures read from Romans, Colossians and first Peter; these being the passages which deal with the doctrinal aspect of our subject. There are Christians who are very satisfied to know that they have been baptized

as believers, by immersion; but it is to be feared that many of them have but feebly appreciated the significance of the act.

The passage in Romans 6 is particularly helpful, and I would ask you first of all to notice just where it occurs. Romans, as you know, is the epistle which gives us an extended exposition of the doctrine of the gospel. Chapters 1 to 3 give us the moral history of mankind, and the summing up of the evidence against all men, to bring in the verdict of guilty before God. Then, on to chapter 5, we have the doctrine of justification by grace and by faith in Christ alone. The question of our sins being thus settled, a new question arises: "Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound?" And it is in relation to this question that the subject of baptism is brought in. We shall never understand baptism unless we see this clearly.

The doctrine of the gospel has two main parts: the first, which explains how God has dealt with our sins, and the second, which shows how He has dealt with ourselves. Our sins have been forgiven, and we have been justified freely by His grace, but what about our sinful selves? Chapters 6 to 8 answer that question, and the subject is introduced with a brief exposition of the meaning of baptism.

Let us remind ourselves here that the truth of the gospel has been summed up for us in these words: "That Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the scriptures." These are the great foundation facts of the gospel, and every true baptism is a reflection of their glory. Every time a new convert goes into the waters of baptism, in the likeness of Christ's burial, and emerges therefrom, in the likeness of His resurrection, testimony is borne to the fact that someone has trusted in the Christ who did so die and rise again.

But this is not said to be the purpose of baptism. The believer who is in figure put in the place of death and burial with Christ by baptism, to be raised in the likeness of His resurrection, while he visibly shows his association or identification with the One who died for him, is announcing the further truth that he himself has died with Christ, has been buried with Him, and with Him has been raised again. This is true in the reckoning of God, but the desirable thing is that it should be known and held to be true in the reckoning of the believer himself.

So when the question is raised: "Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound?" the apostle's answer by the Spirit is: "God forbid. How shall we who died to sin, live any longer therein? Know ye not that so many of us as were baptized unto Christ Jesus were baptized unto His death? Therefore, we have been buried with Him by baptism unto death: *in order that*, as Christ was raised up from among the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life."



The object, then, of our being "buried with Him by baptism unto death" is that hereafter we might walk in newness of life, in the likeness of Christ's resurrection. In other words, the purpose of our being laid in the place of death, in identification with Christ's death, is that we may reckon ourselves thereafter to have finished with the life of sin that formerly characterized us; and likewise, having emerged from that figurative burial place, that we may be conscious of the responsibility to live a new kind of life.

This is further emphasized in the verses that follow. If we have gone into death figuratively with Christ, our lives will reflect the power of His resurrection, as when a seed is planted and bears fruit. We learn that our "old man" was crucified with Him, and with this in view: that the body of sin in us—that is, the whole mass of sinful propensities and motions—might be annulled, or rendered inoperative, so that we might practically be freed from the power of sin.

The beauty and value of this teaching should be evident to all of us, and the suitability of baptism to set it forth should also be evident. Its appropriateness and importance at the beginning of one's Christian experience is wholly to be admired, as exhibiting the wisdom of Him who gave it.

At the same time, we should not fail to see the unsuitability, not to say impossibility, of applying this doctrine to any but true believers. Only of such can it be said that they died with Christ; only such can appropriate the meaning of that death with Him in a practical way; only such can be buried with Him by baptism in order to walk in newness of life.

Colossians 2 has a similar thought. In Judaism there was the carnal ordinance of circumcision, but in Christianity the true spiritual circumcision consists of the putting off of the body of the sins of the flesh. As we have seen in Romans 6, this is only possible by the appropriating of the death of Christ, and our death with Him, as that which removes us from before the eye of God. And it is in this connection that baptism is brought in: "Buried with Him in baptism, wherein also ye were raised with Him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised Him from the dead." Here it is not only faith in what God has done, but faith in what He is able to do: He has raised up Christ from the dead, and He is able so to operate in us as to make our moral resurrection a reality. Baptism is in view of this.

Again in 1 Peter 3 the thought of resurrection is prominent. Noah and his family, sheltered in the ark, passed through the deluge and emerged into a new world. The water that meant judgment for the world bore up the ark. Baptism also, the corresponding type or figure, means salvation for us in a practical way. Having a good conscience,

in view of justification, we can no longer be satisfied with the old way of life. The good conscience demands a new mode of existence, and baptism points the way to this. It does not get rid of any of the vileness of our old nature—"the filthiness of the flesh," or "the body of death"—but the truth it sets forth enables us to overcome it. Christ is resurrected, and we are resurrected with Him. We are on the other side of death and judgment, as were Noah and his family after the flood. There is no way back to the old world, and our baptism signifies just that. If we hold ourselves to be linked with Christ on the resurrection side of death, we shall know His power to deliver from sin.

Thus it is seen from all three passages that contain the doctrine of baptism that its practical application is to the life of the believer. Its saving influence depends upon our understanding and appropriation of its meaning. It does not fit us for heaven, or change our standing before God, or affect the destiny of our souls in any way, but it should help to fit us for earth by making us conscious of having been cut off from the former life of sin and identified with our risen Lord.

It is not to be supposed that anyone understands this fully, on the occasion of his own baptism, but every baptism is a reminder of it and an occasion to expound the truth, and this is what we need.

May the Lord, then, write upon our hearts this solemn lesson: that in baptism we have renounced the former life of sin (as in Romans), the flesh with its worldly wisdom (as in Colossians), and the world of corruption (as in 1 Peter). We profess to have died and been raised with Christ, but let us see to it that we live as resurrected ones, in newness of life. But let us yield ourselves unto God as those that are alive from the dead, and our members as instruments of righteousness unto God. Let us see to it that our "old man" is practically annulled in all his operations, and let the world and worldly ways be left behind for good. That will be the best exposition of the meaning of baptism; and the name of the triune God that has been invoked upon us will be honoured and glorified.

## THE LORD'S SUPPER

Scriptures read: Matt. 26:20, 26-30; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:19-20;  
Acts 2:41-42; 20:6-7; 1 Cor. 11:20-32.

Having considered the place, purpose and meaning of baptism, let us now look at that other precious ordinance called in 1 Corinthians the Lord's Supper. In the book of the Acts it is referred to simply as the Breaking of Bread, but I believe that what we have in 1 Corinthians is its proper distinctive name. In the same way, we may observe with regard to the Lord's Day, that in the Gospels and the Acts it is simply called the first day of the week, but in time that precious day came to be known as the Lord's Day, and so it is described in the first chapter of the Revelation. The fact that the Holy Spirit has used the same adjective (*kuriakos*) with reference to the supper and the day suggests an association of the one with the other, and Scripture definitely points to the observance of the Lord's Supper on the Lord's Day.

As we said with regard to baptism, so we may say with regard to the observance of this ordinance: its institution by the Lord Himself, in the most deliberate and solemn way, on the night of His betrayal, points to a high and holy purpose and a precious meaning. On that memorable night, the passover was partaken of by the disciples for the last time. That feast, celebrated yearly down through the centuries, had pointed forward to the sacrifice of the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world. And now the hour of sacrifice had come; the Son of man was going "as it was written of Him." Clearly the passover would be no longer needed, but the Lord, in His wisdom and affection, saw the desirability of a simple commemorative feast that would point back to His atoning death and remind His redeemed ones of the cost of their redemption, and at the same time provide the occasion for an expression of their love and devotion to Him.

So from the elements of the passover feast our Lord took a loaf of bread and a cup of wine, with which to institute the Supper that has become so precious to us. Giving thanks to God—for that is the meaning of "He blessed" (compare *eulogesas* in Matt. and Mark with *eucharistesas* in Luke and 1 Cor.)—He broke the bread and gave it to His disciples, saying, "Take eat; this is My body which is given for you: this do in remembrance of Me." Likewise also, having again given thanks, He gave to them the cup which contained the fruit of the vine, saying, "Drink ye all of it; for this is My blood of the new covenant, shed for many, for the remission of sins."

It is to be hoped that we all see the simplicity and beauty of this,

as well as its holy character. Well might we shrink from the thought of introducing any modification or detracting in any way from the divine intention. Ecclesiasticism has made a "sacrament" of it, and a means of grace, and Catholicism has created the mass, with its blasphemous "renewal of the sacrifice of Christ" and its doctrine of transubstantiation. Scripture, however, is simple and clear. In 1 Cor. 10 the bread is described as "the bread which we break"; that is to say, it is still bread when we break it; and the contents of the cup are likewise described as the fruit of the vine, after the giving of thanks.

But while we may be free from every kind of superstitious notion, let us see that we do not fall into the contrary error of partaking of the Supper in an unworthy or irreverent manner. We do not find the notion of a clergyman anywhere in Scripture, and indeed it is contrary to the genius of Christianity; nor do we need any consecrated building in which to partake of it—an upper room or its equivalent will serve us as well as it served the Lord and His disciples—but there are conditions of a more important order that must govern us when we come together for this holy purpose, as we may learn from the passages of Scripture that we have read together.

Let us begin by asking these questions: Who may partake of the Lord's Supper?—and where?—and when?—for what purpose, in what manner, and in what conditions?

In seeking the answers to these questions, I would ask you first of all to consider without prejudice that little outline of Christian conduct or practice given for our instruction in chapter 2 of the book of the Acts. I refer to the two verses that we read, 41 and 42, as setting forth what was done by the first Christian converts at Jerusalem, immediately after the momentous events of the day of Pentecost. Following the preaching of Peter, the converts were baptized, and thereupon they took their place in association with the already-existing company of believers. It is said that they were "added unto them," and the passive form of the verb reminds us of the Lord's own definition of a local Christian assembly in Matt. 18:20: "For where two or three are gathered together unto My name, there am I in the midst of them." The three thousand converts at Pentecost, consequently on their baptism, were gathered into visible association with the Lord's name by being added to the local assembly in Jerusalem. This was the normal and natural procedure at the beginning, and so it should be today.

Now as then, every true believer becomes at conversion a member of the body of Christ, the one true church of divine creation into which no false material can enter, and from which no true material can be excluded. But Scripture not only contemplates our belonging to that divine, spiritual unity; it speaks also of local churches or assemblies:

visible companies of believers who were gathered unto the name of our Lord Jesus Christ; and it is very important for new converts to learn, not only their relation to the body of Christ, but also their relation to the local assembly. The latter (not the former) is committed to human responsibility, and while it is the Holy Spirit who gathers to the name of Christ, it is the local assembly that receives to its fellowship, as it is also the local assembly that may have occasion to put away from its midst anyone who may have become unworthy of association with it. Such action is never contemplated in relation to the universal church, but only in relation to the local company.

So it is not sufficient for the believer to know that he belongs to the one true church of Christ, the unity of the Spirit. If he is subject to Scripture and the guidance of the Spirit, he will be led into association with the local visible company that is gathered to Christ's name, if such a company exists in his locality. It is the existence of such a company that ensures, or makes possible, the carrying out of the Lord's mind with regard to ministry of the Word, fellowship, the Lord's Supper, collective prayer, and many other important matters, such as spiritual oversight, discipline, and public testimony. These are all features of the local assembly which should not be divorced from one another.

In relation to our present subject, it should be seen that a company was formed at Jerusalem in which (1) the apostles' doctrine was taught, (2) Christian fellowship was enjoyed, (3) the Lord's Supper was observed, and (4) united prayer was engaged in. So that normally, it may be said, the Lord's Supper is partaken of by those who are together in assembly fellowship, according to the will of God. The assembly is the sphere where conditions of holiness are maintained: by the preaching of the Word, by the exercise of godly oversight, by the adjustment of personal relationships, and, when necessary, by the application of scriptural discipline. These are all safeguards that help to ensure the proper celebration of the Supper. At the same time, we should remember that the breaking of bread, that is, the partaking of the one loaf, is said in 1 Cor. 10 to be an expression of the unity of the body of Christ, and we should think of it in this way, lest we partake in a sectarian spirit.

It may be helpful to state here that Scripture never speaks of receiving to the Breaking of Bread. Reception is always to the fellowship of the assembly. If a visitor comes from another assembly, and is unknown in the place to which he comes, he should bring with him a letter of commendation, as was the practice in apostolic times. This would not be a letter certifying that he belongs to a certain circle or association of assemblies, but that he is a brother known to be walking according to the truth and worthy to be received.

From Acts 2 we may also learn that the observance of the Lord's Supper was of frequent occurrence. It was one of the four activities in which the Christians "continued." Of the other three activities mentioned (the teaching of the doctrine, the enjoyment of the fellowship, and the meetings for collective prayer) it would occur to no one to suppose that they were engaged in only on rare occasions. Yet many Christians and denominations today have seen fit to relegate this precious ordinance to the place of infrequent observance.

When we turn to Acts 20, we find there a plain indication that the Lord's Supper was partaken of by the early Christians every first day of the week. Paul and his companions had crossed over from Macedonia to Troas, arriving there in the early part of the week and remaining seven days with the brethren, in spite of the urgency of Paul's desire to push on to Jerusalem. Then we read the enlightening words: "And upon the first day of the week, when we (or the disciples) came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them . . . and continued his speech until midnight." From a simple and natural reading of this verse, no one can fail to understand that the occasion for the coming together of these disciples was not Paul's preaching but the Breaking of Bread. The Breaking of Bread was the regular weekly occurrence; Paul's preaching or discourse was the extra event which followed the Breaking of Bread and was continued until midnight. That other breaking of bread, by the way, which took place in the small hours of the morning, was evidently Paul's partaking of a simple meal, in view of the long night vigil and the early departure—not to be confused with the assembly's partaking of the Lord's Supper, which had been the object of their coming together. Paul was too spiritually intelligent to displace the Lord's own institution in order to make room for a sermon.

No one can read the first Epistle to the Corinthians without realizing that the Lord's Supper occupied a principal place in the practice of the assemblies in those early days. The words "as often as ye eat this bread and drink this cup" refer to what was a regular occurrence with them. The second verse of chapter 16 points to the same weekly meeting. But while the Corinthians partook of a supper with all regularity, the apostle had to complain that this was not "the *Lord's* Supper." What did he mean? The meaning is evident from what follows. The Corinthians had lost the true conception of the Supper as a divine and sacred institution. With them it had degenerated into an ordinary meal—an occasion for eating and drinking. What they did was not in remembrance of the Lord, and they failed to discern His body. And because they were thus partaking unworthily of what

purported to be the Lord's Supper, the hand of the Lord was upon them in discipline. Many were weak and sickly among them, and some had fallen asleep in death.

So Paul takes the opportunity to re-state in the most solemn way what he had previously given as oral instruction: the institution of the Supper by the Lord Himself on the night of His betrayal. And having done so, he adds those instructions and recommendations to which we all do well to take heed, regarding the manner of our partaking of it. We must examine ourselves and judge ourselves beforehand, lest we partake of that Supper unworthily.

Here the Lord's Supper is seen to have a most sacred character: so sacred that the carnal or unworthy participation of it is seen to call down the discipline of God upon the whole assembly. Hence the need of constant vigilance on the part of the overseers in every assembly. This duty is not fulfilled by the mere exclusion of strangers. It primarily has to do with those who belong to the assembly. These should be constantly exhorted to put away "all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God."

The principle of Matt. 5:23, though it is expressed in the language of the old dispensation, has an undoubted application to the worship of Christians: "If thou bring thy gift to the altar and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift." This is a responsibility which falls upon every individual Christian, and the consideration of it should cause us to hesitate before partaking of the Supper in any light-hearted or careless way.

As to the purpose of the Lord's Supper, it is as the Lord stated it: it is in remembrance of Himself. But there is something else that needs to be said in this connection. The highest spiritual activity or exercise in which Christians may engage is worship, and this is something directly connected with our subject. To the Samaritan woman our Lord said: "The hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship Him." This true worship is something peculiar to Christianity. In the former dispensation, worship was a thing of figures and shadows; but true worship has now been made possible by these considerations: (1) the perfect sacrifice of Christ has put away our sins for ever; (2) the veil has been rent, and the way into the holiest has been made available for all believers; (3) believers have been constituted a holy priesthood to offer up spiritual sacrifices to God; and (4) the Holy Spirit has been given.

Now it is true that our spiritual priesthood does not apply only to the occasions when we come together in assembly capacity, nor is it only on such occasions that we worship. The whole life and walk of the believer should be a continual expression of worship to God. But it would be strange indeed if no provision had been made for collective worship. It may not be scriptural to speak of the Breaking of Bread as a worship meeting, but the finality of that meeting undoubtedly is worship. You do not come together primarily to worship, but to remember the Lord; but you cannot truly remember the Lord without being led into the experience of true worship. And this doubtless was the Lord's intention in the institution of the remembrance feast.

Worship is that attitude of the soul and spirit which rejoices in the contemplation of God's glory and grace as revealed in the person and work of His beloved Son. So the remembrance of Christ—His glorious person, His humiliation, His suffering and death, and all the significance of His wondrous sacrifice, as we are led by the Spirit into the contemplation of it—must produce in our souls the response of true worship. Such worship finds its expression in thanksgiving and praise, led by one and another of the brethren, or in suitable hymns sung by the whole company; as also in the silent response that goes up from grateful hearts as the bread and wine are passed from hand to hand and partaken of by all. This, when realized under the Holy Spirit's guidance, is the most blessed and elevating experience that we can know this side of heaven.

What then are the conditions necessary to its realization? It is evident that the purpose of the Lord will be defeated in such a meeting unless there is, first of all, a recognition of the priesthood of all believers, and, secondly, submission to the Holy Spirit's guidance, in the spirit of Ecclesiastes 5:1-2. This implies an absence of all human control or pre-arrangement. It also requires the suppression of all fleshly impulses. It should be realized that one carnally-minded brother, by his unguided, inopportune and unintelligent participation, may spoil the meeting by deviating it from its Spirit-directed course. Silences may be irksome to the flesh, but spiritual worshippers will prefer to wait for guidance, rather than fill the gap with whatever material may be at hand. When there is true waiting upon God, the Spirit will take of the things of Christ and bring them to our remembrance, so that the various exercises of the assembly will be co-ordinated in such fashion as to stamp a pattern on the the meeting. The thoughts expressed in prayer, in the singing of hymns, or in the reading of Scripture, will not form a miscellaneous collection of ideas, but rather a harmonious



picture of the glory and grace of our Lord. No one who has experienced the blessed reality of this could ever be satisfied with anything less.

A ritualistic service, with officiating priest or minister, is as foreign to the Lord's Supper as anything could possibly be. "Divine Service," so called, with a sermon as its principal feature, and the Lord's Supper added as something supplementary, is a reversal of the picture as we saw it in Acts 20. According to that picture, the disciples need to remember the Lord, and only when that holy object is accomplished do we think of a teaching ministry. The reading of Scripture, or a word of devotional ministry, with a view to drawing out our hearts in worship to the Lord, is doubtless in place at the Breaking of Bread, provided it be of the Spirit's prompting, but teaching or exhortation would hardly be in line with the character of the meeting, and should be postponed until later. When the Supper is given its true place as the centre of the assembly's activities, it means that the Lord Himself is given His true place.

Picture, if you will, a church building of pre-Reformation days. Look in at the door, and what do you see? The congregation has its attention focussed on the elevated platform at the far end of the building, where a robed priest, with his back to the people, is occupied in genuflections and recitations before an altar. That is priestcraft.

Come down to later times, and again look in at the open door of a church building. Again you see the congregation looking in the same direction. Again their attention is focussed upon a robed clergyman, but this time his face is towards them, and he has the Word of God before him. That is a great improvement on the previous picture, but much is still lacking.

Come now to a very simple edifice in more recent times, and look in upon the scene. In the centre of the room is a table, and on that table a loaf of bread and a cup of wine. The Christians are gathered around the table, and no man appears as presiding over that meeting. It is the Holy Spirit who presides there, and the thoughts and affections of the saints are concentrated on the person of the Lord Himself. This is the Christian assembly functioning normally with Christ as its centre. The first picture is Thyatira; the second is Sardis; the third is Philadelphia.

How grateful we should be that the Lord has granted such a recovery of apostolic practice in our times! And it may not be out of place to remind you that the restoration of the Lord's Supper to its proper place in the life of the assembly was coincidental with the re-

storation of the hope of our Lord's return. This was not surprising. It was on the eve of His crucifixion that the Lord instituted the Supper, and it was at the same time that He gave the promise of His coming again. So in the mind of Paul the two things are intimately associated when he says: "For as oft as ye eat this bread and drink this cup, ye do shew (or proclaim) the Lord's death till He come."

Summing up the reasons for the regular and frequent observance of the Lord's Supper, we may say: (1) It is the divinely appointed means of keeping ever fresh in our memories the love of our Saviour and the price paid for our redemption. (2) It provides the occasion and the inducement for the assembly's expression of gratitude and worship. (3) It reminds us of our living link with every member of Christ's body. (4) It serves as a monitor to control our conduct, for we dare not eat unworthily. (5) It tends to keep warm in our hearts the expectation of our Lord's return.

There is one word more I would like to say as to the effect of our so proclaiming "the Lord's death." Someone has said: "It is impossible to find two words, the bringing together of which has so important a meaning, as these two: the *death* of the *Lord*." Who is the Lord? He is the Lord of glory, the Prince of life, the ever-living One. And it is He who has died! Have you ceased to wonder at it? It was that you might never cease to wonder, but that your heart might be increasingly captivated by the wonder of it, that He provided this means of remembering Him "till he come." If your heart does not become increasingly attached to Him, and your life more humble and devoted, it is doubtful whether you remember Him in the way that He intended. Let us never be satisfied with the mere partaking of the emblems, but let us be sure that there is ever a fresh consecration of our being's ransomed powers to Him who loved us and gave Himself for us.

# FELLOWSHIP

Scriptures read: 1 Cor. 1:9; Eph. 3:8-11; 1 John 1:1-7.

May I ask you the pertinent question: Are you in fellowship? I suppose that many of you will answer by saying: Oh yes, I belong to such and such an assembly. But I did not ask: Do you belong to an assembly? I asked: Are you in fellowship? I do not know that the expression "in fellowship," is ever synonymous in Scripture with belonging to an assembly. You may have been in an assembly for a long time and yet not be truly in fellowship. Let us enquire then as to the meaning of fellowship as it is referred to in the Word of God.

But first of all it may be well to say what fellowship is not. It is not, as we have already said, mere church membership. Outward identification or association with an assembly is not fellowship. Nor is regular attendance at the assembly meetings an infallible evidence of being in fellowship. Fellowship has to do, not with physical presence, but with spiritual participation.

We know of a certain confederation or, "circle," of assemblies with well-defined limits, and in the language of a periodical that circulates amongst those believers, "the fellowship" means the visible association of those assemblies with one another without regard to the spiritual condition of them, or of the believers who compose them. Fellowship in this sense is nominal and sectarian.

But when we turn to the Word of God, we find the term employed in a much more elevated and worthy sense. There we learn that true Christian fellowship is a spiritual link created, first of all, between our souls and God, and then between us and our fellow-believers. It is essentially a spiritual, and not a nominal or official, link. It is something that God Himself has created, and one of the choicest fruits of Calvary. It is a new attitude, a sympathy, an affinity, a harmony, a sharing, an agreement, a companionship, and a co-operation—a living, heart warming experience that men of the world and carnal men could never know. It is a merging of human spirits in the enjoyment of God-given privileges, and a sharing in the experiences of Christ Himself.

In 1 Cor. 1:9, we are told that God has called us unto the fellowship of His Son Jesus Christ our Lord. There was a great deal at fault in the fellowship of the saints at Corinth: a great deal of carnality and much that the apostle needed to correct. How does he set about the task? He begins by reminding them that they have been called unto the fellowship of God's Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. The appreciation of this wonderful divinely inspired statement, in all of its fulness of meaning, would doubtless have proved a sufficient remedy for the

carnality, sectarianism, and all the ills of the Corinthian assembly. And doubtless it would be the cure also for many of the ills that afflict the assemblies today.

The fellowship of God's Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, must not be construed to mean merely our fellowship with one another, based upon what He has done for us. It includes that, doubtless, but it is primarily fellowship with Himself. We have been called into agreement, and sympathy, and harmony, and companionship with Himself. And only as we are in the enjoyment of this fellowship with Him can we enjoy Christian fellowship with one another.

Christians may have links of friendship with one another, and may on occasion spend pleasant hours in the enjoyment of one another's company, but if there is no sharing of spiritual thoughts or privileges relating to the Lord and His interests, there is no fellowship. Fellowship is my genuine Christian experience coming into contact with your genuine Christian experience.

This kind of fellowship should exist between all Christian people everywhere, because they all have been called to it, and the basis for it exists in the relationship that God has created. All Christians, having a living link with Christ, have also, for that same reason, a living link with one another; and it is a link that we dare not ignore. However, there are practical difficulties today, more than ever in the church's history, which make the enjoyment of this fellowship restricted and sometimes impossible. And many Christians find themselves torn between a desire to be faithful to God and the principles of His Word and an equally strong desire to enjoy and express the fellowship that is the blood-bought heritage of all true believers. Many of them are looking for guidance in connection with this very important matter, for there appears to be a great deal of confusion of thought.

In Eph. 3:8-9, it is seen as elsewhere in the New Testament, that in Christianity there is a twofold ministry. Verse 8 tells us of the gospel ministry, and a very blessed ministry it is. It consists of preaching among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ. This includes the presentation of all those foundation truths of the gospel as found in the Epistle to the Romans. But verse 9 goes on to tell us of that other ministry, no less important: the ministry of the Church.

The Church ministry is described as making all men see, "what is the fellowship of the mystery which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God." It is a ministry which is occupied not so much with the publicly-proclaimed blessings of the gospel—as forgiveness of sins, justification, regeneration, redemption, and adoption—but rather with the unfolding of the truth as to that wonderful thing called the church, a thing which was in the mind of God, but unrevealed

throughout the ages, a new creation brought into existence as a consequence of Christ's sacrifice and victory, and intimately related to His glorification and the furtherance of His interests in the world. Paul speaks of making all men see what is the fellowship of the mystery . . . "to the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in the heavenlies might be known through the Church the manifold wisdom of God."

Now of the two ministries mentioned—that of the gospel and that of the Church—it is to be observed that the thought of fellowship is connected with the latter. There are many Christians who in their thoughts and practices make fellowship relate to the blessings of the gospel. And it cannot be denied that the blessings of the gospel make possible a great measure of true fellowship between those who possess them. If you and I have obtained forgiveness of sins, we have something in common. And having things in common (spiritual things) is fellowship. But that is not exactly the fellowship of the mystery which we are to make all Christians see.

With the knowledge that the gospel brings, we may form a "fundamentalist church," as they are sometimes called, and if we were not further enlightened, we might be very happy there. We would enjoy a measure of fellowship with other believers based on the blessings of the gospel, but it would not be the fellowship of which Scripture speaks. Let me try to make this clearer to you.

Fellowship is a thing of degrees. There are those with whom I may have *no* fellowship; there are those with whom I may have *some* fellowship; and there are some with whom I may have *full* fellowship. I am told by Scripture to have no fellowship with unbelievers, or with the unfruitful works of darkness. I have no spiritual affinity with these, and any associations with unbelievers, in marriage, in business, or in religion, would constitute an unequal yoke. Light cannot have fellowship with darkness, and righteousness with lawlessness has nothing in common.

But I have something in common with all believers. When I read the Pilgrim's Progress and accompany John Bunyan out by the wicket gate and through the slough of despond, past Vanity Fair and the chained lions, I am in fellowship with him. I share the same experiences and I have the same reactions. When I sing the hymns of Toplady, or Horatius Bonar, I have fellowship with these men. I cannot avoid it. It is the linking of soul with soul by the influence of divine truth, and by the outgoing of the affections in response to the love of Christ. And so I have a measure of fellowship with the Roman-Catholic hymn-writer, Bernard of Clairvaux, when I sing:

"Jesus, the very thought of Thee  
With sweetness fills my breast."

For fellowship is a spiritual exercise, the measure of which is not prescribed by us arbitrarily, but is dependent on the measure of our mutual appreciation of the Lord and His truth. So that I may have, and must have, some fellowship with all who in any measure have a love for the Lord and His Word.

But again there are those with whom I may have *full* fellowship. On what does that depend? It depends on a number of things. Some people seem to think that it depends on our belonging to the same assembly, or the same circle of assemblies. But you may conceivably, belong to the same assembly, or a similar assembly, and not be in fellowship with me at all. Unconverted people have been known to belong to assemblies. The apostle John could say: "They went out from us, because they were not of us." It is a good thing when spiritual conditions in an assembly make false professors feel that it is no place for them. Such had been in the assembly but not of it and were never really in fellowship.

But believers also may be in an assembly without being really "in fellowship." They may be in a carnal condition—and the flesh cannot be in fellowship. They may even be living in sin, as was the man in 1 Cor. 5, who had to be put away. What happens when a believer, belonging to an assembly, commits a scandalous sin? You say, Well, we put him out of fellowship. No, you don't! What you do is to put him away from among you. But he was out of fellowship before you put him away. He was out of fellowship, both with God and with the people of God, when he committed that sin.

On the other hand it might be said that one could be put away wrongfully from an assembly by people of the Diotrophes type, without being put out of fellowship. No one can truly put you out of fellowship but yourself. In the case of Diotrophes, it was he rather who was out of fellowship when he acted in that high-handed way—not those who were cast out.

These extreme cases are used by way of illustration, but it should be evident to all that it is possible for true believers to be nominally or visibly identified with a Christian assembly, and yet, for a variety of reasons—worldliness, carnality, unjudged sin, a critical attitude, a sectarian spirit, etc.—be far from knowing and experiencing the reality of true Christian fellowship.

When I read in Acts 2:42 that the three thousand converts of Pentecost continued in the apostles' doctrine, and in the fellowship, I understand that it was no mere passive continuance in visible association with the church, but an active and practical continuance in the things that make for fellowship. And this is God's plan for all of us.

Looking for a moment at the second Epistle to the Corinthians (Chap. 6:11-13 and Chap. 7:2-3), we see how Paul himself was con-

scious of a great lack in the fellowship of the Corinthian believers. His mouth was opened and his heart was enlarged toward them, but they were straitened in their affections. He besought them to receive him since he had wronged no man, defrauded no man, corrupted no man. What kind of reception was he asking for? Certainly he was not asking for permission to break bread with them. That is very often what we mean by reception, but Scripture never speaks that way. The reception Paul asked for was reception to the confidence and affections of the saints in a real and genuine way, just as they had a large place in his heart.

In travelling around the world one has had many and varied experiences of fellowship—and of the lack of it. One has known what it was to arrive in a strange town, looking forward eagerly to a time of fellowship, only to be received in a cold and official way, on presentation of a letter of commendation, “to the breaking of bread,” without any manifestation of the love and cordiality (and hospitality) that belong to the fellowship of the saints. Fortunately such experiences are rare, but they serve to illustrate the difference between ecclesiastical recognition and true Christian fellowship.

Coming now to the consideration of what is said in 1 John 1, we learn that “if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship one with another.” Fellowship with one another can only be maintained as we maintain fellowship with God. Walking in the light is not a static condition. It implies occupation with, and progress in, the things of God. As we continue in the doctrine, so we may continue in the fellowship.

As we have seen, it is not merely a question of continuing in the doctrine of the gospel. Full Christian fellowship requires that we be enlightened as to the mystery which was formerly hid in God, and that we know our place in relation to it.

Much that is called fellowship to-day is no more than a mutual regard for those who belong to the same ecclesiastical clique, or party, or circle. But Christian fellowship can never have a sectarian basis or find its inspiration in considerations of sectarian agreement. The understanding of the fellowship of the mystery would free us from every kind of sectarian spirit.

Sectarianism is the masterpiece of Satan to destroy or restrict the true fellowship of saints, and we should be set against it. Satan has caused the very question of fellowship to become a bone of contention among brethren, and we should not be ignorant of his devices. (If we regard Proverbs 6:16-19 as an outline of the devil's principal activities down through the ages: the proud look that brought him down from

heaven, the lying tongue in the garden of Eden, and so on—we shall see that his present objective is to sow discord among brethren.) The discord is created mainly by the existence of divergent views on fellowship, and because of this I will now state a few guiding principles which appear to me to be scriptural.

1. Normally in an ideal state of Christianity, our fellowship would be with all Christians everywhere. The only restrictions would be those imposed by considerations of discipline or lack of spirituality in ourselves or in others. The fellowship of the mystery would then be a precious reality to us.

2. Such a fellowship would find its expression in every local assembly gathered in a scriptural way and in subjection to the Holy Ghost. Since every local assembly should be a microcosm or setting forth in miniature of that which is true of the church universal, there should be no man-made restrictions of the fellowship that saints are called to enjoy.

In the local assembly, as seen in Scripture, there are, of course, divine appointments which every Christian may be expected to recognize. A scripturally-gathered assembly exhibits certain essential features, as follows: It is composed of true believers only, and these believers, having been baptized in accordance with the Lord's ordinance in Matt. 28, have been gathered unto the name of Christ, acknowledging Him as their true and only centre. They do not follow the pattern of the congregations of Christendom generally, but recognize the sufficiency of the name of Christ and of His Word. They are subject to Scripture in all things and meet in the simplicity that was characteristic of apostolic times. They have no clergyman to preside over them, but meet in the recognition of the common priesthood of believers. For ministry they depend on the gifts whom God has raised up, and they recognize the prerogative of the Holy Spirit to administer these gifts. They meet every Lord's Day, in accordance with apostolic example, for the purpose of breaking bread, and the worship which accompanies this ordinance is worship in spirit and in truth. It is the centre of the church's activity. The oversight of such an assembly is cared for by elders, men of experience and spirituality, men of good testimony and good example, whom the Holy Spirit has raised up for this purpose. Human appointments are not made for any such spiritual activities, nor are workers paid any salaries, but ministers of the Word look to God alone for their support. Such an assembly is recognized as the house of God and the pillar and ground of the truth. It is set to defend the truth of God, as revealed in His Word, and to maintain the highest standard of holy living, in accordance with that truth. It is also a centre of gospel activity and has fellowship in the missionary work in the regions beyond it.



Such an assembly is a divine institution. With such an assembly I may have fullest fellowship, for it is walking in the light and so has fellowship with God. But with sectarian bodies as such, I cannot have fellowship, for all sects are works of the flesh, according to Gal. 5. In all of them there is disobedience to the revealed will of God, and in most of them the essential features of a Christian assembly are entirely lacking.

3. If there is such a thing today as the local assembly, recognizable as the house of God, because of its adherence to scriptural principles, my privilege and duty will be to have fellowship with it and fully support it, if I personally am walking in the light. The agreement will be there that makes fellowship possible. Such an assembly will not be found to be on sectarian ground. It will have no features that would be unacceptable to anyone seeking to walk in the light.

On the other hand, all congregations or bodies formed after a human pattern do have features and many of them, that are unacceptable for the obedient Christian. Their significance is that the mind of God is replaced by the mind of man in matters relating to God's own house; which is a very serious matter. And my agreement or fellowship with the Lord in such matters make it impossible for me to have fellowship with anything which is contrary to His mind. With Christians belonging to such bodies I may have fellowship in an individual way, but with the collective companies which take the place of churches while ignoring the revealed will of God, it is impossible for me to have fellowship without being unfaithful to the Lord.

4. The same consideration makes it evident that interdenominationalism is not God's thought for His people. It is the belief of many Christians today that the desirable path for them is to remain each one in the denomination of his choice and to co-operate with other denominations as often as there may be opportunity. This position or attitude assumes that sectarianism is a matter of indifference to God, or that it even meets with His approval. 1 Corinthians chapters 1 and 3 teach us otherwise. Instead of Christians stepping over their denominational barriers, occasionally to have fellowship with one another, the mind of God is that they should disown the barriers altogether and meet on the common ground of His Word.

5. This same principle has its application to the matter of reception. In the scriptural view of it, as we have already seen, it is a matter of welcoming a fellow-believer to all the privileges and responsibilities of assembly fellowship. There is no precedent for receiving a believer merely to the breaking of bread, or in any other restricted sense. God's assembly is the place where every believer belongs and if

he recognizes it as such, he should be welcomed to its fellowship in the fullest sense. If however he does not recognize it as such, he cannot feel that his proper place is there, nor can he know true fellowship, or be in harmony with what is done, no matter how willing we may be to receive him. True fellowship is always reciprocal; it cannot be one-sided. And our reception of a believer, whether for a day, or a year, or an indefinite period, is always on the same ground: it implies our recognition of him as a suitable person to share in all assembly privileges and duties; it likewise implies his recognition of the assembly as a divine institution, functioning in accordance with God's will. If it were otherwise, the participation of such a believer would not be an act of obedience, and fellowship would be a formal thing. The use of the assembly as a convenient stopping-place on occasions for the breaking of bread only, while retaining allegiance to a sectarian body, is to ignore the true nature of the fellowship.

6. The fellowship of the mystery, properly understood, would lead us to the repudiation of all fellowships of a merely human order. It is surely sufficient that God has created a fellowship for us, and this fellowship finds its expression in the recognition of every true believer as one with whom I have a spiritual link, and of every true assembly as a divine institution that I am called to support and minister to. Other man-made fellowships are either too extensive or too restricted. The true path is the one which God Himself has traced for us in His Word.

7. The measure of my fellowship with individual believers or assemblies will depend upon the measure in which I and they are walking in the light. No one can compose for me a list of assemblies and say: These you may have fellowship with! That would be the essence of sectarianism. Rather if I am in fellowship with the Lord, I will walk with Him in the midst of the golden candlesticks, taking account of conditions, thankful for all that can be approved of, and seeking also to remedy what may not be in order.

Let us never forget that suggestive picture in the letter to the Church of Laodicea. The Lord is outside the door knocking and seeking fellowship. Let us see to it that our fellowship is made available to Him first of all. He appreciates it. And as regards the saints, rather than being over-fearful lest our fellowship be wasted on unworthy objects, let us fear lest our fellowship be below the standard that the elect of God have the right to expect in us.

Note—In Eph. 3:9, if the alternative reading be preferred (*oikonomia*, dispensation, instead of *koinonia*, fellowship), this should not disturb our conclusions as to the true fellowship of Christians being governed by the revelation of the mystery.

## A SCRIPTURAL ASSEMBLY

Scriptures read: Matt. 18:20; Acts 2:41, 42; 11:19-26; 13:1-3; 14-21-23; 20:6, 7. 1 Cor. 14:26, 16:1-2. 1 Tim. 3:15.

The idea of a church or assembly, whether universal or local, is God's idea. Christians do not meet together in groups or congregations merely because they consider it desirable or helpful, but because God has so ordained it.

It was our Lord Himself who first spoke of the church in its universal aspect when (in Matt. 16:18) He intimated that He Himself was to be the builder and that it was to be built on a sure foundation. And it was He also who first intimated (in Matt. 18:17) that there would be such a thing as a local assembly, to which matters of conduct and right relations between believers might be referred.

It was the Holy Spirit who, on the day of Pentecost, baptized all existing believers into one body and so formed the nucleus of the church universal; and it was the Holy Spirit who likewise gathered the saints together in assembly capacity in the various localities where they were found. Since that time, however, the will of man, governed by many and varied ideas and ambitions, has been responsible for bringing into existence all kinds of ecclesiastical organizations, and to these, unfortunately, the majority of present-day Christians belong.

Our present purpose is to enquire, with the help of Holy Scripture, as to the nature and characteristics of a truly scriptural assembly, gathered according to the mind of God. Such an assembly will be seen to present features that are in marked contrast with what obtains generally in Christendom.

(1) A truly Christian and scriptural assembly is composed necessarily of true believers—that is, of people who, having believed the gospel, have experienced the miracle of new birth, and know themselves to be “children of God by faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.” Only such have any right to belong to a church of God. The apostle Paul could speak of “churches of the saints,” because saved and sanctified people composed them. Unconverted people could not possibly participate in worship and other holy activities of the church, nor could they be expected to support its testimony by holy living. Christians are therefore exhorted not to be unequally yoked together with unbelievers, but to come out from among them and be separate. (2 Cor. 6:14-18.)

(2) All converted people in apostolic times were baptized as such, before taking their place in association with the assemblies (Acts 2:41; 8:12, etc.) Christ had commanded that this should be done (Matt. 28:19), and the baptizing of disciples always resulted from the

preaching of the gospel. The same rule is observed by scriptural assemblies today, and the doctrine of baptism, as found in Romans, Chapter 6, should accompany the practice. New converts should be taught that baptism (that is immersion) is the symbol and figure of their being buried with Christ, with a view to their arising (in the likeness of His resurrection) to walk in newness of life.

(3) In a truly scriptural assembly the saints are gathered to Christ, as indicated in Matt. 18-20. The Lord Himself is the true and only centre, and the assembly is where His divine presence is known in a special way. In many so-called "churches" the centre of gathering is a special set of doctrines, a scheme of church government, a human tradition, a sacrament, or even a heresy. Many preachers constitute themselves a centre of attraction, and people belong to "Mr. So-and-So's church" because they like his preaching or his personality. This is very different from being gathered unto Christ. He is the one and only centre in heaven, and He is worthy that all His people in any given locality on earth be gathered unto Him in the same way.

(4) In a scriptural assembly or church the name of the Lord Jesus Christ is deemed to be all-sufficient. In His name, and His alone, the believers are gathered together. No other name is worthy to be associated with His. If the assembly is a scriptural one, it belongs to Him, and His sole Lordship is recognized. A true "church of Christ" could never bear a human or sectarian name. Distinctive names, whether derived from church leaders, doctrines, forms of government, or what not, are all badges of division. The name of Christ alone unites.

To be gathered in or unto His name means to be gathered in His interests, with His authority, in subjection to His Lordship, and in subjection to His Word. Christians who know what it is to be so gathered can never tolerate to be called by any other name than His. Moreover, the name of "Christians" was divinely given to the disciples. (See Acts 11:26, where the Greek verb translated "called" is a special one implying that it was God who called the disciples by this name.)

(5) In a scriptural assembly the Word of God is recognized as complete and authoritative. In other words, there is no need of creeds, statements of doctrine, church constitutions, rules or regulations, other than those contained in Scripture itself. No man or body of men has ever been competent to draw up an infallible statement of Christian faith and practice, nor is there any need, for God's Word should always be appealed to directly to settle all disputes. It is dishonouring to the Word of God to displace it by appealing to any other authority.

(6) The Holy Spirit is the Vicar of Christ upon earth during the time of our Lord's absence, and it is of the utmost importance that He

should be allowed His place in every local assembly. The power of the Holy Spirit is the only power for worship, ministry or evangelism. His presence and control make all things possible, but it is easy to displace Him in His gracious ministrations by substituting human arrangements. It is common in many congregations to have one man preside as "minister" or "pastor," and all activities are under his control. He may reserve for himself the privilege of preaching and praying, or he may call upon others to do so, but the principle is the same: he usurps the place of the Holy Spirit, whose office in the assembly is to direct the worship, ministry, and other spiritual exercises of the saints. (See 1 Cor. 12 and 14.) It is significant that in Scripture no assembly is seen to be presided over or directed by one man, except in the case of Diotrephes, who did it contrary to the will of God. (3 John 9.)

(7) Scripture teaches that all believers are priests (1 Peter 2:5; Heb. 13:15), so that all believers may participate in worship and prayer in the assembly. The only restriction is with regard to the sisters, who are commanded to be in subjection and not take part audibly. (1 Cor. 14:34; 1 Tim. 2:11, 12.) The fact that the women are commanded to be silent shows that the men were free to speak provided it were under the direction of the Holy Spirit.

(8) With regard to ministry in the assembly, Scripture teaches that God has given gifts for this purpose—men who are spiritually qualified to teach and exhort. They are not the product of a seminary but they are men who have been taught of God and endowed with ability to expound and apply the truth of God in a spiritual way. (See Eph. 4:11, 12.) Scripture nowhere teaches that the ministry of the Word should be in the hands of one man; nor does it teach that all brethren may minister. Whether for teaching or preaching, we are dependent on the gifts whom God has given, and it is the Holy Spirit's prerogative to use them where and when He will. Human arrangements should never interfere with this. The Holy Spirit controls evangelists in their movements. (See Acts 16:6, 7.)

(9) From Scripture we learn that for the right ordering of the assemblies, elders or overseers were appointed by the Holy Spirit. These were men who by their godly living and good example had shown themselves worthy of being recognized as leaders of the flock. See Heb. 13:17, where the phrase "them that have the rule over you" means literally "your leaders," or "them that go before you" (that is, giving an example and showing the way). The words "elders," "leaders," "overseers," etc., are always found in the plural, for no assembly was ever committed to the care of one man. The equality of elders or overseers is deduced from the Scriptures which refer to them. In Acts 20 it will be seen that the persons described as elders in verse

17 are called overseers in verse 28, and their work is described as that of pastors or shepherds, so that these terms can never be employed as having reference to different ranks of church officers. Still less will the distinction between "clergy" and "laity" be found in Scripture. Elders were men who had a care for the flock and served the Lord in this capacity voluntarily, "not for filthy lucre." Their ability to do this depended on their moral and spiritual qualifications. (See 1 Tim. 3 and Titus 1.)

(10) In a Scriptural assembly the Lord's Supper, or Breaking of Bread, occupies an important place as the centre of the church's activities. Being a divine appointment, it can never be relegated to a place of secondary importance, or treated as a matter for occasional obedience. It is evident from Acts 20:7 that the practice of the assemblies in apostolic times was to break bread every Lord's Day. It is the remembrance of the Lord in His own appointed way that produces true worship, and worship is one of the principal functions of the assembly. True worship produces true service, and every other activity is likewise derived from it. Not only should the Lord's Supper be observed on the first day of every week, but it should be observed in the conditions contemplated in 1st Corinthians—not as a sacrament administered by a clergyman, but as a remembrance feast partaken of by disciples meeting together in subjection to the Holy Spirit and not presided over by any man.

(11) An essential feature of every Scriptural assembly is the preservation of that pilgrim character which the Lord Himself impressed upon it. When the hour of His rejection came, He took his disciples to an upper room called a guest-chamber, or lodging-place for transients. Born Himself in the stable of an inn, He taught His disciples not to aspire to anything more than He had. The early Christians met in upper rooms and private houses and it was not to the detriment of their testimony. There was an "other world" religion, and it needed no consecrated buildings. They themselves were the church and the temple of God, and they borrowed nothing from the world which had rejected their Lord. Extreme simplicity marked them in all things, "that the excellency of the power might be of God."

(12) A Scriptural assembly is characterized by true evangelism. The Thessalonian assembly was commended because from it sounded out the Word of the Lord throughout Macedonia and Achaia. The Corinthian church was to be a stepping-stone to the regions beyond it. The Philippians were supporters of the missionary labours of Paul. True evangelism is absent in many quarters. The gospel is never preached in many so-called churches. In others, questionable methods

are used and the results are artificial. Only the gospel of Christ, preached in the power of the Holy Ghost by men whom God has qualified, can be expected to produce genuine conversions.

(13) Regarding money matters, God has also enlightened us in His Word as to what is agreeable to Him. The assemblies were instructed to give bountifully of their substance. The privilege was theirs of contributing to the work of the Lord or the needs of poor saints. They were to put aside weekly a portion of their income for such purposes according as God had prospered them. (1 Cor. 16:2.) The proportion of their giving depended on their individual exercise of heart and love for the Saviour. Giving was voluntary, and it needed the right motive to be acceptable. Needless to say, no unconsecrated money could be accepted for holy purposes, so that public collections are foreign to the practice of Christian assemblies.

(14) The support of evangelists, missionaries and other workers is a privilege of all Christians and Christian assemblies, but the methods employed should be in accordance with Scriptural principles. Workers do not receive salaries from any church or missionary society, but must be dependent on God. They must keep themselves free from the control of any organized body, if they are to know the control of the Holy Spirit. Their dependence upon God for their material or financial support is a healthy discipline and keeps them from becoming high-minded. It also keeps them free to minister the Word of God as those who shall give account to Him and not to men. And as they prove God faithful in His dealings with them, they are the better fitted to minister in fellowship with Him.

(15) Finally, we shall mention that God's Word provides for a system of discipline in connection with the assembly that is in keeping with its holy character and functions. Since the assembly is the house of God, a certain type of behaviour is required of all who belong to it. (1 Tim. 3:15.) If this behaviour is not maintained, certain steps are to be taken with a view to restoring Scriptural order. There is only time for the briefest mention of these:

In Gal. 6:1 we see that if one is overtaken in a fault, they who are spiritual are to seek his restoration. If a brother trespass against another, he is to be sought after by the offended one and restored to amicable relations. (Matt. 18:15.) Elders are to exhort; rebuke and reprove unruly and vain talkers and convince them of their errors. (2 Tim. 4:1-2; Titus 1:9-11.) A causer of divisions is to be avoided (Rom. 16:17-18), and a disorderly person withdrawn from (2 Thess. 3:6). A heretic who refuses correction is to be rejected (Titus 3:9-11), and one who stubbornly refuses to be reconciled to a brother whom

he has offended is to be treated as "a heathen man and a publican" (Matt. 18:17). A person guilty of immoral conduct or who teaches erroneous doctrine of a serious nature, is to be put away from the assembly and refused all fellowship. (1 Cor. 5:13; 2 John 10; 1 Tim. 1:20.) In this way the holiness that becomes God's house is to be maintained.

In the foregoing, we have set forth some fifteen essential features of the Christian assembly. Not one of them can be omitted without gravely interfering with God's purpose and working. Yet in many so-called Christian congregations today, these Scriptural principles are altogether lacking. How dare we call them Christian?

On the other hand we are thankful to recognize that in many places today there exist Christian assemblies formed and maintained after the pattern of Holy Scripture. We are thankful for the privilege of being associated with them, but we should have an exercise about leading other Christians into the same path of obedience to the Word of God. Let us not be proud, but humbly acknowledge the goodness of God and seek grace that in our assemblies may be exhibited not only correct Scriptural order, but also the love of Christ and the power of the Holy Ghost.



## MATTHEW 18:20

Scripture read: Matt. 18:1-20.

It is very significant that the first lesson in Scripture regarding the local assembly is a lesson about humility. The significance of it will become the more apparent, if we proceed to look at the several parts of this chapter in their relation to one another, and in relation to the culminating thought expressed in verse 20. Matthew 18:20 is a precious text for many believers, and it will lose nothing of its preciousness, but probably gain a great deal, if we view it in relation to its proper context.

But let us go back for a little to Chapter 16. There we have the word *ecclesia* (translated church or assembly) employed by the Lord for the first time. The thing was in His mind, and the time had come for Him to reveal it, so He provides the occasion for the revelation of it by asking the question: "Who do men say that I the Son of Man am?" Receiving the answer that men had various opinions, He then directs the question to His own: "Who do ye say that I am?" and this evoked from Peter the ready confession: "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." Such a confession was of the greatest importance. It showed that Peter had received a revelation from God concerning the identity of the Christ, and for this the Lord pronounces him blessed. He has expressed a great truth—the foundation truth of Christianity—and all who receive the same revelation will be equally blessed. It will be possible now to build the church; for Christ, the Son of the living God, is known to be the foundation, and men like Peter, who have faith in the Christ, have become living stones, and so are suitable material for the building. So we have the great declaration: "On this rock I will build My church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." All intelligent Christians understand from these words that the church is a divine creation, a spiritual edifice, of which the Lord Himself is both the foundation and the builder, and because in this aspect of it, it is not committed to human responsibility, there is no possibility of failure or destruction. It is the one true, universal church of Christ, to which all regenerate people belong, and from which they can never be separated. This same church is also referred to in the apostolic writings as a living organism—the body of Christ—and is still further viewed, in its future consummation, as the bride of Christ, for whom is reserved a glorious destiny.

In Matthew 18 the word *ecclesia* is used again by the Lord, but it is immediately evident that the usage is quite distinct from that of Matthew 16. A matter concerning the strained relations between two brethren is to be told "to the church." What church is that? Cer-

tainly not the great spiritual edifice of Christ's building; certainly not the universal company which is His body—not the aggregate of true believers scattered throughout the world—but a local company to which the two brothers belong, a company of believers having corporate existence and recognizable as a "church" in the locality where it is found.

It is of the utmost importance that we distinguish between these two usages of the word "church," not only in the language of our Lord, but also subsequently in the writings of the apostles. That word, as it is employed in Matthew 16, is used only in the singular number, for there is but one true church of Christ in that sense. The acceptance of the word, however, in Matthew 18 is so entirely different, that we are to understand it as referring to a church which is but one of many. And in this sense it is used in the Acts, the Epistles, and the Revelation, with reference to the churches of the saints, the churches in Galatia, the churches in Asia, and so on. These churches are not just segments of the body of Christ, for the body is not composed of churches but of individual saints. And each local company is viewed as a church, or assembly, complete in itself; it is not part of a whole (as of an organization), but has its own corporate existence, and is responsible directly to the Lord, not to any intermediate authority.

In the wisdom of the Lord, we have these references to the church universal and the local assembly in His own words in Matthew 16 and Matthew 18, and in each place we have set forth the essential idea regarding each one of the two things. The essential differences are also clearly exhibited. But if it is clear that in Scripture there are two very different acceptances or usages of the same word (church or assembly), let us be careful also to observe that there are but two and no more. It is never permissible, for instance, to employ the word church with reference to a building, or a denomination.

Having sought to clear the ground in this way, let us turn our attention to Matthew 18 more particularly. In the Lord's mind a local company is in view. It does not necessarily include all true believers in the place—all the members of Christ's body who might be resident there. In this, and in other respects, it differs from the conception of the church as we see it in Matthew 16, as a little patient consideration of the Scripture will show.

Let me remind you, first of all, that true conversion or regeneration, which is a work of the Holy Spirit, puts us into the body of Christ. "By one Spirit were we all baptized (or put) into one body." But that same experience did not make us members of a local assembly. The Ethiopian eunuch was converted on the road to Gaza, and he belonged, there and then, to the church which is Christ's body; but he

belonged to no local assembly at that time, nor do we know for certain that he ever did. So today, a person may be converted while travelling by land, sea or air, or, it may be in an isolated placè, where there are no other Christians, and, in such circumstances, it is evident he would not belong to a local assembly.

Let me also remind you that Scripture speaks of some being cast out of the local assembly (by Diotrephes) who were evidently true believers; and I need not add that they could not have been cast out of the body of Christ. In the exercise of discipline also, one may be put away from the assembly, as was the case at Corinth, but such an action would not affect the believer's place in relation to the universal church. Again, John, in his first epistle, speaks of some "who went out from us, because they were not of us"; which shows that even in apostolic days there were false believers who found their way into the assemblies, at least for a time. All of which goes to show that the local assembly, in contrast with the one true church of Christ's building, is a sphere where much failure may enter. It is also demonstrated that the local assembly is not identical, necessarily, with the body of Christ in a given place.

How then is the local assembly constituted? And on what ground does it stand? Most certainly we see that it is something committed to human responsibility—which the body is not. The local assembly is a gathering together of converted people, in certain conditions, with specific responsibilities and privileges, in visible association with one another for the purpose of testimony and fellowship.

Matthew 18 is the starting point of our instruction—and what precious instruction it is! Christ places a little child in the midst and says we must be like that. The greatest in the kingdom of heaven is he who has the lowest opinion of himself. The least of those who believe on Him are not to be despised, for angels who behold God's face are glad to be their servants. The Saviour Himself went after each one of them, as a shepherd goes after his straying sheep or lamb, and if He thought so much of them, we should seek to be in harmony with His thoughts. Rather than that we should offend one of such believing ones, it were better that we should have a millstone hanged about our neck, and be cast into the depth of the sea. For it is better not to live than not to love. And please remember that this instruction is being given because the local assembly is about to be brought into view. The reference to the local assembly is not casual. A first reference to such an important matter could not be casual. The local assembly is Christ's thought with regard to testimony and fellowship in a practical way, and very much is involved—His own glory, the worship of God, the welfare of the saints, and the testimony of the gospel.

The Lord draws nearer to the subject by referring now to a matter of personal trespass: "If thy brother trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone." This is to be done with a view to gaining and restoring the offender. Should we fail—as we are so liable to do; for we bungle things so easily—we are to take two others and make a second attempt. Should we again fail, the matter is to be referred to the church. And if the offending one refuses to hear the church (that is, the local assembly), he is to be considered as a Gentile and a sinner.

If we put ourselves in the place of the disciples who first heard these words, we shall realize that they are words which must have caused them a great deal of astonishment. In the law, they had been taught not to suffer sin on their brother, but to rebuke him (Lev. 19:17); but this was much more. A new standard of conduct is set up, in connection with a new kind of fellowship that never existed before. Saints who are related to one another in the fellowship of the Christian assembly, must have a standard of behaviour that is altogether superior to all that exists elsewhere. Because the local assembly is the house of God. Relationships there are spiritual and Spirit-controlled, and carnality is inexcusable. So if a brother is stubborn and proud, and refuses to be brought to amicable relations with his brother, the fellowship and harmony of the assembly is compromised, and such a state of things is intolerable. God's own interests are involved.

It was Christ's own way of revealing the essentially holy and divine character of the assembly. Such were to be its functions, in worship and service and testimony, that the maintenance of proper relations and a right Christian spirit among the believers was of the utmost importance. The disciplinary action of the assembly, when other measures failed, might appear to be severe, but the Lord assures those who will act on His instructions that whatever they bind on earth shall be bound in heaven—their action will be confirmed and ratified by the only court of appeal that is higher than the assembly itself.

Such a solemn statement from the lips of the Lord called for a word of explanation. The conferment of such authority to act on the Lord's behalf and in the defence of His interests would be more than the disciples could have anticipated, and more than they—or we—might have faith to receive. But there was a reason for it, and that reason is expressed in verse 20: "For where two or three are gathered together unto My name there am I in the midst of them." This indeed is the charter of every local assembly—a true definition of what the assembly really is, and a statement that should command the admiration of every lover of truth.

I am well aware that some have tried to tell us that verse 20 of

Matthew 18 relates to a prayer meeting, because of the reference to prayer in the previous verse. Such a suggestion is a very mistaken and harmful one: if heeded, it would rob us of a very precious truth. The real context of Matthew 18:20 is the whole of the preceding passage relating to the assembly and its disciplinary action, verse 19 being quite parenthetical. The value of verse 19 is that it suggests the efficacy of prayer as something we can have recourse to when disciplinary action has not produced the desired result. But it does not belong to the main line of instruction, the object of which is to make known to us what the assembly really is. Verse 20 takes this up and tells us of a company, however small, who have been gathered together unto the Lord's name, and who are given the assurance of the Lord's own presence in their midst. Could anything be more precious?

The thought of being gathered unto the Lord's name was not a new one. We find it in passages like Jer. 3:17; but there it is with reference to a geographical centre—a place of the Lord's choosing. Now it was to be “neither in this mountain nor yet at Jerusalem. The new spiritual order would not require such a place: the name of the Lord alone would be sufficient. Wherever two or three would be gathered by the Holy Spirit unto the name of Christ, the Lord would be in the midst of them, and that is what constitutes the assembly. I am assuming, of course, that men like J. N. Darby and Thos. Newberry were right when they taught that the preposition *eis* should be translated “unto,” “into,” or “to,” in such a construction, and that its use in this verse implied that Christ's name was the centre of gathering, just as the Holy Spirit was the gathering power. Certainly the Holy Spirit would not gather to any other centre.

So there is a difference between being gathered *to* the Lord's name and being gathered *in* His name. To be gathered in His name is precious; to be gathered to His name is more precious. To be gathered in His name is to be gathered in His interests, and by His authority. To be gathered to His name means to be drawn to a common centre where He has promised to be in the midst. He is not visibly present, but His name represents Him, and our attachment to that name unites us in a practical way. This is the true ground of God's assembly, and it is in marked contrast with every other kind of religious association. A company of believers that is truly gathered unto Him can never have a sectarian character or spirit.

Attention should be focussed also on the significance of being gathered together. It is not simply that two or three are found together at one time in a given place, but that a gathering influence has been at work; and who will deny that the influence is that of the Spirit of God? God's Spirit was at work to bring each individual to an experience of vital contact with Christ for salvation; it is also His

office to gather the saints around the person, or to the name of, Christ as Lord for the purpose of worship, ministry, and testimony. And this He does not merely on occasions, but in a permanent way, producing the formation of local assemblies according to the will of God.

True worship and prayer is by the Spirit of God; true edifying ministry is by the Spirit; so also is true gospel testimony. But in addition to these varied functions of the assembly, there is the initial gathering together of the saints with the formation of the local assembly in view. There is also the subsequent raising up of elders and of gifts for ministry, with the sending forth of missionaries and evangelists—all of which is viewed in Scripture as the work of the Holy Spirit.

Can a Scriptural assembly come into existence as the result of the energy of the flesh—the mere exercise of the will of man? To ask the question is to answer it. The existence of an assembly, and its proper functioning as such, depends from first to last on the activity of the Holy Spirit. If we know what it is to be led by the Spirit in our individual experience, if we are subject to His guidance, He will gather us with other Christians to the precious name of Christ in assembly capacity. He never would lead us into any sectarian association.

So we take the words “Where two or three are gathered together unto My name” to refer to a company of believers whom the Holy Spirit has gathered into association with Christ’s name, in subjection to His Word with a view to its functioning as an assembly of God in the place where it is. We do not think of them as referring to any casual meeting of Christians on a given occasion, but to “the church” already referred to in verse 17—a company having permanent corporate existence which habitually assembles itself because it has been gathered in recognition of the one true centre.

When we say, “in subjection to His Word,” we refer to all the commandments, precepts, principles and examples of the Word which reveal the mind of God concerning His assembly. Such would be found, for instance, in Acts 2:41, 42, where we have a picture of the first assembly ever formed. There we learn that those who believed the Word, or were converted, through Peter’s preaching, were thereupon baptized, and the same day were added to the nucleus of already-existing believers to form the assembly in Jerusalem. Being thus added, they thereafter continued in the apostles’ doctrine, and in fellowship with the saints, the breaking of bread and the prayer meetings being essential features of their regular practice. Their baptism implied their submission to Christ as Lord, as well as their renunciation of sin, the flesh, and the world; and their continuance in the doctrine and the fellowship would ensure the maintenance of conditions suitable to the assembly.

Matthew 18 is related to all this and shows what steps must be taken when the occasion demands it, to maintain a pure and spiritual fellowship. In Matthew 16, where the church universal is in view, we see that faith in Christ is what puts us into that unity. But the local assembly is a different thing altogether. Our belonging to it, is a question of our knowing the will of God and being subject to it.

This becomes much more evident when we come to the epistles. There we learn more fully what the local assembly really is. Instead of our viewing it merely as the aggregate of believers in a given place, we find it to be a recognizable institution to which believers may be added and from which they may be put away. It is composed of believers indeed, but they are believers brought together in a visible unity. Among them, elders and ministers (or deacons) have their place, and there is the recognition of collective responsibilities and privileges.

In such an assembly, the commandments of the Lord are imperative, and there is no room for the mind and will of man. In the place where it is, it is "the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15). The question may well be asked: If the assemblies of apostolic days, meeting in primitive simplicity, bore this character, why may we not meet today, in the same simplicity, and in dependence on the Spirit of God, and bear the same character? Does not the Holy Spirit gather the saints today unto the name of Christ alone, as He did at the beginning? And is He not sufficient for all their needs—whether for worship, ministry or testimony? And if so, is not the local assembly—as a divine institution—as great a reality today as it was then?

But let us not forget that the first lesson ever taught in connection with the local assembly was this: that our participation in its relationships and privileges demands that we be characterized by the humility of a little child, and that there be no tolerance of self-will, stubbornness or pride.

The assurance given by the Lord as to His presence "in the midst" is an assurance that can be claimed by every scripturally-gathered assembly, as long as it is characterized by humility and dependence on the Holy Spirit. The last lesson given us with regard to the local assembly stands in relation to the first. For the assembly at Laodicea is seen to be proud, worldly and self-sufficient, and the Lord is outside the door. May we be willing to learn that the assembly of God can only function on the principle of complete adherence to the Word of God and complete dependence on the Spirit of God, with every activity of the flesh condemned and suppressed!

# THE MINISTRY

Scriptures read: Eph. 4:7-13; Col. 1:25-29; I Cor. 4:1-2;

II Cor. 4:1-2; I Peter 4:11.

The order prescribed in the Word of God for the proper functioning of the assemblies is in every respect different from all that obtains in organized Christendom. This is no less true in regard to the important matter of the ministry of the Word. God's thoughts have been revealed with the utmost clearness, so that there can be no doubt as to what He desires: the question is as to whether we have willing minds and obedient hearts to accept and to act upon what has been made known.

Let us recognize, first of all, that ministry is a divine appointment for the assemblies. It is not just something desirable, but something which God has seen to be necessary, and for which He has made careful provision. This provision we see in the Scriptures that we have read.

There is first the giving of spiritual gifts by the ascended Lord. How lofty is this thought! Men's thoughts are on another plane altogether; for it is the common practice for young men to choose to "enter the ministry," as it is called. This amounts to choosing a clerical career, just as others might choose to follow the medical or legal profession, and there is the corresponding "preparation": the years of study, the obtaining of a degree, and the consequent "ordination". Then comes the call and appointment to the pastorate of a congregation, and the "reverend" gentleman is presently able to speak of "his" church and "his" flock. During the period of his office there, the congregation is dependent on his ministrations—whether or not he be competent, spiritual, or even converted. Needless to say, this man-made system of ministry is productive of many evils, which we need not enumerate. And there is another system which is equally unsatisfactory, though a very different one—we shall refer to it later.

Coming back, then, to the thought of a divine provision for the ministry, we learn from Eph. 4 that when the risen Lord ascended up on high, triumphing over all His foes, His triumph was celebrated by His giving gifts to men. These gifts are said to be: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers, "for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ." This was God's own provision at the beginning, and it is God's provision still. He continues to give such gifts, and we should be thankful for them. Can the saints be perfected without them, or the body of Christ edified?



If the ascended Lord has given these gifts to the church, we may be sure He is jealous about them. It is His own prerogative to use them where, and when, and as He may choose. And to Him alone they are accountable. Hence we get the question: "Who art thou that judgest another man's servant?" Christ Himself is Lord over all such servants. We may get the benefit of their services, but we cannot entertain the thought of ownership. They are Christ's bondservants and are exhorted not to become the servants of men.

The thought of Christ's ownership of His own servants leads us to perceive that these servants or ministers must at all times be under His own control. So we learn in I Corinthians that the gifts are administered by the Holy Spirit. He alone knows the true spiritual needs of the saints and can make provision accordingly. And it is His prerogative to use the gifts in the assemblies of the saints *according to His own will*, just as it is His prerogative to use any brother in the leading of prayer or thanksgiving. This principle is not recognized, of course, in the denominations generally, and it is becoming less and less recognized in the assemblies which once attached great importance to it. One wonders whether an assembly may rightly think of itself as an assembly of God if the ministry is controlled (say, by carnally-minded "elders") in such a way that those whom God would use for the edification of the saints are excluded from their rightful privilege.

The credentials of a true minister are primarily his God-given ability to minister with profit. A minister is not known by his possessing a degree or title, nor by his having been ordained or "commended". To be "commended to the work" (a non-scriptural expression) is in the minds of many the equivalent of a licence to preach or teach. But Scripture teaches that ministers should commend *themselves*—by their godly comportment and manifestation of the truth. (See II Cor. 4:2.) And the saints know when a man's ministry is of God; when God speaks to them through it. That is the best commendation.

The first principle, then, with regard to the ministry is this: it must be through the men whom God has gifted for it. All else will be mere activity of the flesh—a sacrilegious thing, if we consider the holy purpose of the ministry. Now this principle is stated with all plainness in I Peter 4:11: "If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God; if any man minister, let him do it as of the ability which God giveth." We do well, then, to ask ourselves whether it has always been so amongst us. Has all the ministry been of this order in our regular ministry meetings, or even in our special "conferences"?

In days of old God spoke to His people Israel through the prophets. In His sovereignty He raised them up as the occasion demanded. Jeremiah He chose from before his birth; Amos He called

from being a herdman; Isaiah received a vision and said: "Here am I; send me." God never lacked an instrument through whom He might speak to His people, and the prophets did not fail to deliver the messages that were given to them. They feared God, but they feared not the people. They denounced sin and apostasy; and often they were insulted and stoned for their pains.

Has God no special messages for His people today? Is there not evil and departure to be corrected? Surely in Christianity there is provision made for prophetic ministry too. God has not forgotten how to raise up and prepare His servants for such a ministry. Prophets were given as well as apostles. These, we understand, gave the mind of God to His people independently of the Scriptures, which were not yet complete. But since the Word of God was "filled up," through the ministry of Paul (Col. 1:25) we need no fresh revelations. Provision has been made to meet all our needs, and conditions have been foreseen right down to the end of the age. But we do need men who know the Word of God and have been fitted by Him to unfold its meaning to us; men who, in touch with God, are conscious of the special needs of our times, and are willing and able to give us, fearlessly and graciously, what God most desires us to know.

It we feel that there is a lack of them, let us remind ourselves that we are told to covet earnestly the best gifts. God will give us what we want, if it is what we need. But let us not be satisfied with substitutes. An insipid, ineffectual ministry can never replace God's true provision for His church. And an every-man ministry is just as unscriptural as a one-man ministry.

If, therefore, we accept the principle that the work of the ministry pertains to those whom God has fitted and called as ministers—if we are able to recognize them as gifts from the ascended Head of the church—it must be evident to us also that we should be glad to accept and make room for *all* of the gifts whom God has seen fit to give us. Shall we exclude God's own provision for ministry from the sphere which purports to be the house of God? Yet this is the result which often follows the making of human arrangements: the choosing of "speakers" (i.e., men who speak—a new term), sometimes weeks and months ahead of the occasion on which the speaking is to take place. It is not impertinent to ask whether the Holy Spirit is expected to fall into line with such arrangements. And if we select our ministers and exclude others (of those truly competent and spiritual), may not the result be that we shall deprive ourselves of the ministry we need most? I suggest to you that the control of the ministry is one of the most dangerous procedures, and any interference with the Holy Spirit's

prerogatives in this respect may result in an impoverishment of the spiritual life and testimony of the assemblies.

Diotrephes would have excluded even the apostle John; and Paul was so unwanted and criticized at Corinth that we find him pleading: "Receive us; we have wronged no man, we have corrupted no man, we have defrauded no man." The implication here is that every servant of Christ who has not corrupted, wronged or defrauded any man is worthy to be received.

The gifts that Christ has given are not all of a sort; they are varied; and we need the variety of ministry that they can give us. This will save us from being unbalanced and sectarian. One line of ministry will not serve all purposes, and some lines are very much neglected among us today. I suggest, for instance, that we need to give more attention to the development of the spiritual life: the meaning and application of the death of Christ to our every day existence—the meaning of being dead and risen with Him—and the place of the Holy Spirit in the control and guidance of our lives. Some would place all the emphasis on what we call "assembly truth"; and I do believe in the importance of that; but if our own individual lives and characters are not shaped by Christian doctrine, we shall not do very well in the sphere of the assembly.

The ministry of the Word means, of course, the ministry of the Word of God. How may one speak "as the oracles of God," if he does not give that which the Word of God contains? The Book of divine revelation is so extensive, and so full and so deep, and so pregnant with meaning in all its parts, that one wonders why anyone should want to go elsewhere for inspiration, or talk about anything that is not contained therein. Shall I use the time of my hearers in giving them my thoughts, my opinions, or my reasonings about things? Is it not rather my business to give them what God the Lord hath said? Of Ezra's men we read that they read in the book of the law distinctly and gave the sense thereof, and I judge that our business in the ministry is to do likewise. And I can only give profitably what God has given to me for the profit of my own soul. I must eat the little book first of all before I can prophesy to others. That means I must so assimilate the truth as to be edified by it. If it has not helped me, why should I expect it to help others? Only that which is for edification is permissible, and only the Word of God can edify.

The recognition of this will save me from giving out anything uncertain or speculative. Novelties may interest the mind but they will not edify the soul.

It should be recognized that every occasion for ministry is different from every other one. Every place, every company of people, and every time, present their special circumstances and needs. What may be suitable and seasonable on one occasion may not be so on another. So the minister of the Word must be a spiritual man, must be led by the Spirit, and must give the word that the Holy Spirit knows to be most needful in the place where he is. Will a true minister of Christ ever speak smooth words to please his hearers? Will he minister according to the tastes of his hearers, rather than according to their needs? Or will he be satisfied to give pleasant platitudes that all can assent to, without being exercised as to God's wish in the matter?

Again, if the purpose of ministry is the edifying of the body of Christ, will the minister of the Word choose to minister only where he is most appreciated? Will he give his ministry only where it is *least* needed? One recalls that God of old sent His prophets to deliver needful messages and warnings to a very rebellious and apostate people. So we may need to recognize that the sphere of service may be wider than the sphere of fellowship. There were messages for Pergamos as well as Smyrna; for Laodicea as well as Philadelphia. The sphere of my ministry may not be the sphere of my choosing, but it is God's prerogative to send me where He will.

This brings us close to another question. I would not mention it if Scripture did not do so. Would it be possible for a Christian man to be influenced in his ministry by the consideration of material gain? The warnings of Scripture appear to suggest the possibility, however humiliating the thought may be. Paul could say: "I have coveted no man's silver, or gold, or apparel;" but Jude warns about some who had "men's persons in admiration because of advantage." Could that ministry be blessed of God which had filthy lucre as its motive?

If we ask what is the proper object in ministry, we shall find a ready answer in Scripture. It is "the perfecting of the saints . . . the edifying of the body of Christ"; it is "that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus." Whatever does not contribute to this end is not worthy of the name of ministry.

The consideration of the high and holy character of ministry in the church of God should lead us to see that the ministry be worthy of its object, as well as its source. Paul was ever conscious of the dignity that attached to his ministry, whether in the gospel or to the saints. He speaks of himself as "the public minister of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles, ministering (as a priest) the gospel of God." (Rom.

15:16.) The holy sphere of Christian ministry is no place for jokes and wisecracks, and much less for vulgar slamming or carnal scolding of the saints. He who indulges in such practices cannot be conscious of being "the public minister of Jesus Christ."

I would like to underline the word "minister." Does not the word mean servant? Ministry was never intended to set a man above his fellows. If I am to minister the Word of God I must do it as a service for the saints, with all Christian humility. Paul did it "with all humility of mind, and many tears." We do not see too many tears in the ministry today. If the elders are told not to lord it over God's heritage, how unbecoming for the servants to do so! Authority for the saints resides in the Word of God, not in preachers, and it is not for these to legislate where the Word does not do so. It is a pity when people appeal to what Mr. So-and-So says instead of to the Word of God.

As to the spirit that should characterize us in the work of the ministry, we may remind ourselves of Paul's words to the Thessalonians: "We were gentle among you, as a nurse cherisheth her own children;" and again: "We were willing to have imparted unto you . . . our own souls."

But he warned the Ephesian elders that after his departure men would arise "speaking perverse things to draw away the disciples after them." This was evidently a perversion of the ministry—a using of it to their own selfish ends. It was this too that happened at Corinth. Teachers there formed cliques and parties around themselves. We do not know their unworthy names, for the apostle transferred these things to himself, Apollos and Cephas. But we know that their ministry was carnal, because it produced carnal results, even the dividing of the saints. True God-given ministry will never produce this result, but will bring the saints on to the unity of the faith and the fuller realization of their oneness in Christ. True ministry is always Christ-exalting, and what is Christ-exalting tends to bring the saints together.

Finally, let me remind you that it is a serious business to engage in the work of the ministry. It is something that will have tremendous repercussions at the judgment-seat of Christ. James exhorts us in these words: "My brethren, be not many masters (or teachers), knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation." A teacher or minister has a great responsibility. "Let a man so account of us," says Paul, "as of ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God;" and thereupon he stresses the need for faithfulness in this sacred stewardship. A faithful ministry is viewed as the contribution of gold, silver

and precious stones to God's building; it is work which shall abide, and the worker will receive his reward. But much that was supposed to have been ministry will be seen in that day to have been wood, hay and stubble. It will not endure the fiery test.

If it be true that we shall give account of every idle word spoken, how much more shall we give account of words spoken in ministry, words that were supposedly messages of God for His people! It may be that very soon I shall be giving account to the Lord of the words I am speaking to you now! How very sure I must be that they are acceptable words, upright words, words of truth . . . "given from one Shepherd"! (Eccles. 12:10, 11.) And if the motive of my ministry be not love, that ministry will have no more value than sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal. It must be ministry motivated by love for the Shepherd Himself, as well as for the sheep whom He commanded to be fed.

# THE OVERSIGHT

Scriptures read: John 21:12-22; Acts 20:17-21, 26-31; 1 Tim. 3:1-7;  
Titus 1:5-11; 1 Peter 5:1-4.

With the Lord's help I wish to speak to you on the important subject of the oversight; by which term we mean the pastoral care of the assemblies. As we have already said with regard to the work of the ministry, so we may say with regard to the work of the elders: God's thoughts are very different from man's thoughts, and if we are wise we shall take all of our ideas from the Word of God. In Christendom around us we see great variety in the institutions and practices of the various bodies, and especially is this the case with regard to what is commonly called church government. We need not examine and compare these, but shall address ourselves immediately to the task of ascertaining what the mind of God is with regard to the spiritual care of the assemblies.

It may be well at the outset to remind you that the work of the oversight is distinct from the work of the minister of the word. We have dealt with the work of the ministry in a separate address, and have shown that this depends on the giving of spiritual gifts to the church by Christ the risen and ascended Head. But oversight is not the exercise of spiritual gift; it is rather the godly care and superintendence of the flock by men whose character and spiritual maturity commend them for it.

Since it was in the Lord's mind, not only to build a church of indestructible character, in the universal aspect of it, as revealed in Matthew 16:18; but also to bring into existence local assemblies of Christians, as a visible and practical expression of that divine unity, as in Matthew 18:20; so He knew that these assemblies would need to be cared for, and He made provision accordingly. It is well to remember that while ministry has in view the edifying of the body of Christ, shepherd work is related to the care of the local assembly. There is, however, a gift of pastor, related to those of evangelist and teacher, which has a wider scope than the local assembly.

The first intimation of the kind of order which was going to exist in the assemblies is that which we have in Matthew 20:25-27. There the Lord tells His disciples that in the world "the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them." "But," He says, "it shall not be so among you." That is not the kind of example to be followed. That is not the pattern for a Christian community. There is positively no room in

Christianity for any kind of hierarchy, or for giving place to men who would exercise dominion over, or authority upon, God's people. Notice these prepositions "over" and "upon." They are used suitably with reference to government among the Gentiles, but they are carefully avoided when Scripture speaks of the work of elders in the assemblies; though the Authorized Version does not always show this.

As soon as assemblies were formed as a result of the missionary efforts of Paul and Barnabas we read of the appointment (by them) of "elders in every church" (Acts 14:23). Notice it is not an elder or a pastor for each church, but "elders" (plural) for every one of them. And so it is in the language of Scripture throughout.

In Acts 20:17 Paul sends from Miletus to Ephesus and calls for the elders. Why did he not call for the "pastor" or "minister"? It is evident that no such office existed in the sense in which it exists today in the majority of Protestant churches. Having called for these elders, Paul exhorts and warns them with regard to their work, reminding them that he himself had given them an example in all things, "serving the Lord with all humility of mind," and ceasing not to warn everyone night and day with tears.

But observe verse 28: "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock *wherein* the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which He hath purchased with His own blood." There is a touching appeal in these words. The assembly is God's assembly: He has purchased it with His own blood, therefore it is precious to Him. See that you take care of it, not as though it were a worthless possession of your own, but recognizing it to be God's most precious possession since it cost Him so much to acquire it.

I would ask you also to observe here that the men who in verse 17 are called elders are now (in verse 28) described as overseers, while their work is described as that of shepherds. This is instructive, because it shows us that elders, overseers and shepherds are one single class of office-bearers in the Christian assembly. If they are called elders (presbuterous), it is because they are men of experience and maturity; if they are called overseers or bishops (episcopous), it is because they are called to watch over the saints; if the reference is to their shepherding the flock, it is because they must show the way by giving an example, and must see that the sheep are properly fed. But these various terms were never intended to designate different ecclesiastical ranks; indeed the idea of rank is entirely absent in every one of them.

It is noteworthy that Peter, though himself an apostle, when addressing the elders called himself an elder (1 Peter 5:1). Observe also that he speaks of "the elders which are *among* you"—not over you.



In Hebrews 13 and elsewhere we have in the Authorized Version, expressions like "them which have the rule over you," but these might be rendered simply "your leaders" or "your guides." Peter is careful to warn the elders not to act as being lords over the assembly, as though it belonged to them. This is a warning that is as much needed today as when it was first given. Christendom around us, with all its ecclesiastical pretensions, is the result of not heeding this warning; and every form of clerisy is the result of ignoring the principle that elders are put in the assemblies, not over them.

I read with you in John 21 the words of the Lord to Peter regarding the shepherd work he was to do. It was not that Peter was being given any special work in that respect, but there were special reasons for saying those words to Peter. It was he who had professed, in effect, to love the Lord more than all the disciples. Though all forsook their Master, yet would not he. So he had confidently affirmed, and it had been necessary for him to learn a bitter lesson, so that all self-confidence might be destroyed. The Lord, in resurrection, had interviewed and forgiven him, but now the time had come for his reinstatement and restoration to the office and work from which he evidently considered he had fallen. Three times he must declare his love for the Lord, that the Lord in turn may charge him to feed His sheep and His lambs. And is not the prime requirement for anyone who would do shepherd service that he have no confidence in self, and that his principle motive be true love for the Lord? Well would it be for every would-be elder to answer honestly and sincerely the challenging question: "Lovest thou Me?" Out of a sincere love for Christ would come the desire to be useful in His holy service, and the work of oversight is something that may be legitimately sought after, or desired, provided love be the motive.

In what does that work consist? In attending "oversight meetings"? I have not read of such meetings in Scriptures. They may be necessary, but it is evident that the work of overseers is something very different. The saints are exhorted to know those who "labour" among them; and oversight meetings could hardly be described as labour among the saints. Part of their work is to show hospitality; part is to give instruction and counsel; part is to warn the unruly and comfort the discouraged; part is to seek the restoration of those who have erred, and to correct any tendency to error or misconduct. All of which supposes a constant vigilance and maintaining contact with the spiritual needs of all the believers; a winning of their confidence, so that counsel will be sought in time of need; a readiness to share the burdens of others, and a willingness to investigate impartially any

matter which may threaten to compromise the testimony of the assembly.

This is a work which calls for spiritual qualifications of no mean order, so we shall not be surprised that Scripture demands them. It is evident that an elder or overseer must have a knowledge of the truths and principles of Scripture—how else could he give needed counsel or correct error? It is evident he must be a spiritually-minded and gracious man—how else could he handle difficult questions with wisdom and tact? It is evident he must in all things give a good example—how else could he be a leader and guide? These, then, and similar qualifications, are just what Scripture demands.

Before we turn to 1 Timothy and Titus to look more closely at them, let us remind ourselves that Scripture gives us no authority for appointing elders. Paul appointed them and delegated others to do so, as a temporary measure before the Scriptures were complete, but who would presume to do so today? Nor is there any precedent or authority for the choosing of elders by the assembly. If we fall back on Scripture alone—as we must do—we shall find that God's provision is this: He has carefully specified, in two places, the qualifications required in every elder, and He has said in effect: He who has them is an overseer, apart from any human appointment; he who has them not is no overseer, though he be a thousand times appointed!

The divine wisdom of such a system should be apparent. It frees us from the obligation to recognize as overseers carnally-minded men who may have been seeking only a place. It deprives of all authority the decisions of men not qualified to make them. And it leaves spiritual and competent men free to take up pastoral work without the necessity of obtaining any kind of official licence for it. Yet we have heard of So-and-So being "put into the oversight"! We wonder who put him in. Even in the Acts we read of overseers being made such by the Holy Ghost. We have heard too of someone who "resigned from the oversight," and we wonder to whom the resignation was presented, if it was the Holy Ghost who did the appointing.

The language of Scripture is: "We beseech you brethren to know them which labour among you, and take the lead among you in the Lord, and admonish you; and to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake." (1 Thess. 5:12.) These Thessalonian elders were to be known by the things which they did: the example they gave, and the labour or work which they engaged in; and the saints were to esteem them accordingly. Those who did it well and were able to minister the word were to be counted worthy of double honour.

Let us now look at the qualifications of an overseer. The description given in 1 Timothy 3 corresponds closely to that of Titus 1, and if we set them forth in parallel columns, we shall discover that there are something like fourteen essential characteristics required in both passages. These we may group together as follows: (1) What the elder is in himself, or in relation to his personal life before God; (2) What he is in his own home and in relation to his family; (3) What he is in the world, in relation to the unsaved who know him; and (4) What he is in the assembly.

In the sphere of his own individual life he is required to be humble, pious and devout. His relations with God must be those of an exemplary Christian. He must know what Christianity is in actual experience, judging the motions of the flesh within him, and cultivating intimacy with God. This is not asking something special, but only what is normal Christianity. And lest someone—brother or sister—may be saying: “These qualifications of the elders don’t concern me; I am not in line for becoming an elder”—let me remind you that no lower standard is set for you. There are not two types of Christianity in the Bible: the standard set for all is the very highest. But what is enjoined upon all, becomes a “must” for those who are to stand before the saints as examples and leaders.

Secondly, the overseer must have an exemplary life in his own home. He is to be “the husband of one wife”. This I take to mean that he could not be a man who had been divorced and remarried. In the Gentile world of Paul’s day there were many people who had become involved in matrimonial entanglements prior to conversion. They might not be able to undo the past, and no blame would attach to them as Christians, but a divorced man who had remarried, and whose former wife was still alive, would be no example of the purity of Christian doctrine and therefore could not be an elder.

An elder, moreover, must have his family in subjection. He is expected to have “believing children”; which seems to imply that a Christian man who brings up his family “in the nurture and admonition of the Lord” may expect to see them all brought to the faith. His control or government of his family is said to be an indication of his fitness to take care of the church of God. Certainly if he fails in the lesser sphere, it is not to be expected that he will be successful in the greater. It is required of him also that he be given to (or be a lover of) hospitality. It is not enough that he practise it: he must like to do it. This would be an indication of his love for the saints, as in the case of Gaius (III John 5, 6).

Then with regard to his testimony in the world, the overseer must be irreproachable. He must be known as an honest man, sober and discreet, a man who is publicly respected for his quiet consistent life. There is no scandal associated with his name, and he is known for his godly self-control. He has been provoked and unjustly treated many a time, as other people have, but he has not given way to anger. He is not known as a bad-tempered man. Bad temper is like the bubbles that come to the surface of a pool of water, revealing the existence of a putrid corpse beneath. So the manifestations of bad temper reveal that the "body of sin" in us is not annulled in a practical way.

In the world too, an elder must be known not to be a covetous or avaricious person. More stress is put upon this feature of Christianity than we sometimes notice. From I Cor. 5, we may learn that a covetous person or extortioner is unfitted for the fellowship of the assembly. So an elder must not in any measure be a lover of filthy lucre; he should be known as a generous man, willing to do good and communicate as he has opportunity.

In the sphere of the assembly, the elder is seen to be a man of spiritual experience and maturity. He has a knowledge of the Word of God, and is able to apply it. His ability to teach, I take to be not necessarily ability to share in the regular ministry of the Word, but rather his being able to impart instruction in an individual way as it may be required by the circumstances. He is expected also to be alive to the danger of heretical teachings. These he should be able to refute, as they appear, and so the mouths of unruly and vain talkers are effectually closed. He brings the Word of God to bear upon the error, so that its true nature is revealed and it can proceed no further. This is a very important service.

All such services call for the maintaining of a constant vigilance, as well as the maintaining of fellowship with God. Let me remind you that when seven men were chosen for service relating to material things—the administration of assembly funds—they had to be men "full of the Holy Ghost" (Acts 6:3). How much more is this to be required in men who give attention to spiritual things!

Every service related to the assembly is holy service, and there is no service higher than that entrusted to the men who are qualified to be overseers. Much is committed to them, and much will be required from them.

And now, may I ask: What is your reaction to the Word of God when it brings before you the qualifications of an overseer? Will you lower the standard, as the Pharisees did? I am convinced that the low level of spirituality in many assemblies today is due to this very thing. We do not have, generally speaking, qualified leaders who could give the example and counsel and guidance that are everywhere needed. But the way is open to us. We may all be (and ought all to be) men of Christian character, men of spiritual experience, men subject to the guidance and molding influence of the Spirit of God. And to be useful in Christ's holy service should be the aspiration of every one of us. But if we attempt to dispense with the services of a spiritual oversight, we shall soon sink to the level of any of the denominations around us.

If, by God's grace, we do find ourselves in the place of overseers, let us beseech God to keep us humble. There is a Diotrephes in every one of us, and he will be sure to make trouble if not suppressed. Let us remember that an elder has no authority in himself: the authority is in the Word of God. An elder's usefulness consists in his being able to bring the Word of God to bear on every situation that may arise. Elders do not legislate, for there is but one Lawgiver. The Word of God is legislation enough, and the duty of elders is to see that the Word of God is conformed to.

Need I remind you that the sphere of an elder's activity is within the local assembly to which he belongs? The tendency in Christendom has been to imitate the political world and create an autocracy of some sort. This may appeal to the carnally ambitious, but it is foreign to God's thoughts. In Scripture every assembly is responsible directly to Christ the Lord, and it is not difficult to see the wisdom of this.

In closing, let me say a word about the reward of those who shall have engaged in true shepherd service. Peter tells us of this. I, he says, "am also an elder"; I exhort you to feed the flock of God. Think of their interests and welfare. Don't exercise lordship over them, but be examples to them. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away. Surely that will be recompense enough! If the day of Christ is really before us, and if it means anything to us to receive from His hands a crown of glory, shall we not set about qualifying ourselves for a share in the task of shepherding the flock for which He died?