

**A**  
**SCRIPTURAL ASSEMBLY,**  
**and Other Addresses**



By  
ANDREW STENHOUSE,  
of Chile

Copies may be obtained free

from:

GEO. E. TAYLOR

1422 Hazelwood Avenue

LOS ANGELES 41, CALIF.

Printed in U.S.A.



## CONTENTS

---

A Scriptural Assembly .....	5
Matthew 18:20 .....	11
The Ministry .....	18
The Oversight .....	24



# 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 dishonoring 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. Theirs 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 labors 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? Certainly 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 place, 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 defense 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" (I 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, so 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 pastorship 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 license 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.

If 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 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 everyday 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 reasonable 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 call 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 Scripture. 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 license 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 look now 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?