



The Sin  
of  
Sectarianism



*By*  
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# THE SIN OF SECTARIANISM

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## *Chapter One*

### INTRODUCTION

**SECTARIANISM** is a sin and a great one. It is plainly condemned in the Word of God; yet it is seldom judged as it ought to be by God's people. It has come to be accepted by the majority of Christians as something justifiable, excusable, or, at least, unavoidable. But once we come to the conclusion that it is sinful, we shall readily perceive that none of these adjectives is applicable.

Sectarianism is the antithesis of Christianity. For Christianity is the expression of "love, joy and peace in the Holy Ghost" (Rom. 14: 17), but sectarianism has been responsible for hatred, sorrow and strife down through the ages. It has hindered or destroyed the fellowship of true believers and sundered those who should have walked together harmoniously and unitedly. The crimes it has been responsible for are without number, and the dishonour done to the name of Christ has been incalculable. Yet this criminal has been defended, and is still defended, by the very people who should have been first to denounce and condemn it.

No sin has been protected and propagated as has the sin of sectarianism. No sin has been gloried in by true Christians, as well as by millions of nominal church members, as has this one. No sin has been more responsible for the destruction of true Christian affection among God's people, and of true fellowship in the things of God. No sin has been a greater stumbling-block to the unconverted and a greater hindrance to the progress of gospel work throughout the world.

Sectarianism is a work of the flesh, and not of the Spirit, and as such it should be recognized as an enemy of God's interests in the world. It is an evil root that will spring up

anew in the place where it was believed to have been eradicated, for it is as natural to the flesh as it is foreign to the Spirit. It is time to declare war against it; yet it is only too possible that they who do so may be easily betrayed into the acceptance of a new form of it. This has been its history in the past. The flesh has essayed to fight the flesh and has emerged the stronger for it. But the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, and if we allow the Word of God to have its way with us, even the strongholds of sectarianism may be pulled down.

All true spiritual revival has been the result of a return to dependence upon the Word of God and the Spirit of God, in recognition of human failure. The failure with regard to sectarianism was never more in evidence than at the present time, and the first step in the direction of recovery is for us to recognize and confess it. It is not to be expected that mere church members will have any concern about the matter, but our appeal is to those who have known the grace of God in truth (Col. 1: 6) and who have the Spirit's witness within them that they are true children of God through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ (Rom. 8: 16; Gal. 3: 26). All such should be expected to understand that it is the mind of the Spirit of God that His people should be one — undivided in their fellowship, and undivided in their testimony.

No portion of Scripture should be more familiar to the mind of a believer than our Lord's prayer, contained in the 17th chapter of the Gospel of John. What can be more sacred than the revelation given there of the thoughts and longings of the heart of the Son of God addressed to His Father in prayer? And the mind that reverently weighs those holy words: "That they all may be one; . . . that the world may believe that Thou hast sent Me," can never be indifferent to the divided state of Christians in the present day. Fellowship with Christ demands that our whole behaviour and attitude be adjusted to the thoughts and desires of His heart in this very important matter.

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When we come to the New Testament epistles, we are immediately confronted with the sad fact that divisions existed among the Christians of the first century, and it was this fact that gave occasion to the Spirit of God to express His mind once for all regarding the seriousness of such a state of affairs. "Sects" were included among the ugly things described as works of the flesh (Gal. 5: 20, R.V.), and the early chapters of 1st Corinthians have much to say about the evil of sectarianism. Let us look at these chapters more particularly.

The church or assembly of God at Corinth had been brought into existence through the faithful labours of Paul the apostle. He had faithfully presented the gospel, and many precious souls had been won for Christ. Men and women from all walks of life, Jews as well as Gentiles, respectable people as well as deep-dyed sinners, had been brought to know the grace of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, experiencing the miracle of conversion. These had been baptized and brought together in assembly fellowship, gathered by the Spirit of God unto the precious name of Christ, to function as an assembly or local church in the midst of the corruption and wickedness of Corinth. Such an assembly, properly functioning, could have been an immense power for good in the place where it was. The transformed lives of the Christians who composed it were in themselves a testimony, for vice-bound sinners had been "washed, sanctified and justified"; but there was also a message to be given to the unbelieving world, and the giving of that message called for the united efforts of all concerned. But the Corinthian believers were not united; they were very much divided. Instead of giving a united testimony to the world, they were wrangling among themselves and forming parties and cliques according to their several carnal opinions and favouritisms. As a consequence, the testimony of Christ was seriously compromised, and the heart of the apostle was well-nigh broken. Can any right-thinking Christian fail to perceive the sinfulness of such behaviour?



By the Spirit of God Paul was led to express, in his first epistle to the Corinthians, what holds good for all time regarding the heinous sin of sectarianism. We are not to suppose that there were actual groups of Christians in Corinth who had separated themselves from the main body of believers and adopted sectarian names, after the fashion of present-day denominations. Things had not yet come to such a pass, but the evil was there, nevertheless, in the attitude and tendencies of some who were carnal and who used the persons and names of some in their midst for the forming of schisms, which, if allowed to develop internally, would sooner or later have led to open division.

Paul, in condemning the carnality of those who fomented such party feelings, does not make reference directly to the individuals whose names were being used in this way. Had he done so, many, no doubt, would have been ready to say that he was jealous of the individuals concerned, but he very wisely transfers these things to himself and his fellow-workers, Apollos and Cephas: a procedure which enables him to condemn the evil with greater energy and effectiveness. In chapter 4, verse 6, he tells us that these things he has transferred, "as in a metaphor", to himself and Apollos, in order to teach the lesson that it is improper to use *any* names, however worthy, for the purpose of dividing the saints by gathering them around human leaders. Thus the whole principle is seen to be wrong, whichever names might be involved; and not even the name of Christ might be employed as a party badge, because it belonged, not to a sect, but to the whole company of the saints.

What shall we say then of the many sectarian and distinctive names used in Christendom today? Can that which was denounced as carnal in Paul's day be esteemed as spiritual in this twentieth century? Let us remember that many serious evils existed in the Christian assembly at Corinth, evils which called for immediate and drastic action; and nevertheless it is the evil of sectarianism that the apostle deals with first of all in his epistle. Surely this

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is suggestive. The sin of sectarianism was that which revealed most clearly the carnal state of the Corinthian believers. Because they were carnal, they were disposed to follow human leaders and group themselves around such, instead of viewing Christ alone as the one gathering-centre for all His people. The apostle exhorted them to consider that all true ministers of Christ were gifts to the church, and should be esteemed as such, but whatever their personality or usefulness, in no case were they to be set one against another, or given place as leaders of rival factions among the saints.

The sin of sectarianism is again exemplified in the 3rd Epistle of John. The epistle is addressed to one Gaius, evidently a very worthy brother, and one whose love toward the saints was well known. Gaius belonged to a local Christian assembly where a very abnormal state of things existed. In that assembly was a brother (or one who called himself a brother) by the name of Diotrephes, and to his perpetual dishonour it is recorded in Scripture that he loved to have the pre-eminence among the brethren. This inordinate love of place led Diotrephes to deny to other brethren their rightful privileges in the assembly. Even the apostle John and his companions were excluded, when it was their intention to pay a visit to the assembly. John had written expressing this intention, but Diotrephes would have none of it. And when others expressed themselves as favourable to the reception of these servants of the Lord, Diotrephes did not hesitate to cast them "out of the church." It is evident that the assembly for him was not God's assembly but his; and he "lorded himself" over it. In this he is the prototype of that intolerant clerical spirit that has manifested itself so frequently in the history of Christendom; and it is here also that we have the first employment of language that points to the existence of a real division among the saints. John can no longer address himself to the church of God in such-and-such a place: he addresses himself rather to a faithful brother in that place and refers to the followers of Diotrephes as

“them” — he “loveth to have the pre-eminence among *them*”— not among *you*. Already Diotrephes had a following, and that word of Paul to the Ephesian elders was fulfilled: “From among your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them.” (Acts 20: 30).

In the history of sectarianism it will be seen, as Scripture has forewarned, that the evil has been largely due to the following of human leaders and the adoption of human names. It will be seen also that this has meant the abandoning of the true spiritual conception of the church and of the churches, and of the divinely-inspired instructions relative thereto. The testimony of Scripture, as a full and final authority on such matters, has been set aside, and some other human authority has been set up in its place; and the results of such a procedure could only be disastrous to the spiritual life of the believers and their testimony in the world. The revelation of the Lord’s will, both in His own words and in the subsequent apostolic writings, is very complete and understandable, where there is a will for it; and it demands our adherence and obedience throughout the whole period of the Christian dispensation. Where there has been departure, true spiritual recovery in any degree could only mean a returning to the principles and practices of the Word of God.

In the following pages it will be our intention, with the Lord’s help, to show, first of all, what Scripture teaches regarding the church universal and local Christian assemblies, with their principal features, functions and practices, as they existed in apostolic times; and thereafter to give a brief outline of the history of departure from the apostolic pattern, leading to the formation of sectarian bodies and parties, with all their attendant evils, so that the causes of sectarianism may be discerned and the remedy discovered.

## *Chapter Two*

### THE TRUE CHURCH

LET us go back, then, to the starting point, namely, our Lord's own words regarding His people and His church. When Peter first confessed: "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God," our Lord used the occasion to intimate that on this rock He would build His church, and the gates of hell would not prevail against it. (Matt. 16: 18.) We can have the absolute certainty that these words have been, and are being, fulfilled. According to them, Christ is the Builder of His church, and it is built upon Himself, the Rock of Ages. How could it any sense fail? That church, as a divine creation, is one against which the gates of hell could not possibly prevail; and we do well to endeavour to grasp very clearly the true conception of this indefectible and impregnable thing that Christ has called "My church". The term, as there used, does not refer, and could not refer, to any one of the many ecclesiastical organizations existing in the world today. None of them can claim to be His church or assembly: the one that He declared He Himself was going to build.

This will be the more clear to us if we carefully consider what is said elsewhere in the Scriptures about the same church. The germ thought given us in Matthew 16 is developed in the writings of the apostles, and particularly in those of Paul. This apostle was the instrument divinely chosen to give us the revelation of the church as a body, a living organism, of which Christ Himself is the Head. The church, as a body, is composed of many members, all of them having a living link with Christ the Head, and all of them deriving nourishment from, and being controlled by, that Head in Heaven. (Rom. 12: 4; 1 Cor. 12: 12, 13; Eph. 4: 15, 16; Col. 1: 18, 24; 2: 19).

An anticipation of this teaching may be found in chap-

ter 9 of the book of The Acts, in connection with the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. Saul was engaged in persecuting the Christians, and on the road to Damascus he was arrested by a light above the brightness of the sun and by a voice which said: "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou Me?" That voice, as Saul presently learned, was the voice of Jesus, the head of the church. That Head was in heaven, but when Saul persecuted the members of His body on earth, the Head protested. This incident serves to emphasize the vital unity existing between the Head and the members.

We may recall also that a very wonderful thing had happened on the day of Pentecost, according to chapter 2 of the same book of The Acts. On that day the Holy Spirit was given, and the nucleus of believers existing in Jerusalem — a company of about a hundred and twenty persons — were baptized into one body. That is to say, the coming of the Holy Spirit upon those Christians to indwell them constituted them "the church". The Holy Spirit was Christ's gift to them, according to His promise, and by the giving of the Spirit the church was formed. On that same day also, following the preaching of Peter, about three thousands souls were converted, and in virtue of that divine experience of conversion, involving the reception of the Holy Spirit also, these souls were added to the church. All of which goes to show that the formation of the church was a divine work, performed by the Lord Himself.

Subsequently we read of others who were converted in the same way through the preaching of the gospel, and wherever there was a real work of God, the seal of God was put upon that work by the giving of the Holy Spirit. So we read concerning the Corinthians: "For by one Spirit were we all baptized into one body" (1 Cor. 12:13); the meaning being that as each individual was brought to faith in Christ, he was put by the Spirit's action into that living organism which is Christ's body. *For the church is never contemplated as an organization at all, but as a living spiritual unity, divinely created and divinely sus-*

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*tained.* To that divine unity all true Christians belong, whatever may be their ecclesiastical associations on earth; and from that unity they can never be separated.

To think of Christ's church as a public body or system set up in the world is altogether beside the mark. Christ's kingdom is not of this world, nor is His church. His people are in the world but not of it (John 17: 14, 16); they are strangers and pilgrims (I Pet. 2: 11), because they are a heavenly people (I Cor. 15: 48) with a heavenly citizenship (Phil. 3: 20). So the church exists before the eye of God, but it was never intended to exist in the world as an ecclesiastical organization. Its testimony to the world was not to be a testimony of public religious services or ceremonies, conducted in consecrated buildings, but a gospel testimony taken to the people in their own circumstances; and its worship and service Godward were of such a nature that they were best expressed in the intimacy and privacy of the Christian circle.

Furthermore, the 4th chapter of the Epistle to the Ephesians enlightens us as to the nature of that spiritual and heavenly unity. It is there seen to be a unity of the Spirit, and all believers are exhorted to live and act in accordance with the truth so revealed. There is but one body and one Spirit, as there is but one hope or common destiny for all; there is but one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of all. This is true for all believers, however much or little their conduct may be in agreement with it. But if the truth as to the one indivisible body of Christ, and the one unity of the Spirit, were to possess us as it ought to do, we should be forever freed from a sectarian spirit and the danger of associating ourselves with any of the man-made unities or bodies of Christendom.

A brief reference to the writings of Peter may help us further to grasp the scriptural conception of the church. Peter never forgot the lesson he received that memorable day at Cesarea Philippi, when the Lord said to him: "On this rock I will build My church"; and in his first epistle he develops this same idea when he says: "To whom

coming (that is, to Christ), as unto a Living Stone . . . ye also, as living stones, are built up a spiritual house" (I Pet. 2: 4, 5). If the figure of the body has much to tell us concerning the unity and indivisibility of the church, so also does the figure of the spiritual building referred to here. We are taught that by coming to Christ we are ourselves constituted living stones in the building of which He Himself is the Builder. Just as the body is composed of living members, so the building is constructed with living stones, and so the truth is emphasized that only those who have had a vital experience of conversion to Christ can have any place or part in the church of His creation. This was true of the people whom Peter describes as "living stones", for in the first chapter of that same epistle he says that they were redeemed with the precious blood of Christ, and also that they were "born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the Word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever." If this was a condition for belonging to the church in apostolic times, it is equally so today.

Again, if we view the church of Christ as a flock, we learn the same lesson. Christ said: "I am the good Shepherd, and know My sheep, and am known of Mine." And again: "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me: and I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of My hand" (John 10: 14, 27, 28). The possession of eternal life is thus assured to every true sheep of Christ's flock, with the certainty that such a one can never be lost. The church of Christ is not composed of people who are seeking salvation, but of people who know themselves already saved by faith in the Saviour.

The figure of a flock is not to be confused with that of a fold, also employed in the same chapter. When our Lord said (verse 16): "Other sheep I have, which are not of this fold," He was referring to the Jewish fold; and when he added: "them also I must bring, and they shall hear My voice," He was speaking of Gentile believers who

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would be brought to hear His voice in the gospel and so be saved. Thus He was able also to add: "There shall be one flock (not *fold* here), and one Shepherd" (John 10: 16, R.V.). The precision of scriptural language (obscured in the A.V.) requires us to distinguish between the fold and the flock. The former is a suitable figure of Judaism, for the Jews were hedged in by a system of commandments and ordinances; but the flock is held together by the adherence of the sheep to the shepherd, and this is the true principle of unity in Christianity. Our Lord said concerning Himself: "He calleth His own sheep by name, and leadeth them out"; meaning that He led them out of the Jewish fold to be gathered around Himself. This same principle holds good today, for many other folds have been brought into existence since apostolic days, and Christ is still graciously occupied in calling His own sheep by name, leading them out from sectarian associations unto Himself.



## Chapter Three

### LOCAL ASSEMBLIES

BUT Scripture does not only speak of the church universal — that great company of true believers taken out of every kindred, and tongue, and people and nation; united to Christ and to one another in a true spiritual unity by the Holy Ghost who indwells them — a heavenly unity, we may say, known only to God and to the apprehension of faith. For we also find reference made in the book of the Acts, and in the epistles, to churches or assemblies of Christians meeting in different localities. If it is important that we have a right conception of the one true universal church of Christ, as composed of all true believers, it is equally important, for practical purposes, that we understand the Lord's mind in relation to local assemblies of believers who meet in His name. For the two conceptions are essentially different.

In Matthew 16, when our Lord spoke of His church for the very first time, He used a word which was eminently suitable to describe that church. He did not speak of His synagogue, but of His *ekklesia*; a word which signifies etymologically "a called-out company" (from *ek*, out, and *kaleo*, to call). This word has been rendered "church" in the Authorized Version and other versions of the Scriptures, but where there has been a sincere attempt to give a faithful rendering of the original (as in the New Translation of J. N. Darby), the word "assembly" has been employed as its nearest equivalent. The word "church" is not derived from *ekklesia* at all, but is an Anglo-Saxon derivation from a different Greek word (*kuriake*), and the use of it has led to considerable confusion; for men have felt free to attach to this word whatever meaning has best suited their purpose. So we find it applied, it may be, to a religious building, to a

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teaching body or hierachy, to a denomination, or to the aggregate of all denominations.

But when we come to the Scriptures, we find that *ekklesia* has two simple usages or applications in relation to God's people. The first we have seen in Matthew 16, where our Lord speaks of His assembly: the one universal company of the redeemed, the company that He Himself is forming by taking out from among the nations a people for His name (see Acts 15: 14). The second we shall find in Matthew 18, where the Lord again speaks of the assembly, but this time in a different sense. The subject is introduced by a reference, first of all, to the question of one brother who trespasses against another, the offended one being told (other action having failed) to refer the matter "to the assembly". A simple reading of the passage will enable us to see that the assembly here referred to is a local company of Christians who habitually meet together as a visible expression of that heavenly unity to which we have already referred. Later we shall find that such assemblies or churches came into existence wherever the gospel was preached and people were converted; but this first mention of a local company is of special importance as revealing that it was the purpose of the Lord for His people that they should so meet in assembly capacity. Further references will teach us that they would meet regularly for the purposes of worship, ministry, fellowship, and prayer; and all of this by divine arrangement; but the point here is the constitution of the local assembly in a given place.

Since the whole subject was new to the disciples whom our Lord was addressing, He must needs give them fundamental instruction in the matter, and this He does in His own wonderful way. First He teaches them that a fellowship is to exist among His disciples of such a delicate and spiritual nature that nothing is to be allowed to mar it. No Christian may offend his brother and thereafter maintain an attitude of indifference or self-justification. Re-

conciliation and the restoration of fellowship is to be sought immediately, but if the offender proves to be rebellious or stubborn, he will find himself eventually excluded from the assembly as unworthy of its fellowship. The assembly would have power to act in the exercise of discipline, and when so acting on the Lord's instructions its decisions would be ratified in heaven. This shows clearly that each individual company was to act in an autonomous way, but always in the fear of the Lord. It also shows that such a local company or assembly was a divine institution, endowed with powers and prerogatives of a high and holy order. These prerogatives did not belong to individuals as such, nor to any special rank of individuals or any superior council. They belonged to the assembly as gathered by the Holy Spirit in submission to the lordship of Christ. For the Lord goes on to say (verse 19 being parenthetical): "For where two or three are gathered together unto my name, there am I in the midst of them." This is the reason given for the exercise of divine authority by the assembly: the believers in themselves are nothing, but having been gathered by the Holy Spirit unto the name of Christ — that is to say, not on any sectarian ground, but in submission to Christ's lordship — they have the assurance of His presence in the midst. Such a conception of a Christian assembly is altogether divine. It is what the Lord contemplated, and what He made provision for, and there never was any need to organize or develop anything along different lines. The Lord knew perfectly what was best for His people, and we should not assume to be wiser than He.

We may now look at the appearance historically of such assemblies in the world and learn whatever Scripture may have to teach us concerning them.

The first of these was the assembly at Jerusalem, and the functioning of that assembly is described for us in simple terms that provide us with a model for all future assemblies, as was doubtless the Holy Spirit's intention.

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We refer to chapter 2 of the Acts, verses 41 and 42. Following the preaching of Peter on the memorable occasion of the Spirit's descent, we read that "they that gladly received his word were baptized, and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls. And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine, and in fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers."

It has pleased the Holy Spirit to call attention here to seven essential features in the activities of that first assembly, features that were to characterize all the assemblies as they began to appear elsewhere; so that we may say: (1) they were composed of converted people, that is, people who received the message of the gospel for their personal salvation; (2) the converted ones were baptized; (3) they were added together in a visible unity; (4) they continued to receive apostolic instruction; (5) they experienced and enjoyed true Christian fellowship; (6) they regularly observed the breaking of bread, that is, the Lord's Supper, according to the Lord's own appointment; and (7) they also met regularly for the purpose of collective prayer. Such were the primitive Christian assemblies as gathered and controlled by the Holy Spirit, before place was given to the will and ambitions of men. And it is further said (ver. 47) that the Lord added daily such as were being saved, indicating that it was not only the Lord's work to save people but also to bring them together in assembly fellowship for the purposes indicated above.

## Chapter Four

### BAPTISM AND RECEPTION

THE essential difference between the church, viewed as the body of Christ, and the local assemblies which began to appear everywhere as visible expressions or representations of the divine unity, may perhaps be more clearly seen if we consider these in relation to the ordinance of baptism. In the great commission (Matt. 28: 18-20), which is the only word of authority that we have for baptizing, we see that the ordinance is connected with the ministry of evangelism. Disciples were to be made by the preaching of the gospel (compare Mark 16: 15, 16), and those disciples were to be baptized, with a view to their being further instructed.

This programme was observed on the day of Pentecost, and we have seen that the baptized ones were then added to the local assembly. Now it is clear that with regard to the church, viewed as a divine and heavenly unity, there is never any occasion to speak of baptism (that is, water baptism) in relation to our being added thereto. It is "by one Spirit" that we are all baptized into one body (1 Cor. 12: 13) and united to Christ as head of that body; and this is a divine operation quite independent of ordinances. But in relation to the local assembly it is said: "They that gladly received his word were baptized; and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls."

It would be a serious mistake to connect water baptism with our admission into Christ's universal assembly. Our conversion to Christ and the operation of His Spirit within us make us, *ipso facto*, members of His body. No such vital experience could be made dependent on an ordinance, for all ordinances are necessarily of a symbolic nature. But when we think of the scriptural conception of a local assembly, we see that the divine order is: conversion,

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baptism, and addition to the local company of believers. Why, we may ask, should baptism be mentioned just there? Because it is evident that our fellowship in a local assembly is dependent on our being received into that assembly by those who compose it, and such would naturally expect of us, not only a profession of conversion, but also our submission to Christ's ordinance of baptism, as that which was intended to accompany a genuine repentance and turning to the Lord.

It is a common saying that baptism does not put us into the church. Of course it does not, if by the church is meant the universal company of believers; but this should not blind us to the fact that in the scriptural order of things baptism normally precedes admission to the local assembly. And the reason for this will be more apparent if we examine the doctrine of Scripture regarding the meaning of the ordinance.

This doctrine is found in three New Testament passages, the first of these being Romans, chapter 6. There we are taught that baptism points to the fact of our having died to sin. In the reckoning of God, every believer has passed through death, burial and resurrection, in the person of Christ. And in his baptism the believer proclaims this great truth, as also his obligation to live in accordance with it by walking in newness of life. He has died unto sin, and he is now alive unto God. It is evident that this doctrine could have no reference to any but converted people. But how important it is — and, we may say, how eminently suitable — that every converted one should take this position of identification with Christ before associating himself with the fellowship and testimony of a local assembly.

The teaching of Colossians 2: 11-13 and 1 Peter 3: 21 contains the same lesson. Baptism is in view of the putting off of the body of the sins of the flesh and the exhibition of a life of victory by the operation of God, akin to that operation by which He raised Christ from the dead. And in view of the importance of this ordinance in rela-

tion to right Christian living and public testimony, it would be presumptuous on our part to make reception into a local assembly independent of it. Undoubtedly it was divine wisdom which caused it to be recorded that the first Christian converts "were baptized", and the same day "were added".

## Chapter Five

### A DIVINE NAME

Of the assemblies that began to appear elsewhere we may select the one at Antioch in Syria as providing further helpful instruction. The story begins in Acts 11, where certain itinerant preachers are seen to be making known the gospel and winning souls to Christ. These were not men with any official ecclesiastical status: they were simply men of Cyprus and Cyrene who had been scattered from Jerusalem by the persecution that arose about Stephen. But the gospel they preached was effective in producing conversions, and the formation of an assembly at Antioch followed as a matter of course. There was nothing official about its constitution: it was rather a work of the Holy Spirit that drew the converts together; and this should be true of every local company. Our Lord had said: "Where two or three are gathered together unto My name, there am I in the midst of them"; and this was true at Antioch. *The gathering power that brought them together was the power of the Holy Ghost, and the centre to which they were gathered was the name of the Lord.* The Holy Spirit would never gather to any other name. And being so gathered, the presence of the Lord in their midst was a blessed reality.

Tidings of these things having reached the ears of the assembly at Jerusalem, Barnabas, a spiritual man, was sent to Antioch to give assistance. He assumed no official position among them, but being full of the Holy Ghost, he exhorted them and helped them considerably. The next move was for Barnabas to go as far as Tarsus and fetch Saul (that is Paul), in whom he appears to have had more confidence than did the brethren at Jerusalem. And together Paul and Barnabas continued their ministry there for the space of a year. The simplicity and spon-



taneity of all this is delightful to trace, and the absence of ecclesiastical control and organization is noticeable.

A simple verse in this same chapter is worthy of special attention in connection with our subject. Verse 26 tells us that "the disciples were called Christians first at Antioch". Does this mean that the inhabitants of Antioch gave the name of Christians to the believers? We think not. The believers have been given all kinds of names both by friends and enemies, from that day till this, but the name of Christians did not originate in that way. What the believers should be called was far too important a matter to be left to the whims of the inhabitants of Antioch or of any city. It was a matter that God Himself was interested in, for it was a matter that affected the interests of Him who had been made "both Lord and Christ". It was eminently suitable and desirable that those who belonged to Christ should be called Christians. No other distinctive name could serve the same purpose. If Christ was their Lord, they should be known as those who belonged to Him. These considerations should prepare us to expect that God revealed His will in the matter and caused the disciples to be so named. Those days of instruction at Antioch were days of fresh revelations. Much that Paul committed to writing later was doubtless taught orally first of all at Antioch and elsewhere, and it is in connection with this teaching ministry that the statement is made: "The disciples were called Christians first in Antioch." Is it not therefore probable that the name of Christians was given to the believers in the apostolic ministry of Paul and Barnabas? Such a conclusion would be confirmed by the fact that in the divinely-inspired record of these happenings the Spirit of God has chosen to use a special verb when telling us what the Christians were "called". Had He wanted to tell us what the Antiochians called them, He would doubtless have used the common verb *kaleo*, but He prefers to use *chrematisai*, which according to Newberry, Young, Green, and others, has the meaning of "oracularly or divinely called". The

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usage of this same verb in other Scripture passages seems to limit it to occasions when God was the Speaker or Caller.

If this conclusion be sound, we may gather that the divine intention was that God's people of the present dispensation should be known as Christians, and in view of this, the assumption of other humanly-devised names becomes serious. The fact is that all other names are divisive, but the employment of the name of Christians can never have a divisive tendency. It is a name that is in itself a testimony, since it proclaims the one great truth which we want to make known, namely, that we belong to Christ. It is a name that we may well glory in, and Peter has this to say about it: "If any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God *in this name*" (1 Pet. 4: 16, R.V., Darby and others).

The name of Christian is one which we cannot add to, without detracting from its glory. If "in Christ" we are complete and have all things, as the Colossian epistle teaches us, then to be a Christian means more than any other name can suggest. The addition of any adjective would be paramount to a confession that the term Christian in itself does not contemplate all that a child of God should be.

Christians, of course, are described by other terms, such as disciples, saints, children of God, believers, brethren, etc. But none of these was intended to be a distinctive name for the people of God, a name by which they should be known in the world. They are terms descriptive of some relationship or characteristic of Christians, but none of them tells the whole story. We are disciples, but of whom? We are believers, but of what? We are saints, but so were Abraham and David and Daniel, though they did not know the blessings of Christianity.

The fact that multitudes of people call themselves Christians who have no right to the name is no reason why we should abandon its use. Rather is it a reason for restoring it to its proper place as descriptive only of those

who have experienced the saving grace of Christ and who own His lordship in the world. In doing so we shall have gone a long way in the direction of correcting or removing the evil of sectarianism.

## *Chapter Six*

### THE MINISTRY

A FURTHER lesson to be learned from the assembly at Antioch is in relation to the ministry. Chapter 13 of the Acts begins by telling us that there were in the church there "certain prophets and teachers", and five of these are named. In addition to Paul and Barnabas, there were Simeon, Lucius and Manaen. Here, as elsewhere in Scripture, there is no reference to any kind of appointment to the ministry, but certain men were distinguishing themselves as being competent to minister, and the Holy Spirit was making use of them. Evidently they were men whose spiritual qualification for the ministry was derived from the ascended Head of the church, according to the teaching of Ephesians 4: 11, 12. In the assembly at Antioch there was liberty for them to minister, according to their God-given ability, and there was no question of their taking "holy orders" first of all, or of their being in any sense "ordained" or given special theological training in any kind of institution.

Strangely enough, the passage is sometimes used to teach the need of ordination, since there is a reference to hands being laid upon Paul and Barnabas before they departed on their first missionary journey. But the words must be read very carelessly indeed to suppose that they could in any way support the practice of clerical ordination. In the first place, there is no mention of ordination or anything of the sort. The laying on of the hands of the brethren signified no more than the committing or commending of Paul and Barnabas to the grace of God for the new venture to which the Holy Ghost had called them. This is plainly stated in the following chapter (14: 26). Moreover, Paul and Barnabas had been employed in the work of the ministry for more than a year at Antioch

before the commending took place. It would be strange indeed if men of that calibre needed some kind of ordination at the hands of men who were evidently their inferiors. But nowhere in Scripture is ordination for the ministry taught: it must be read into the passages that are supposed to give it some support. Paul is careful to state elsewhere (Gal. 2: 6) that they who were apostles before him communicated nothing to him. True ministry is always the exercise of a divinely bestowed gift, and in primitive Christian assemblies there was liberty for its exercise under the control of the Holy Spirit. No human licence or authorization was needed.

We may observe also in this same passage the plurality of prophets or ministers in a single assembly. The order of the ministry, as taught in 1 Corinthians 12 and 14, contemplates the possibility of two or three brethren ministering in a single meeting. Nor was this done by pre-arrangement, but as it was revealed to one and another. (Ch. 14: 29-33). Sisters were intructed to keep quiet (v. 34) but this very prohibition emphasizes the fact that the brethren were free to minister, provided they had gift for it and were subject to the Holy Spirit. Peter, by the Spirit, imposes this restriction: "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" (1 Pet. 4: 11). One reason for the plurality of ministers is that there are "diversities of gifts" (1 Cor. 12: 4) and of ministries and operations. All are necessary, but the exercise of each is said to be in the energy and under the control of the Holy Spirit (vv. 7-11). All of which is in marked contrast with the one-man ministry that obtains in most denominations of Christendom today.

## Chapter Seven

### PASTORAL CHARGES

SIMILAR observations may be made with regard to the pastoral care of assemblies. Nowhere do we read of "the pastor" of such-and-such a church. But when Paul and Barnabas had completed their first missionary journey and founded many assemblies, they returned over the same ground and appointed "elders" in every one of them. Again we observe the plural number (Acts 14: 23); it is "elders in every assembly". If we ask what was the purpose in appointing these men, we shall find Scripture sufficiently explicit. It certainly was not a question of creating clergymen of any sort, though some of the elders doubtless gave their whole time to the care of the churches. Some also would share in the ministry of the word (see 1 Tim. 5: 17), but it was not on that account that they were appointed as elders.

Chapter 20 of the Acts will give us help in this connection. There it will be seen (in verse 17) that Paul sent from Miletus to Ephesus and called the elders of the church. (Why, we may ask, did he not call for "the pastor"?) The elders having come, he proceeded to give them a farewell discourse, and in that discourse he enjoins upon them the care of the assembly in these words: "Take heed unto yourselves, and to all the flock wherein (or among which — not *over* which) the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which He hath purchased with His own blood" (v. 28, R.V., J.N.D., etc.).

Let us note carefully in this remarkable verse that the same people who are called elders (*presbuterous*) in verse 17 are now called overseers (*episkopous*, sometimes rendered bishops), and their work is described as that of taking care of the flock. In other words, the elders are the overseers and shepherds of the flock; so that these

various terms can never be legitimately employed to designate different ecclesiastical ranks, as all honest expositors will recognize. This at once disposes of all episcopal and hierarchical church systems, for a bishop in Scripture is nothing more or less than an elder or pastor, of which several existed in every congregation or assembly. That is to say, the government or care of each individual assembly was in the hands of its own local elders, a group of men who are said to have been given this charge by the Holy Ghost. No higher authority is recognized anywhere in the matter of church government, apart from the apostles, for whose unique office there could be no succession.

It will be recalled that the Lord had occasion to rebuke His disciples, when a question arose among them as to who should be the greatest. He pointed out to them that it was foreign to His plan that there should be differences of rank among them; and if any were to be distinguished among them, it would be on account of their spiritual qualifications, and not because of any official appointments. These are His words: "Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; and whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant" (Matt. 20: 25-27).

In accordance with the spirit of this important pronouncement, we find in the subsequent New Testament writings that the language is carefully chosen to avoid giving any impression of the existence of a hierarchy or any kind of clerical class. Thus it is said: "The elders which are *among* you"; rather than the elders which are *over* you (1 Pet. 5: 1). In Hebrews 13: 17, the expression "them which have the rule over you" is simply "your guides" or "your leaders" (*hegoumenois*). Thus every kind of ecclesiastical pretension is discouraged.

If it be asked: What provision has been made for the selecting or appointing of elders down through the ages?, it must be confessed that there is no support for any of

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the practices most common in the ecclesiastical world today. What we do have is two extensive sections of Paul's last epistles (1 Tim. 3 and Titus 1) which give us fully the qualifications of elders or overseers. We are exhorted to know such and give them recognition; also to esteem them highly because of their work (1 Thess. 5: 12, 13). But there are no instructions as to any official appointment. Paul and Barnabas, as we have already seen, did the appointing of elders in the newly-formed assemblies mentioned in Acts 14, and later Timothy and Titus were delegated by Paul to do the same thing in other fields. But who would claim to have such authority today? Apostolic authority was a necessity in the early days of Christianity, before the canon of Scripture was completed, but we are compelled to recognize that no provision was made for its continuance, except in the letter of Scripture itself. We do have full instructions as to the spiritual qualifications of those who would share in the work of elders, but not a word as to their appointment. May not those qualified give themselves to the work, therefore, as called to it by the Holy Ghost? And are we not required to recognize them by their work, rather than by any form of ordination? Such an order of things is certainly in keeping with the nature of Christianity.



## Chapter Eight

### THE LORD'S SUPPER AND WORSHIP

BEFORE leaving chapter 20 of the Acts, let us learn a further lesson regarding the practice of the early churches or assemblies. On the eve of our Lord's crucifixion, He instituted the Supper of commemoration or remembrance, and from Acts 2 we have learned that the newly-formed assembly at Jerusalem "continued" — amongst other things — "in the breaking of bread"; that is, they continued in the celebration of the Lord's Supper. But it is from Acts 20 that we learn with what frequency this celebration took place. Paul and his companions were visiting the assembly at Troas, en route to Jerusalem from the west, and verse 7 informs us that "on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them . . . and continued his speech until midnight." Such a discourse would doubtless be a memorable one for all the saints, but the important thing to observe is that the disciples came together, as they customarily did, on the first day of the week, not to hear Paul preach, but to break bread in accordance with their Lord's command.

Since the accomplishment of Christ's redemptive work, the first day of the week has been the characteristic day of Christianity, soon to be known as the Lord's Day (Rev. 1: 10); just as the breaking of bread was to be known as the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11: 20). The same adjective (*kuriake*, dominical, taking character from the Lord) is used of both, for both are the Lord's in a unique way. The observance of the day was practised primarily in the breaking of bread, and reference is made to it also in connection with the giving of a weekly offering for Christian purposes (1 Cor. 16: 1, 2).

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In 1 Cor. 11 the apostle is careful to repeat, with all solemnity and emphasis, his instructions, previously given in oral ministry, as to the right partaking of the Lord's Supper, in view of the disorder that had crept in at Corinth; but neither here, nor elsewhere is anything said about the administration of a sacrament by a clergyman, or anything of that nature. The instructions are given to the whole assembly, and the apostle's concern is as to the conditions of holiness requisite in those who should partake. Very evidently the Supper was partaken of in a very simple way by the believers, and no suggestion is made as to the necessity of following any prescribed order of service, or of having any kind of ecclesiastical officer in attendance.

Elsewhere we learn that all believers are priests (1 Pet. 2: 5, 9; Heb. 13: 15) and, as such, it is their privilege to worship "in spirit and in truth" (John 4: 23, 24). The common priesthood of believers is a forgotten truth today, but for the early Christians it was a blessed reality. In view of it they met together in simple dependence on the Spirit of God. Their meetings were not presided over by any single man, recognized as being competent to take charge; but all brethren were free to lead in prayer and thanksgiving, or otherwise contribute to the purpose of the meeting, including the giving of thanks for the bread and wine, and the distribution of these elements among the participants. Otherwise the principle of the common priesthood of believers would be violated. Such an arrangement, however, demands a real consciousness of the presence of the Holy Spirit and an unfeigned dependence on His guidance and control, else the result would be confusion.

Nor was this order of things limited to the weekly meeting for the observance of the Lord's Supper, for it may be learned from 1 Corinthians 12 and 14 that there was liberty for different brethren to take part in meetings for prayer, ministry or exhortation. What the apostle insisted upon was that all should be done for edification.

## *Chapter Nine*

### DISCIPLINE AND ADMINISTRATION

IN summarizing the characteristic features of the early Christian assemblies, with a view to tracing the development of sectarianism, it is important to call attention to the fact that a system of discipline existed among them, with divine approval. We have already seen that when the Lord first spoke of the local assembly and defined it as a company (as few as two or three, it might be) gathered unto His name, He declared that such a company had authority to act in the exercise of discipline, and that such action would be ratified in Heaven. (Matt. 18: 18, 20). The particular case that He chose as an example of such discipline, was that of a brother who had given offence and who was unwilling to be restored to amicable relations with the offended one. The fact that such a person was to be considered as "a heathen man and a publican", shows that a very high standard of conduct was expected of those who were together in assembly fellowship, and we should understand that the assembly could not really function in a normal way for God's glory, unless proper spiritual relations were maintained amongst the believers who composed it.

Other passages of Scripture require that disciplinary action be taken in a variety of ways for different causes. A brother who is overtaken in a fault is to be restored by those who are spiritual (Gal. 6: 1). Unruly and vain talkers are to be exhorted and rebuked by the elders (2 Tim. 4: 1, 2; Titus 1: 9-11). Causers of divisions and disorderly persons are to be avoided and withdrawn from (Rom. 16: 17, 18: 2 Thess. 3: 6). A heretic who refuses correction is to be rejected (Titus 3: 9-11). And a person who is guilty of immoral conduct, or who teaches erroneous doctrine of a serious nature, is to be put away from

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the assembly and refused all fellowship. (1 Cor. 5: 13; 2 John 10; 1 Tim 1: 20).

Our purpose in thus briefly reviewing the steps of discipline to be taken with a view to maintaining conditions of holiness, purity of doctrine, and spiritual relations in the assembly, is mainly to show that in every case the action is taken by the local assembly itself, or by persons within the assembly, that is, spiritual persons or elders. No provision is made for action to be taken by any higher authority, such as a provincial bishop, a national presbytery or synod, a united oversight, or any kind of ecclesiastical hierarchy. Such authorities simply did not exist in apostolic times, and it is evident that in the matter of discipline each local assembly was expected to manage its own affairs.

If it be thought that Acts 15 teaches otherwise, we need only say that no disciplinary action is contemplated there. Paul and Barnabas, with others, had been teaching in the assembly at Antioch that Gentile converts should not be required to observe the law of Moses. They had been converted to Christianity, not to Judaism. But some who came from Jerusalem taught otherwise, and the result was confusion in the minds of many. It was decided therefore that Paul and Barnabas, with other representatives of the assembly at Antioch, should go up to Jerusalem and consult with the apostles and elders there. At this memorable meeting, the mind of the Holy Spirit was sought and obtained with regard to the matter in question, and the result was communicated to Antioch and other assemblies. It was entirely a question of determining and declaring what was the doctrine and practice which the apostles held to be according to the mind of the Holy Spirit. Since then, all such questions have been fully dealt with in the apostolic writings, and the faith has been once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3). The New Testament revelation of Christian doctrine was duly completed through the ministry of Paul (Col. 1: 25), and all that is necessary for our instruction is contained therein. It would therefore be

quite unwarranted to appeal to the Jerusalem meeting of Acts 15 as a precedent for general assemblies or councils, for whatever purpose convened.

Scripture teaches, then, that all questions of administration and discipline belong to the local assembly as such, and each local assembly is seen to be directly responsible to the Lord. This is clearly seen in the addresses to the seven assemblies of Asia, in Revelation 2 and 3. Each assembly is there represented as a single candlestick, and the Lord walks in the midst of them, with separate messages to deliver them, according to their individual condition. The prophetic interpretation of these messages, which applies them to successive phases of church history, we believe to be entirely sound, but this in no way detracts from the fact that the original Asian assemblies stood in the relation of individual responsibility to the Lord, as do local assemblies today when gathered according to the principles of Scripture.

This conception of the local Christian assembly as an autonomous or self-governing body, responsible directly to the Lord, we believe to be fully supported by every relevant passage of Scripture, and we consider it to be of the greatest importance in relation to the subject of sectarianism, as we shall presently show. Lest we be misunderstood, however, let us here say that we gladly recognize that in Scripture we see the assemblies definitely linked together in a spiritual way. While there was no organizational unity, and no universal, national, or regional government, the same apostolic teachings were given in all of the assemblies, so that they all had the same constitution, the same beliefs, and the same practices. Moreover, the believers who composed those assemblies were all members of the one body of Christ, so that a definite spiritual unity and a true fellowship existed. But this is a very different thing from the organized or official unity brought about by the confederation of assemblies in the form of a public body. No provision was made in Scripture for the formation or administration of any such public body or bodies,

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and it has only been by the will of men that such have come into existence. God's will was that each individual assembly should exist in dependence upon Him alone. His Word and His Holy Spirit were sufficient resources, when assemblies were willing to be guided by them, and the promise of His presence in the midst was given, not to any organization, but to individual companies of two or three gathered unto His name.

## *Chapter Ten*

### THE "CATHOLIC" CONCEPTION OF THE CHURCH

WHAT has been said in the foregoing pages may not present a complete picture of the life of the assemblies in apostolic times, but enough has been said to show that the picture is a very different one from what developed in later times. Had scriptural principles been adhered to, and apostolic examples followed, sectarianism as we know it could never have been developed. The tragic and pathetic picture of a divided Christendom is the direct result of the introduction of human ideas and the abandonment of Scripture as an all-sufficient guide. So long as the Christian assemblies were content to exist as such, in dependence on the Lord and His Word, they were perfectly safe. The body of Christ, as such, could not be divided, because that is a divine unity which neither Satan nor man can touch; and the local assemblies, existing in organizational independence of one another (but in spiritual communion, as far as conditions permitted), did not present the aspect of a material fabric that could be rent asunder.

Sectarianism depends for its very existence on the adoption of a conception of church unity which Scripture never contemplates, and the process of its adoption is not difficult to trace. In the language of Scripture, as we have endeavoured to make plain, we may legitimately speak of "the church" (that is, the church or assembly of God, or of Christ) in the general sense, when referring to the whole company of true believers, redeemed by the blood of Christ and united to Him by the Holy Spirit; or, in the local sense, when speaking of a company of believers gathered to the name of the Lord Jesus, in submission to His word and His Holy Spirit. But when we come to post-apostolic times, we soon begin to discern the employment of scriptural terms in an unscriptural way, and the word

“church” was one of the first to be abused in this way.

The first step was to apply the term “Christian” to all who made a profession of Christianity. With the passing of the first generations of Christians, the insistence upon the need of personal conversion became less and less emphatic. Children of Christian parents were not required to give testimony of having definitely turned to God with repentance and faith. Already toward the end of the second century the baptism of infants was being practised, the belief in baptismal regeneration having replaced the scriptural and evangelical belief in regeneration by the living Word of God. (1 Pet. 1: 23, Jas. 1: 18).

So there arose a new order of “Christians”: people who professed Christianity as a religion but knew nothing of the saving grace of God in their lives. Baptism, not conversion, was the beginning of their spiritual experience, and although a course of religious instruction followed, it was necessarily something different from the preaching of the gospel. For you cannot consistently preach the gospel to people whom you have already baptized as inheritors of the kingdom of God.

Consequent upon this, the conception of the church as a living spiritual organism, composed only of true believers linked to Christ in glory, was soon lost, and that of a visible organization, with a hierarchical government, came more and more into view. In the local assemblies or congregations, men arose to take control in an ambitious and carnal way, after the manner of Diotrephes, and soon a distinction was made between the “clergy” and “laity”. With the development of the episcopal office beyond the limits of a local company, and the recognition of the administrative authority of “metropolitans” over extensive territories, the simple scriptural order of the assemblies, functioning independently, but under the control of the Holy Spirit, was in time replaced by the mechanism of an ecclesiastical organization. That organization called itself “the church”, but it never was the church in the scriptural sense of the term, for it never coincided with, or corres-



ponded to, or was co-terminous with, the true body of Christ. And Scripture never gave the name of church to such an organization.

The development of this idea was gradual, and it did not provoke general protest. Nevertheless, God did not leave Himself without witnesses to the truth. One of these was Origen, a man of great learning and spiritual insight. Born in Alexandria in the year 185, he was early instructed in the Scriptures by his godly father Leonidas, and he bore a clear testimony to the spiritual nature of the church, which he saw to be composed of those who have experienced in their lives the saving power of the gospel. But his teaching was too scriptural to suit the clerical class (he himself being classified as a layman), and he was eventually excommunicated by Demetrius, Bishop of Alexandria.

Cyprian, Bishop of Cathage, who lived about the same time, was a very different kind of person. His writings contain frequent reference to "the Catholic Church", which for him was a visible organization under human control. Christians who did not conform to its teachings and practices were excluded from it, though they belonged to the true body of Christ; and, on the other hand, Cyprian himself confesses that in the so-called Catholic Church there were many tares among the wheat. Thus, from the beginning, this much-vaunted "Catholic" Church showed itself to be something other than the true church of Christ. It stands identified as the first of the sects, and mother of all the rest.

Many individual assemblies or congregations, seeking to adhere to New Testament teachings and practices, remained on independent ground and found themselves gradually separated from the Catholic group, whose episcopal government they refused to recognize. In other words, these separated assemblies continued in the same position that all assemblies had occupied in the beginning, while those that banded themselves together under the leadership of the clergy became an ecclesiastical organiza-

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tion, arrogating to itself the distinctive title of "Catholic". In spite of the etymological significance of this word (i.e., universal, general, embracing all), it was in its application nothing more than a sectarian name from the outset, standing as it did for something which did *not* embrace all, and only, true believers.

And so the formation of the first public religious body, professing to be Christian, yet not composed of all Christians, and confessedly embracing "many tares among the wheat", was the result of the adoption of the "Catholic" concept of a universal church organization composed of many individual churches and having a hierarchical government. Every intelligent and spiritually-minded reader of Scripture must see how great was this departure from the original pattern. And so it must ever be, when the leadership of men is followed and the Word of God disregarded.

In the centuries that followed there is frequent reference, even by Catholic writers, to the existence of those congregations which maintained a separate testimony. Some of them claimed to have maintained it in an unbroken succession from the time of the apostles; others separated themselves from the Catholic body as conditions developed which they saw to be more and more unscriptural; and still others were cut off because they protested against the growing apostasy. These were all doubtless blamed for being sectarian, whereas *the sectarianism existed in that body politic which had been created contrary to the teaching of Scripture and which could not command the adherence and respect of sincere Christians*. Many would remember the Lord's words in Matthew 20: 26: "It shall not be so among you"; and they would see in those words sufficient warrant for repudiating every form of hierarchical or "Catholic" administration.

## *Chapter Eleven*

### THE DEVELOPMENT OF CATHOLICISM

As the Catholic system developed, and its leaders became more and more arrogant, there was more and more occasion for faithful Christians to separate from it. Those who did separate, in order to retain the purity and simplicity of apostolic doctrine and practice, were sometimes given names which made them appear to be sectarian, though the names very often did not properly belong to them, nor were they accepted by them. Sometimes, when a leader or teacher would arise among them, his name would be used to form a sectarian title. Thus the Montanists got their name from Montanus, who began to teach about the year 156, protesting against worldliness in the churches and the increasing control of the bishops. Early in the third century the eminent writer Tertullian separated from the Catholic system and was associated with the so-called Montanists. He protested against infant baptism, which was then being introduced, and other departures from scriptural practice. (De Baptismo VIII, Eng. Trans, by A. Souter).

Other names given to those who early separated or simply remained apart from the organized ecclesiastical body were Cathars (meaning Puritans) and Novatians, from one Novatian who was a leader among them. Such separated Christians, or companies of Christians, were very numerous and continued to spread widely, but those to whom such names were given should not be thought of as organized bodies, after the style of modern denominations. They existed rather as a protest against the organization of the churches, and they doubtless would have been happy to be called simply by the name of Christians. Where no organization existed, there was no need for a sectarian name; but those who take sectarian ground, not only take

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a name to themselves, but insist upon giving some such name to all who take the ground of scriptural simplicity, lest the non-sectarian position of the latter should appear to condemn them.

Prior to the "conversion" and victory of Constantine (312), Catholics and non-Catholics had been subjected alike to the persecution of pagan Rome, but with Constantine's accession to power the situation greatly changed. Not only did the Catholic body cease to be persecuted, but she soon found herself in the position of being able to persecute others. Constantine himself knew nothing of spiritual conversion, and the organized church system was Christianity for him. It suited him to deal with "Christians" through their officially appointed leaders, the bishops, and these soon had powers conferred upon them by the state to suppress what was not to their liking. Nor did they long delay in showing the persecuting spirit that has characterized that system ever since.

In the second half of the fourth century a distinguished Spaniard named Priscillian was converted to Christ, and becoming a lover of the Scriptures he soon began to teach others. He emphasized holy living as showing the reality of conversion, but the unconverted clergy soon opposed him. Large numbers of people were attracted to the movement which he originated, including many of the educated class, but false charges of witchcraft and immorality were brought against him by Bishop Ithacus, and Priscillian was executed by order of the church, along with six others, among whom was a distinguished lady named Euchrotia. Though it was sought to destroy all the writings of Priscillian, some of them have been preserved, and they show him to have been a saintly man, sound in doctrine and desirous only of calling men from lives of vice and worldliness to the reality of true Christian experience.

Thus began the sad story of merciless intolerance, torture and bloodshed that have characterized the so-called Catholic Church down through the centuries. And the same policy has been constantly pursued of not only mur-

dering saintly people who had a zeal for the truth, as they found it in Scripture, but also of calumniating their memory by the invention of charges against them for which not a scrap of evidence can be produced.

As political power increased in the Catholic body and the hierarchy became more developed, so its spirituality decreased. The so-called Christian church became wedded to the pagan state, and instead of its purifying the state, which it was powerless to do, the already secularized church became paganized. And the paganism has remained.

The clergy were now being spoken of as priests, and it was a priesthood modelled after that of pagan Rome. Christ certainly ordained no priests, and the whole idea of an intermediary priesthood is foreign to Christianity. The Epistle to the Hebrews tells us of the efficacy of Christ's once-for-all sacrifice, and teaches us that He was Himself both the priest and the sacrifice. He entered into the heavenly sanctuary, there to appear in the presence of God for us; and the Christian recognizes no other priest. Priests were unknown in the early Christian churches, for neither the office of deacon (i.e., servant or minister), nor that of elder or overseer, bears any relation to the function of a priest. A priest is one who sacrifices (compare the French equivalent *sacrificateur*), and neither elders nor deacons were sacrificers of anything. So the theory had to be developed that in the celebration of the Lord's Supper there was a renewal of the sacrifice of Christ. Since, however, there is a manifest and radical difference between a supper and a sacrifice, the scriptural term had to be disposed of and "the sacrifice of the mass" adopted instead.

Hislop, in "The Two Babylons", has clearly demonstrated how pagan beliefs and practices were gradually incorporated into the Catholic system until hardly a single feature of pure Christianity remained. We may mention, among other things, the worship of Mother and Child; belief in the mediatorial powers of saints, so-called; vene-

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ration of their relics; the observance of Lent and feast days, such as Easter, Christmas and Lady-Day; the title and prerogatives of the Pontifex Maximus and the College of Cardinals; priestly vestments and ornaments, the pontifical mitre, the crozier, the tonsure, the rosary, the sign of the cross; belief in Purgatory and prayers for the dead; and very much more.

In defiance of the second commandment of the decalogue (Ex. 20: 4-6), the use of religious images was introduced and defended, and in some cases pagan images were baptized with Christian names. Pagan temples were appropriated and adapted to "Christian" uses. The initials of pagan deities (I-H-S) inscribed on temples were given a new meaning and allowed to remain. And, what was worse, thousands, if not millions, of pagans were baptized or sprinkled in the triune name of God and officially recognized as belonging now to the so-called Christian church, without having experienced anything of the vital converting and sanctifying power of the gospel of Christ.

It was about this time that sprinkling began to replace the hitherto universal practice of baptism by immersion. The writings of Tertullian, Justin Martyr, Hyppolitus and others of the period all speak of the immersion of catechumens. And even in the days of Constantine, church buildings were erected with baptisteries, instead of the more modern baptismal font. But the necessity of "christianizing" vast numbers of pagans made the simpler method of sprinkling more acceptable. The spiritual significance of immersion, as a figure of burial and resurrection had long been lost.

The very existence of this mass of unregenerate people within the body of Catholicism, even apart from the question of its complete departure from scriptural belief and practice, made it imperative for all true Christians to withdraw from it, in accordance with the command: "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? and what con-

cord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an unbeliever? . . . *Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you.*" (2 Cor. 6: 14-17).

This obligation to separate from unbelievers, and therefore from the apostate mass of Christendom, applies to all Christians everywhere. That which they separate from is not, and never was, the church of Christ; for no organized body can claim to be that. As believers, they belong to the true unity of the Spirit, which is the body of Christ, nor can they ever be separated from it. But from the visible organizations of men they are called to separate, for all such organizations have a sectarian character, as the Catholic Church, so-called, has had from the beginning; and in all of them there is an admixture of unconverted people.

Believers who do separate, then, from unities which God condemns should not be called sectarian nor blamed for the making of divisions. It is their bounden duty to separate from all associations of merely "nominal" Christians, for reasons of faithfulness to Christ and His Word. Scripture indeed teaches that the wheat and the tares are to be allowed to grow together *in the world* (Matt. 13: 38); but no such association is contemplated in the church. Christian assemblies are not to be composed of such mixtures.

Nor should such separated Christians commit the error of organizing themselves afresh into a new denominational body. This is where many well-intentioned reformers have failed. Having withdrawn from that which they deemed to be unfaithful and corrupt, they have set about organizing a new denomination characterized by greater purity of doctrine and practice, and so a new sect has been born. What they have failed to see is that the creation of such a body or organization is itself a departure from the revealed will of God, and in the creating of it they are simply following the example of the Catholic system.

Authority there was for the formation of local assemblies of Christians, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, as at the beginning; but authority for the organization of sectarian bodies, composed of a number of assemblies, and controlled by a central government, there was none. And as soon as we adopt the principle of acting without the Word of God, we open the door for the introduction of all kinds of innovations.



## Chapter Twelve

### THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

HITHERTO we have spoken of the Catholic Church, employing the term "Catholic" (with a capital C) in the sectarian sense which the word usually carries as applied to a visible organized body. The word "catholic" in its natural and true significance could only apply properly to the all-embracing church of Christ; which is a divine, spiritual and heavenly unity, including all believers and known only to faith. But Catholics themselves never use the word in this sense; it has always a sectarian connotation.

But there is a further development to consider. That which for several centuries had called itself the Catholic Church was to become, in part, the Roman Church. The development of the hierarchical system was gradual, as was to be expected, seeing there was no scriptural authority for it. In the early Christian assemblies, as we have seen, there were elders or overseers: a plurality of them in each local company. These were humble and spiritually-minded men who, for the most part, earned their own living while at the same time caring for the churches. The idea of clergy and laity did not yet exist.

But in course of time, as worldliness increased, ambitious men arose, who, in the spirit of Diotrephes, assumed an exclusive control and leadership, so that it became possible to speak of *the* presbyter, or *the* bishop, of such-and-such a church. The plurality of elders in the congregation gave way to a one-man government and ministry. Next came the creation of an artificial distinction between the presbyter and the bishop (elder and overseer), the bishop having greater authority, being appointed to one of the larger and more influential congregations. In the larger cities, the bishop became known as the metropolitan

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and claimed jurisdiction over a number of churches in his area.

The development did not stop there, and in time we see the emergence of five distinct ecclesiastical heads. These were the patriarchs, so-called, of Alexandria, Antioch, Rome, Jerusalem and Constantinople. Each of these exercised control in his own area, a control which included the excommunication and persecution of all who refused to be subject to his authority. But the process of development could not be considered to be complete until one of the five assumed the ascendancy over all the others and proclaimed himself universal bishop of Christendom.

The ambition to do this was doubtless present in the minds of not a few of those who occupied the patriarchal office, and one who attempted it was John, Patriarch of Constantinople. When his intention was revealed, the then Bishop of Rome, Gregory I, wrote to rebuke him and used these words: "None of my predecessors have ever consented to take this profane title" (i.e. Universal Bishop). He also said that the very fact that a bishop should want to assume such a title was evidence that the time of antichrist was close at hand! It is to be observed that his argument was not that the title belonged to the Bishop of Rome, rather than Constantinople, for none of his predecessors had ever claimed it, but that it was a profane and antichristian thing for *any* bishop to assume it. Nevertheless, within three years of Gregory's death, when the emperor Phocas did confer the title on Gregory's successor, Boniface, it was accepted.

Thus it was that the papacy came into existence in the year 606. Not till then was it ever recognized that the Bishop of Rome had any special authority such as that which is claimed for him today. And he only attained to that supremacy by the decree of an earthly emperor. It is worthy of special note that even the great Augustine, as secretary of the Council of Melive, could express himself, in company with his fellow-bishops of Africa, in the following words: "Whoever appeals to those beyond the

sea (meaning Rome) will not be admitted to the communion by any in Africa." So little did he believe then in the supremacy of the Roman bishop.

What comes then of the theory, advanced by Roman Catholics, that the apostle Peter was made head of the church and that this distinction has been inherited by the bishops of Rome? Every intelligent reader of Scripture knows that it was never the Lord's intention that a single bishop or elder should preside *over even one congregation*, and much less over *all* congregations. The apostle Peter himself repudiates the whole system of hierarchical government, when addressing the elders of local assemblies in the region where he had laboured (1 Pet. 5: 1-4). He calls them elders and says that he himself is an elder with them. None among them might exercise dominion over the Lord's heritage, and the only one entitled to be known as "Chief Shepherd" was Christ Himself.

A careful study of Scripture will show how completely its testimony refutes the Catholic tradition regarding Peter's bishopric, or even his residence, in Rome. Nor shall we find a scrap of evidence that Peter ever acted as pope, or was recognized as such by his fellow-apostles or by anyone. On the contrary, there is much evidence against such a notion. (See, for example: Acts 8: 14; 10: 25, 26; 15: 13, 19; Gal. 2: 11-14; 2 Cor. 11: 5; Eph. 2: 20-22, etc.).

In the early chapters of the book of the Acts, Peter occupies an important place. There we may read of his activities in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, as far as chapter 15. After that the story moves north and west to Asia Minor, Greece and Rome, but there is no further mention of Peter. The historian Luke gives us abundant details of the travels of Paul, with all the principal happenings in those parts; but Peter does not appear anywhere in the history. Was this just an oversight?

According to the Catholic tradition, Peter was in Rome from about the year 41. According to Scripture, he was still in Jerusalem in 50 or 51 (Acts 15). Paul arrived in

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Rome about the year 60, but Peter was not there (Acts 28). In the years that follow, Paul writes several epistles from Rome and makes mention of a number of worthy persons who accompanied him, but there is not a word about Peter. His last epistle, written shortly before his martyrdom, says, "Only Luke it with me" (2 Tim. 4: 11).

Where was Peter all this time? His own epistles tell us. Being the apostle "of the circumcision" (i.e., of the Jews), as Paul was "of the uncircumcision" (i.e., of the Gentiles), Peter had his ministry, after the years in Judea and its surroundings, among the Jews of the dispersion in the regions of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, and it is to his spiritual children in those parts that he addresses his two epistles. (1 Pet. 1: 1; 2 Pet. 3: 1). In the first he sends greetings from the church in Babylon, whence he was writing (1 Pet. 5: 13), and in the second he says he is ready to put off his tabernacle (2 Pet. 1: 14), which means that he was now an old man. From Acts 2: 9 and from the writings of Josephus we know that there was a numerous colony of Jews in Mesopotamia, and since Peter was the apostle of the circumcision, it was his business to go there to evangelize them. The greetings from Babylon indicate that he had laboured successfully there, and the character of his writings addressed to believers in the region of Asia Minor would indicate that he did not intend to return that way.

It is seen therefore that the Catholic Church (rather the Roman Church) is built upon a fabric of fallacy and falsehood, and it stands condemned as the greatest and most sectarian of all sects. Its history is a history of corruption and violence, of arrogant claims and bitter intolerance; its distinctive dogmas and practices are plainly condemned by Holy Scripture; and its final fall and destruction are proclaimed with no uncertain sound in the prophetic word (Rev. 17 and 18).

## Chapter Thirteen

### THE GREEK CATHOLIC CHURCH

WE have dwelt at some length on the example of the Romish church, because it is not always realized how much she has been copied by other sects of Christendom. If we understand how great is her guilt and how certain is her doom, it should make us careful about imitating her in any respect whatsoever. If she stands condemned, it is because she has violated the Word of God, and her example should tell us that the only safe path for any of God's people is to return to the ground of Holy Scripture. Even if we should come to the conclusion that there is not a people upon earth that is following the Word of God faithfully, the way is always open *for us* to do so.

When Paul was bidding farewell to the elders of Ephesus, he could speak of troublous times to come, of grievous wolves who would enter in and not spare the flock, and of men who would arise from their own midst to draw away the disciples after them. And in view of such conditions, he commended them, not to the tender mercies of an ecclesiastical institution, but "to God and the Word of His grace" (Acts 20: 32). This is our resource still, and we should remember the unfailing promise of our Lord: "Where two or three are gathered together unto my name, there am I in the midst of them."

Akin to the Roman Catholic Church in many respects is the Eastern Orthodox or Greek Catholic Church. The existence of this great section of Catholicism is often conveniently forgotten about, so that the Roman section may speak of itself exclusively as *the* Catholic Church. But the fact of its existence has to be faced, and it has several important implications.

It may be said that the big division of Catholicism began when the Bishop of Rome was declared to be uni-

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versal bishop by the decree of the Emperor Phocas. As we have seen, there were up till that time five ecclesiastical heads in Christendom, ruling over their respective areas. The beliefs and practices of the confederated churches were in the main uniform. All accepted the Nicene Creed. All were sacramental and ritualistic. All claimed a clerical ordination inherited by succession from the apostles. Nevertheless, there were some important differences. The West was Latin, and the East was Greek, both in language and thought. The adaptation to paganism, that advanced so rapidly in Rome, was not so acceptable to the churches of the East. The use of images, particularly, was repudiated, and there was some conflict between the Pope of Rome and the Patriarch of Constantinople over certain points of doctrine. At the Council of St. Sophia the Patriarch Photius condemned the Latin Church for adding the word "filioque" to the Nicene Creed, and this widened the breach. Finally the pope excommunicated the patriarch, and the patriarch excommunicated the pope. The pope remained as head of the Western Church, and in the East four patriarchs remained Orthodox in what is called an oligarchy. They did not unite under one head, and each patriarch continued to rule his own diocese. But the Roman pope, remaining as head of only one fifth of Christendom, continued to call his church the Catholic one, and himself the universal bishop.

The Eastern Orthodox Church (calling herself orthodox because of her refusal to admit the word "filioque" in the Nicene Creed) has continued to claim to be "the direct heir and true conservator" of the original primitive Catholic Church, and the Roman section finds it difficult to refute this claim. With the growth of Orthodoxy, a new patriarchate was added for Moscow, and lesser ones for the Serbs, Rumanians and Georgians. The tendency has been for the various patriarchates to become more independent of one another, so that it is perhaps more correct to think of them as Eastern Orthodox Churches, rather than one church. But the doctrine and practice of these churches

may be said to be uniform. The dogma of papal infallibility is of course rejected, as is the use of carved images (except the crucifix), and belief in Purgatory. But Greek Catholics share with Romanists most of the errors of faith and practice that we have already mentioned. Scripture doctrine is little known among their millions of members, and superstitions abound. The same persecuting spirit that characterizes Rome has been manifest in her sister church, though never to the same extent, and her policy of lording it over the common people, in league with the state, has been largely responsible for the development of the communistic spirit in Russia.

## *Chapter Fourteen*

### THE "CHURCH" OF THE MIDDLE AGES

COMING to the middle ages, we see what the development of the Catholic system led to. It is a terrible picture. First there came the scourge of Mohammedanism, which in some aspects was a reaction to the idolatry, corruption and luxury of that pseudo-Christianity which had now become a world system of religion. So far had the so-called church lost every notion of what the gospel was, and what was meant by the work of evangelization, that she was satisfied to civilize the heathen and secure a nominal adherence to herself. And when faced with the overbearing conduct of the Saracens towards pilgrims in Palestine, she never dreamed of evangelizing them, but decided rather to meet them in their own spirit with carnal weapons of warfare. And so Europe and the near East saw the astounding spectacle of the so-called Christian crusades. These crusades testify still further to the complete apostasy of the Roman Church. In defiance of every principle of Christianity, she proposed to subdue her enemies by force of arms. The crusading armies had the blessing of the clergy, and their immorality was openly condoned and encouraged by the granting of indulgences and anticipatory absolution.

Later, in the thirteenth century, came a movement which seemed to promise better things. Francis of Assisi founded a preaching order of friars, and he and his followers seemed to be fully conscious of, and desirous of correcting, the existing corruption in Christendom. But it is very evident that they had no real message of salvation to give to the needy world. The gospel of God's grace and the doctrine of salvation by faith in Christ was unknown to them. They preached salvation by morality and good works. Some truth was retained in an intellectual way in



the creeds that were recited, as for instance in the so-called Apostles' Creed (composed in the middle ages), but no truth was preached that had any vital influence on the lives of the people. The masses were quite ignorant of doctrine, and most of the clergy as well. Many of the latter were quite illiterate. A vast amount of superstition grew up around sacred subjects, and the power of the priests over the people was greatly increased by the beliefs that were held as to the magical powers of these gentry. They might be the most ignorant of men; they might be living immoral lives; but because they were the clergy, they had the power to regenerate infants by the magical rite of baptism. Similarly, they had power to transform a sacramental wafer into the body or person of Christ.

Was then the light of truth completely extinguished in Christendom? In the Catholic Church, practically it was. But outside of it God had His witnesses, as He has always had. Shortly before the time of Francis of Assisi, Peter Waldo, a merchant of Lyons, became enlightened not only as to the truth of salvation, but also as to the need of separation from the mass which had become completely leavened with false doctrine and worldliness. In separating himself, he was simply obeying Scripture, and many followed his example. As a result, simple evangelical congregations sprang up in Southern France and in Northern Italy, and these continued to exist throughout the time of the Inquisition. They became known as Waldensians, but they really got nothing from Waldo but the simple evangelical faith that Christians have always found in the Scriptures.

Similar to them were the Paulicians, so-called, who were to be found in the region of the Taurus mountains. A seventh century document called "The Key of Truth" has come down to us, and it reveals that these people had a good comprehension of the truth of Scripture. They emphasized the need of individual conversion and protested against the worship of the Virgin, the saints, and their images. When the Empress Theodora restored the use of images in the Eastern Church in 842, a violent perse-

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cution of the Paulicians began, and many were beheaded, burnt or drowned.

In the tenth century many Paulicians passed over into Europe and settled in the Balkans, where they became known as Bogomils, that is, Friends of God. Prominent among them was Basil, who spent forty years preaching and teaching before his enemies had the satisfaction of seeing him burnt alive in the hippodrome at Constantinople.

Being driven west by the persecutions of the Greek Church, the Bogomils appeared in Bosnia in the twelfth century. There some eminent persons became converted, including the Bishop of Bosnia, and as the truth spread, a simple and scriptural form of worship was practised. Because of this, the pope ordered the King of Hungary to invade Bosnia in the year 1216, and later the Inquisition was established there.

Similarly, the Albigenses appeared in Provence in the twelfth century. In 1209 Innocent III declared a crusade against them and ordered the King of France to carry it out. In 1210 the so-called Holy Inquisition was established under the superintendence of the monk Dominic. This has been well described as "the most monstrous instrument of barbarous oppression that has ever appeared in the known history of the human race . . . Its atrocities not only can not be exaggerated, but no language can be found sufficient to describe them adequately." Could it ever be dreamed that a true Christian could be found capable of remaining in association with such an iniquitous system?

It does not seem that prior to the Reformation the Waldensians, Paulicians, Bogomils, Albigenses, and others ever organized themselves into ecclesiastical bodies after the fashion of modern denominations, and this doubtless contributed to their preservation. They did not all have the same degree of light as to scriptural doctrines, but in all of them we see the desire manifest to get away from the

superstitions and practices of the medieval Church, and to return to the purity and simplicity of God's Word.

What the Church of Rome had lost, more than a conception of right scriptural order, was the very life and spirit of Christ, the sense of the love of God, and every humanitarian or compassionate instinct. It had become a great ecclesiastical machine without a soul.

## *Chapter Fifteen*

### THE REFORMATION AND LUTHERANISM

THE story of the Reformation may be said to begin with the ministry of John Wyclif. A man of great intellect and spiritual vision, he was a lecturer at the University of Oxford. Offended, first of all, by the overbearingness of Rome in relation to practical questions, he took up the study of theology and soon perceived that Rome's corrupt practices were the fruit of her corrupt doctrine. Courageously he denounced the corruptions in a large number of tracts and sermons. But his greatest contribution to the cause of truth was his translation of the Latin Bible into the common language of the people. The translation and circulation of the Scriptures was the one great requisite for the exposure of error and the spiritual conversion of the people. The invention of the printing-press afterwards was an immense help toward this end.

We need not attempt to give here a summary of the events of the Reformation, these being sufficiently well-known, but we shall call attention to certain aspects of the movement as they affect our subject.

Luther was converted as a result of reading the Scriptures. The great truth of justification by faith completely revolutionized his thinking. He saw the error of many medieval beliefs and practices, and particularly the sale of indulgences, which greatly shocked him. He rightly concluded, as did many others, that the official "Church" which sponsored such practices could be no depository of divine truth. The immoral lives of many popes and other ecclesiastics had long caused many right-thinking people to disrespect them, but as soon as it was seen that they were in error regarding the great doctrines of the Christian faith, there could no longer be confidence with regard to anything.

There was nothing to be done but revert to the principle of being guided by Scripture alone. Tradition was everywhere and always seen to be at variance with the Word of God. Scripture, however, teaches us the need of being dependent on the Holy Spirit, whose work it is to guide us "into all truth" (John 16: 13). Insofar, then, as the reformers were humbly dependent on God's Spirit, the sense of Scripture was revealed to them, and the great doctrines of the Christian gospel were once again proclaimed throughout Europe.

That such a recovery should be possible after centuries of apostasy is a testimony to the vitality of the Word of God. Hidden and forgotten for practically a thousand years, its simple discovery and exposition swept away the superstitions and errors of the middle ages as nothing else could have done. The nailing of Luther's ninety-five theses to the church door at Wittenberg was the turning point of history, and we can never be thankful enough for that great event. Nevertheless we must recognize that the unfolding or rediscovery of the truth was gradual, and although the great reformers were able to arrive at the same conclusion with regard to all the great doctrines of the faith, it was not so with regard to matters pertaining to church order and practice. This we take to be the significance of the Lord's words in Rev. 3: 2, addressed to the church at Sardis, (representative in that prophetic outline of the post-Reformation Protestantism): "I have not found thy works perfect before God."

Every spiritual movement in Christendom has been a recoil from the corruption and error which had crept in, and a return, in a measure, to scriptural doctrine and practice. But we cannot fail to observe that in most, if not all, of these movements there has been a retaining of some of the elements of the error held and practised in the system or systems denounced as apostate. And so it was with Luther. Though God used him mightily to make known the saving truths of the gospel, he did not perceive with the same clearness of vision the teaching of Scripture

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as to baptism, the Lord's Supper, and church matters generally.

Others of the reformers did see further than he, and, as a result, the Reformation, generally speaking, developed along two distinct lines. One of these followed Luther and led to the formation of Lutheran Churches; the other followed Calvin, Zwingli, and John Knox, and produced the Reformed and Presbyterian Churches. The Anglican Church emerged subsequently as a mixture of the two, with more features of Catholicism retained.

Luther himself protested against the use of his name for the formation of a new Protestant sect, but since he was responsible for the setting up of an ecclesiastical system with features that could not be defended as scriptural, it was natural that his followers should become known as Lutherans. The name was doubtless given first as a nickname by the enemies of the Reformation, but today it is used unashamedly by millions of professing Christians who confess thereby that they are not prepared to apply the principle of the Reformation any further than Luther was able to apply it himself. The avowed principle of that great movement was the recognition of Holy Scripture as the only infallible rule of faith and conduct. How far did Luther carry it? Only as far as it affected the evangelical faith. For the ecclesiastical system he set up was no more supported by Scripture than the one which he left.

Lutheran Churches in the main are formed after the Roman Catholic pattern, with an episcopal hierarchy, and a liturgical form of worship. From Luther they have inherited notions of the regenerating efficacy of baptism, with the practice of infant baptism, and also a special not-too-well-defined conception of the sacramental and supernatural presence of the body and blood of Christ in the elements of the Lord's Supper. The churches exist today in a number of nationalist groups: German, Swedish, Norwegian, Danish; but their beliefs and practices are very uniform. They accept the Augsburg Confession of Faith as a correct exposition of evangelical doctrine, along with

Luther's two catechisms and the Schmalkald articles. And insofar as Lutherans are expected to subscribe to these statements of doctrine, the right of an ecclesiastical body to say what its members shall and shall not believe is admitted. In this respect also the Roman Catholic Church has been copied.

In relation to the subject of sectarianism the following quotation from a high Lutheran authority is significant: "No sect in Western Christendom, outside the Church of Rome, has accentuated in its doctrine the Real Presence and the mysterious communion of the sacrament as has our Evangelic Lutheran sect" (Archbishop Nathan Soderblom, of Sweden). Here we observe, first of all, the confession of sectarianism in the expression "our Evangelic Lutheran sect", and we wonder whether the archbishop ever read chapters 1 and 3 of 1st Corinthians. Secondly, we note that in the very thing in which he wants to glory, as being peculiar to his sect, he has to recognize that he is in the company of the Church of Rome. Surely the recognition of this should have caused him to reflect on the implications before making a boast of it in public. It is a confession of the inability of Lutheranism to see beyond the Roman Catholic conception of the Lord's Supper, as developed in the middle ages.

## *Chapter Sixteen*

### REFORMED CHURCHES AND PRESBYTERIANISM

CALVIN, Zwingli and others of the reformers rightly understood that Luther was not prepared to go far enough in his repudiation of Catholic dogma and practice. Under the guidance of Scripture, they returned in a measure to the simplicity of Christian worship, repudiating the unscriptural ideas of Lutheranism with regard to baptismal regeneration and the presence of Christ's body and blood in the elements of the Lord's Supper. The churches organized by these leaders and their followers became known as the Reformed Churches in Switzerland, Holland and Germany; in France they were known as Huguenots; and in Scotland they were Presbyterians. They did not free themselves from the notion that the church could be united to the state and have its support, as in the case of the Catholic Church from the days of Constantine. Did not Scripture tell them plainly enough that the church does not belong to the world, and cannot have fellowship with it?

The system of Presbyterian government, that is, government by elders, was adopted by all these churches. They rightly understood that in Scripture "elders" and "bishops" meant the same thing, and that there was no authority for a hierarchical or episcopal system. They saw generally that Scripture contemplated a plurality of elders in each congregation, but they went beyond Scripture in appointing a presiding or ministerial elder, distinguishable from the others in that he possessed a clerical ordination and was authorized to administer the sacraments. Thus the unscriptural distinction between clergy and laity was retained, even by zealous reformers. They failed to see that this ecclesiastical innovation was what gave Catholicism its birth, and so long as it is retained and



defended it will be impossible to return to the scriptural order of Christian worship and service.

As regards their theology or doctrine, the Reformed and Presbyterian Churches have largely followed Calvin, and here again it may be pointed out that whenever confessions or credal statements are set up as obligatory for church members or clergy, the organization which sets them up confesses itself to be sectarian. No man or body of men was ever competent to draw up a statement of doctrine that would be authoritative for all Christians of future generations. Divine inspiration would be necessary for that, and divine inspiration pertains to the Scriptures alone. Scripture alone has authority for all believers, and if any other authority is recognized or appealed to, it means that we have moved on to sectarian ground. This is the ground Catholicism takes. Scripture alone is not sufficient: there must be an authoritative interpretation of it. So there is the recognition of a human authority for the defining of doctrine, and there follows necessarily the recognition of some authority for its defense. Thus it comes that all Reformed and Presbyterian Churches, instead of viewing their congregations as purely autonomous, are so organized that a presbytery, synod, or General Council may be appealed to for the settling of questions pertaining to doctrine or discipline. Failure to recognize the decisions of such a body means the cutting off of dissenting congregations, and so new sects come into existence.

The important thing to observe at this point is that no such system of government by presbyteries, synods, or General Assemblies is ever contemplated in Scripture, and the principle which leads us to disallow the claims or decrees of the Roman hierarchy and its councils should free us likewise from the legislation and jurisdiction of all humanly-appointed or self-appointed authorities. The recognition of any form of central government presupposes the existence of a sect, and wherever a sect exists, there is the possibility of its being divided and sub-divided, for

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the same principle which brought it into existence will continue to operate.

The sad thing about the Reformed and Presbyterian Churches that came into existence as a result of the Reformation is that although they had a theology that was in many respects sound, they soon became a cold and lifeless mass. They had a name to live but were dead. (Rev. 3: 1). The recovered truths of the gospel were held intellectually as theological propositions, but there was no evangelical zeal. Personal conversion was not insisted on, especially in relation to the children of Christian parents. Baptism was supposed to have brought them "into the channel of divine grace," or made them "inheritors of the covenant." Extreme Calvinism caused many of them to take on a very severe attitude to life in general. The love of God was little preached and less exhibited. Holiness was sought only by a carnal effort to keep the commandments of the Sinaitic law, rather than by the living of a life in communion with Christ. Sermons in the eighteenth century were dry-as-dust disquisitions that had no practical influence on the lives of the people, and vital Christianity was practically non-existent. As Thomas Chalmers afterwards confessed — for he had fallen completely under the blighting spell of moderatism — "We inhaled, not a distaste only, but a positive contempt for all that is properly and peculiarly gospel."

To some extent the Presbyterians were affected by the evangelical revival under the preaching of Whitefield and Wesley, but the Reformed Churches in Europe have never experienced the life-giving breath of God in the gospel. They have yet to learn that Christianity means very much more than subscribing to a statement of doctrine, or regularly attending church services to sing psalms and put a modest offering in the collection plate.

## *Chapter Seventeen*

### ANGLICANISM

WE turn now to consider briefly the position of the Church of England. This was not a new denomination brought into existence as a result of the Reformation. Its congregations and parishes and clergy existed before the time of Henry VIII as part of the Roman Catholic system. As is well known, Henry threw off the dominion of the pope and assumed the headship of "the church" in England. Roman Catholics frequently speak (either maliciously or ignorantly) of Henry VIII as one of the founders of Protestantism. The fact is that Henry remained a Catholic, as far as religious belief is concerned, to the end of his days, and even wrote a treatise against the doctrine of Luther. And the masses who belonged to the church that was thus brought under new management did not experience any change of belief at that time. The Church of England was simply the Catholic Church in England, and it was later that changes in doctrine and practice were introduced. And even when changes were officially accepted or imposed by the ecclesiastical leaders, large numbers of people remained "Catholic" in their sympathies, and this Catholic element has continued to the present day.

Henry VIII had Protestants burnt for their Protestantism and some Roman Catholics also for their adherence to the pope. But the influence of the Reformation was spreading. Bilney, Cranmer and Ridley, and others like them who had experienced conversion through the study of the Scriptures, laboured for the cause of truth and paid for it with their lives. Henry's successor, Edward VI appears to have embraced the evangelical faith, and during his reign two editions of the Anglican Prayer Book were produced, the second being more definitely Protestant than the first. But it is not possible to convert a church

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or denomination *en masse* by the adoption of a new prayer book. In Mary Tudor's reign there was a reversion to Catholicism, and about three hundred persons suffered martyrdom for their Protestant faith, but when Queen Elizabeth ascended the throne the Protestant position was secured.

The Catholic spirit, however, has never died out of Anglicanism, and in the seventeenth century the Church of England ruthlessly persecuted all who differed from her. Today it is a divided church, and it still retains enough of the features of Catholicism to hold Catholics within its fold. Numbers of these pass over annually to the Church of Rome, and there is much ado about their "conversion"; but there is no question of conversion in such cases, and much less conversion from the evangelical faith. It is simply a question of Catholics going where they belong. The strange thing is that so many evangelicals should be content to remain in association with them in a church that tolerates so much that is unscriptural.

The "Ecclesiastical Polity" of Richard Hooker did much to hinder the complete reformation of the Church of England. He laboured to prove that Scripture alone was *not* a sufficient guide in church matters, and his arguments were very acceptable for the bulk of the clergy, who were reluctant to abandon all that could not be shown to have a scriptural origin.

Anglicanism retains the Catholic notion that all parishioners are Christians by baptism; baptismal regeneration being part of the official doctrine. In the service of "Infant Baptism" we read: ". . . this child is by baptism regenerated and grafted into the body of Christ"; and in the catechism it is asserted that in baptism an infant is "made a member of Christ, a child of God, and inheritor of the kingdom of heaven." Conversion is not required, and confirmation prepares for the taking of communion and full membership of the church.

The figment of ordination by an episcopal succession that has come down from the old Catholicism is believed

in, as giving validity to the orders, and the Church of England is considered to be a branch of the "one holy Catholic Apostolic Church," which term is supposed to include apostate Romanism and Greek Orthodoxy.

Anglicanism is essentially a national institution established and supported by the state. It is similar to the Lutheran Churches in this, as also in its love of ritual and belief in clerical prerogatives. It has also a certain undefined belief in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist or Lord's Supper. In view of all this it is not surprising that the Church of Rome should be spoken of as a "sister church."

The Protestant Episcopal Church in America is a daughter of the Church of England.

## *Chapter Eighteen*

### PURITANS, INDEPENDENTS AND CONGREGATIONALISTS

As a result of the Reformation and the widespread reading of the Scriptures that followed it, many members of the Church of England saw further than their leaders in the matter of reform. The Puritans were that element in the church that endeavoured to purify it more completely of its Romish features, but they were not successful and suffered much for their nonconformity. The Act of Uniformity (1662) required all ministers to declare before their congregations their acceptance of and agreement with the Book of Common Prayer, and two thousand clergymen who refused to do so were ejected from their livings.

The Puritans have often been misunderstood and maligned. The writings of many of them show them to have been men of deep piety and understanding. They were the true Protestants of England who desired only to carry the principle of the Reformation to its legitimate conclusion. On their expulsion from the Church of England, they became merged with Independents (or Congregationalists), and the term Puritans was then applied to the whole nonconformist body.

The Independents, afterwards called Congregationalists, were, as the name implies, independent congregations that came into existence from about the reign of Queen Elizabeth. Refusing the whole idea of episcopacy, they went further than the Presbyterians in that they maintained it was scriptural for each congregation to be independent, and to recognize no authority over it, other than that of the Lord alone. They did not, however, conform to Scripture in the matter of baptism, infant baptism being practised as they had known it in the Church of England. Their doctrine, at that time, was similar to that of the Presbyterians.

It was men of the sturdy Puritan stock, with strong religious convictions, who landed from the *Mayflower* in New England and laid the foundation of the new American nation. The churches established there were of the Independent or Congregationalist type, but there was a hierarchy among the colonists which imposed its will in religious as well as civil matters. The intolerance was such that Baptists were persecuted, and four Quakers were hanged on Boston Common. We may well admire the principles of moral integrity that characterized those early settlers, but with many of them the grace of Christianity was largely unknown.

The principle of independency, as advocated by the Congregationalists, did not prevent their becoming a denominational body. The evangelical note, brought to them so blessedly by George Whitefield, was soon lost. Doctrine degenerated and division came when the Unitarians separated from the orthodox Congregationalists. On the other hand, the latter, in America, have, as recently as 1931, been merged with a similar body calling itself the Christian Church. The distinctive feature of the latter has been its rule of making "Christian character" the only requirement for church membership. Doctrine is unimportant, and conversion is not a necessity. So any decent-living person may be a church member, irrespective of what he does or does not believe, and this kind of fellowship is very acceptable to large numbers of people. But by this same token it declares itself to be quite unacceptable to all who know the saving power of the gospel.

While the principle of autonomy, as applied to Christian assemblies, is scriptural in itself, it is a very poor thing to be left with if the lamp of truth has been extinguished and life has gone out of the body.

## *Chapter Nineteen*

### QUAKERS, OR SOCIETY OF FRIENDS

THE Quaker movement was founded in the seventeenth century by George Fox. Failing to find the spiritual satisfaction he sought for in the churches of his time, Fox professed to discover the secret of true religion in the practice of an intimate personal communion with Christ. Such a practice is of course recognized by all true Christian people to be essential as the spring and source of all worship and service, but it must be communion based on the knowledge of Christ obtained from the revelation of Him in Holy Scripture, and not divorced from it. With Fox and his followers it became the sole guiding principle — an “inner voice” or “inner light”, by which man’s conduct was to be governed. Creeds, ceremonies, ordinances, and doctrines, whether scriptural or otherwise, were discarded as non-essential. But in some respects there was a return to the simplicity and spirit of primitive Christianity. Elaborate buildings for public worship were called “steeple-houses”, since it was recognized that they could not properly be called churches, and the plain buildings of the Quakers were simply meeting-houses. Plainness of dress was accompanied by plainness of speech; and truthfulness, sobriety, honesty, and punctuality were required in all members of the society. The Quakers have also taken a definite stand in their attitude against participation in war, but many of them have shared in Red Cross work and post-war reconstruction work.

However, the sincere Christian who reverences Holy Scripture as the Word of the living God finds himself sorely puzzled as he considers the Quaker’s attitude to Bible teaching generally. It should be remembered that George Fox once charged a judge to “tremble” at the Word of the Lord (thereupon receiving the appellation of “quaker”);



but he who really trembles at the Word of the Lord will not deem any part of it to be unessential. Quakers are quoted as saying that Christ holds authority above that of the Bible, but this cannot be said without lowering the value of Scripture. Christ accredited Scripture as the Word of God; and there cannot be a Word of God that has inferior authority.

In the Bible all exhortations to holy living are based on Christian doctrine. The glorious person of Christ is exalted, His sacrificial death is shown to be the source of all blessing, and His purposes and plans with regard to His church are carefully delineated. And it is in view of all this that the Christian is exhorted to live at the height of his calling. But we shall not find the Christian church as a divine institution among the conceptions of Quakerism — a church composed of converted or regenerated people, who, because they know themselves to be “redeemed with the precious blood of Christ”, feel impelled and constrained to live for the glory of their Saviour. Instead, we shall find a humanly organized society, with rules and practices that ignore the divine scheme completely.

It is true that Quaker meetings in some respects are nearer in appearance to the scriptural conception of a Christian assembly than many of the churches, since they allow for spontaneous prayer and ministry, as led (in theory at least) by the Spirit; and the quiet periods in their meetings (while waiting for divine guidance) might well be imitated in some quarters where the order of service is purely mechanical. Nevertheless, this apparently spiritual feature is negatived by the consideration that the ministry is seldom ministry of the Word of God, nor does it have to be in agreement with that Word. Evangelistic work among the Quakers seems to be conspicuous by its absence, and children are brought into the Society of Friends by natural birth — not by the spiritual birth which brings us into God's family.

It is puzzling to know what Quaker's can understand by the authority of Christ, if the Word of Christ is not obey-

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ed. We recall that the Lord's last great commission to His disciples required the preaching of the gospel to every creature, accompanied by the baptism of converts, and their subsequent instruction in the obeying of all His commands (Matt. 28: 18-20). But amongst the Quakers we find that neither is the gospel preached, nor are the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper practised.

This disobedience of the Lord's plain commands cannot be attenuated by calling attention to the good works of the Quakers. The Christian's motive for the doing of good works is the constraining love of Christ, but this motive can not be said to be present where there is no desire to keep His commandments. He Himself said: "Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I have commanded you." This is the true "society of friends."

## *Chapter Twenty*

### METHODISM

IN the eighteenth century, as we have before remarked, a state of spiritual deadness came over the national churches that had emerged from the Reformation. Of the one true church of Christ, which is His body, it may be said that it is a living organism, because the life of Christ resides or operates in every one of the members. But if the members of an organizational unity are not spiritually regenerate, that church is dead, no matter how sound or scriptural its confessions of faith may be. And there can be no hope of spiritual regeneration if the gospel is not preached as the power of God unto salvation. In the Anglican, Lutheran and Reformed churches generally, rationalism took the place of the gospel, and the results were disastrous. Ecclesiastical bodies existed as shells without kernels, or as valleys of dry bones.

But God in His mercy had an answer. The very emptiness of religious life in England drove a group of students at Oxford to seek for the kernel of Christianity, among them John and Charles Wesley and George Whitefield. They did not find it immediately. John Wesley was ordained as an Anglican clergyman and went to Georgia as a missionary before he knew the reality of conversion. On the outward journey he was thrown into association with a band of Moravian Christians who sought to help him by giving him the gospel, but he was not yet ready to give up the attempt to save himself by his own religious works. They did, however, make a definite impression upon him, and on the return journey a storm at sea helped to convince him of his unreadiness to meet God. So it was that, back in London, he attended a meeting and listened with interest to the reading of Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. The great truth of justification by faith

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laid hold upon him, and he found peace with God through believing His Word. From that hour the object of his life was to make known the gospel of the grace of God, and many thousands were converted through his ministry.

It is believed by many that the great spiritual awakening that spread throughout the country saved England from the horrors of a revolution similar to that of France. Infidelity was rampant and the oppressed people seethed with discontent. The Wesleys and Whitefield brought the gospel into this unpromising atmosphere and witnessed the greatest of all miracles, for multitudes were turned from lives of vice and irreligion and transformed into saints. But the preachers and their converts found themselves driven out of the Anglican Church, and Wesley, recognizing that the Christians needed to be nourished in their new faith, organized groups for prayer and Bible study, which at first were known as societies.

This would have been a great opportunity to return to New Testament order and practice, had Wesley been as enlightened regarding church truth as he was regarding the gospel and personal Christianity. It does seem that at one time he realized he had not gone far enough in the direction of a return to scriptural order, for he wrote in his Journal under date of January 20, 1746: "I read over Lord King's *Account of the Primitive Church*. In spite of the vehement prejudice of my education, I was ready to believe that this was a fair and impartial draught, but, if so, it would follow that bishops and presbyters are (essentially) of one order, and that originally every Christian congregation was a church independent of all others." But he did not act on the principle he thus recognized, and his societies degenerated into a tightly knit organization with autocratic control. Nevertheless those early societies were nearer to the pattern of scriptural assemblies than many organized churches. In the absence of clergy, laymen participated in prayer and exhortation in the meetings, and, in dependence on the Lord, they were prospered.

Wesley, however, was a clergyman and never lost the consciousness of it, and so the ideas pertaining to the episcopal system of the Anglican Church were in time transferred to the new Methodist body as it developed. In spite of this, spiritual vitality characterized the Methodist congregations for a long time, because of their strong evangelistic spirit. In view of this, it is sad to reflect that Methodism today is one of the ecclesiastical bodies most affected by the leaven of modernism.

Wesley gave to the church of his founding a set of Articles of Religion based on the Articles of the Church of England, and also Rules of Conduct which are still much set by among Methodists. One of the rules declares that "there is only one condition previously required of those who desire admission into these societies: a desire to flee from the wrath to come, and be saved from their sins." So the societies were not necessarily composed of converted people, but of such as desired to be. Wesley saw his organization develop to the extent of having a yearly Conference, as a means of governing and guiding the denomination. And so he confided or committed the care of the flock to an institution of human devising, with the consequences that are seen today.

Perhaps some day God may use another instrument to lead His sheep out of the fold of Methodism, as He used Wesley to bring so many out of the mother fold of Anglicanism, but we should hope that the result in that case would not be the setting up of another episcopal sect. Whitefield seemed to have some such thought in mind when he wrote:

"Let names, and sects, and parties fall,  
And Jesus Christ be all in all."

## *Chapter Twenty-one*

### BAPTIST CHURCHES AND MENNONITES

WE have seen that from the earliest times there have existed independent Christian congregations which refused allegiance to the official Catholic body. Early in the sixteenth century there were many such churches in Germany and elsewhere, known by the common name of brethren, and among other things that characterized them was their repudiation of infant baptism, since they believed that the Scriptures taught the baptism of believers only. They recognized that the Lord's commission (Matthew 28) and analogous passages authorized the baptizing of converts or disciples, and none others. The doctrine of baptism, as found in Romans 6, Colossians 2, and 1 Peter 3, makes it plain that the meaning of the rite can have no application to any but those who can say that they have died and risen with Christ. It also makes it plain that the only proper mode of baptism is by complete immersion, since it is a figure of burial and resurrection.

As the light of the Reformation broke over Europe, these brethren gave special emphasis to the truth about baptism, and many people who had only been baptized or sprinkled as infants now received baptism as believers. This gave occasion to their being called Anabaptists (or re-baptisers). It was at first an offensive epithet, but it came to be applied very generally to all who practised baptism according to the Scriptures. Such a practice had been considered a capital offence for many centuries, but it was the hope of many that it would be adopted by the leaders of the Reformation as a proper complement of the evangelical faith. In this they were disappointed.

It was known that Zwingli in his earlier years admitted there was no scriptural authority for the baptism of any but believers, but later he defended the traditional Cath-

olic practice of baptizing infants, and this practice was retained both by the Lutherans and the Reformed Churches. There appears to be a relation between their view of baptism and their failure to see the wrongness of union between church and state. The state's control over church members would of course be limited if it only applied to converted people. The more acceptable theory (from the political point of view) was that all baptized people were members of the "Christian state", and therefore it was desirable to baptize as many as possible. Sad to say, both Lutherans and the Reformed Churches engaged afterwards in the persecution of Baptists of all kinds.

The Anabaptists not only repudiated union of church and state, but they aimed at disowning all other human expedients not warranted by Scripture. This was the logical end to which the principle of the Reformation should have carried all Protestants, but, as we have already seen, many, while professing that principle, preferred to stop where their leaders stopped. So Scripture ceased to be for them an all-sufficient guide.

However, the issue became somewhat confused by the fact that among those called Anabaptists there were some people who became very fanatical and introduced not only practices that were unscriptural but some that were positively immoral. This state of things gave rise to the Munster rebellion, which cast a dark shadow over the cause of truth; not because these people professed the true faith (for they were not evangelical believers in any true sense), but because the name of Anabaptists was given to them indiscriminately by their enemies. Their principles and practices were very different from those held by the bulk of people to whom that name was given.

Among those who held a true evangelical faith and aimed at scriptural practice, one of the leaders was Menno Simon, a converted Roman Catholic priest who gave himself to the building up of the scattered churches of believers, particularly in the Netherlands. His followers subsequently took the name of Mennonites and adopted a con-

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profession of faith which was signed at Dortrecht in Holland in 1632. They differ from Baptists in a number of respects, and some types of Mennonites have become very extreme in their attitude toward the use of modern conveniences such as telephones, motor-cars, and so forth. Some of them have organized communities in order to live, as they say, in a simple and non-competitive way, in separation from the world. Something of the Catholic monastic spirit characterizes them. Instead of the Christian conception of being in the world but not of it, influencing men as "the salt of the earth", they are content to withdraw from it and cultivate their own souls. Sad to say, the gospel message is hardly known among them today; and still less do they preach it to their fellowmen.

Some of Menno's followers crossed the Channel and settled in England. It was these who formed the first British Baptist congregations. The first Baptist Church of which we have any definite record was one founded by John Smyth, a Separatist minister, in 1608. Smyth took a very definite stand for what he believed to be according to Scripture, and British Baptists did not take on any of the parasitical notions and practices that are features of the Mennonite movement. Smyth, however, did not see that his position as sole minister or pastor of a congregation was in conflict with Scripture, and to this day Baptists continue to maintain the unscriptural distinction between clergy and laity. Ordained and salaried pastors preside over their congregations and bear the title of "Reverend", as is the case in most other Protestant denominations, as well as in Catholicism.

With reference to the title of "Reverend", as pertaining to a clerical class, the following remarks of C. H. Spurgeon are worthy of quotation: "It is at any rate a suspicious circumstance that among mankind no class of persons should so commonly describe themselves by a pretentious title as the professed ministers of the lowly Jesus. Peter and Paul were 'right reverend' men, but they would have been the last to call themselves so. A lad fresh from



college who has just been placed in the pulpit is called the 'Reverend So-and-So', while his eminently godly father who has for fifty years walked with God has no claim for such reverence. We wonder where men first sought out this invention, and from whose mind did the original sin emanate. We suspect he lived in the Roman Row in 'Vanity Fair', though the 'Rev.' John Bunyan does not mention him."

Nor can it be said that the Baptist system of church government is any more scriptural than that of most denominations. They boast that a Baptist congregation is a perfect democracy; by which is meant that each member of it has a vote in matters pertaining to discipline, appointment of officers, etc. But Scripture contemplates no such democracy, nor is the worldly principle of rule by the majority ever countenanced. It is plainly taught in the Word that local government is in the hands of elders or overseers who are set in the assembly for that work by the Holy Spirit (Acts 20: 28). They are not chosen by the assembly, but are known to it by their spiritual qualifications (1 Tim. 3 and Titus 1) and by the pastoral work which they perform (Thess. 5: 12, 13). As for ministry, it corresponds to those whom Christ has given as gifts for the edifying of the church (Eph. 4: 11, 12). Baptists, with others, appear to share the mistaken belief that pastors can be made in theological seminaries.

Baptist congregations are grouped and classified according to their adherence to this or that "Convention". The Convention is the General Meeting to which representatives are sent from the various congregations. Though its functions may not be identical, it is what Lutherans would call a Synod, or Presbyterians a General Assembly. There are over a score of different Baptist denominations in the United States, and most of them are very sectarian in spirit. The name of Baptist is gloried in, as though baptism were a monopoly of these alone. In Scripture only one man is called "the baptist", and that because of his unique mission. He was sent to baptize. Paul, on the other hand,

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could say that Christ sent him not to baptize but to preach the gospel. Baptism is a secondary thing in Christianity, though important enough in its place. To exchange the name of Christian for that of Baptist is a poor exchange. The one says, I belong to Christ; the other says, I belong to a sect.

Like many other sectarian names, Baptist is a misnomer. The scriptural ordinance of baptism, and the scriptural doctrine concerning it, are not especially known in the Baptist denominations. The present writer had the experience of entering the largest Baptist bookstore in the city of London and asking for a book on baptism, only to be informed that such a thing did not exist! He does possess some excellent treatises on the subject, but not one of them is a Baptist publication.

What, then, do Baptists stand for? Unfortunately, we cannot give a general answer to that question. The Northern Baptist Convention of the United States stands for anything but the faith of the gospel. Harry Emmerson Fosdick, a notorious modernist, was a Baptist. The Southern Convention is more conservative, and the British Baptists still more so. But if there is a measure of faithfulness to the Word of God, it is in individuals and individual congregations, who by reason of that faithfulness should feel themselves obliged to separate from the conventions which fail to take a stand for truth, even as Spurgeon separated from the Baptist Union a century ago. Such as are faithful, are faithful because they are Christians, not because they are Baptists; but the sectarian name of Baptist links them with many whose views and practices they should abhor.

## *Chapter Twenty-two*

### PENTECOSTAL CHURCHES

**SIMILAR** to the Baptist Churches in some respects, but also with some very distinctive characteristics, are those congregations and denominations which may be grouped together under the general description of "Pentecostal". Originating in America, they are mainly autonomous congregations, grouped together in several loosely-defined associations, the largest group, calling itself "Assemblies of God", being more definitely organized and recognizing a General Council. They are evangelical and revivalistic, and practise believers' baptism, but their principal emphasis is upon the gift of tongues, miraculous healing, and other signs, said to accompany the baptism of the Spirit, which for them is an experience distinct from and subsequent to conversion.

It is beyond the purpose of this book to expose and refute the erroneous teachings of heterodox sects, usually composed of people who do not know the reality of conversion, but we recognize that in the various Pentecostal bodies there are a great many sincere believers with a zeal for the truth as far as they understand it. Their high-pressure methods of evangelization undoubtedly are responsible for the making of countless numbers of false conversions, so that it is inevitable that there should be a great deal of chaff amongst the wheat. Conversion for many of them is nothing more than an emotional experience brought about in an atmosphere of something akin to mass hysteria, and their religious enthusiasm must needs be maintained, not by the cultivating of an inner life of communion with Christ and feeding upon the Word of God, but by the external influence of meetings conducted in the same atmosphere of excitement and extravagance.

The fundamental error of all such groups lies in the

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supposition that the sign gifts which accompanied the apostolic ministry (at least in the beginning of it) were intended to have been continued down through the ages. What is essential to Christianity for all time (see Eph. 4: 11-13) is not distinguished from what was temporary and introductory (see 1 Cor. 12: 28), and there is much confusion of thought in other directions. In the apostolic ministry miraculous gifts were readily recognizable. Foreign languages were instantly acquired and spoken (Acts 2: 7-11), and as a result the listeners were convicted and converted. Gifts of healing were exercised on unconverted people, and the results were always immediate and complete: there were no failures or partial recoveries. Even the dead were raised. And even the enemies of the gospel were compelled to acknowledge the reality of the miracles. (Acts 4: 16). But all who are familiar with modern "healing campaigns" cannot fail to observe the contrast they present.

It is evident to every careful reader of the New Testament that the sign gifts had ceased to be operative even before the canon of Scripture was closed. It should be observed also that gifts of healing were never employed for the benefit of Christian people. Pentecostals commonly insist that there be a previous conversion. It is common too, among them, to confuse the gift of healing (which belonged to certain individuals and was intended to be a testimony to the unconverted) with the prayer of faith (James 5: 13-15), which was a provision for the saints and in no way dependent on a healing gift. The prayer of faith is a resource for the sick at all times.

There is also a basic error in Pentecostal thinking in relation to the Holy Spirit. The giving of the Spirit, though at first (in some cases) related to the laying on of the hands of the apostles, was later declared to be the experience of every truly converted person from the time he believed. The Ephesians, "having believed", were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise (Eph. 1: 13, R.V.), and the teaching of Romans 8 is that if anyone has not the

Spirit of Christ, he is none of His; that is, not a true believer (ver. 9). As many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are the sons of God (ver. 14). And in all the epistles we shall find that sign gifts are never appealed to as an evidence of the reception of the Spirit. The "fruit of the Spirit" (Gal. 5: 22) is the true evidence, and it is characterized by none of the pseudo-miraculous signs that Pentecostals attach so much importance to. But the testimony of Scripture has little weight with those who are set to exalt emotional experience at the expense of truth.

We may add that in spite of the claim to give the Holy Spirit His place, most Pentecostalist congregations have an appointed "pastor", after the common pattern of denominational bodies; and it is common also to give women a place in the ministry, contrary to the plain teaching of Scripture (1 Cor. 14: 34; 1 Tim. 2: 11, 12). The giving of place to the Holy Spirit would surely lead to a better understanding of, and a fuller obedience to, the teaching of the Word of God, according to the principle of 1 Cor. 14: 37: "If any man think himself to be . . . spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord."

## *Chapter Twenty-three*

### THE SALVATION ARMY

THE Salvation Army has earned the respect of Christian people, and of non-Christians as well, throughout the world, because of its philanthropic and social welfare activities in many spheres and directions, and especially among the "down-and-outs". In these activities it deserves unstinted praise, and other Christians might profitably imitate its example in doing good to all men. But our present inquiry is as to how it stands in relation to the Word of God.

The Army was founded by William Booth, a former Methodist minister, and at first his intention was to make his work, in the slum area of London's East End, supplementary to the work of the churches; but in time the organization resolved itself into a separate denomination. Originally organized as a Christian Mission, it later took shape along the lines of an army, in which Booth assumed the generalship. Recruits become cadets and are trained in the Army's schools and colleges, becoming, on graduation, lieutenants or captains, with opportunity thereafter for promotion to the higher ranks. In this respect the Salvation Army may be compared to an episcopal church system in which bishops, archbishops, cardinals, and pope are replaced by majors, colonels, commissioners, and general.

The efficiency of the Army organization and the success of its efforts to ameliorate human suffering should not be permitted to blind us to the fact that every Christian in that organization is committed to a course of disobedience to the Word of God and to the recognition of a human authority that replaces the authority of Christ Himself.

With regard to the organization itself, it will be remem-

bered that Christ said: "Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them; and they that are great exercise authority upon them; but it shall not be so among you" (Matt. 20: 25-27). In the Army the authority of the General is absolute, and must be submitted to by every officer; and this principle of authority also exists right down through the ranks.

In the matter of doctrine, it may come as a surprise to many Christians that, even with regard to the foundation truths of the faith, the Salvation Army is far astray. The late Chas. Stanley, a devout and well-instructed Christian, has shown in a pamphlet on this subject that the teaching of the Army as set forth in "The Doctrines and Discipline of the Salvation Army", written by the General and published at Headquarters, is in many respects similar to that of the Church of Rome as defined by the Council of Trent. And the late H. A. Ironside, a well-known Bible teacher, has shown in his book: "Holiness: the False and the True" how erroneous is the Army's teaching on the subject of sanctification.

In the Army publication just cited, the General makes it plain that he does not believe in a gratuitous and perfect justification, based on Christ's death and resurrection, which every true believer knows is his by faith in the Saviour. He also makes it plain that he does not believe in the present possession, by the believer, of the gift of eternal life. Nor does he believe the scriptural teaching as to the new birth and the new creation which every believer knows to be the result of the Holy Spirit's operation within him.

All who are acquainted with the Army's work in its spiritual aspect must be aware of the unsatisfactory and temporary nature of many of the "conversions" that take place among them. This is the direct result of the deficient doctrine that is taught. According to the doctrinal scheme of General Booth, salvation is the result of the sinner's repentance and strivings after holiness throughout his lifetime. Regarding conversion he says: "It is *like*

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being made over again; *like* becoming a new creature; *like* being born again . . . It is *very imperfect*." (Op. cit. p. 50) (Italics ours.) Scripture says: "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold all things are become new. And all things are of God" (2 Cor. 5: 17). And again it says that we are "born again . . . by the Word of God which liveth and abideth for ever" (1 Pet. 1: 23). The General says it is something *like* that, but not a divine operation at all, for it is "very imperfect".

So the truth is, sad to say, that in the so-called Salvation Army, the truth as to salvation is not really taught or known, unless it be by some who may see further than the official doctrine would permit them. Instead of eternal life being the free gift of God to all who believe, as Scripture so plainly teaches, it is, according to the General, something that awaits the Christian who is faithful and who perseveres to the end.

And what is the standard of faithfulness? Certainly not adherence to the Scriptures or obedience to the Lord's commands. For our Lord, in His great commission, commanded to make disciples, baptizing them and teaching them to obey all things; which would include the partaking of the Lord's Supper. But in the General's book of doctrine we read: "Does the Army consider baptism as a duty that must be performed? — Decidedly not. The Army only considers one baptism essential to salvation, and that is the baptism of the Holy Ghost". (Section 26: 3). And again: "Is the ordinance of the Lord's Supper essential to membership of the Army or salvation? — Certainly not." "What is the teaching of the Army on the subject of the Lord's Supper? — When such an ordinance is helpful to the faith of our soldiers, we recommend its adoption". (Section 26: 7, 8). We confess that it shocks us considerably to have to transcribe such words. Are we to obey Christ in the matter of baptism? "Decidedly not," says the General. Are we to obey His last loving request with regard to the Supper? It is "cer-



tainly not" essential, but if a man feels helped by it, then it is recommendable.

These examples serve to illustrate the General's attitude to Holy Scripture generally. Its authority is not binding, but the General's authority must always be submitted to. Great areas of divine truth are entirely set aside, and it may be said that God's own plan for His people in the matter of church fellowship, the ordinances, the ministry, etc. is entirely dispensed with, and an organization of human devising allowed to take its place. And whatever good may have been accomplished by the Army, we know that it is faithfulness to the Lord and His Word that will count at the judgment seat of Christ.

## *Chapter Twenty-four*

### CHRISTIAN ASSEMBLIES

IN addition to the various denominational movements, we have already seen that in the course of the centuries there has frequently been a movement of separation from the official organized ecclesiastical body or bodies of Christendom, with a view to returning to the simplicity of scriptural order. Wherever true Christians have been found, with a genuine love for the Scriptures, the necessity of separation has been understood. True Christianity, according to God's plan, could not be practised within the pale of a corrupt ecclesiastical organization. And many such Christians have perceived that Scripture never required their allegiance to an ecclesiastical organization of any sort at all.

In the early part of the nineteenth century many believers were feeling dissatisfied with the spiritual deadness of the churches, and longed for revival. Among these was a group in the city of Dublin who began to meet in private houses for the purpose of Bible study. They belonged to different denominations, but as they continued to meet, a brotherly spirit was developed among them, and they soon found that real Christian fellowship was a greater reality in those informal gatherings than in the church services of the denominations. They also found that the interchange of thoughts in the Bible readings resulted in a great deal of light being thrown on the meaning of Scripture. This was particularly the case with regard to what we may call church truth. It was seen, for instance, that the practice of these brethren, as they met around the Word and looked to the Holy Spirit for guidance, was just a normal Christian practice contemplated in Scripture. If a clergyman happened to be present, no special place was given to him: all were Bible students, and all were free to take part.

Some of these brethren were men of considerable intellectual attainment, and not a few of those who later became identified with the movement belonged to the higher ranks of society, but the notion of true brotherhood prevailed. The Bible study was bound to produce, not only an increase of knowledge, but also an exercise of heart as to the practice of what was being revealed. Inasmuch as there was a willingness to be led into all truth, and no desire to defend any of the existing denominational practices, these Christians soon perceived that it was improper for them to continue in association with the various sectarian bodies where their fellowship and other privileges were restricted. They learned that the church was one: the true body of Christ, divinely created, and distinct from all organizational unities. They had proved that the presence of the Lord was with them as they met in dependence on the Holy Spirit, and the cold, formal atmosphere of the churches had no more attraction for them. Their enquiry into Scripture, moreover, led them to see that there was no authority for the distinction between clergy and laity, and that it was the Holy Spirit's prerogative to use whom He would in ministry and exhortation.

The next step was to see that for other purposes besides Bible study they were free to meet together in the Lord's name. Their desire was to remember the Lord in the breaking of bread, in fellowship with the same Christians with whom they studied the Scripture so profitably, and not under the auspices of a sectarian body; and they could find no scriptural objection to this. On the contrary, they found that Scripture taught the common priesthood of believers, so that they needed no ordained minister to officiate for them. And although they had all been accustomed to worshipping in consecrated buildings, they readily perceived that such buildings were quite unnecessary and even foreign to the genius of Christianity as depicted in the New Testament.

Nothing was further from the thoughts of these brethren than to organize a new kind of religious denomination.

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The more they studied the Word of God, the more they saw that denominationalism of every sort was wrong. They met simply as Christians, in submission to Scripture and the guidance of the Spirit, and the promise of the Lord in Matthew 18: 20 became a precious reality to them. They felt that they had been gathered by the Spirit to the name and person of Christ, and that this was the divine ground of the Christian assembly. All was not revealed to them immediately, but as fresh light was received from the Scripture it was acted upon.

In course of time, similar gatherings began to appear elsewhere. Anthony Norris Groves, who had been associated with the Dublin meetings while attending Trinity College, returned to his home town of Exeter and began to practise there what had been such a blessed experience in Ireland. A very large company came into existence at Plymouth and others at Bristol, London and elsewhere. One of the remarkable features of the movement was that from time to time new meetings, or assemblies, as they were commonly called, came into existence, or were discovered, that did not owe their origin to any knowledge of, or contact with, the already existing ones. It was as though the Spirit of God stirred up Christians simultaneously in different areas to seek a more scriptural fellowship and mode of worship and service than existed in the churches to which they had hitherto belonged.

Among those who became identified with the company at Dublin were two men who were later to become well known as eminent Christian teachers. These were John G. Bellett and John Nelson Darby. The latter was an Irish clergyman from Wicklow who, when he investigated the whole question of clerisy, came to the conclusion that it was a sin against the Holy Ghost — “the distinctive sin of the present dispensation,” he called it. He and others who had been clergymen resigned from their charges and took their place simply as brethren in one or other of the newly formed groups.

Darby became identified later with an assembly in

London, but he travelled extensively, ministering the Word wherever there was an ear for it, not only in Britain but also on the continent, where his ministry resulted in the bringing into existence of many assemblies according to the New Testament pattern. He also became well known as a writer. His translations of the Scriptures, both in English and French, are among the best of modern translations and his "Synopsis of the Books of the Bible" and other writings have been helpful to many. One of his first pamphlets was entitled "Considerations on the Nature and Unity of the Church of Christ", and it is believed to have helped many to see the evil of sectarianism in a clearer light.

Many others of the brethren associated with "J.N.D.", as he was familiarly called, have also contributed greatly to the edifying of the church by their written ministry: among them J. G. Bellett, Wm. Kelly, C. H. Mackintosh, and F. W. Grant. Others, too, were well known for the godliness of their lives, the simplicity of their faith, and the influence of their example, such as George Muller, Robert Chapman, Henry Craik, and A. N. Groves.

In connection with the last-named brother, there was a further development in the testimony of the assemblies. This was in connection with missionary work. Groves felt a call to take the gospel to heathen lands and eventually decided to set out for Bagdad, in Mesopotamia. His first thought had been to become ordained by the Church of England and go abroad under the auspices of the Church Missionary Society, but after coming into association with the group of brethren in Dublin, he perceived that ordination was not a scriptural requirement for the ministry. He also felt it would be inconsistent with his understanding of the will of God to be dependent for his support on a missionary society of any sort. After much spiritual exercise, he and his wife decided to go forth in dependence on God alone. Traversing Europe, they eventually reached Bagdad, where they laboured for a number of years, enduring great hardships on account of

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flooding, epidemics, and war. Groves' ministry was blessed to many with whom he came in contact among the various missionary organizations, but when it came to applying the principles of Scripture to the organizations and their practices, he found that opposition was aroused. All was permissible except any teaching that would threaten the stability of the organizations themselves.

Meanwhile, in England, brethren such as Muller, Chapman and Craik, who had acted at first as pastors of Independent congregations, came to see more clearly the constitution of local assemblies according to Scripture. They saw no authority in the Word for electing elders, or making appointments of any kind, but they were willing to recognize as fellow-elders all who had the scriptural qualifications and into whose hearts the Lord had put the desire to labour for the welfare of the saints. It cannot be said that there was a true return to apostolic practice in every detail, but the general desire was to know the mind of the Lord and be guided by Scripture alone.

Darby's advice to Christians was: "Take heed to the promise of the Lord: 'Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them' (Matt. 18: 20). If two or three of you meet together in His name, He will be there. It is there that God has put His name, as of old in His temple at Jerusalem. Remember also, that when the disciples came together, it was to break bread. If God sends or raises up among us someone who can feed our souls, let us receive him with joy and thankfulness from God, according to the gift that has been vouchsafed to him. Never make any regulations; the Holy Spirit will guide you. As to discipline, remember that cutting off is the extreme resource. To preserve the holiness of the Lord's table is a positive duty . . . If the whole corporate system has come to naught, I get back to certain unchangeable blessed principles from which all is derived. The very thing from which all springs, to which Christ has attached not only His name but His discipline — the power of binding and loosing — is the

gathering together of the two or three.”

Thus there was a return to the original scriptural ground of the Christian assembly. At first it was simply a question of viewing the church as a spiritual unity, the body of Christ, and of believers meeting together to remember the Lord in a simple scriptural way, without sectarian connections and without the intervention of officiating clergy. The principle of ministry was the same as it had been in the beginning: God gave gifts for the edifying of the church, and there was liberty for their exercise under the control of the Holy Spirit. But it was further seen that these were but parts of a whole, and the picture was not complete until it was understood that *the “two or three” gathered together in the name of Christ, with Him as their centre, constituted a local assembly in the place where it was.* This was the original ground of God’s assembly in any place. There never had been any other. The “corporate system” which had come to naught was never God’s system: it was a system set up according to the thoughts and ambitions of men. But the original pattern of Scripture was there to be copied; its unchangeable principles could still be acted upon. Moreover, the power of binding and loosing never belonged to the corporate system, or systems, of men. Christ attached it to the gathering together of the two or three, that is, to the local assembly as originally constituted. Such an assembly, gathered not only in but unto (Gk. *eis*) the name of Christ, could count upon the presence of the Lord in their midst, and discipline could be exercised with His authority.

There was no reason therefore for the setting up of anything new, or of organizing after the fashion of the existing denominations. The original ground of Scripture was there; it had been available down through the ages, and it was still available. The divine plan had the whole Christian dispensation in view, and no modification or adaptation was necessary. Indeed the freedom from sectarianism which these believers sought for was dependent on their adhering in every respect to the pattern of God’s Word,

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for that is the only ground acceptable to all believers.

But there was not only a returning to the ground of Scripture; there was also in these assemblies an exhibition of the spirit that had characterized Christians of apostolic days. A spirit of brotherly love prevailed, and there was a forsaking of worldliness and luxury. Jewels and other objects of value were deposited in the assembly offerings. Ministry was of a sort unknown in the denominations, the deep things of God being opened up in a most refreshing and edifying manner. A strong evangelistic spirit characterized most of the assemblies, and there was a going out into the highways and byways with the message of the gospel. Evangelists and ministering brethren simply depended upon God for their support, instead of receiving stated salaries, and their needs were abundantly supplied.

In many parts of the world today such assemblies exist, in numbers great or small, differing perhaps in detail, but all of them endeavouring with a measure of faithfulness, to adhere to the divine plan; and it will pay us to reflect not a little on the mercy of God that has permitted such a recovery. After eighteen hundred years of Christendom's checkered history, the picture was one of hopeless confusion: yet a door was opened to escape from that confusion and return to the simplicity and blessedness of scriptural order. And that door stands open for all Christians everywhere today. If there did not exist a single scripturally-gathered assembly on the face of the earth, it would still be the privilege of believers to begin meeting according to the divine plan revealed in Scripture. Those who did so, found that the unchangeable principles of God's Word were as perfectly practicable in the nineteenth century as in the first, and they demonstrated that it was God's intention that they should have been carried out in every century. This statement does not have to be modified by any consideration of subsequent failure, for whatever failure there may have been has been the result of departure from those principles and not the endeavour to carry them out.



## *Chapter Twenty-five*

### CIRCLES OF FELLOWSHIP

**T**HE spiritual movement described in the previous chapter was bound to become a target for the attacks of the enemy. The Babylonian confusion of Christendom was Satan's master work, and a testimony in these last days to the unity of the church of Christ was something he could not be expected to allow to pass unnoticed. His object to destroy the distinctive testimony of the assemblies was soon manifested.

That master mind knew, as the presidents of Darius knew in Daniel's day, that occasion against the leaders in those assemblies could only be found "concerning the law of their God." These leaders were not only gifted and educated men, but men of recognized piety and spirituality. But the devices of Satan frequently include the employment of godly men for a work of destruction, especially if they are made to think that they are contending for truth and the honour of the Lord.

Two of the outstanding leaders were J. N. Darby, already mentioned, and Benjamin Wills Newton. The latter ministered regularly in a large and influential assembly at Plymouth, whereas Mr. Darby travelled extensively and only visited Plymouth on occasions. While both were gifted and godly men, it appears that they had what we might call different lines of ministry, including different systems of prophetic interpretation, and in course of time a party spirit grew up around each of them.

We may recall that when a similar state of things existed at Corinth long ago, Paul refrained from visiting the assembly there, having a fear that he might speak too strongly and so find that his ministry and authority were employed for destruction and not for edification. He preferred rather to write to the Corinthians in a beseech-

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ing tone and await results. And his second epistle to them conveys the impression that the party spirit in Corinth was effectively dealt with, for there is no more mention of it.

But Mr. Darby visited Plymouth when party feeling was running high, and the result was that open division took place. About fifty Christians withdrew from the assembly and began to break bread elsewhere. The reason given by Mr. G. V. Wigram, one of the leaders, for this withdrawal was that "a new and human church system had been introduced" . . . "a new ecclesiastical polity having been introduced and acted upon and avowed."

Two years later (in 1847) a charge of heresy was brought against Mr. Newton, and this was eagerly taken up by the party who had separated from him. The teaching in question was in relation to the sufferings of Christ, said to be non-vicarious and endured by Him during His lifetime at the hand of God, because of His relation, as Man, to the human race, and particularly to the Jewish nation. We need not enter here into the question of the doctrine, except to say, in all fairness, that a good deal of speculative writing on similar subjects was indulged in at the time, not only by Mr. Newton, but also by Mr. Darby himself and others. (In later years, Mr. Dorman and other associates of Mr. Darby withdrew from fellowship with the latter on the ground that he was teaching a doctrine concerning Christ's sufferings which could not be distinguished from that of Mr. Newton.) Most of such writing was too abstruse for many of the Christians to take it up seriously, and in no case was it understood to indicate any unfaithfulness of heart toward the person of Christ. Each one of the writers asserted plainly enough his belief in the perfect sinlessness of Christ and His fitness at all times to be a substitutionary sacrifice for sinners. Nevertheless, statements were made by Mr. Newton which were very serious in their implications and, when brought to the notice of the Christians in general, caused great concern.

On account of these statements, Mr. Harris, another leading brother in the Plymouth assembly, withdrew from association with Mr. Newton, and others followed him. Mr. Newton then published a statement in which he humbly confessed his errors and withdrew them. One month after issuing his "Statement and Acknowledgment," that is, in December 1847, he withdrew from the Plymouth assembly and from all association with assemblies elsewhere.

It is important to remark, however, that many years later Mr. Darby said of him: "He was the most godly brother I ever knew." (This was in the home of Dr. Robert Cameron, in New York City, as reported in *Perilous Times*, April 1917).

It is painful for us to record these happenings, but we do so in the briefest manner, in order to arrive at what more immediately concerns us, which is the failure to deal in a scriptural way with difficulties which arose in the assemblies.

We have already seen that the utmost measure of discipline contemplated in Scripture is the putting away of persons from the fellowship of the local assembly (Matt. 18 and 1 Cor. 5). Each assembly is individually responsible to take this action, when necessary, in relation to persons belonging to it. Beyond that, it is required to do no more. But when it is done in the Lord's name, and in accordance with His Word, it is evident that other assemblies, similarly gathered and owning the same scriptural principles, would feel bound by the action taken with regard to the persons affected.

Mr. Newton was not put away from the Plymouth assembly, but he voluntarily withdrew, for although he had repudiated his errors, confidence in him as a teacher was now destroyed. It appears that none of his sympathizers was ever known to hold or defend those errors, but the fact that Newton had held them made it necessary for all other assemblies to be on their guard against them. In view of this, when some brethren moved from Plymouth

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to Bristol and applied for fellowship at Bethesda Chapel there, they were carefully examined by responsible brethren before being admitted. These responsible brethren were godly men, including George Muller, Henry Craik, and others whose piety and other spiritual qualifications were well known and acknowledged, and there was every reason to have confidence in their decisions. And there the matter would have rested if all brethren elsewhere had held the same scriptural view of the local assembly and its functions in discipline and otherwise.

But it is evident that Mr. Darby and his associates had other views. Mr. Wigram, as early as 1838, had written: "The question . . . is, How are meetings for communion of saints in these parts to be regulated? Would it be for the glory of the Lord and the increase of testimony to have *one central meeting*, the common responsibility of all within reach, and as many meetings subordinate to it, as grace might vouchsafe? or to hold it to be better to allow the meetings to grow up as they may *without connection* and dependent upon the energy of individuals only?" (Italics ours).

Now if Scripture had been appealed to, and the simple principle recognized that we dare not act without scriptural authority, the above question would never have been raised. Does not the very question reveal that Mr. Wigram and others felt themselves competent to rule in a wider sphere than the local assembly? Yet Scripture makes no provision for rule in a wider sphere. It is a notion that belongs essentially to the Catholic conception of the church as an organizational body — a notion that leads to popery.

J. N. D. had recognized this as late as 1846, when he wrote: "Government of bodies in an authorized way I believe there is none; where this is assumed there will be confusion . . . If man set up to imitate the administration of the body, it will be popery or dissent at once." But what was his subsequent course of action? Mr. Darby

called upon the assembly at Bethesda Chapel to take up the whole question of Mr. Newton's errors and pronounce judgment upon them as a body. The elders at Bethesda did not feel they were obliged to obey him in this, and said so. However, this was interpreted by some as indicating sympathy with the doctrine in question, so in order to clear themselves in the eyes of the whole assembly, the elders drew up a letter explaining how they had acted and why. This "Letter of the Ten", as it came to be known, has been greatly misunderstood and made to say what it was never intended to say. Its opening paragraphs contain a distinct repudiation of the errors attributed to Mr. Newton, it being stated that "we utterly disclaim the assertion that the blessed Son of God was involved in the guilt of the first Adam, or that He was born under the curse of the broken law, because of His connection with Israel. We hold Him to have been always the Holy One of God in whom the Father was well pleased. We know of no curse which the Saviour bore, except that which He endured as the surety for sinners", etc. This was a plain statement of their attitude toward the doctrine in question. They utterly disclaimed it from the outset. And in the light of that attitude persons presenting themselves at Bethesda for fellowship were dealt with. No one sympathizing with Newton's teachings was ever received, or would have been received, by them, but they would not reject a person simply because he came from the Plymouth assembly where Newton had formerly taught.

The rest of the letter is occupied with the reasons given by the elders of Bethesda to that assembly for refusing to take a disciplinary action not contemplated in Scripture. The principle for which they contended was simply the autonomy of all local companies as gathered in Christ's name, and the right to judge in all matters of local discipline, without interference from any outside quarter. They did not view the assemblies as constituting a visible organized body with responsibility to a central government

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or any hierarchical authority, but as local companies responsible directly to the Lord.

J. N. D., on the other hand, was now acting on the principle of "imitating the administration of the body," and soon a number of assemblies banded themselves together under his leadership to form a "circle of fellowship", with the avowed intention of cutting off Bethesda and all who sympathized with her. *It is impossible to avoid the conclusion that when they did so they moved on to sectarian ground.* The newly-formed body, with its recognized government, was not the body of Christ; and any other body is certainly sectarian. Bethesda, and hundreds of other assemblies like her, refused to take the position of associating with a body of any kind.

It should be understood clearly that the question between the Bethesda assembly and Mr. Darby was never one of sympathy with the doctrines of Mr. Newton, but a question of adopting or rejecting a new and sectarian view of the assemblies, involving the taking of unscriptural and unauthorized measures of discipline, which, if adopted, could only lead to repeated divisions. The brethren at Bethesda took the position that it was not for them as an assembly to condemn another assembly, but simply to deal with individuals, if and when they presented themselves for fellowship.

The practice of cutting off assemblies, as such, shows that a sectarian consciousness already exists, for if there is no sect, there is nothing to cut them off from. It should be self-evident that the scriptural injunction to "put away from among you", can only apply to those who *are* among us; that is to say, in the fellowship of the local assembly. This is the utmost measure of discipline contemplated in Scripture, and there is no higher court of appeal than the assembly itself. As Mr. Darby himself acknowledged, if any set up to govern in a wider sphere, "it will be popery or dissent at once."

As was to be expected, they who set themselves up as leaders within the newly-created "circle of fellowship" be-

came very authoritative and dictatorial. Their decisions and judgments, whether just or unjust, had to be submitted to, as a condition for continuance in the fellowship. And the unavoidable result of this unscriptural system was that in course of time, when different judgments were given, assemblies took different sides, and the organized body became divided, not once, nor twice, but many times, so that a number of mutually exclusive companies exist today as a testimony to man's inability to steer clear of the rocks of sectarianism, even when motivated by the best of intentions.

Nevertheless, there were hundreds of assemblies which refused on principle to affiliate with any such party or "circle", and continued to take the place of being administratively independent and autonomous, as all assemblies had been at the beginning. Their number has increased to thousands, as new ones have come into existence from time to time as the result of gospel activity throughout the world. Not all believers belonging to them have understood the principles here set forth, and second- and third-generation Christians are especially liable to slip back to sectarian ways of thinking and acting, for sectarianism is as impossible to eradicate from human nature as any other of the sins of the flesh. But the lesson to be learned from the events surveyed in this chapter is that when difficulties arise in inter-assembly relations, it is never right to have recourse to the forming of a new party or denomination, but to stand rather in the position in which God has set the assemblies, that is, in the position of individual responsibility and dependence on Himself.

## *Chapter Twenty-six*

### “NEEDED TRUTH” ASSEMBLIES

IN addition to the exclusive system of circles of fellowship, in which government is by a central London assembly or a group of self-appointed leading brethren, another organized body has come into existence which possesses the same sectarian character, but with a different conception of government. This is commonly known as the “Needed Truth” party, because of its origination in a line of teaching that first appeared in a magazine of that name.

Of the “exclusive” line of teaching it may be said that it was characterized by an emphasis on the truth that “there is one body”, whereas the scriptural teaching as to local churches was largely neglected. So much so, that in the writings of many brethren of that connection, though the word “assembly” is used profusely, it will be found that the same word is scarcely ever employed in the plural form. Instead of speaking about assemblies, as Scripture does, they commonly use the expression “the Church of God on earth” — an expression not found in Scripture. Local assemblies, if thought of at all, are simply segments of the one universal church, instead of individual companies having each one its separate responsibility. According to this line of teaching, it was thought that all believers residing in a certain locality constituted the assembly in that locality, without regard to their being gathered to Christ’s name as a visible company. And some have gone so far as to say you cannot have an assembly today, because you cannot get all the saints together in one place. But, according to Christ’s own definition, an assembly may be as few as two or three, provided they are gathered in His name.

The view that all believers in a locality constituted the local assembly, whether gathered or not, led to the develop-



ment of a theory that the assembly boundaries were fixed by decisions of the political administration. So it was something very much akin to the Anglican or Presbyterian parish: a question of one's geographical residence. But in Scripture the local assembly is always a company that habitually meets together in Christ's name, having a corporate existence, with authority to put away from its number or receive into its midst.

Amongst the assemblies which refused to own any affiliation with exclusive circles of any kind, the truth as to the local assembly was more clearly seen, but there was necessarily a good deal of variety of judgment on practical matters. This did not hinder their having fellowship with one another, for the spiritual link that bound them was greater than all considerations of local administration or practice. And so it must have been even in earliest times. But this lack of uniformity was judged by some to be looseness, and preachers especially took it upon themselves to criticize assemblies which did not measure up to their standards. By many it was felt that some system of control should be introduced by which assemblies might be made to conform to a uniform pattern. In other words, the desire was for some to govern in a sphere that was wider than the local assembly.

This was the G. V. Wigram idea reasserting itself, but the old exclusive arguments were discarded and a new set made use of. It was held (as Scripture indeed teaches) that each assembly is a separate entity in the locality where it is, and is governed by its own local elders; but it was further proposed (contrary to the teaching of Scripture) that these assemblies should be linked with one another in an administrative way as forming one fellowship, and that a united oversight was essential for this.

Little appeal was made to Scripture in support of this view. It was pointed out, rightly enough, that at the beginning of the church's history a pattern was given in connection with the assembly at Jerusalem for the imitation of all future assemblies. And so it was insisted that

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in every assembly the dominating features and procedure should be (as in Acts 2: 41, 42): conversion, baptism, addition to the local assembly, continuance in the apostles' doctrine, and in fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. So far, so good. No one could object to uniformity in the sense of imitating apostolic example. But more was taken out of this scripture than could legitimately be found in it.

Much was made of the word "fellowship". Our understanding of it (it is the same as the word "communion") is that it refers to one of the four privileges, exercises, or activities in which the Christians continued to participate. It is an abstract noun signifying the spiritual intercourse in which they engaged as being associated with one another. But in the language of the "Needed Truth" school of teachers it was made to stand for "a unique concrete thing which consists of all those whom God has brought together in a visible unity" (Quoted from an official statement by Needed Truth overseers). In other words, "the fellowship" was for them the visible association of assemblies in a corporate society — the old denominational idea over again.

In this way another sect was born. Of course, these assemblies would scornfully reject the suggestion that they are sectarian, but the fact remains that they have created a body, and that body is not the body of Christ. Each assembly makes the amazing claim for itself that it is "the Church of God", to the exclusion of all else in the locality where it is found. We had thought that it belonged to the Church of Rome only to have such pretensions; but we may as well ask: On what ground is this claim made?

The "Needed Truth" assemblies, or the people who compose them, had withdrawn from association with those assemblies which met in a simple scriptural way without pretending to be anything more than individual companies of saints who endeavoured to carry out the mind of the Lord as far as it was possible in the midst of the confused state of Christendom. The new companies set themselves

up as "a unique concrete visible unity". We shall ask in vain, What did they have that the others had not? Certainly nothing that was divine; but indeed a great deal of fleshly pretension.

As with all denominations, the new organization had to have its central government. It is a Presbyterian form of government by representation. Each local company has its elders, but elders are also appointed for wider circles: counties, districts, countries, etc. No attempt has been made, as far as we are aware, to justify the organization of a county, district, national, or supreme oversight, by anything found in Scripture. The authority of the "Needed Truth" magazine appears to have been sufficient. Thus one of their early leaders declared: "It is hopeless to expect assemblies to come to one mind . . . without using the means of conferences of overseeing men" (C. M. Luxmore, "Needed Truth", Vol. 2, pp. 75, 76).

And so power was put into the hands of men, and the Catholic principle of discipline was again adopted — with the same disastrous results. It was not long till that power was used in the most despotic way to rend asunder what they had not hesitated to call a divinely formed unity: "the only visible expression of divine unity on earth"!

## *Chapter Twenty-seven*

### CAUSES OF SECTARIANISM

HAVING passed in review the origins and development of the principal denominational systems, and given some account of a modern attempt to return to the original ground of Scripture, we may now endeavour to draw some conclusions. If lessons are to be learned, it will be necessary to discern the causes of sectarianism in the first place, and then the reasons for failure in the attempt to find a remedy and give expression to the will of God.

We may state in a general way that the cause of all sectarianism has been, first of all, a departure from the scriptural conception of the church as a divine and heavenly unity, existing indefectibly before the eye of God. The church of Christ, against which He said the gates of hell could not prevail, was never committed to human responsibility as a visible society on earth, and men should never have set up to organize or administer it as a public body.

Secondly, a principal cause of sectarianism has been the following of human leaders, instead of abiding by the authority of Scripture as an all-sufficient guide. Such leaders in the beginning organized themselves into a clerical group which assumed lofty titles and prerogatives in the so-called "Catholic" Church, contrary to our Lord's declaration in Matthew 20 as to the inadmissibility of all such pretensions. These pretensions have been imitated to some degree by leaders in all other sectarian bodies, for a human authority of some sort is necessary. And the farther we drift from truth, the more necessary is the human authority.

All heterodox bodies necessarily recognize two authorities. All would claim to recognize, and in some sense, follow, the Bible; but all recognize another authority as well, which always proves to be the decisive one. Because any

teaching which is truly orthodox, is a teaching supported by Scripture. If it is orthodox by this divine standard, it does not need the support of any other authority. But if appeal has to be made to such an additional authority in support of it, it is confessedly lacking in scriptural support. With Rome, it is the papacy and papal tradition; with Mormons, it is Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon; with Christian Scientists it is Mrs. Eddy's "Science and Health"; with Seventh Day Adventists it is the "Testimonies" of Mrs. White; with "Jehovah's Witnesses" it is the writings of Pastor Russell and Judge Rutherford; and so on. But no heretical sect can be maintained by the testimony of Scripture alone, and the same is true in a lesser degree with regard to the denominations called orthodox. These have recourse usually to confessions, creeds and articles of faith drawn up by men of previous generations who were not more infallible than their present-day followers. Indeed present-day believers are in a better position to decide what is the true teaching of Scripture than were any of their predecessors, for the former creeds and doctrines have been submitted to spiritual criticism, and there has been opportunity to sift them and separate the chaff from the wheat.

It ill becomes us therefore to accept a ready-made creed or confession of faith, when we have the whole Bible at our disposal. Every true believer should be sufficiently a lover of truth to become acquainted with the whole range of Scripture doctrine; and since every believer is indwelt by the Holy Spirit, he has a safeguard against falling into serious error if he depends upon this divine Guide. Such is the teaching of 1 John 2: 18-27.

Again it may be said that sectarianism has been the result of ignoring Christ's institution of the local assembly, defined in Matthew 18: 20 as a company (as few as two or three it might be) gathered unto His name and counting on His presence in their midst. Such a company is authorized by His word to deal with matters of discipline, and is therefore viewed as autonomous, being adminis-

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tratively independent of all other assemblies; but the setting up of any other arrangement necessarily leads to the creation of sectarian bodies. The simple scriptural arrangement which provides for Christians meeting in local companies, in direct dependence on the Lord, instead of looking to superior councils to make decisions for them, accords perfectly with the whole scheme and genius of Christianity, and its recognition and adoption would have obviated many of the ills that afflict Christendom.

Another contributing cause of sectarianism has been the adoption of human names, in which we may include the misappropriation of scriptural names. Scripture warned about this from the beginning, and Christians meeting in a simple scriptural way, as gathered to Christ's own precious name, would realize the incompatibility of owning any other name than His. But human names are necessary for human creations, and the employment of such names is a sufficient indication that a sectarian consciousness exists. Where believers meet on the common ground of Christianity there is no need of a distinguishing title.

But we have seen that even where there has been an abandoning of sectarian positions and names, and at attempt to return to scriptural ground, there has been a certain amount of failure in the attempt, and this because of the tendency to sectarianism that seems to be part of our very nature. For it is not the recognition of scriptural principles alone, or the adoption of right scriptural order in assembly matters, that will preserve us from the evil. If the sins of the flesh, such as pride, love of place, intolerance, and the allowance of a party spirit, are not condemned in us, we shall soon find ourselves back on sectarian ground. That is why our Lord's first lesson on assembly matters had to do with the attitude of brother toward brother. (Matt. 18). It will take more of the grace of God to discern this cause of sectarianism, than was necessary in relation to any of the others.

The thought is entertained by many Christians that in order to be together in Christian fellowship there must be

complete uniformity of thought and practice, and where this does not exist they feel justified in separating themselves and forming a different company. Now agreement with fellow-believers is very desirable, and we are exhorted to speak the same things (1 Cor. 1: 10) and to be of the same mind (Phil. 2: 2). In all matters about which the Word of God has given clear testimony it is both possible and necessary. But the fact is that while Scripture gives us definite guidance on all essential matters, there are other matters concerning which it gives us no guidance at all, apart from general principles; and so it must be recognized that in such matters there is liberty for brethren to think and act differently, according to their understanding of the mind of the Lord.

There are always people who want to make others conform to their ways of thinking and acting, and who can only get along with those willing to do so. It is not a question of conforming to what Scripture plainly teaches, but of their interpretations and applications, of their traditions and established customs, or simply of their judgments and opinions. But it should be recognized that we are not called to legislate for one another where Scripture has made no pronouncement.

It is evident from the New Testament that in apostolic times there was much divergence of thought among the Christians about a variety of matters. This is clearly seen in passages such as Romans 14, where even Paul, having apostolic authority, did not legislate for some who were of different judgments regarding the eating of meats and observance of days. The issue may be clear enough for us today, but in the circumstances of those early believers, some with a Jewish background, and some being Gentiles, the apostle was led to enter a plea for patience and mutual forbearance. It should be remembered always that ministry is not only the occasion for the exposition of divine truth but also for the exhibition of divine grace.

Scripture warns us concerning people who would insist on our acceptance of their views and opinions as a ground

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of fellowship. The "heretic" of Titus 3: 10 may be defined as an opinionative or factious person whose views do not commend themselves to the saints, being views which do not have the authority of divine revelation, and which tend to divide rather than unify the saints. It should be borne in mind that ministry in the church should always be ministry of the Word of God, not of human opinions. The Word of God will not divide Christians but will strengthen and edify them.

The ministry, moreover, should be varied and evenly balanced. Undue emphasis on certain lines of truth at the expense of others will tend to sectarianism. A sense of proportion is very necessary. Objective ministry which exalts Christ and feeds the souls of the saints should have more place than that which is purely subjective and which tends to cast believers back upon themselves to find satisfaction in their own attainments.

Scripture teaches that in ministry, as in all the works of God, there is room for much diversity without destroying the unity or the harmony. There are diversities of gifts, ministries and operations, but one and the self-same Spirit (I Cor. 12: 4-11), and this variety is needful for us as individuals or assemblies. The Word of God, moreover, is both profound and extensive, and we should be constantly acquiring fresh knowledge and fresh visions of the glory of Christ and His church. The tendency of the sectarian mind is to run all truth, or rather some truth, into a fixed mould, and express it in cut-and-dried forms of speech. This does not suggest the exercise of true spiritual gift or an acquaintance with the value of all Scripture.

The fashion of the sects is to draw up a statement of doctrine, a confession of faith, a series of articles, or some such document that will be authoritative for all the members. But this amounts to setting aside Scripture as a perfect and sufficient authority. And even where there may be no written declaration of belief, Christians are sometimes found to be grouping themselves together on the basis of their agreement or common appreciation of



a special line of teaching or practice, with the tendency to draw away from, and even despise, their fellow-believers whose emphases and appreciations may lie in a different direction. Such ideas sometimes find their expression in new editions of hymn-books or in monthly magazines which circulate among the saints; and the acceptance or rejection of such hymn-books or magazines becomes a criterion by which individuals and assemblies are judged. In all such cases it should be understood that there is a tendency to departure from the original ground of God's assembly, for it is no longer a question of being gathered unto Christ on the ground of submission to His word and the guidance of His Holy Spirit.

Where a sectarian or party spirit exists, ministers of the Word are esteemed as faithful only when they stress a certain line of things which may commend itself to the hearers, often because of their background or upbringing. But the line of ministry which we may most stand in need of may be the one which we appreciate least, and the faithful brother is usually the one who ministers the truth that is least popular in the circle where he finds himself. It is not God's plan that we should choose our preachers or the kind of ministry we are to receive, and a scripturally-gathered assembly is characterized by freedom for the Spirit of God to use whom He will among those gifted for it.

Those who are employed in the task of strengthening a sectarian position frequently believe that they are doing a service for God. They observe tendencies here and there that are unscriptural, but instead of ministering the word they would be corrective of such tendencies, they revert to the idea of withdrawing from association with those who need the corrective ministry and encircle themselves within the bounds of an unaffected area. In this way a new party comes into existence, with undefined limits at first, but none the less sectarian in character. But we should remember that it is unscriptural to belong to any party, even a party formed to defend the truth. One has well

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said that the truth of the church cannot be maintained by forming a party to defend it, since the forming of the party is itself a denial of the truth of the church.

It may not be so easy for us to be linked with others whose views and practices are different from our own, but the grace of Christianity consists in making as much allowance for others as we would claim for ourselves. None of us has a monopoly of all truth, and no one dare set himself up as a pattern for others to imitate in all things. Still less should we endeavour to force upon the saints conformity to views or practices which Scripture does not lead them to adopt. As another has said: "The divine way of meeting the difficulty is not to form a party to oppose (those who differ), and so almost force them into being an opposite party . . . There are great spiritual resources available for us in Christ and in the Spirit of God — resources of grace and brotherly kindness, of prayerful entreaty and the use of the Scriptures — of which the men of this world know nothing. We need to be thoroughly right ourselves in order to use these resources aright. Let us seek grace to use them, instead of flying to expedients which have no authority in the Word." (F. B. Hole in "The Administration of the Mystery").

## *Chapter Twenty-eight*

### AN OPEN DOOR

**WHAT** then is the path available to the saints of God who at the present time desire to do His will and forsake the sin of sectarianism?

In the prophetic outline of church history given us in chapters 2 and 3 of the Revelation, it is seen that subsequent to the Protestant apostasy depicted in the message to Sardis, it was said to Philadelphia: "Behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it." In the nineteenth century many of the Lord's people availed themselves of that open door, returning to the simplicity of the New Testament practice by abandoning all human names, to be gathered to the precious name of Christ alone. And the Lord gave them this commendation: "Thou hast a little strength, and hast kept My Word, and hast not denied My name."

That door is open still, and will remain open till the Lord shall come, so that we, as they, having but a little strength, may avail ourselves of it. It is not the door into another fold or enclosure. Rather is it a door that opens outwards, to enable us to escape from the confusion and restricting influences of organized Christendom. It is a door that leads outside the camp to Christ Himself. "Let us go forth therefore unto Him, without the camp, bearing His reproach" (Heb. 13: 13).

Of the making of denominations there is no end. Each generation produces its would-be church-makers who think they have an idea that will work better than anything that has been tried before. And all are doomed to disappointment, for nothing of human creation can ever function according to divine principles.

God's plan from the beginning was for individual Christian assemblies to depend directly on the Holy Spirit and

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be responsible to the Lord alone, with no system of inter-assembly administration or discipline, and no system of central government. Every system marked by these features of organization has also been marked by failure and division. And so it must be, right on to the end of the age. But the promise of Christ to the individual assemblies still holds good: "For where two or three are gathered together unto My name, there am I in the midst of them." Why then should we wish for more? Whatsoever is more than this is human and unauthorized. "Self-determined arrangements, ecclesiastical accretions or modifications, the establishment of church authority apart from that which is laid down in the New Testament, could only dishonour God, mar the testimony, stultify the divinely appointed position, and meet with the Lord's disfavour and disapproval at the judgment seat." (W. E. Vine in "The Divine Plan of Missions").

And surely a thousand experiments in sect-making are enough to convince us that it is a profitless task. It has caused untold sorrow in millions of lives. It has produced intolerance and cruelty and a blinding of true spiritual perception. It has unjustifiably separated beloved saints of God and made the church's testimony a laughing-stock to the world. It has stumbled unbelievers and the lambs of Christ's flock. It has greatly furthered the interests of Satan, and is from every point of view indefensible. It is plainly condemned in Scripture as a work of the flesh, and is a sin to be repented of and renounced by every right-thinking Christian. It will have tremendous repercussions at the judgment seat of Christ.

If it be asked: What are to do? the answer is plain. We must surrender every name, system or practice that is unauthorized by the Word of God, and return to the simplicity of New Testament teaching.

In doing so, we shall meet with fellow-believers as Christians, and as gathered only to the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, for the purpose of carrying out His mind regarding worship, ministry, prayer, and evangelistic ser-

vice, in dependence on the Holy Spirit. We shall not countenance any form of clerisy, but allow freedom for the exercise of any spiritual gift which the Lord may be pleased to vouchsafe to us. We shall recognize as elders or shepherds all who are qualified to engage in that service according to the requirements of Scripture. And if any need of discipline arises, we shall limit ourselves strictly to doing that which Scripture commands. We shall not recognize any authority whatsoever outside the Word of God, nor take any action that Scripture does not authorize.

As regards our relations with other companies of Christians, we shall recognize as scriptural assemblies all such as meet in accordance with the Word, having the essential features of New Testament churches. Our fellowship with them will not be governed by considerations of official party connection or decisions made by some hierarchical authority, but will be a spiritual link made possible by their submission to the Lordship of Christ and the principles of Scripture.

On the other hand, we shall adopt a very different attitude toward all companies that meet on sectarian ground, for we must feel obliged to condemn what God has condemned. We cannot recognize as Christian assemblies those that are formed after the ideas of men, even though Christian people may compose them. Certainly we may, and should, have a measure of fellowship with all who are Christ's, as individuals, but to recognize their denominations and co-operate with them in interdenominational movements would involve compromise of the truth. It will therefore be our duty to point out, humbly but firmly, that there is a difference between obedience and disobedience to the Word of God, and our separation from the various bodies of Christendom should never be construed as the manifestation of a sectarian spirit, but rather as our repudiation of all sectarianism, and the manifestation of a desire to walk in the ways that God Himself has traced for His people.

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This attitude toward the denominations will not be understood by large numbers of Christian people who have, perhaps throughout their lives, accepted denominationalism as though it were a normal feature of Christianity. It may help such if we suggest that they make a serious attempt to transport themselves in thought to the first century and try to imagine what would have been the reaction of spiritual Christians in those days had the evil of denominationalism suddenly appeared in their midst. We know how the apostle repudiated most energetically the incipient sectarianism at Corinth. And someone has asked the question: If, during Paul's absence from the city, the assembly had actually become divided into three or four sections, under the influence of leaders who wished to form different parties in support of their respective views, what would have been the attitude of the apostle toward those several denominational groups? To ask the question is to answer it. If he had any dealing with them at all, it would be for the purpose of recalling them to the original ground of God's assembly, to be unitedly gathered to the name of the Lord Jesus Christ alone, in submission to His word, as given in the oral and written ministry of the apostles. If the various interpretations and opinions of leading men caused them to be divided, their plain duty was to surrender those interpretations and opinions; for the Word of God condemned the divisions that were so created.

We do not suggest that all Christians will ever come together again as at the beginning, but if only one Christian comes "outside the camp" to Christ, it will be for His glory. In view of present-day movements in the religious world, it is quite possible that many denominations may agree to unite, and the less they care about scriptural principles and doctrines the easier it will be for them to unite. Let no Christian be deluded into thinking that such a movement would be of God. Even if *all* denominations agreed to come together and form "one united church", the believer's place would still be outside of it, and with

more reason than ever before. Such a united church is the dream of Catholicism, but only the complete apostasy of all denominations would make it possible.

The only ground of true practical unity is adherence to the Word of God, not only in an intellectual way, but in the power of the Holy Spirit. This adherence can only be expected, in the first place, of people who are Christians in a true sense of the word, that is, people who have had a genuine experience of conversion or new birth. But experience shows that even truly converted people are often to be found defending what is unscriptural, for one reason or another. For not all believers are true disciples. Not all have yielded their wills unreservedly to Christ the Lord. Not all have adopted the rule of unquestioning obedience to His revealed will.

Where, however, there is a surrender of one's own will, with a true desire to do the will of God, it will soon become apparent that sectarianism is a sin which should be condemned and abandoned. It is impossible to carry out the whole will of God within the restricting confines of any denominational body. In a scripturally-gathered assembly, on the other hand, there is liberty to practise all that the Word of God enjoins. And all who delight in doing the will of God will not find the path too narrow.

If, however, we do take, or have taken, scriptural ground, and are determined to practise all that the Word of God enjoins, we must take heed lest we be found boasting in the very scripturalness of our position or harbouring a censorious spirit toward those who remain in the place from which we came out. For it is only too possible to be scriptural in our position and yet sectarian in our attitude. It may be comparatively easy to take that position, but it requires more of the grace of God to maintain a right attitude toward all who belong to Christ, and just because they belong to Him. It is also possible to be in a scriptural position and be greatly lacking in other respects. For, as has been often said, a scriptural position is no guarantee of a spiritual condition, and no assembly can

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function satisfactorily if there is a condition of carnality, pride or worldliness. And we must ever be dependent upon the Holy Spirit for guidance and power.

If place is given to the Holy Spirit, He will take of the things of Christ and reveal them to us, for His mission is to exalt Christ in the midst of the saints; but there is no substitute for dependence on the Spirit. Human arrangements for ministry may ensure some sort of order, and this is preferable no doubt to disorder, but it is not the more excellent way for which Scripture has made provision. If the reality of being gathered unto Christ were more definitely known, and the control of the Holy Spirit submitted to, greater things would be seen in the midst of God's assemblies than men have yet dreamed of. Ministry under such conditions would be characterized by the result foreseen in 1st Corinthians 14: 24-25: even an unbeliever or uninstructed person coming into the gathering would feel the power of the word, to the extent of falling down on his face to worship God and confess "that God is in you of a truth." This is the testimony that would attract others to God's true centre of gathering. Believers would rejoice to discover it, and it would be our glad privilege to welcome them to their proper sphere of Christian fellowship.

But if the power be lacking, let us not be afraid to acknowledge it and seek to remove the obstacles. The difference between a scripturally-gathered assembly and any sectarian company should be such that no visiting Christian would fail to discern it. Too often, assemblies which began well have so degenerated as to become in many respects similar to the denominations around them. The practices of denominational bodies have been imitated to such an extent that the distinctive testimony of the assemblies has been weakened, if not annulled. Let us not forget that in things divine the supreme excellence is simplicity, and the less we have of organization and equipment the more likely are we to see the glory of God.

Some also have adopted the policy of ignoring denomi-



national differences to the extent of treating the sects as if they were "Christian" bodies, and of viewing scriptural assemblies as though they were just another denominational group; and it is sometimes proposed that the assemblies co-operate with such bodies in Christian service, and that believers from them be received indiscriminately to the breaking of bread and other privileges. But we may well pause and ask ourselves whether this practice accords well with the Word of God, and whether it is in the best interests of the believers concerned. Many are satisfied to remain in their sectarian connections while using the assemblies as a convenience, on occasion, for the purpose of breaking bread. So that, while an assembly may act with the best intentions, desiring to encourage such in the path of obedience, the contrary result is often produced.

Our own understanding of the matter is that Scripture treats the Lord's Supper as a function of the local assembly, and only one of the privileges in which members of the assembly are expected to engage. We have already seen how a pattern was set in Acts 2 for the practice of all assemblies, according to the law of first mention, and how the mind of God was revealed to the effect that persons should be first converted, and then baptized and added to the assembly, before sharing in the privileges of instruction, fellowship, breaking of bread and collective prayer. Moreover, it seems evident from 1st Corinthians 11 that the partaking of the Lord's Supper was a very solemn matter, and one that called for much precaution, lest the privilege be abused. Unworthy participation would call down divine discipline upon the whole assembly. And in view of this, disciplinary measures are prescribed for the maintenance of the purity of assembly fellowship. It seems reasonable therefore to suppose that the privilege of breaking bread was limited to those amenable to the discipline. Such a consideration would not, of course, exclude visitors who were known to belong to assemblies where scriptural discipline was practised. But because of the need for such precaution, Scripture establishes the

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practice, for believers going from one place to another, of carrying with them letters of commendation, accrediting them as persons fit to be received. (See 2 Cor 3: 1; Rom. 16: 1; Acts 18: 27). Such precautionary measures are more necessary today than ever before.

In defence of the practice of admitting all Christians to the breaking of bread, without regard to their ecclesiastical connections, it is sometimes said that we are to receive all that Christ has received, according to the precept of Romans 15: 7: "Receive ye one another as Christ also received us to the glory of God." It is probable that this text in its original application had no reference to reception into an assembly, and much less could it refer to the reception of believers to the breaking of bread. The words were addressed to believers who belonged, evidently, to the assembly at Rome, but who were in disharmony with one another because of their different Jewish and Gentile backgrounds. They needed to receive one another in the sense of manifesting a greater spirit of fellowship. In a similar sense the Apostle Paul asked the Corinthians to receive him. (2 Cor. 7: 2).

However, if we apply the text to the matter of assembly reception, we must, in all consistency, understand it to mean reception to full Christian fellowship, and not simply admission to one of the assembly's privileges. The concept of receiving to the breaking of bread is not a scriptural one. If we receive at all, we receive to the fellowship of the assembly, with all its privileges and responsibilities. Romans 15: 7, moreover, supposes a reciprocity of reception, and true fellowship is always reciprocal. A believer who seeks fellowship in a Christian assembly should be prepared to receive the assembly as such, acknowledging it to be a divine institution and not merely a voluntary society formed according to the ideas of men. Only thus can he have the consciousness of doing the will of God in associating himself with it. The mere interchange of courtesies between assemblies and denominations is not a true expression of fellowship at all, for

fellowship is a divinely-created thing and is based on obedience to the Word of God. (See 1 John 1: 7).

Again, the text in question supposes a *permanent* reception. When Christ received us, it was no temporary thing, and if we are to imitate this example we must receive one another in the same way to the glory of God. For an assembly is either a church of God, in the scriptural sense of the term, or it is a mere human society, unworthy of our recognition. If it is the former, we should definitely belong to it; for it cannot be scriptural or divine on occasions only.

The question, then, reduces itself to this: Is there such a thing today as being gathered to the name of the Lord Jesus Christ alone, in recognition of His lordship, and in complete subjection to His Word and the guidance of the Holy Spirit? Is it possible for believers to be gathered simply as Christians and in recognition of the essential unity that links them together as members of Christ's body, as all Christians were in the first century? And is it the mind of God that they should renounce all man-made religious associations and parties, in order so to meet according to the Word of God? Again we say, to ask the question is to answer it. Even if no other Christians in modern times had recognized the possibility and necessity of it, it would still be our duty and privilege to do that which God's Word reveals to have been His mind for all His people from the beginning of the church's history, and till Christ shall come.

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