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Free Action

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BY.....

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The Free Action of the Spirit.



IT is not our purpose in this pamphlet to bring Scripture proof of the Holy Spirit's presence on earth. This great truth is no doubt more or less familiar to all our readers.

When the Lord Jesus Christ ascended to the right hand of God, having accomplished the work of redemption, He sent forth from the Father (Acts ii. 33) that other Comforter, the Holy Ghost, who was to abide here with the saints for ever (John xiv. 16). We press this point of supreme importance upon the attention of our readers. The abiding character of the Spirit's presence is what distinguishes the present dispensation from all others. When Christ came here He did not come to abide with His people for ever. He came to suffer for their sins; far more, He came to glorify God about them. For this He went to the cross, He was there made sin, He who knew no sin (2 Cor. v. 21). He went into death for His own; yea, He went before them, like the true Ark of the Covenant, descending into the dark waters of death and judgment that His people might walk dry-shod. Peter, impetuous and no doubt sincere, says,

“Lord, why cannot I follow Thee now?” But this was impossible. Atonement Christ alone could accomplish. None could share in redemption’s toil. At the cross Christ stood alone to meet man’s bitter hatred, Satan’s power of darkness, and all the waves and billows of God’s wrath against sin. But the work is done, eternal praises to His name!

And now Christ risen from the dead has gone into heaven. Often did He announce to His sorrowing disciples that He must leave them; but He also assured them that when the Holy Ghost should come it would be far otherwise. That other Comforter, the Spirit of truth, would not only be *in* them, but He should dwell (or abide) **with** them.

It is not our purpose now to enlarge on the first of these great truths. Every Christian understands more or less clearly that the Holy Ghost dwells *in* him. Indeed this is what constitutes the true Christian position according to John xiv. 20 and Romans viii. 9, “At that day ye shall know that I am in My Father, and ye in Me, and I in you.”

“If any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His.”

But is there not much misconception, ignorance, and unbelief as to the blessed truth that the Holy Spirit abides *with* us? Christ went away, but the Holy Ghost, He promised, “would abide with you for ever” (John xiv. 16).

Briefly we feel led to point out from Scripture the free action of the Spirit both in the world and in the Church. It was God's intention that the glad tidings should be preached in all the world. Since the cross a new phase of God's dealings had come. It was no longer Jerusalem and the Jews that were the objects of His dealings, but "the whole world" and "every creature."

A prayerful study of the opening chapters of the Acts bows the heart in wonder and worship as we see God bringing about this gracious purpose of His love. He is seen behind every circumstance, and controlling every outburst of human wrath, and turning all things to His own glory in the accomplishment of His will.

After the martyrdom of Stephen a violent persecution burst forth against the Church at Jerusalem. Satan's effort no doubt was to crush the work at its beginning, and nip in the bud this new testimony to the One whom wicked hands had crucified and slain. But the wrath of man is made to praise Him. Up till this time the testimony had been confined to Jerusalem, but now they were all scattered abroad, except the apostles. We know from the earlier chapters of the Acts that many thousands had already been added to the Church in that city. Now these became scattered throughout Judea and Samaria (Acts viii. 1).

And did these scattered ones withhold the

light of the gospel from the regions where they were dispersed? By no means; the results of their labours, so far as Judea was concerned, are alluded to in the Epistle to the Galatians, for by the time Paul came upon the scene, some years afterwards, not only were souls saved, but assemblies had been formed (Gal. i. 22).

Here we find a striking instance of the free action of the Spirit. It has been said that *only an assembly* can receive. But what assembly could possibly have received these converts of the preached word (Acts viii. 4)? We do not in the smallest degree question the responsibilities and the privileges of the assembly, but it would have been an unwarrantable interference with the liberty of the Spirit's action for the assembly at Jerusalem to have hindered in Judea and Samaria the gathering together of the saints. Indeed it could not have been done. The same power that had gathered them together at Jerusalem likewise gathered them wherever the gospel bore its fruit in the salvation of souls.

Another remarkable instance of this free and independent action of the Spirit now comes before us in the case of Samaria. "Philip went down to the city of Samaria, and preached Christ unto them" (Acts viii. 5). The servant had to do directly with his Master, and God wrought mightily through his means. There was great joy in that city, for "they believed Philip preaching the things concerning the

kingdom of God, and the name of Jesus Christ," and they made public confession of their faith by baptism.

But in the case of Samaria things were somewhat different from Judea, and hence "when the apostles which were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent unto them Peter and John" (Acts viii. 14). This was not to raise any opposition to the work which had been so blessedly accomplished, but to prove their hearty fellowship in that which God had wrought. Difficulties might have arisen, and a barrier to fellowship might have been raised owing to the mixed state of Samaria with regard to worship. But God took care that no divided feelings should at this opening stage of the Church's history be allowed to supervene. How blessed would it have been had this state of things continued!

From Acts ix. 31, we learn that the formation of assemblies had been taking place freely throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria. It could not be otherwise, for this is what God wished His people to do, namely, to gather together into one place for worship, edification, and prayer, wherever Christ was preached and souls were saved. For Jerusalem to have hindered this would have been to thwart the free and sovereign action of the Spirit of God.

But now came a crucial case, a case calculated to raise every prejudice of the Jewish mind. Up

till now the work had been confined to Jews and Jewish proselytes. But God was about to open the door to the Gentiles. The keys of the kingdom of heaven had been entrusted to Peter (Matt. xvi. 19), and for this reason, even had there been no other, Peter must be the servant chosen for this important part of the work. Philip, who lived at Cæsarea, might be the instrument in the reception of Samaria, but he could not be entrusted with the reception of Cornelius and his household. The keys which at the day of Pentecost Peter had used to open the door to the Jewish believers, he is now called upon by the Lord Himself to use a second time in the admission of Gentiles to the same privileges and blessings as the Jews. For this he was prepared by the remarkable vision of the sheet let down from heaven. Every prejudice of his being both nationally and religiously rose in rebellion at the thought of eating what was common or unclean ; and Gentiles were unclean in the eyes of a Jew. But what God had cleansed was no longer common or unclean. The free and sovereign action of the Spirit of God in connection with the work of the Lord is most marvellously illustrated in this history of Cornelius (Acts x.). God is seen to be working at both ends, preparing Cornelius to receive the message, and preparing Peter to deliver it.

Here Peter has to do directly with his Master and not with his fellow-servants. He receives

no commission from man, nor does he seek the permission of Jerusalem in a case where, humanly speaking, this permission might have been deemed necessary. Had the question of receiving Cornelius been sent up to Jerusalem for consideration, we might well believe that Cornelius never would have been received. Peter acts in obedience to his Master, and leaves the results with God. These results, so far as Cornelius and his friends were concerned, were blessed indeed. While the joyful news of peace and forgiveness through a crucified and risen Christ was being proclaimed in their ears, "the Holy Ghost fell on all that heard the word" (Acts x. 44).

Now comes the opposition from Jerusalem, and things looked dark indeed. Division was threatened, but blessedly averted. Why should the gracious operation of God's Spirit lead to any such disastrous consequences? And yet there were exercised consciences to be satisfied, and prejudices to be cleared away. And how was this to be done? Surely not by raising a storm of opposition throughout the assemblies of Judea, and Samaria, and Galilee. No, but "Peter rehearsed the matter from the beginning, and expounded it by order unto them" (Acts xi. 4). The simple and unvarnished account of all that had taken place was enough to convince the apostles and brethren in Judea, as it had already done Peter, that the work was of God. And yet Peter divides the responsibility. It

might not have satisfied others to have said, "The Spirit bade me go with them, nothing doubting," but all difficulty was settled by, "Moreover these six brethren accompanied me" (Acts xi. 12).

In the mouths then of all these witnesses every word of God's blessed work at Cæsarea was established: "The Holy Ghost fell on them, as on us at the beginning. Then remembered I the word of the Lord, how that He said . . . Ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost. Forasmuch then as God gave them the like gift as He did unto us, who believed on the Lord Jesus Christ; what was I, that I could withstand God?"

It was right that Peter should do all that in his power lay to clear away whatever difficulties lay in the way of a hearty recognition of the work at Cæsarea, but after this rehearsal of the matter, further hostility on the part of Judea would have been withstanding God.

Yet another instance in this same chapter must conclude this brief survey of the Spirit's free and independent action in those early days of Christianity. Hitherto none but Peter had admitted Gentile believers, but now those "scattered abroad upon the persecution that arose about Stephen" extend their labours as far as to Antioch, and there preach to the Grecians (these were Gentiles). "The hand of the Lord was with them; and a great number

believed and turned unto the Lord" (Acts xi. 21).

But this does not satisfy Jerusalem—"Then tidings of these things came unto the ears of the Church which was at Jerusalem." God was working independently of Jerusalem as a centre, teaching the great lesson that in Christ Jesus was neither Jew nor Gentile, but all were one, and that the middle wall of partition was broken down.

Every care was taken by the Lord to preserve the Church from division, and yet nothing must be allowed to hinder the free action of His Spirit.

Barnabas was sent down to Antioch from Jerusalem, but "when he came and had seen the grace of God," he was glad. He immediately falls in line with what God was doing, and he exhorts these young converts to cleave to the Lord with purpose of heart. Oh, for more Barnabases! "He was a good man, and full of the Holy Ghost and of faith," and the result of his visit to Antioch was that "much people was added unto the Lord."

We cannot pass on without pointing out the blessed evidences of the grace and love of Christ at work in the hearts of the saints both at Jerusalem and Antioch at the end of the chapter (vers. 27-30). The brethren in Judea were in need, for a dearth had visited the land. No resentment is found in the hearts of the

disciples at Antioch for the suspicion and coldness with which they were received by Jerusalem, for "every man according to his ability determined to send relief unto the brethren which dwelt in Judea." No pride prevented the Jewish disciples from accepting help from those Gentile brethren whom they might have been tempted to despise. "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law" (Gal. v. 22, 23).

From this point of the narrative the Jewish character of the assembly ceases; Jerusalem becomes less prominent. It was at Antioch, indeed, that the disciples were first called Christians. This name may have been given to them in derision by the world; but two things are clear—first, the disciples must have had much of Christ about them to have earned the name the world gave them; and secondly, the Holy Spirit accepts this name, the only name ever given by God to His saints of this dispensation (1 Pet. iv. 16). Never do we find in Scripture such names as Baptist, Congregationalist, Wesleyan, or Calvinist. Why then assume any other name than that which God has given us?

It has been said, and truly said, that the day of Pentecost was the birthday of the Church. When Christ was on earth the Church had not yet been formed. The earliest mention of the

Church is the well-known passage in Matthew xvi. 18, where the Lord, acknowledging Peter's magnificent testimony to His Person—"Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God"—replies, "Upon this rock I will build My Church."

Old Testament saints, then, do not form part of the Church. The Church is the body of Christ (Eph. i. 22, 23), and not until the day of Pentecost was this body formed. During the wonderful interval between the resurrection and ascension of the Lord Jesus, the risen Christ announced to His disciples that "ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence" (Acts i. 5). Up till that memorable day, the disciples, though they may have had many interests in common, were nevertheless *units* separate the one from the other, but on and after Pentecost they became *united* to Christ their Head in heaven, and to one another on earth. Let 1 Corinthians xii. be carefully studied, and the importance of this truth will become apparent. It is not, however, our present purpose to enlarge upon the scriptural doctrine of the Church in its various aspects of the Body and the House. It is rather the practical details connected with the gathering together of the saints in the present dispensation that we would seek to bring before our readers.

About seventy years ago God revived many important truths that had been almost entirely

lost by His people in so far as any practical enjoyment thereof was concerned. The thirty-four large volumes, entitled "The Collected Writings of the late J. N. Darby," contain a vast amount of most helpful information on these matters, and go to prove that God was not only restoring to the Church the long-forgotten truths of the coming of the Lord as the true and proper hope of the Church, and also the personality and presence of the Holy Ghost, but they also show that these very truths were resisted and refused by the large bulk of Christians.

Of late years almost every intelligent Christian has come to accept as scriptural the teaching which at first met with such virulent opposition. There is of course room for much further spreading of these truths, and also for much clearer understanding of them; and we cannot forget the solemn words of the Lord Jesus Christ, that "if any man will do His will, he shall know of the doctrine," &c. (John vii. 17). God will not give clear light to any of His people who will not act according to the light He gives, "he that hath to him shall be given" (Mark iv. 25). But notwithstanding this, Christians everywhere are beginning to accept the teaching as to the coming of the Lord that met with such hostility seventy years ago. That it might have its practical effect upon them and upon all of us, should be our earnest prayer.

The same may be said as to the truth of the

personality and presence of the Holy Ghost. At that time few saw that the Holy Ghost was more than a divine influence for good. Now large numbers of Christians are learning that what was taught seventy years ago with regard to the Spirit, and only accepted by a few, is really the teaching of Scripture. There is still much ignorance, sometimes even much wilfulness, and not a little false doctrine, but that the Holy Spirit is a divine Person, and not a mere influence, is becoming largely accepted. For this we can thank God, while we should earnestly seek a walk in accordance with this great and all-important truth.

But while large numbers of earnest Christians are making much of the Spirit as indwelling the individual, and as power for service and testimony of the individual saint, they seem utterly to ignore His presence and action in the assembly. It is to this side of the truth that we feel led to direct the reader's attention. The present movement in Wales is calling attention to this aspect of the truth, and for this reason we feel it important to examine Scripture upon this point, so that we may be in more complete accord with the revealed mind of God, in more thorough subjection to His Word, and thus be saved from many of the serious dangers which we fear are threatening the unestablished saints of God in that land and elsewhere.

We would now turn to I Corinthians xii., and

seek help from God as we study this much neglected portion of His Word. At verse 17 of the previous chapter commences the practical instruction connected with the coming together of the people of God in assembly. The prime object of all was to "show the Lord's death till He come." To take the Lord's Supper together is the bounden duty and holy privilege of every Christian. It is a sorrowful consideration that so few ever do so in the way and manner laid down in the Word of God.

The early Christians partook of that holy feast together every first day of the week (Acts xx. 7). They assembled for the purpose without any minister or president over them; they assembled as members of one body, and not as members of different bodies. The Lord's presence at His own table was recognised by them, and the liberty of the Spirit to use whom He would to break the bread or lead the whole assembly in worship or prayer.

Christians have for long so lost sight of the truth of the presence of the Holy Ghost that they think that strange which to the early Christians was the invariable practice. The clerical idea has so taken hold of Christendom that the free action of the Spirit in the assembly seems a strange and dangerous practice.

We do not make light of the individual responsibility of the servant of the Lord to exercise whatever gift he may possess, whether

in the gospel to the world or as a teacher in the assembly. What we plead for is a more simple faith in the presence of the Holy Ghost and His unfettered action in the assembly of God's people when gathered together.

At the day of Pentecost the Holy Ghost descended upon the company of the disciples gathered together with one accord in the upper chamber at Jerusalem. Two things followed; "all the house" where they were sitting was filled with His presence, and each one of them individually was filled with the Holy Ghost.

The Spirit is present in the assembly as well as indwelling each individual Christian. This is clearly seen in many scenes described in the Acts. Let two instances suffice. When Ananias brought part of the money and laid it at the feet of the apostles, Peter said, "Ananias, why hath Satan filled thine heart to lie to the Holy Ghost?" (Acts v. 3). And again: "Thou hast not lied unto men, but unto God." God the Holy Ghost was present in the Church, and not only in the individuals composing it. Further, when the Church at Antioch was assembled together, "the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them" (Acts xiii. 2). There were several teachers present; the one man ministry had not then been instituted. Human arrangements and the control of the clergy have their origin in man's will, whereas what God originally instituted was

the guidance of the Holy Ghost and liberty of the Spirit to act by whom He would. Where such liberty is experienced in power, an unbeliever present would fall down and worship God, reporting that "God is among (not *in*) you of a truth" (1 Cor. xiv. 25).

But there was need of instruction in those days on this very subject of "spiritual manifestations" (1 Cor. xii. 1), for the heathen were familiar with displays of excitement through demoniacal possession. There were evil spirits as well as the Spirit of God; so here at the very threshold of our inquiry, we are afforded a conclusive test to which all pretensions to spiritual guidance must be submitted. This test has a double application. In the first place, "no man speaking by the Spirit of God calleth Jesus accursed" (1 Cor. xii. 3). From this it is evident that the Spirit of God will never lead any one to speak slightly of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Holy Ghost is here to glorify Christ (John xvi. 14), and therefore whatever in the smallest degree robs Him of His glory cannot be the prompting or the leading of the Holy Ghost.

But in the second place, wherever there is a true confession of Christ, wherever there is a bowing of heart and conscience to Jesus as Lord, there we are entitled to recognise the action and leading of the Holy Ghost. There may be much ignorance of other things, but

“no man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost.”

The importance of such a verse cannot be overestimated. How needful this crucial test was for the saints in those days will be recognised by the fact that more than thirty years after the apostle John urged it home to the consciences of his fellow-believers (1 John iv. 1-3). It is as needful for us to-day, *never more so*.

But this being recognised: the person of the Lord Jesus being unequivocally owned and acknowledged by the assembly of God's people, room must be left and liberty given to the free and unfettered action of the Holy Ghost. Where this is not the case, where a man is looked to as president or leader, let him be the very best of men, the gathering cannot be recognised as the coming together of the assembly of God in accordance with the revealed Word of God. It may be an assembly of saints, but it lacks the special characteristic of the assembly of God, namely, an assembly where “God is among you of a truth.”

“There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit.” Men would concentrate all the different gifts in *one man*, and call him the clergyman or the minister, but it is not so revealed in Scripture. “Diversities of gifts”—apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers—“but the same Spirit”; “all these worketh that one and the self-same Spirit, dividing to every man severally as He will.”

Where amidst all the machinery of Christendom is this seen carried out in actual practice?

When God revived the testimony as to the Spirit seventy years ago, bringing to light afresh the long forgotten truth of the Church of God, its *unity* as the body of Christ, its *responsibility* as the house of God, and its true *hope* as the Bride of Christ, many saints were gathered together and experienced the power and the joy of being thus guided in their assemblies for prayer, worship, and edification. They recognised in a practical manner the truth of the words, that "where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst" (Matt. xviii. 20), and the leading and liberty of the Spirit in contrast to the dead formality of human arrangement gave immense freshness and power to their meetings.

This does not in the smallest degree lessen the importance of the exercise of any individual gift the Lord may have given to His people. All are not gifted as preachers of the gospel, or teachers of the saints, and for any to attempt to do what they are not called to by the Lord, or qualified to do by having received a gift, can only result in confusion and failure. We must not confound the *gift* of the Spirit, and the *gifts* of the Spirit. Whereas every Christian has received the gift of the Holy Ghost and is indwelt by the Spirit, some only are gifted by the Spirit. "God hath set some in the Church, first apostles,

secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers. . . . Are all apostles? are all prophets? are all teachers?" &c. (1 Cor. xii. 28-31).

If verses 7 and 11 of this same chapter be quoted as implying that every man in the assembly possesses some gift, we reply that the language there used does not involve any such conclusion. The emphasis in verse 7 should be laid on the word "*profit*." Wherever a gift or manifestation of the Spirit has been given, it is for the profit of the hearers and not for the exaltation of the speaker. This was a most important principle, for at Corinth many were gifted with the gift of tongues, and the danger was that they should use this gift for their own glorification and not for the edification of the Church. This will come before us more fully presently.

In verse 11 the emphasis should be laid on the clause "severally as He will;" that is to say, the one Spirit that indwells every Christian divides His gifts severally or separately in accordance with His own sovereign will. This strikes at the root of the whole "one man ministry" idea. Evangelists, pastors, teachers are separate gifts; they are not concentrated in one man, but divided separately to different individuals according to God's own will.

While all this is true, there is another side to the question which must not be forgotten, especially in these days of weakness and confusion. "Covet earnestly the best gifts" (1 Cor. xii. 31).

Again, "Desire spiritual gifts" (I Cor. xiv. 1). And again, "Covet to prophesy" (I Cor. xiv. 39). Let none be disheartened. We would earnestly encourage all our young brethren to diligent prayer that whatever ability may be latent, whatever gift may be possessed, though it may appear small, it may be *stirred up*. Diligence is required; diligence in prayer, diligence in the study of the Word, diligence in communion with the Lord. Avail yourselves of whatever helps God may put in your way; "Having then gifts differing"—notice again the *different* gifts—"according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith"—don't attempt anything beyond your faith, though you may well pray, "Lord, increase our faith"—; "or ministry, let us wait on our ministering; or he that teacheth, on teaching," &c. (Rom. xii. 6-8).

What an exhortation have we here to diligence in the stirring up of the gifts. We believe that attention to this is greatly called for. Let no young men be above learning from those who have been in the work before them, and let the older ones lay themselves out to help and encourage the younger. Never shall we forget the encouragement received from an old evangelist now with the Lord, when first attempting gospel work.

Again let us say to our younger brethren: Begin young; you cannot suddenly develop

a gift at thirty, forty, or fifty years of age. In writing this we are, of course, addressing ourselves to those who have been early converted. The grace of God may call a man out of his sins and distance when far advanced in life, and may set him to work at once; but for a young Christian to waste his best days in sloth and worldly pleasure is like wrapping up his talent in a napkin,—it is damaging to himself and dishonouring to the Saviour and Lord to whom he owes everything.

But let us imagine a feeble little company of the Lord's people. They may possess no gifts, yet a more excellent way is before them. In 1 Corinthians xiii. we are shown what never fails. Love never fails. Gifts of power may exist, but without love they are valueless, nothing but sounding brass and tinkling cymbals. Where a spirit of love exists, though there may be no gifts, sinners will be sought for, saints comforted, gatherings cemented together and increased. Where gifts exist without love, the conversion of sinners will be neglected, saints will be harassed and distracted, gatherings scattered and broken up.

“Love never faileth.” Let us heed the aged apostle John's words: “Beloved, let us love one another.” “Beloved, we ought also to love one another.” “And this commandment have we from Him, That he who loveth God love his brother also” (1 John iv. 7, 11, 21)

Brotherly love is not only an exhortation but a command.

In 1 Corinthians xii. we are taught the *principle* of gathering; in 1 Corinthians xiii., the *power*; and 1 Corinthians xiv., the *practice*. The principle we have seen is this, that the Church is the body of Christ; that each member has his place appointed by God Himself—"God hath set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased Him" (ver. 18); that while the body is one, the members are many, and the gifts distributed separately according to the sovereign will of God the Holy Ghost.

As we have seen, the gifts are bestowed upon the few for the benefit of the many—"God hath set some (not *all*) in the Church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps," &c. (ver. 28). These are evidently special gifts bestowed upon *some* in the Church. No doubt "helps" is a very wide term, and yet how much room is there for such a gift!

Besides this, *every* member has his place to fill in the well-being of the whole body; "the eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of thee" (ver. 21). How painful is it to see how the flesh so frequently comes in and acts in diametric opposition to this principle. Excommunication and excision—which should be the last dire extremity—not seldom is resorted to when lesser forms of Church discipline would be

adequate. Here, then, it is that chapter xiii. comes *affording us the grand effective power for carrying out the principles of chapter xii.* Let each Christian study it carefully and on bended knees! Discipline has its place; chapter v. of this same epistle proves it. But no action of any kind in the assembly of God, whether in ministry or in discipline, can afford to be done apart from adherence to the exhortations of chapter xiii.

The principle of gathering according to chapter xii. being understood, the power according to chapter xiii. being sought, where do we in Scripture find directions for the practical carrying out of these things in assembly? The one and only chapter in the whole Bible that describes how a meeting of the assembly should be conducted is 1 Corinthians xiv. The first thing that strikes one is the absence of a clergyman, minister, or president. How completely Christendom has departed from the simplicity of earlier days may be seen by comparing the different forms of public worship to-day with what we find in this chapter. Every sect in Christendom—Rome, Anglican, or dissenting—makes one man prominent in every congregation. If this one man be present, all is expected to go well. There must be order at any rate; it may be the order of a spiritual mortuary; it may be, and alas, often is, that the one man has not one spark of divine life in his soul, and that not a breath from the Spirit of God ever passes over

his congregation, but at least there is no confusion. It is the order and control of man. The man may be, and sometimes is, thank God! truly converted and spiritually minded, but even so, the control of the meeting is that of man.

But in 1 Corinthians xiv. a very different character of meeting is described. There is no visible president, but perfect liberty for each one to take part in whatever way the Spirit of God may lead.

In the first place we read that the whole Church should come together into one place (1 Cor. xiv. 23). This might not always be possible, owing to the large numbers of believers in any one city, but this at any rate in principle should characterise the assembling together of the saints. The local assembly according to Scripture represents the whole Church. This we gather from 1 Corinthians xii. 27, "Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular." This was addressed to the saints at Corinth. *In fact* they only formed a part of the body of Christ, and yet they locally represented the whole body.

It is not forgotten that we are now in days of confusion and division, and in this divided state of things never do we find the whole assembly in any locality together, not even in heart. But for all that we should remember that, according to Scripture, all the saints in each locality are bound to "come together"; if

they do not, it is failure and disobedience on their part to the plain word of God. Seven times over in I Corinthians xi. and xiv. do we find the expression "come together." It is the bounden duty as well as the holy privilege of the Lord's people so to do.

The Church is God's assembly, it is not merely an assembly of saints; consequently *all* the saints should in each locality "come together." They should come together not as Roman, Anglican, or Greek—not as Baptists, Independents, Wesleyans, Friends, or even Brethren, but as members of the one body of Christ. This is the scriptural doctrine in accordance with which each saint is responsible to act. Ample direction is given in the Word as to how to act when so gathered together. And if in any one place the whole assembly of God does not or will not so come together, yet is it the privilege of even two or three to do so, counting upon the grace and faithfulness of the Lord who has promised His presence where two or three are gathered together in His name. Only let them take care that they do not, on the one hand, exclude any whom He would admit, nor on the other, admit any whom the discipline of His house would exclude on the ground of false doctrine or evil conduct.

Without going into all the details of the chapter, which should be studied prayerfully by every member of the assembly, both brothers

and sisters, young and old, there are two main exhortations around which all seems to turn.

In the first place, "Let all things be done unto edifying" (ver. 26). How important is this to be remembered when the saints come together in assembly. Seven times over in the chapter do we find such words as "edify" or "edification." The assembly was not the place for the display of gift, nor for the mere utterance of things that were true. "The spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets" (ver. 32). We understand by this that a brother might have the ability to speak, and might even feel prompted to do so, but bearing in mind the great end in view, namely the edification of all assembled, he might find it necessary to hold his gift in check.

In the early days of the Church, when gifts of tongues abounded, this was specially important. Paul himself possessed this gift more than any other, and outside the assembly he no doubt exercised this gift freely, nevertheless *in the assembly* he would rather speak five words with the understanding, than ten thousand with a tongue. Why? Because edification was the end in view. This is a point that should not be overlooked. The speakers of five words are not often heard. Some hold back fearing that they will not be able to speak long enough; others go on far too long. We are persuaded that many a brother, if feeding on the Word, and

living near the Lord, might lift up the hearts of the saints, and be a channel of much blessing in these days of weakness, by just the utterance of a sentence or two.

Let every brother who does speak in the assembly take heed to the clause "words easy to be understood" (ver. 9), for we are convinced that much of the speaking lacks its edifying character from the simple fact that it entirely goes over the heads of the hearers.

Further, every brother should come feeling his responsibility in connection with the assembly. We fear that oftentimes many come as mere onlookers. This should not be. "When ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine," &c. (ver. 26). They were not reprov'd for this; it was the normal state of the assembly; liberty for every one. Yet is it not the case that there are many brothers whose lips never move in audible prayer or praise in the assembly? This should not be. May the Lord stir up His own to consider this. It does not follow that in every meeting every one should take part. What we feel is that some never take part, and their very silence is oftentimes a burden to the others.

In the early days things seem to have gone to the other extreme, and this had to be corrected. A limit was put to the number who should speak. Many more might pray or lead in praise, or with hymns, but the *speakers* should be confined

to two, or at the most three (vers. 27-32). Why? That all might learn, be comforted, and edified. For too many to speak at one meeting or to speak too long would not edify, and this was ever the thing to be sought.

For the same reason, two were not to speak at the same time. Evidently this sometimes took place. But this could not edify, and furthermore, it was confusion.

This brings us to the second great principle of our chapter—"Let all things be done decently and in order" (ver. 40). It is clear that if two or more were to speak or pray at the same time, confusion and not order would be the result. But suppose the Spirit of God led a second to speak while the first was still speaking, what then? "Let the first hold his peace" (ver. 30). The principles of the world are diametrically opposed to this rule. In the world the first speaker holds the right to continue, but in the assembly of God there is no such thing as the rights of man. What right have we to anything but judgment? In the assembly it is a question entirely of the Spirit of God.

Doubtless in the early days of the assembly here described, when the whole canon of Scripture was not complete, God revealed what was of importance for the whole assembly, communicating His mind in this special manner. Of course to-day this cannot be. The whole of God's mind has been revealed. No fresh revela-

tion can take place. Now it is the ministry of the Word already possessed.

But the same principle no doubt applies wherever the assembly gathers together. The speaking must be one by one ; and further it is limited to two or at the most three on each occasion of assembling.

Another limitation is now also added, which in these days of insubjection to the Word of God is becoming painfully ignored—"Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak ; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law" (ver. 34). No words could be more explicit.

The Spirit of God is here laying down instructions which were to regulate His own action "in all assemblies of the saints." A woman might possess a gift as well as a man, *e.g.*, the four daughters of Philip (Acts xxi. 9), but the mere fact of the possession of a gift did not entitle the possessor thereof to exercise it at all times and under all circumstances. We have already seen that there were occasions where a man was to hold his peace in the assembly ; the woman was not permitted to speak there at all. It is equally clear from 1 Timothy ii. 8-15 that a woman publicly preaching to a mixed audience of men and women is contrary to the Word of God.

It is vain to plead the fact that such service

has been blessed to the conversion of sinners. It is a simple matter of obedience to the Word of God. "What! came the Word of God out from you?" The Church does not teach in spite of what Rome claims. When God speaks, as He does in the Scripture, it is our wisdom, as well as our duty, to obey.

But when God speaks He speaks to all—"came it unto you only?" The instructions here given were not confined to the Corinthian assembly, but were for the guidance of every assembly of the saints at all times. These are the commandments of the Lord. If any pretended to being spiritual, let him prove his claim by submission to God's own voice, and let him acknowledge that these were not merely the opinions of an apostle, but the commandments of the Lord.

Never was there more need than to-day to insist on this principle. Christian men and women are loudly asserting that they are filled with the Holy Ghost; but does the Spirit fill any one to act in disobedience to the Word? To act otherwise than according to what is written is wilful disobedience or culpable ignorance.

In conclusion, we would earnestly commend to all our Christian readers a continued and prayerful study of this chapter. We here find a full and detailed account of that kind of meeting peculiar to Christianity. When the assembly of God assembles as such, 1 Corinthians xiv.

instructs us as to how the service should be conducted.

1. No clergyman, minister, or president.
2. Liberty of the Spirit to use whom He will in worship, prayer, or exhortation and doctrine.
3. Edification of the assembly, and not display of the speaker, to be the one object of the ministry.
4. Subjection in all things to the revealed will of God.

How seldom are such meetings held. Never, we may say, are they found amongst the so-called churches of the day; how seldom even amongst those who are seeking to act according to the truth of the Church as found in Scripture. Meetings for preaching the gospel, meetings for lectures to the people of God, and meetings for reading the Scripture abound, all most important and needful in their varied uses. We need them all, and should value them highly, but do not let us lose that kind of meeting which above all others should be found amongst us. In days of confusion and ruin like these, days when the gifts are scattered by reason of our failure and sin, it is still the privilege of the saints to assemble as the chapter we have been considering directs. Even though none of the gifts may be present, God will be there "among you of a truth."

Much more blessing will be experienced in coming together in this way than by setting up

one to speak or preach who is not gifted nor called to such work by God.

Let none suppose that we would weaken the sense of the responsibility to preach the Word where the gift exists; but all are not called to preach, whereas the whole Church is called to come together for worship, prayer, and edification. And if in days of ruin like these, the whole Church in any particular locality never does so, yet may the few who desire to be guided by the Word of God do so, taking care not to assume any exclusive claim to being the assembly of God, nor to exclude any saints sound in doctrine and godly in walk.



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