

. THE .
Lordship of Christ.

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THE LORDSHIP OF CHRIST.

IN ITS RELATION TO THE BELIEVER AND THE CHURCH.

SATAN is presented to us in the Scripture as a usurper; he holds authority in this world to which he has no right or title. When God at first created the world there was no ruler but Himself, but when Adam was formed and set on the earth, he was put in authority, he had "dominion" (Gen. i. 26) given unto him. When Adam fell by disobeying God, he lost this authority; it fell into the hands of his deceiver to whom he had yielded, and Satan became "the prince of this world" (John xvi. 36), "the prince (or ruler) of the power of the air" (Eph. ii. 2). It is needful to keep this solemn fact before us, while seeking to learn from the Word of God the present place of authority which has been given to the Lord Jesus, so that we may own and honour Him as Lord. Satan holds authority, a real and powerful dominion over men and things, but it is the authority of a usurper, it is not his by right but by robbery. At the Cross, the Lord Jesus triumphed over the usurper, and won back that authority which Satan had so wickedly stolen. Let us turn to two Scriptures which speak to us of this. First in Gen. iii. 15, we hear God speaking to Satan, at the very time he had obtained his authority

by causing Adam and Eve to rebel against the will of God and yield obedience to him, telling him in the hour of what seemed to be his victory, that the Woman's Seed would bruise his head, and rob him of his authority. This was fulfilled at the Cross. There the Lord Jesus not only yielded Himself up to God, becoming perfectly obedient even unto death, putting away sin by His sacrifice, but through death that He "might destroy him that had the power of death that is the devil" (Heb. ii. 14). The word here rendered "destroy" means "to take away the power" of, and is elsewhere translated "loosed" (Rom. vii. 2), so that its bonds no longer hold its captives, because their power is taken away. Thus by the Cross, the usurper had his authority taken from him, and restored to God. Then we are told in Matthew xxviii. 19, that when the Lord Jesus had risen from the dead, he claimed that "All authority in heaven and on earth" had been committed unto Him. He is not yet exercising all this authority, nor claiming all the dominion which by right belongs to Him (Psa. ii. 8), and which He will one day exercise (Psa. lxxii. 8-11). Throughout this dispensation of grace, He is patiently waiting, until a people has been called out from the world by the preaching of the Gospel, to own His Lordship and to become His disciples.

SAVED TO OWN HIS LORDSHIP.

Salvation, as it is presented in the Word, therefore, is not only a deliverance from hell and from the penalty and power of sin, but from the authority of Satan (Acts xxvi. 16) to God, and from the dominion of

the ruler of darkness, into the kingdom of the Son of God's love (Col. i. 13). We have a type of this in the redemption and deliverance of Israel, set free from Pharaoh's bondage to own the rule and do the will of Jehovah (Exod. xix. 4-6; Psa. cxiv. 1-2). And in their case, as in ours, the Deliverer became the Ruler, who spake to them with authority from God (see Acts vii. 35-37). This side of the Gospel is often forgotten, yet it is clearly taught in the Word. At the close of Mark's Gospel, in which the Lord is presented as the Servant, the commission is, that the Gospel he preached to every creature, and the result to those believing, is salvation; while in Matthew's Gospel, in which He is presented as King and Ruler, with "all authority" given unto Him, the commission is to "make disciples," baptising and "teaching them to observe all things" whatsoever the Lord has commanded. They are saved to own His Lordship and obey His will in all things. Not in some things, or in such as they approve of and choose from among the others, but in "all things" whatsoever He has commanded. This is how we are to own His Lordship. Not by saying "Lord, Lord" with our lips, yet refusing to do the things He bids us (Luke vi. 46). What is true of the saved individual, must also of necessity be true of such in their assembled capacity, when gathered together to own His claims as set over the House of God down here (Heb. iii. 1-6). In giving effect to this, we need to be exercised before God, lest we give countenance to or have fellowship with anything that would disown His authority or set aside His commandments. The

“all authority” of the Lord Jesus is expressed in the “all things whatsoever He has commanded.” There must be no compromise, no leaving out of some of these, because we do not like them, or think them applicable to us, or because some of those with whom we wish to maintain friendship would be offended at our obedience to them. This brings to mind a word which we sometimes hear used regarding those who become misled by error—that is the word “heretic.” Its meaning in the Greek language is the common everyday word for one who “chooses,” who makes choice for himself and takes his own way. It has no reference to one who abandons “the faith” and drifts into open, palpable error, but is used to describe one who picks and chooses for himself, such parts of the Lord’s commandments as he thinks fit, associating others with him in his choice. This is how sects are formed, and how all divisions originated. To do only such things as we approve of, because we like to do them, is not obedience, it is self-will, and practically is a disowning of the “all authority” which God has given to His Son. But some may ask—Do you take the place of saying you know and keep all the Lord’s commandments? No, we do not say so, for we only know in part. There may be things in the Word of God which we have not yet learned, and therefore do not obey, but if any one comes to us with an open Bible and shows us such things, we would welcome his help and seek at once to give effect to that which the Lord has commanded to be done. This is what the denominations will not permit. They have their Creeds,

their Confessions of Faith, and their Church Standards. You may do whatever they have included in them of the commandments of the Lord, but you must not go beyond that. This is why it is so serious a thing to be openly identified with any system which sets aside those commandments of the Lord, which are the expression of His supreme authority, to the acknowledgment of which all who have become his disciples are called.

THE LORDSHIP OF CHRIST IN THE ASSEMBLY.

It is a matter of surprise with many, that the New Testament Scriptures do not contain a more elaborate scheme of church government than they find there. The very absence of what they would expect to find is pleaded as a justification for introducing all sorts of arrangements suggested by human prudence and wisdom. But all this only betrays that the place God has given to His Son is very little understood. When the Apostle Paul is about to enter upon the question of spiritual gifts and their exercise in the church, his starting point is, that we must have right thoughts about the place and authority of the Lord Jesus (see 1 Cor. xii. 1-3). Do we put Him in the place of the Accursed One, or do we own Him as THE LORD. On the cross He was the accursed One, for He bore our sins and all the curse that belonged to them. But, raised from the dead, God has declared Him to be "both Lord and Christ" (Acts ii. 36). And He Himself claims all authority in heaven and on earth (Matt. xxviii. 18-20 R.V.). It seems startling to be asked—"Do you call Jesus 'anathema' (accursed) or do you call Him LORD?" We should feel inclined to answer,

with something like indignation, that, of course, we call Him Lord. But while we say so in words, and think we know what we are saying, we are bidden to pause and consider that no man can say so in reality, "but by the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor xii 3). This twelfth chapter tells us much of the character of the various gifts, and how they are set in the body, all being made mutually needful to one another. Chapter xiii. reminds of the love in which they must needs be exercised, if they are not to become utterly worthless; while chapter xiv. goes on to show us these gifts in active exercise, and to give many important instructions in relation to ministry in the assembly. But as it all started with the absolute need of owning Jesus as the Lord, so it concludes with this solemn appeal—"What! came the word of God *out from you*, or came it *unto you only*?" (chap. xiv. 36). If you were the authors of it, of course you are at liberty to alter it or set it aside for something better. But, if it came *to you*, and not *from you*, then your place is that of unquestioning obedience. "If any man think himself to be a prophet or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord" (verse 37). And yet, sad to say, these are the very things that the professing denominations of Christendom have, with one consent, set aside as unsuitable for this day. The idea of voting for, or choosing ministers by majorities, or having them appointed by men, is entirely foreign to the Word of God, and virtually a denial of that place to which the Lord Jesus has been raised at the right hand of God, from which He gives

gifts to men for the spread of the Gospel in the world, and for the shepherding and teaching of His saints all through the ages. The Giver of all these gifts of ministry is the Lord Jesus, and there is no room for man or for the Church to intervene. Yet both have done so, and continue to rob the Lord of that honour which has been given to Him alone. It does not matter whether it is the Pope, claiming infallibility, or the Primate or Bishop exercising clerical domination over saints of God, or the Church choosing by vote its own ministers, the whole is a denial of the supreme authority of the Lord Jesus, and the all-sufficiency of His power to provide all that His people need throughout the entire period of their earthly course. It was when the Church ceased to count upon the Lord to supply all that was needed in ministry, when unbelief limited His power to raise up and furnish those whom He saw needful to shepherd and teach His people, and when men became self-willed and wise in their own conceits, that they turned from the Divine pattern as given in the Word, and began to order things according to their own desires and inclinations. Baptism was made a sacrament, requiring a minister to perform it, although not a word is said in Scripture of such a practice, not even the name of the baptiser has been given in any case except one, that is the case of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch when only two were present (Acts viii. 38). The Lord's Supper was soon altered from the simple gathering together of the assembly to "break bread" (Acts xx. 7) to a "Eucharist" or an "Ordinance," which required the presence of a priest

or clergyman to "celebrate" or "administer" it, bringing in that which is entirely foreign to the Word of God, and which sets aside the authority of the Lord as set over the house of God. The order of the assembly, as given in 1 Corinthians xiv., is by common consent of all the denominations, set aside as being no longer suitable for this enlightened age, each having adopted its own alterations or improvements, until scarcely a trace of the original pattern remains. Yet these very instructions, as given by the apostle, are here said to have all the authority of being "the COMMANDMENTS OF THE LORD" (1 Cor. xiv. 37). For any to set them aside, or to be openly identified with any system in which they are ignored or rendered inoperative, is to take sides with those who deny to the Lord the place of Lordship to which God has called Him.

But it may be asked—How are we to carry out these instructions now that there are no apostles, and no miraculous gifts as there were in the early church? The answer is, the Lord Himself who gives these commandments to His gathered people, is Himself "in the midst," and has promised to give His people power to give effect to all that He has commanded them to do. The beginning of all the grievous departure which we see around us in Christendom to-day was unbelief, and the way of restoration must be in a return to the Lord Himself, and faith in His love and faithfulness in supplying all that He has promised to His obedient people.

When an anxious soul is afraid to believe the wondrous good news of the Gospel that we are setting

before him, for fear he should not be able to hold on afterwards, do we not tell him that the Lord Jesus is a living Person, with power to save to the uttermost all that come unto God by Him? Christ crucified is a stumbling-block to the would-be religious ones, and foolishness to the would-be wise ones, but to those who believe, He is the power of God and the wisdom of God. But it is just the same with regard to the exalted Christ, and His place in His Church. Unless we are taught by the Holy Spirit to own Him as Lord, and to count upon Him for everything we need, we are sure to be looking to some human device to supply the place that God intends to be filled by His Son. The one place, therefore, for those who have thus learned of God to honour His Son, is where two or three are gathered unto His Name. They may be very ignorant; they may be making many mistakes; but they are gathered around Himself that He may teach them, shepherd them, guide them, correct them, and be their all in all. But there cannot be real dependence unless there is equally real subjection. Faith and obedience ever go hand in hand, and each helps to increase the other. Faith never says, "Oh, that will not do nowadays; things are so different now," for it hears the Lord Jesus saying, "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the age." And as long as He keeps His promise, there should be no difficulty about our observing all things whatsoever He has commanded. Unconsciously we allow our unbelief to rob Christ of His place, because we dare not trust Him to fulfil what He has promised.

POWER TO CARRY OUT HIS WILL.

Some time since, when travelling by rail, we were thrown into the company of a clergyman of the Establishment. We soon found him to be a simple child of God, and we enjoyed some happy intercourse together. In the course of conversation, he made the following remark: "I never try to drive people to church. I often say to my parishioners that they should do about spiritual things as they do about their groceries—go where they get the best served. If the Methodist parson does them more good than I do, let them go to him by all means." We replied that, while that was certainly very liberal from his point of view, yet it appeared to us to be very wrong. "If what you are doing at church," we said, "is what the Lord has commanded, then they ought all to be there, if they are God's children. But if it is contrary to Scripture, then, however much they might like it, neither you nor they have any business there." "Oh," he said, "I do not think God has given us any direct instructions as to such things. I believe He leaves us considerable liberty to follow what we find most suitable to our own particular case, and that we are quite justified in choosing accordingly." We told him that, on the contrary, we found the Word of God just as explicit about these things as it is with regard to the way a sinner must be saved. "I should like you very much to show me where" was his answer; and most willingly we took out our Bible and turned from passage to passage. We saw how those who gladly received the Gospel were baptised, and how they con-

tinued stedfastly in the doctrine of the apostles, and in the fellowship, and in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers (Acts ii. 41, 42) ; how the disciples came together on the first day of the week to break bread (Acts xx. 7) ; how, when the saints were gathered together, all might prophesy one by one, that all might learn and all might be comforted, and yet that all must be subject one to another (1 Cor. xiv. 31, 32) ; how elder ones in each assembly were to feed the flock and take the oversight thereof, looking for their reward when the Chief Shepherd shall appear (1 Peter v. 1-4), and much more. At last, as our journey was drawing to a close, he said, " I have been deeply interested in all you have been saying. It is very beautiful ; indeed, as a theory, it looks perfect, but it seems to me that in practice it would need some sort of supernatural power to make it work." " Undoubtedly," we replied, " that is just what it does want ; and what do you suppose the Holy Ghost was given for ?" " Oh," he replied in astonishment, " I never thought of that." This incident made a deep impression on us at the time, and that impression has never been weakened since. We are persuaded that all the variety of systems which divide the professing church, can be traced to the fact that Jesus, as the Lord in the midst, with authority and power, is not discerned. The presence of the Holy Spirit down here, " dividing to every man severally as He will " (1 Cor. xii. 11), is the direct consequence of the exalting of the Lord Jesus (Acts ii. 33 ; Eph. iv. 8, etc.). We own Him as the Lord, when we are willing to gather in simplicity around Himself, and to count on

Him, by the Holy Spirit, to minister to all our needs. When we adopt some other plan, we practically put Him back into the place of the curse; for, in refusing to own the consequences of His ascending up, far above all things, we, in effect, deny Him His place, for "No man can say that Jesus is the Lord but by the Holy Ghost."

THE SPIRIT INDWELLING AND OWNED.

In regard to the order of God as given for the assemblies of His saints, God's way is a perfect way, but our carrying out of the way of God may be imperfect, and it is these two things that are so often confounded. Perhaps the difference is more readily understood in connection with the individual believer. Each believer is indwelt by the Holy Spirit. "What! know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost, which is in you?" (1 Cor. vi. 19). And the indwelling Spirit teaches and guides those in whom He dwells. "As many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God" (Rom. viii. 14). "When He, the Spirit of truth is come, He will guide you into all truth" (John xvi. 13). That is God's perfect way for each of His redeemed ones. But what should we think of a Christian who said, "I cannot do wrong or make a mistake. What I say is the utterance of the Holy Spirit, for He dwells in me, and leads me into all truth?" We find no difficulty here in distinguishing between the perfection of God's provision, and the imperfect use we make of it. And it is exactly the same, whether we consider the individual saint or the assembly. If a believer is giving way to jesting and unseemly conversation, we do not say that,

because the Spirit of God dwells in him, this foolish talking is dictated by the Spirit ; neither do we say that it is evidently untrue that God's Spirit dwells in him, or he could not speak thus. But we do point out to him, that just because the Spirit dwells in him, such ways are wholly unbecoming, and we exhort him to walk worthy of the calling he is called with. Apply all this to the assembly of saints. In 1 Cor. xii. the apostle is speaking to the Corinthian believers as to spiritual gifts and their exercises, and he says (ver. 7), "The manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal." And again, after mentioning various gifts of the Spirit (ver. 11), "But all these worketh that one and the self-same Spirit, dividing to every man severally as He will." In Eph. iv. we are carried back a little further, and are taught, that when the Lord Jesus went back to the right hand of God, He bestowed, and ever since, continues to bestow, gifts upon His church. In the twelfth and following verses, we learn what the object of these gifts is : "For the perfecting of the saints *unto* the work of ministering, unto the building up of the body of Christ " (see Rev. Ver.). This is God's perfect way, and just casts us upon Himself for everything. The Lord Jesus will indeed rule where He is truly owned, and His place is given to Him. The Holy Spirit will speak by one and another to the help and blessing of all, when He is ungrieved. When failure is manifest, do not let us blame God's way, and proclaim it to be an exploded theory; but let us rather humbly cast ourselves upon God Himself, who alone can make His own way work effectually.

NOTHING TO BE ALTERED.

We learned a valuable lesson from a Christian blacksmith lately. "My master," said he, "had given me detail drawings of some iron work he wanted made. The drawings showed all dimensions and other particulars; and I carefully looked over them before I began. Now, I reckon to understand my trade pretty well, and I saw two or three points where I thought I could improve on the drawings, and accordingly, instead of working exactly to the instructions, I carried out my own thoughts, and expected to get praised for what I had done. Presently the master came and looked first at my work and then at the drawings. 'What is the meaning of these alterations?' said he, and of course I explained my ideas to him. 'But that will not do at all,' was his answer. 'When you get drawings you must work exactly to them, or else your work is no use.' I shall not forget the lesson in a hurry," added the brother; "it has set me thinking how the Lord will judge all our works by the same rule." Now may the Lord help every one of us to apply the lesson in like manner. The longer the time since the Lord first gave His instructions, the greater the danger that His servants will begin to think they need not keep so very close to them. On all sides we hear it said, "O yes, but things were very different then. Circumstances are so changed since the apostles' days; and we could not carry things out now just as they commanded." Is this an argument we ought to listen to? Or does the lapse of time make no difference as to the obedience He expects from us? Notice par-

ticularly what He puts before and after the instructions. He gives in Matt. xviii. 20 two precious words about Himself. First He says, "*All authority* hath been given unto Me in heaven and on earth." All the time He occupied the servant's place, He never spoke His own words, or did His own works, but was obedient in all things to the Father who had sent Him. But now he is declared to be the Son of God, with power, by the resurrection from the dead ; and He claims the authority that the Father has given to Him. And then He finishes with the blessed promise, "And lo, I am with you *always*, even unto the end of the world (age)." Now we want to look upon all His commandments as shut in between these two declarations about Himself. We need to see that we cannot tamper with one of them, we cannot alter or set aside the least part of what He taught those eleven to teach us, without lessening His authority. And when we are inclined to talk about "altered circumstances" as a reason for not carefully carrying out all His commandments, we need to be reminded that we are robbing ourselves of the power of His promise, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end." If His authority is unchanged, and He Himself remains with us to the end, surely he looks for the same obedience now as at the first. And, if every day is taking us further from the time when He gave us His commandments, do not let us forget that every day is bringing us nearer to His coming back again. Our every-day obedience, just like our eating of the bread and drinking of the cup, should show the Lord's death till He come. So when we are

tempted to let this thing slip or alter that, the answer of our hearts would ever be : “ He came to die for me ; He is coming again to take me to Himself ;” and the simplicity of our obedience would declare how reverently we own His authority, and how joyfully we wait for His appearing.

The Authority Belonging to the Name of the Lord Jesus.

I WOULD seek by the help to God to speak a little of one great truth set before us, namely, "The authority belonging to the Name of the Lord Jesus, in connection with the preaching of that Name to the world, and the place that He occupies in the assembly." In this connection I will ask you to turn with me to two passages of Scripture. The first is Matt. xvi. 13-19. Peter having made the confession, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God," the Lord said to him, "Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build My Church." Peter, in his confession, acknowledges God's great Rock-foundation, that never can be shaken, upon which all the purposes of God are to be established. The Lord, on the other hand, speaking of the Church, which He is about to form, as a building, declares that all those who are to be built upon that foundation, must have something in common with the foundation; they must be partakers of the Divine nature. "Peter" in Greek is *Petros*, and "rock" is *Petra*. When the Lord says, "Thou art *Petros*, and upon this *Petra* I will build My

Church," He is saying in effect, "Thou art a Rock-man," one who has the same nature as the Rock. And to whomsoever it is given by the Father to know Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, such an one becomes a Rock-man, a living stone, possessed of the same life and the same nature as Christ Himself."

We know that Romanists have misintrepreted these words of Christ, by making them to mean that Peter is the foundation upon which the Church is being built. The best answer to this delusion is to be found in the Spirit's commentary on the passage, by the pen of this same Peter. Turn to 1 Peter ii. 3,4—"If so be ye have tasted that the Lord is gracious. To whom coming, as unto a living stone, disallowed indeed of men, but chosen of God, and precious, ye also, as living stones, are built up a spiritual house." Does Peter suggest here that he is the stone, or that anybody was to be built upon himself? He is but one of the living stones, and every one who is taught of God that Jesus is the Christ, is a partaker of the Divine nature which belongs to Him, who is at the same time the Sure Foundation and the Chief Corner-stone.

Now let us turn back to Matt. xvi. 19, "And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be, having, been, bound in heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be, having been, loosed in heaven" (ver. 19). This is the rendering of the verse as given by Dr. Young in his translation of the Scriptures, and I believe it to be the undoubtedly correct one.

You will observe the difference between it and the rendering of the Authorised Version. This latter gives us the idea that the binding on earth *precedes* the binding in heaven ; while the former teaches us that God binds in heaven first, and that, as the one who is taught of God to declare His mind speaks in accordance with that which has been already registered in heaven, what he says shall stand fast.

THE KEYS OF THE KINGDOM.

What, then, are we to understand that the Lord meant by these solemn and remarkable words which he addressed to Peter ? Was He bestowing some special power upon him, such as the " Church of Rome " declares to have come down to her by direct apostolic succession ? Was He entrusting Peter with the power to forgive sins, or to keep people in their sins ? Let Peter himself again answer the question. Turn to Acts xv. We have it here recorded that a council of the apostles and elders was held at Jerusalem to consider a matter brought before them. Certain Pharisees had been down to Antioch wishing to compel the Gentile converts to be circumcised and to keep the law ; and Paul and Barnabas had been sent up from Antioch to Jerusalem to confer with the apostles and elders about this matter. In verses 7-11, we find Peter speaking on this question. Does he claim some special power of " binding and loosing " individuals by the exercise of his own authority ? Nothing of the sort. Here is what Peter understood by Christ's entrusting him with the keys of the kingdom of heaven : " Men and brethren," he says, " ye know how

that a good while ago, God made choice among us, that the Gentiles through my mouth should hear the word of the Gospel, and believe. And God, which knoweth the hearts, bear them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as He did unto us ; and put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith." Peter once again rehearses what he had already declared before the apostles and elders at Jerusalem in chapter xi. He had been justifying himself on that occasion for having eaten with the Gentiles, and his justification was, that God had bestowed the Holy Spirit upon them that believed ; and who was he, that he should withstand God by refusing to have fellowship with them ? And now Peter appeals to the same thing again, to remind those to whom he was speaking, that God had put no difference between the apostles themselves and these believing Gentiles. He does not even say, " We believe that *they* shall be saved even as *we*," but, " We shall be saved even as *they*." Such was Peter's understanding of this matter, and it exactly explains to us what was meant by the " binding and loosing," and by " the keys of the kingdom of heaven " being committed to Peter as in Matt. xvi. 19.

When Peter first preached the Gospel to Jews, on the day of Pentecost, at Jerusalem, and to Gentiles, in the house of Cornelius, God was simply using his mouth that men might hear and believe. But, none the less, when Peter declared that the sinner who trusted in Jesus was delivered from condemnation, his word of loosing or deliverance would be made good, for it agreed with that

which was settled in heaven. In like manner, if he declared that the Christ-rejecter was condemned already, the word must equally stand fast, being in accordance with the Divine decree. And all this holds good with us also when we preach the Gospel. It is an individual thing. It was not addressed to the disciples collectively, but to Peter as an individual, yet it did not belong to Peter exclusively, but followed on his individual confession of Christ and his individual proclamation of the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ to others. In exactly the same way, it belongs to each one who, being taught of God, confesses Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God. Such an one is, therefore, a Rock-man, built upon the Divine foundation ; and when he witnesses to others about the Christ, according to the Divine teaching, he becomes again what Peter was in that day, one binding and loosing according to the Divine decree. Men may say to us, " I don't believe in salvation in your easy way." But, none the less, according to their acceptance or rejection of the Christ whom we preach to them, they shall be loosed from the bonds of sin and judgment, or held fast in them for ever.

THE CHURCH LOCALLY.

Turn now to Matt. xviii. 15. I would ask you to notice here, how the subject being dealt with, is commenced from the opposite end to that at which the Lord commenced in the other matter in chapter xvi. There He began with that which was true of Himself, and from that all the rest proceeded. He said, " Upon

this rock I will build My Church ;” and then He went on to show how that building should be carried on, through the witness of those who had been taught of God, which witness should be accompanied with His power. But in this 18th chapter, He begins at the other end. Starting with a personal matter between two brethren, He shows those brethren to be part of a company or association having responsibility concerning one another, and having instructed them how to carry out certain steps belonging to that responsibility He leads up to the fact that their association is all founded upon Himself, and that His authority accompanies the steps taken, and He calls that company of believers by the same name of “ Church ” that He had before applied to the whole building which He had said that He would build. Now, there is manifestly a distinction between those two aspects of the Church. When Christ says, “ Tell it unto the Church,” He does not mean the Church as He spoke of it in chapter xvi. 18 ; we cannot tell anything to *that* Church. It is very plain that a brother in a difficulty cannot tell it to the Church of the whole period which began at Pentecost, and will only be completed when the Lord comes. The Church in chap. xviii. is something well known, well defined, something about which the parties here concerned are in no doubt, something that can be reached by individuals. Now, my object in turning to this Scripture is, to point out what is the character of the Church here spoken of, as compared with the aspect of the Church brought before us in Matthew xvi. 18, but I must pause a moment to

ask you to consider the words of the 15th verse : " Moreover, if thy brother trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone ; and if he hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother." Is it not true that there is scarcely any instruction in all the Divine record, that we need to have more deeply impressed upon us, than that contained in these exceedingly familiar words ? Alas ! how much of sorrow, of heart-burning, of division and strife, might have been saved, if we had acted out both the letter and the *spirit* of these instructions on all occasions. If I have dared to speak to others about my brother's fault before going to him, I have in great measure unfitted myself for that which is in the heart of God, the gaining of my brother ; and I have put myself out of fellowship with God about this purpose of His. I shall need, therefore, to judge myself about my own sin, and to confess it to God, before I venture to go, at the bidding of the Lord Jesus, to seek to gain my erring brother.

THE POWER OF DISCIPLINE.

Now read verses 17 and 18 : " . . . If he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the Church : but if he neglect to hear the Church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican. Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth, shall be, having been bound in heaven ; and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth, shall be, having been loosed in heaven " (Young's Translation). The grammatical construction is the same here as in chapter xvi. 19, and then immediately follows

verse 20—"For where two or three are gathered together unto My name, there am I in the midst of them." And thus, beginning from the other end, the Lord brings us back exactly to the point at which He started, in Matt. xvi. 13-19. He Himself, that which He is, is the sole foundation, the one only source of power and authority in the one case exactly as in the other; and our relationship in both cases is exactly the same. Here, as in Matt. xvi. 19, the binding and loosing is done in the Name and by the authority of the Lord Jesus. Though the matter began with a personal trespass between two believers, it passed beyond the control of the individual, when, having taken the one or two more with him, and having failed in gaining his offending brother, he now has to tell it to the Church, that they may unitedly, in responsibility to the Lord, and in the authority of His Name, act according to His command about it.

The basis of the entire subject is in these words, "For where two or three are gathered together unto My Name, there am I in the midst of them" (verse 20). Very much occurs to the mind in regard to this deeply momentous statement. First, I would point out the intimate connection between the power and authority as to binding and loosing in this passage and in the other (chapter xvi.). I think we saw distinctly in the former case that, upon Peter's confession that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the Living God, a special power and authority were declared to be attached to his words of binding and loosing. As long as Peter gave utterance to that which God had revealed to him,

to all the truth that circled round the great fact that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the Living God, he might count upon his words being upheld and maintained by that Living God. All the powers of earth might be arrayed against his word ; but when the day of account comes, it will be found that Peter's words, spoken in accordance with the Divine teaching, will be ratified by the eternal binding and loosing in heaven. But only so far as they agreed with that teaching, and no further. In the same way the Lord has given power to the assembly to act in His Name in carrying out His will, but He has given no power to a church to pass an arbitrary sentence of their own, and then to claim that all are bound to act upon it because they have done it. For that reason I press the importance of the exact rendering of the words which makes the binding in heaven to precede the binding upon earth. An assembly will sometimes go altogether beyond the Word of the Lord, in order to get rid of some troublesome brother ; and, having done so, they will say, " We were gathered together in the Name of the Lord, we have bound on earth, and therefore it is bound in heaven, and you must all own and submit to it." There is no warrant for such a saying as this. We need to discern the mind of the Lord, and to be guided by the Word of God alone. We must act only upon the clear and unmistakable instructions of that Word. And more than this ; we need to have one mind from God about it. It is not enough to have the united voice of the overseers of the assembly ; as a matter of fact, they are not mentioned

in this chapter. In saying this, however, I am not in any way suggesting that they or their judgment should be ignored. Overseers should always first take the initiative; and, having come to a united judgment themselves, they should seek to lead the whole Church according to the Word of God. But it is the Church, and not the overseers, who are to bind or loose. The Lord says, "Tell it unto *the Church*; and, if he will not hear the Church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican." So it is the action and sentence of the Church as a whole, to which these words are attached, "Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth, shall be, having been bound in heaven." Why is such tremendous weight attached to this action? We get the answer in verse 20, which gives us the foundation upon which the whole passage, from the beginning, stands. The Lord, speaking in anticipation of the time when these disciples would be associated together as the Church of God, is leading them to see the meaning and character of this association. And what does it mean? Simply this, that all power and authority there belong to the Lord Jesus. And because this is so, therefore wherever two or three even, are gathered together unto His Name, He is in the midst of them, and will give his weight and authority to that which they do in His Name and according to His commandment. It is under these conditions, and only these, that the Lord pronounces the declaration as to their binding and loosing. What they thus bind or loose on earth "shall be," it shall stand, "having been bound or loosed in

heaven." This affords no room for man to exalt himself, and talk of power and authority being given to him. The Church is not only carrying out the will of the Lord Jesus, but it is bearing witness to the fact that it is His power and His authority that alone can make effectual that which they do in His Name.

OVERSEERS : THEIR PLACE AND WORK.

A word may be useful here as to the function of overseers in connection with the action of the assembly. They bear a considerable resemblance to the relationship which exists between a judge and a jury. After the witnesses have been heard, the judge marshals the facts together, calls attention to the salient points in the evidence, and shows the bearing of the law upon the facts. Having done this, he leaves the jury to come to a decision in the matter, for they alone can deliver the verdict. Now what is it that gives their verdict its authority? The jury, as individuals, are nothing more than other men; there is no special power vested in them to do anything at all. But gathered together in that jury box, and having taken the oath, they represent the majesty of the throne of Great Britain, and the whole power and authority of that throne attach to their verdict. The comparison is only an imperfect one, and must not be strained, but it has its value. Overseeing brethren, as guides in the assembly, should be able to sift facts and evidence, and to bring these facts in a clear way before the assembly. They should also be able to bring the teaching of the Word to bear upon the facts,

and to show what that Word commands to be done. But having done this, having indicated the action that ought to be taken by the Church as a whole, they can go no further as overseers. In the actual giving effect to the Lord's commandment, they are simply a part of the Church, and in fellowship with the whole Church, they carry out the will of the Lord. Thus, the sentence of the assembly, carried out according to the Word of God, and in subjection to the commandment of the Lord Jesus, becomes in reality His sentence. It all falls back upon that Word, "There am I in the midst."

It has sometimes been alleged that too much has been made of this section of Matthew xviii., and that verse 19 shows that it is only a coming together of one or two for prayer that the Lord is speaking about, when, in verse 20, He declares that He is in the midst. A little more care in examining the exact words which the Lord spoke, will show that this objection is an entirely mistaken one. Verse 19, is plainly parenthetical. Verse 18 says, "Whatsoever *ye* shall bind," &c., and is addressed to them as a whole, in the church character of verse 17. Verse 20 again speaks of the whole company, though that company should consist of but two or three. But verse 19 is addressed to a part only of the whole. "If two of you shall agree . . . it shall be done *for them.*" Not, "If you shall agree, it shall be done *for you.*" This difference is significant, and leads to a most blessed truth. When once the brother who had been sinned against, has put the matter into the hands of the Church, he is debarred from taking individual action

any further. At the first, it was his privilege and responsibility alike, to endeavour to win his brother, and even when he had taken the one or two more with him, he might still hope, with their help, to attain his blessed object. Now, however, the circumstances are changed, and the separate action of one or two is no longer permissible. Is there an end, then, to the special privilege and responsibility of those who had taken the earlier steps? No, indeed. They may, and should, recognise that, in a very special sense, the grief of the offender's sin, and of the consequent action of the Church, is a matter for their continued prayers. And the Lord graciously interposes with a special and most encouraging promise at this point, doubtless for the special help of those who would bear the burden of church sorrows before God. But, as has been already shown, this is quite distinct from the "whatsoever ye shall bind," which precedes it, and the where "two or three are gathered together unto My name," which follows it.

TWO ASPECTS OF THE CHURCH.

When we were considering, the first two mentions of the word "church," as used by the Lord Jesus in Matthew xvi. and xviii., we then saw that the one had reference to an entire building, which is being carried on right through the dispensation by the preaching of the Gospel; while the other was connected with the gathering together of saints unto the Name of the Lord Jesus, in such a fellowship and unity that even here they

should, in every place, become a dwelling-place for God Himself, until presently the whole building is complete. In connection with each of these aspects of the Church, we saw that the Lord repeats the self-same declaration as to the authority, the binding and loosing, that shall attach to the words and acts of those who carry out His bidding.

Let us now turn to Ephesians ii. 19 to 22, and we shall get further light as to the two aspects of the Church which we have been considering. "Now ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow-citizens with the saints, and of the household of God; and are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets (the word 'foundation' is not used here in the sense of the rock, but of the first tier of stones, the foundation stones, laid upon the rock), Jesus Christ Himself being the chief corner stone." Notice what we have got up to this point. Those who had been Gentiles, far off from God, and completely separated from Israel, who, as to their natural position, are said to be near to God, have now been brought nigh. The middle wall of partition has been broken down, and they are in exactly the same position as believing Jews. Together they have been built upon God's foundation. This much we know, but as to the character of that building nothing has yet been said. Let us read on. "In whom (that is, in Christ Jesus) an entire building"—I prefer to use this literal translation, because much stress has been laid on the fact that in the original there is no definite article. The Revisers, for this reason, have rendered it "each several

building." But the absence of the article does not by any means call for such a rendering, which, in fact, destroys the meaning of the passage ; for "each several building" does not grow (increase) into a holy temple. The apostle does not say "*the* whole building," because he has not yet told us that there is a building, in the sense of an enclosed and complete structure. All the preceding passage might be true of a wall only. But now he says that what is being wrought is a complete building, which is being fitly framed together of continually added parts, and so is growing up into a holy temple in the Lord. This temple is manifestly the completed whole, not yet to be seen by human eyes, but ever before the mind of God.

But there is still something more to be declared. Let us read on. Verse 22—"In whom ye also are builded together." The "ye also" refers to those to whom the apostle is writing, the saints at Ephesus. And if to Ephesian saints, therefore to saints everywhere gathered unto the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ ; saints everywhere who own that name, and are being builded together in accordance with God's purpose concerning His Son. Saints not thus builded together cannot be unitedly and collectively an habitation for God through the Spirit. It is quite true of every saint that his own body is the temple of the Living God, who by the Holy Spirit dwells in him. That is true from the moment we believe ; but it cannot be said of every company or association of believers, apart from their obedience in carrying out the commandments of the Lord, that they unitedly form an

habitation for God through the Spirit. They must be builded together in order to be that.

We have here what corresponds with Matt. xvi. and xviii. In Matt. xvi., the Christ, the Son of God, says, "I will build My Church," It is all His own doing; nothing ever needs to be revised, for all is perfect from the beginning to the end, till the top stone be set upon it. In Matt. xviii. we have the other aspect of His Church. Here we see a little company of believers, with trouble and sorrow and sin still manifest amongst them, but with the same Son of God in the midst of them. And because He is in the midst, and because their gathering together unto His Name is the acknowledgment and expression of His authority as Lord, therefore they are accounted of God as a present habitation for Himself, so that they may be continually yielding Him a sweet foretaste of the time when the whole building shall be perfect and complete.

ASSEMBLIES OF GOD :

THEIR RELATION TO CHRIST AND TO EACH OTHER.

THERE are two dangers to which we are liable, in seeking to give effect to the will of God in things connected with His Church : the one is that of adding to or going beyond that which He has commanded, and the other is diminishing from or stopping short of His commandment. The outcome of the one is tradition, and of the other scepticism, particularly that unbelief so prevalent among those who profess to be God's people. Those two things interact the one upon the other, and each helps to produce its opposite. All the corruptions and divisions we see around us in Christendom are the outcome of those, and spring from the natural heart and mind insubject to the will of God. And let those who have through grace been taught something of the truth of separation to the Name of the Lord Jesus ever remember that the same danger remains, because the same heart is in us, which apart from the restraining grace of God will ever seek to produce the same results in our case, although it may be in different ways. A Scriptural position will not of itself exempt us from the need of constant watchfulness against this danger to

which we are ever liable, of adding to or diminishing from the commandments of the Lord, concerning His Church, and the place of supreme authority belonging to the Lord Jesus in all things connected therewith.

Now, when we turn to our present subject, "The Relationship of such Assemblies one to another," and their behaviour towards each other, the first thing that strikes us is the absence of anything of a parallel character to the declaration of Matt. xviii. 18, unto which reference has been made. God's silence should be of great weight with us; and the fact that God has nowhere repeated a third time, in a third application, these words, "Whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be, having been bound in heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be, having been loosed in heaven," should surely prepare us to find that in regard to the association of assemblies one with another there is nothing exactly corresponding to that which there is in the association of believers together as a church, as gathered unto the Name of the Lord Jesus, and owning His authority as Lord. I do not say that there is no sense in which the Lord is in the midst of His assemblies; I believe we shall find that there is. I do not say that there is no power for action; again, I believe we shall find that there is. But there is nothing of the definite, specific character, which we find in Matt. xviii. 18, in connection with an offending brother, or in 1 Cor. v., in connection with the fornicator, I was once asked to meet with a few of the so-called "Exclusive brethren" for conversation, and one matter that came up was this

very subject of the relationship of assemblies to one another, and the power and authority of a circle of assemblies to deal with one offending assembly in their midst. I asked them if they could show me in the Word of God, anything in this connection corresponding to the commandment in Matt. xviii., where the Church deals with an individual. The brother who was the leading spokesman replied, "Oh, some things are axiomatic, and don't need Scripture to prove them." An axiom is something that is self-evident. To say that anything in regard to the things of God is axiomatic, is to exalt human thought and reason above the Word of God. That at once settled the matter to my mind, and I felt that there was no use going on contending with one who could take such a position. We had no common ground to stand upon. I trust that to every one of us, in connection with the Word of God, nothing is axiomatic. We do not know the simplest things of God's verities apart from His revelation. At every point we have to fall back upon God's Word; and we must never attempt to rely upon our own natural perceptions.

In regard to the relation of churches, one with another, we get valuable instruction in the first three chapters of Revelation. But it is very distinct in character from anything which the Lord commands to be done in Matt. xvi. and xviii. It will perhaps be well to notice here, that some are ready to dismiss much of the plain teaching of Rev. ii. and iii., on the ground that the whole scene is described as a "mystery" or parable. But we must not forget that these churches were seven

existing assemblies. The apostle John was commanded by the Lord Jesus to send to these churches the messages with which he was entrusted. Not only was each church to receive its own message, but all that John received from the Lord, he was commanded to send to each church of the seven. In this way, the believers in each church would know not only the message sent to themselves, but also that which was sent to each of the other six. While I have not the smallest question that the whole thing does present to us a panoramic symbol of the history of Christendom from that time till now, yet this cannot for a moment take away the direct application of the words of the Lord Jesus to the church to which they were sent. His words were no less perfect guidance and instruction for them in their then circumstances because they have also a symbolic and prophetic application. In these seven churches we have presented to us, in mystery, a complete, entire thing, a picture of all the assemblies of God's gathered-out ones in the world. In Matt. xviii. we had the Lord Jesus in the midst of the individual church, and here we see Him in the midst of the churches. There is no visible link of connection between these churches. Their connection one with another is in every case through the Lord, and arises out of the relationship of each assembly to Him, who is in the midst as Lord, exercising authority and judgment.

AN ERRING ASSEMBLY.

Let us look at a few verses in these chapters which speak of action to be taken towards a sinning church.

First, in chapter ii. 5, we read—"Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick (lampstand) out of its place, except thou repent." You see the Lord Jesus does not say by what means this is to be done. If He is going to make use of any instrumentality, He does not indicate what the instrument is to be. He speaks of it as His own personal intervention; He says, "I will come and take thy candlestick out of its place, except thou repent." Then to the church in Pergamos He writes—"Repent; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth" (verse 16). He had just spoken of some in that church who held doctrines which He hated, and He does not simply command these persons to repent, He calls upon the whole church to repent; He holds them all unitedly responsible for the evil doctrine being in their midst. Yet His long-suffering is not exhausted, and while He says, "I will come unto *thee* quickly," He does not say, "I will fight against *thee*," but "I will fight against *them*." He will direct his first action against the persons who hold the doctrine, giving further opportunity for repentance to the disobedient church, who had delayed to deal with what was so hateful to Him.

Then again in chapter iii. 3, in writing to the church in Sardis, He says, "Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief." Here again it is the Lord's personal intervention.

Verse 16—"So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will (or rather 'I am about to') spue thee out of My mouth." You notice, in all these cases, that the Lord's call to the church is to repent, and failing in their repentance, He says, "I will come and remove thy candlestick;" "I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them;" "I am about to spue thee out of My mouth." Here, at any rate, there is no commandment regarding action to be taken by other churches.

Nevertheless there is something very remarkable and noteworthy, and that is, that to every one of these seven messages He adds these words, "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches." Not, "let him hear what the Spirit saith to him," or "to the Church;" but "let him hear what the Spirit saith to the *Churches*." So that while on the one hand we do not find instructions given to six churches to combine in taking away the candlestick from the seventh, on the other hand we find no warrant for indifference on the part of six as to what is going on in the seventh church. The word is, "He that hath an ear to hear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches." The whole of what the Lord spake to John was to be written, and sent to every one of the seven. If then the Lord is drawing aside the veil, and telling out that which He, who searches all hearts, discerns to be the condition of each church; and if He calls upon each to take heed to what He says to all the rest, what are we to learn from this? Certainly it affords no warrant for rash inter-

ference ; but just as certainly it gives no countenance to indifference as to the whole matter. If, when He says to one church, " Repent, or I will come and take away thy candlestick," surely every church should be deeply concerned : and by all the claims of love, of fellowship, of what they owe to the Name of the Lord Jesus, should they seek to be exercised before God as to any way in which He would have them to help on the work of repentance, and so avoid the solemn necessity that the Lord should come in judgment and remove the candlestick.

THE REMOVAL OF THE LAMPSTAND.

The taking away of the lampstand seems to be equivalent to the breaking up of the assembly, or the taking from it that which distinguishes it as an assembly of God, and this is a matter that is kept within the control of the Lord Jesus. We may, and should be so in fellowship with Him, as to perceive and own what He is doing, but He does not tell us to do it. The difference may seem slight to some, but a little consideration will show us that it is one thing for the Lord Jesus so to deal with an assembly, that all shall perceive that He has removed the lampstand, and quite another for Him to delegate authority to a number of assemblies to remove it. The joining together of any number of assemblies to cut off another assembly, is an act wholly without warrant from the Word of God. But, on the other hand, we are plainly taught that we ought to be in fellowship with the Lord as to His earlier action in

calling the offending assembly to repent, and also as to His subsequent removal of the lampstand where there is no repentance. And in all this there is to be not only fellowship between each separate assembly and the Lord, as to what He is doing, but, of necessity, also fellowship one with another about it. Still, this is very distinct in character from the commandment as to putting away an individual from the fellowship of an assembly. In that case, if the Word of God has been faithfully carried out, the offender has been put away at a definite moment by those who were commanded by the Lord to perform the solemn act. It would, therefore, be a matter of flagrant defiance of the authority of the Lord Jesus, for another assembly to receive such an one. But we have nothing similar to this in regard to our action towards an assembly that has gone astray. Here the Lord keeps the control in His own hands. He alone removes the lampstand, and it is our responsibility to take heed to what He does, so that we may acknowledge it in our own action.

One result of this difference is, that all may not clearly recognise the Lord's action at the same time. Some may be fully persuaded that He has removed the lampstand, while others may believe that the assembly character has not yet been wholly lost, but that the Lord is still granting space for repentance. When, in obedience to the Divine commandment, an assembly have put away an unrepentant transgressor from among them, they can inform others of what has been done, and should be able to count upon all to act accordingly.

But we cannot put our perception of what we believe the Lord has been doing upon the same footing, or claim that, because we believe that the Lord has taken away the lampstand, therefore all others shall acknowledge the same thing. In the one case everything is specific. The circle of those who are called upon to take action is clearly defined, and the sins for which the guilty one is to be put away are plainly indicated. The case of the fornicator, in 1 Cor. v., is a case in point. The Lord does not say, "I will remove him." He commands the assembly at Corinth, "Wherefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person;" and they were to do it when they were gathered together, because then alone they could act in His Name and with His power. When they have thus acted the Lord says, "What ye have done shall stand, for it was first of all done in heaven." But if in this, or in anything else, we go beyond the Word of God, we are practically adding to His Word, and He will presently have to reprove us as liars, because we presumed to give to our thoughts the authority that belongs to His commandments alone.

NO INDIFFERENCE.

But all this affords no reason why we should be indifferent as to the condition of other assemblies. While the Lord tells us plainly what part He has reserved to Himself, He makes our part equally plain by the seven times repeated exhortation, "He that hath an ear to hear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the

churches." This is a distinct call to all to oneness of mind in discerning what is His judgment as to the condition of each assembly. And it should be a matter for deep humiliation and self-judgment when this oneness of mind is lacking. Some think the Lord has plainly removed the lampstand, while others are of a wholly contrary opinion; and what is to be done? What do the Scriptures teach as to the remedy for divided thought and judgment among the saints in a single assembly? Let us turn to 1 Cor. i. 10. There were divisions in Corinth, and the saints were ranging themselves under the lead of different teachers. "I beseech you," says the apostle, "by the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment." Is this a hard saying? Indeed it is, for our natural hearts. Nothing could be harder. But look at what goes before (verse 9), "God is faithful, by whom ye were called unto the fellowship of His Son Jesus Christ our Lord." Our faithful God has called us to this fellowship, and in accordance with this calling He commands us to be of one mind. The fact that the Corinthian saints were not one-minded is evidence that they were carnal, walking as men; and they are called to judge themselves as to this before they can pretend to act for God in dealing with evil-doers. It is this carnality of heart, that is the great hindrance to our discerning the mind of God and so becoming of one mind. The apostle does not say that some of them were

carnal because they did not understand the will of God, but that, as a whole, they were carnal because there were divisions among them.

Are we ready to say that it is a hopeless thing to look for oneness of mind among those who profess to be gathered to the Name of the Lord Jesus? Apart from God's faithfulness, there is nothing more hopeless. That is what we must fall back upon. And whoever shall most truly judge himself for the carnality manifested by our divisions, and shall most help on the spirit of self-judgment in his brethren, will have the most largely contributed towards that unity of mind and mouth which is so precious in God's sight.

I am not shutting my eyes to the fact that oneness of mind is impossible if there is no recognition of God's Son, Jesus Christ, as Lord. Where a human system, with its man-made creeds and laws, has been adopted, the only basis upon which a goodly unity is possible is wanting. Those who profess to desire a perfect joining together in the same mind must begin by judging and departing from that which makes it impossible. But do not let us forget that the utterly divergent traditions, that are so tenaciously clung to by our fellow-saints still in the bondage of religious systems, are but the ripened fruits of that carnality which declares itself among those who have been brought out of these systems by their divided thoughts and ways.

JOINT FELLOWSHIP, NOT INDEPENDENT ACTION.

The Lord holds us responsible, then, to take account

of what He is doing among the assemblies, and He calls all to fellowship, one with another, in this. If this fellowship is to be attained and maintained, there must be no precipitate action on the part of those who see things most promptly and most clearly. Such precipitancy will lead to division, as regards those who will not follow until they can see the thing clearly; while it will turn into mere imitators of men those who cannot bear to be left behind, whether they see the thing themselves or not. But it is not only those who will not wait that are responsible for the divisions that are so dishonouring to the Name of the Lord Jesus. If, through slothfulness or indifference, through unwillingness to admit a fault on the part of those we like, or through clinging to traditional ways and thoughts, we are failing to take heed of what the Lord is doing, we must bear our share of the blame. One extreme always promotes another. The brother or the assembly who will go too fast, increases the obstinacy of those who do not want to move at all. In the same way, the resistance of those who will not see increases the impatience of those who are lacking in forbearance. The one diminishes from the Word of God by refusing to act out its teachings; while the other adds to it by forcing strained interpretations upon it, to justify himself in finding a way out of a position that seems unbearable.

“But can it be the mind of God,” some are asking, “that there should be such confusion as exists to-day? Here is a company acting in such self will, that some of us cannot conscientiously acknowledge them as a

church at all, yet others persist in maintaining fellowship with them. Thus, while we would not receive them if they came to us, we go elsewhere and find ourselves seated with them at the table. Is not this disorder? Assuredly it is, and disorder that we need to weep over. But there is something worse even than such disorder, and that is a man-made remedy. The disorder may exercise our consciences, and bring us in brokenness of heart to the Lord for help. But when we have adopted a human device for putting things right, confession ceases, and our hope of help from God is gone.

Let me add a word as to one manifest reason why God has not committed to any of us the power to "cut off" an assembly. God invariably requires us to act on principles of perfect righteousness, and on that account, when He bids us put an individual away, He commands that his sin shall be proved by undoubted evidence. In the mouth of two or three witnesses every word must be established (Matt. xviii. 16); and the apostle repeats the same words as a reason why he would not attempt to form a judgment about some who had sinned at Corinth, until he could be present and hear all the evidence in presence of the accused (2 Cor. xiii. 2). Any one who has had any experience in sifting evidence, will know how difficult it often is to arrive at the exact truth when dealing on the spot with a matter concerning an individual. How much greater the difficulty, then, when we are attempting to estimate the conduct of a whole company of people with regard to whom we can scarcely ever have the same opportunities of forming an

accurate judgment. Hence the Lord bids us take note of how He is dealing with such a company. When He takes away the candlestick HE will make it plain.

DIVIDED ASSEMBLIES.

Sometimes we are called upon to consider the case of an assembly that has divided into two parts, each of which claims our support and fellowship, while desiring us to refuse the same to the other. In such a case it often happens that the matter about which they have ostensibly divided is little more than a pretext. It may be for years there had been two parties in that assembly divided over some matter of doctrine, or as to what is scriptural order in the fellowship. Held together by a continually weakening bond, some personal dispute becomes the occasion of the final breach. The saints take sides about the matter just in accordance with the line of cleavage that was plainly to be seen before, and while no one is consciously telling untruths, the versions of the matter given by the opposing parties are absolutely contradictory. Then comes the danger that other assemblies will uphold one or the other according to their previous sympathies with their general line of things.

O how needful, then, to give heed to the Lord's own words, "Repent, or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent."

What is wanted, then, is for each assembly to seek to perceive what the Lord is doing, having heart and

conscience awakened to the deep importance of knowing His mind and acting in fellowship with Him. This must needs carry with it the desire to be and act in fellowship with other assemblies in our solicitude over a corrupt Thyatira or a lifeless Sardis. But the fellowship must be that of God's Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. He holds the stars in His right hand, and only so can they be used in the maintaining of the fellowship. It must be with churches as with individuals, for the state of each church is the state of the individuals who compose it. It is only, then, as we are holding the Head, from whom all the body by joints and bonds has nourishment ministered, that we can be knit together, increasing with the increase of God.

We sometimes hear truths of this kind spoken of as "secondary things," as if they had not much in them for the heart and conscience, and we are told to talk more of the Lord and less of these things. Separate these things from the Name of the Lord; separate them from His honour and glory; let them be taken up in a carnal, fleshly way, and they will deaden the conscience and harden the heart. But that is not only true of matters that concern the assembly and the relationship thereto of the Lord Jesus. You may fight for the doctrines of the Incarnation, of the Atonement, for the solemn realities of Eternal Judgment and Everlasting Life, in a carnal spirit, and with a heart not subject to the will of God, and in doing so you will equally deaden your soul and blunt your conscience.

Put things on their true basis. Let our zeal for every

truth be the outcome of our love and loyalty to the Lord Jesus, and no such unhappy results will follow. Let us mourn over the departure of fellow-saints from the path of obedience to Christ in these things, just as we should mourn over their worldliness or lapses into immorality. Mourn over them because they belong to Christ, because they ought not only individually to be His possession, indwelt by God's Spirit, but, even now, should be so builded together as to form a dwelling-place for God through the same Spirit. Let us ever maintain and manifest this spirit and attitude toward fellow-saints who have departed from the truth, and we shall both be blessed in our own souls and shall be fitted for God's use in leading others to the full knowledge of the truth.