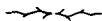


A Plain Path in a Day of Confusion.



THE picture of the Church of God as it was at the beginning was beautiful indeed. A spirit of oneness, unknown surely before, animated each and all. Pharisees and publicans in that company were of one mind. Home born Jews and Hellenists, or foreign Jews, could consort together, worshipping in one company, and not as before in different synagogues. For all of them shared in the baptism of the Spirit, and all were indwelt by the Holy Ghost (Acts ii. 42-47 ; iv. 32). Obedience to Apostolic teaching, dependence on God as manifested by prayer, and unanimity, all being of one heart and one soul, characterised that newly formed and rejoicing company.

The condition of the Church even in subsequent Apostolic days how different ! At Corinth, in the Assembly planted by Paul, contentions soon became rife, schisms appeared among them, and sects were being formed (1 Cor. i. 10-12 ; xi. 18, 19). Resurrection of the dead, a cardinal truth of Judaism and of Christianity, was denied (xv.) ; and a partaking in heathen feasts in temples of idols was not unknown (viii.-x.). Eighteen months of the Apostle's labours had the Corinthians enjoyed (Acts xviii. 11) ; richly, too, were they endowed with spiritual gifts (1 Cor. i. 7) ; and yet, when Paul's personal presence was withdrawn, into what a condition had they sunk. Within four years of his first leaving Corinth all these evils had been developed. Young as they were in the faith,

and but lately emerged from heathenism, as many there had, they needed the fatherly care and admonition of the Apostle, and that he did not withhold. He sought in his first Epistle to expose, and to check the disorders which had arisen.

How soon, then, did evils manifest themselves in the Church of God ! If the remembrance of such recent Apostolic labours did not keep his converts, for he was their spiritual father (1 Cor. iv. 15), need we wonder if evils and confusion are rife in the Church in this day ?

We turn now to Ephesus. There, too, did the Apostle labour ; and the Assembly had the privilege of his personal ministry for the space of three years, as he tells the Elders when they met him at Miletus (Acts xx. 31). During that time he had kept back nothing in his ministry which was profitable for them. Of repentance toward God, and of faith toward the Lord Jesus had he testified, and of the Gospel of the Grace of God likewise. Further, he had preached among them the Kingdom of God, and also had declared all the counsel of God (21, 24, 25, 27). Very full had been his ministry among them. If ever there was an Assembly well taught it must have been that at Ephesus. But what can be said of the abiding effect of all the Apostle's labours ? He will tell us, as we listen to his address to the Elders of that Assembly gathered to meet him at Miletus. Grievous wolves, they must expect, after his departure, who, from *without*, would enter in not sparing the flock. Also from *within* would arise men speaking perverted things to draw away disciples after them (Acts xx. 29, 30.) Of these last mention is probably made by the Lord in Rev. ii. 2. But what a state of matters would it be in that well taught Assembly ! Even the remembrance of the Apostle's presence among them, and his labours with them both public, and in the houses of the saints, would not keep all that from being manifested. And before

his death he wrote to Timothy who was there (2 Tim. i. 15), that all they which are in Asia have turned away from me. All that were in Asia, *i.e.*, the proconsular province, had heard the Word of the Lord, both Jews and Gentiles, when Paul had laboured among them (Acts xix. 10). Now before his death all that were in Asia had turned away from him, perhaps not willing to be identified in any way with Paul the prisoner. All had not forsaken Christ, but all had turned from Paul. Two men he mentions, evidently prominent in that defection, Phygellus and Hermogenes. But another person he names, as deserving of honourable mention, *viz.*, Onesiphorus, who, when in Rome had sought him out diligently, and found him, and oft refreshed him, being not ashamed of his chain. The Lord will not forget the service thus rendered to His servant.

To an infant Church like that at Corinth the Apostle ministered truth to counteract the evils which had arisen. To the Elders of Ephesus, speaking of future trouble, he did not do that. The Ephesian Assembly had already heard *all* the counsel of God. So the Elders he commended to God, and to the word of His grace, which could build them up and give them the inheritance among all them which are sanctified (Acts xx 32). He had no more truth to communicate. That would keep them if they kept hold of it.

Years after, writing to Timothy labouring at Ephesus, he addressed him individually—a man of God (1 Tim. vi. 11; 2 Tim. iii. 17), and told him what he should do under the circumstances therein described. Of what Timothy had *heard* of Paul he was to have an outline of sound words in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus (2 Tim. i. 13). That, too, which he had *heard* from Paul among many witnesses he was to commit to faithful men, who should be able to teach others also (ii. 2). The Word of truth he was rightly to divide,

cutting it in a straight line (15). And, in view of the days that were coming, he was to preach the Word, and to be instant in season and out of season (iv. 2).

Nothing fresh for the believer's walk and establishment in the faith was Timothy to expect. The Apostle had completed the Word of God (Col. i. 25). John would unfold more of prophetic truth; but that has for its subject God's dealings with the world, rather than His counsels for His people in the present dispensation. And Timothy, in common with all of us, was no vessel of revelation. Hence this Epistle to him is most valuable, as it shows us one, who was to be left on earth after Paul's martyrdom, a disciple of Christ, but not an inspired one, the position, as far as that is concerned, in which all Christians find themselves to-day.

Now Paul was writing to him, not to the Ephesian Assembly. When addressing an Assembly about the exercise of discipline he could tell them to put away the offender from their midst (1 Cor. v. 13). For that is a prerogative of the Assembly. But writing to Timothy, as an individual he does not do that, the latter having no power in himself to put any one away. Further, the Apostle had evidently before his eyes, as the illustration of a great house shows, the state of *Christendom* at large (2 Tim. ii. 20). What Christian would think of putting any out of Christendom? It would be absurd to entertain such an idea. Paul then wrote to Timothy his child in the faith, giving him directions for any one who would be faithful in the midst of unfaithfulness.

Of such he writes. If any man purge himself from the vessels unto dishonour, he shall be a vessel unto honour, sanctified, meet for the Master's use, prepared for every good work (2 Tim. ii. 21). Was an individual to wait till the whole company moved? That might never be. And certainly the condition of the Ephesian Assembly did not encourage any

such expectation. At all cost then the individual was to act, purging, or purifying himself from the vessels to dishonour. He could as a last resort refrain from association with such.

Now what was to be understood by purging himself? The verb in the form here used is only met with in one other place in the New Testament, viz., in 1 Cor. v. 7. There the Assembly were to purge out the old leaven, to get rid of it from their midst, to have nothing to do with it. Here, 2 Tim. ii. 21, the individual is to purge himself, etc. Now if every faithful one did that, what would result but a marked separation between all of them and the others. Has this Scripture no voice or application for this day? Has the Lord left His Church without guidance to the end of the dispensation? Would that be like Him, who loved it, and gave Himself for it (Eph. v. 25)? Surely it would not. So pointing out what an individual might be called on in faithfulness to do, Paul tells Timothy with whom to associate.

Dissociation from vessels to dishonour would not leave the individual alone on earth, however he might be locally alone for a time. He could, as Timothy is here told, follow righteousness, faith, love, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart (2 Tim. ii. 22). If Timothy was then to do this, what are faithful Christians now to do? Would not such a line of action make a distinct difference between them and others? Would any ask, How can I know the pure in heart? The Apostle concluded that such could be known, and surely would lay on the heart of every faithful one to find them out.

Would any object very strongly to the phrase "circle of fellowship," as if it was inconsistent with the confession of the truth of the unity of the Body? a phrase this last we believe unknown to Scripture. Without contending for the term excepted to, would not something very like it be the result of

giving heed to Apostolic precept? And, since Paul was the great teacher about the Body of Christ, rightly to follow his instructions to Timothy could be no denial in practice of the confession of that truth. Would any say that 2 Tim. ii. 22 was a direction only to Timothy? What will such say to verse 21 of that chapter? "If a man purge himself from these, etc." That was not written for Timothy's guidance alone.

But any who raise the objection stated above confound the truth of the *Body* with that of the *Assembly*. The former speaks of vital union which can never be broken. The latter, viewed in one aspect, admits of separation from evil doers found within the Church of God. The offending Corinthian was, it turns out, a member of the Body of Christ all the time. But surely, whilst put away from their midst, he was not regarded as a member of the Corinthian Assembly. In questions of discipline, or anything connected with that, it is as members of the Assembly that any action is taken, and not as members of the Body.

But are people asking, What shall we do in the midst of confusion around us? Would any return to the system from which they came out? They must then come under the Apostle's lash of building again the things they had destroyed, and so making themselves transgressors (Gal. ii. 18).

Then shall we make a new start, as some would say? How can that be? There have been times in the history of the Christian Church when to outward appearances a new start might seem to have been made. At the Reformation was one of those times. At the calling out of those designated as Brethren was another. On each of these occasions long *forgotten* truth, contained in the Word, was recovered; and that, acting by the Spirit on those thus enlightened, separated them

from the rest of their brethren in Christ. The truth recovered necessarily caused this; and obedience to the teaching of the Word called for it.

But what further truth has now been recovered from the divine Word, which for centuries lay in it quite unknown? Those who would advocate a new start do not point us to anything newly recovered from the Scriptures of truth. No ground is there then for a *new start*. And strictly speaking there can be no new start in Christian times; for the Holy Ghost when He came guided the Apostles and Prophets into all the truth (John xvi. 13).

But say some, Let us go back to the beginning. The beginning, we ask, of what? Of Christianity? That is impossible. The state of things is very different from what it was then (Acts ii. 42-47; iv. 32). Then, too, the truth of the Body of Christ had not been taught, and souls among Gentiles had not been evangelised. Is it to the beginning of the movement of seventy years ago that we are invited to return? That, too, is impossible. Then there were no companies of Christians on earth known to be meeting as simply gathered to the name of Christ. To go back to that beginning would be to ignore the work of God on earth since then. It would be the ignoring also of different companies of faithful saints gathered out during these years. What God has done during all this time must then be wiped out like a score from a slate, in order to begin *de novo*. Is that feasible? Is that rational?

But here a difficulty would arise impossible, we believe, to surmount. What Apostolic authority is there for such a step? There is none. Paul, Peter, John, and Jude, each in their own line of teaching warn the faithful of evil times that were coming, and in some respects had already begun. Each tells its readers what to do in the circumstances described;

but not one of them suggests as a panacea the returning to the beginning. Shall we follow Apostolic guidance, or attempt an impossibility on the strength of the advice now tendered? Divine teaching provides what is needed. What to avoid, and with whom to associate, the second Epistle to Timothy makes perfectly plain. Let us follow that, and we shall be safe, and following it we may surely count on the divine blessing.

One word in conclusion. Does the advice in 2 Tim. ii. 21, 22 clash with the admonition of Eph. iv. 3? Had the Apostle modified his teaching ere he died? Undoubtedly not. Timothy, as he followed righteousness, etc., with those who called on the Lord out of a pure heart, would be carrying out the admonition of Eph. iv. 3, to endeavour to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace; and would illustrate for the guidance of us all by his conduct at Ephesus how to combine the teaching of the two canonical Epistles.

