

How the Lord forms an Assembly.

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(MATT. XVI. 13-18 ; ACTS XVI. 5, 9-26.)

ON the occasion of Peter's confession in his answer to "But ye, who do ye say that I am?" when he said, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God," the Lord answered (having regard to that which He discerned in Peter's soul, the fruit of revelation), "Upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." In the face of the conditions that were on the earth

at that time, and the power of the adversary, the Lord definitely committed Himself to that word.

I referred to the passage in Acts xvi. 5 that you may note what is recorded there, that the number of assemblies or churches increased daily. Thus the Lord not only committed Himself to the statement which He made in the presence of the disciples, that He would build His assembly and the gates of hell should not prevail against it, which is universal in its bearing, but He also is seen in His activities forming assemblies in different places. It is remarkable that in this particular part of the Acts we have the intimation that the assem-

blies increased in number every day ; it refers to assemblies which the Lord formed in different localities. It is therefore clear that the Lord Jesus not only had before Him that He would build His assembly, but in pursuance of that He formed assemblies in various localities.

Now in this chapter in the Acts we see the lines upon which the Lord wrought in forming an assembly in Philippi. Philippi was, as it were, the very gate of Europe, and the Lord in directing His servants thither had the whole earth before Him in view of building His assembly, against which hades' gates should not prevail.

With regard to the formation of the assembly at Philippi, the Lord's hand from heaven had been over the movements of the Apostle Paul. If you carefully observe the context you will see how wonderfully heaven had the whole situation in hand. The apostle was forbidden by the Holy Ghost to speak the word in Asia, and the Spirit of Jesus did not allow him to go to Bithynia; he could not go to the right hand or to the left. Then the Lord Jesus drew near to His beloved servant the apostle in a vision. Paul saw, as he tells us, in a vision, a man of Macedonia, or, as it is rendered in the new translation, "A certain

Macedonian man, standing and beseeching him, and saying, Pass over into Macedonia and help us." I have no doubt at all that the Macedonian man represents the Lord Himself.

Think of the grace of the Lord assuming a *local* bearing! He is the Head of the church in heaven, but in this particular case it would appear that He presented Himself in a local bearing, as a "Macedonian man." Think of the grace of that! And He was *beseeching*. Think of the resources of the Lord's wisdom, the resources of His power, and yet beseeching, Come over and help us! Not *Me*, but *us*.

That is the spirit and bearing

of the Lord Jesus in forming an assembly in a locality. What a model! Here is no arbitrary legislation, but the gentleness that would beseech; not the mere exercise of power to act, which would have been unquestionably His right, but the grace of the situation: He says, "Come over . . . and help *us*." It seems to be kindred to that which the apostle had presented to him when the Lord said at the hour of his conversion, "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou *me*?" Here we get that which corresponds to that. But who were the "us"? I think the women—notably Lydia and her household—and the jailor and his house-

hold formed with the Lord the
“us.”

It is interesting to notice that in the instance recorded in Mark ix., when the disciples refer to the man who cast out demons but who did not follow with them, the Lord says: “He who is not against us is for *us*.” (New Trans.) In this He included Himself with His disciples.

Now the movement of the Lord in this grace is irresistible, and so, “assuredly gathering that the Lord had called us . . . we came,” Luke records. There was the power of that affectionate gentleness which displayed itself in the Lord, and that was irresistible to the apostle. Beloved brethren,

that is the way the Lord forms an assembly. Having reached Philippi, the chief city in that part of Macedonia, the Lord left, if I may so say, a certain reserve for spiritual discernment. The apostle, as no doubt waiting on the Lord, went to the principal city of the colony, and abode there many days. It was, you will perceive, a transitional moment from Judaism to Christianity, and on the sabbath day they went outside the city gate. The city of Philippi might be remarkable for learning, it might be conspicuous in that region for wealth, but neither of these things are necessary in the formation of an assembly.

Paul, and those in company with him, went outside the city, and found some women by the river-side, now observe, "where prayer was wont to be made." It was customary. The Lord is now bringing into view the elements that He will use in the formation of an assembly. I think these women would be figurative of a work of God *in* persons; they would represent what God had wrought there. Do not let any one of us think that anything that we are *naturally* will be employed by the Lord in the formation of an assembly. You may have a very good commercial brain, or a trained mind, but what the

Lord would employ in the formation of an assembly is the work of God that is in you and in me—that which is set forth in the women. O beloved brethren, as one casts one's eye back over church history, what wreckage has been wrought by endeavouring to import elements into our assemblies which the Lord cannot and never will use.

The only elements that He will use are those which are the fruit and product of the work of God—nothing else! How necessary it is to learn this, if we desire to “Come over . . . and help,” for that is the appeal. I think the Lord would have that word sink down into our

hearts ; because there is not only the initial formation of the assembly, but the work is carried forward and goes on. They are being formed, and the Lord, as it were, calls for helpers. Who will help ? “Come over . . . and help us.”

Furthermore, there is the river-side. Of what does that speak ? What element would that represent ? I think it speaks of nearness, proximity to the flow of the Spirit. There will be and can be no formation of an assembly without the uninterrupted flow of the Spirit. There is the *habitual* spirit of prayer, too, indicated in what took place by the river-side, “where prayer was wont

to be made." Do we not need for a moment to ponder the thought of this river? What about spiritual power in the assembly? Can the thing be put together by devices? No. Can the thing be formed by human arrangement? No. We need the Spirit. We must have the Holy Ghost; it is imperatively necessary; and we need also the habitual spirit of prayer that is ever waiting upon God.

Now these are the elements that the Lord is setting in relation to the apostle, for we must not forget Paul. With regard to the formation of assemblies, Paul must have his place. He is the "wise masterbuilder," and he must

be with us to the end. The Lord would have him ; He says, "Come over . . . and help."

Now you will note that the Lord takes the initiative. Oh, that we always remembered this ! Do not attempt to go before Him. It says of Lydia, "whose heart the Lord opened." I am aware, as we read, that she "attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul," but note it was the Lord who took the initiative. And in the formation of assemblies anywhere the Lord will take the lead, and the Lord will maintain that attitude always. One's great exercise in going into a place is to discover the brethren who are with the Lord

—they are always to be found—who are near enough to Him to know His mind, to know the line on which He is working.

The Lord takes the initiative. Now this is not only true in the initial stage, but it goes on always. How precious to discern this grace among the brethren—that they are prepared to wait in deference to the Lord. I have noted it in many places. I have sat and marvelled at the wonderful skill of the Lord holding in check restive spirits, in holding persons in control. He will have His own way. “Whose heart the Lord opened, and she attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul.”

Now there is, furthermore, the element of baptism. Lydia was baptised, and her household. I do not (nor do I suppose any one does) regard baptism as a thing done once and then overlooked and forgotten. Every step of our way is to be in the light of our baptism. What about your household? Have you things, have I (it is a question which ought to touch us all), have we things in view which ought to have been buried (for baptism is burial), because Christ died to them?

We have here brought into prominence that she was baptised and her household. The Lord would have that maintained.

The principle of the water is ever to be with us—not only for you, my dear brother, but for your household, in fidelity to the Lord. Note, “*and* her household”; unless this is so, there are elements that will disturb the assembly; elements perhaps on account of which the Lord may, for the time being, veil His movements.

Now this beloved woman whose heart the Lord opened, and who was baptised and her household, was a seller of purple of the city of Thyatira. That element is noted by the Spirit in this chronicle in connection with the formation of the assembly at Philippi. I believe the Lord would have in

every assembly He forms a seller of purple. She is not a merchant-man with worldly skill ; she is a woman, in the pursuit of her undertakings. She stands for the work of God wrought there by the Holy Ghost.

Now with regard to this purple : purple, as you know, is a colour which stands for imperial glory. The assembly as the Lord forms it is not on a level with a humanly devised religion. It is in no way comparable with heathen religion or any other for that matter ; it stands on a higher elevation. The Lord has in the formation of His assembly, even in a locality, a seller of purple. Are we taking account of the work of God in

ourselves—the light He puts in our souls? This calls for secret prayer and meditation, to get beneath all that is natural and carnal. One finds, as we do, how easily we can become immersed in commerce and all that is connected with it. Oh, how we need to be alone with God to discover His own work in us!

Divinely given thoughts, a divinely given understanding are obtainable, that would give us to hold *all* the saints as clothed with imperial glory. Now have we got this? You may be in a very small meeting; in Matthew xviii. the Lord even suggests that assembly conditions may come down to two persons:

“Where two or three are gathered together . . . there am I.” Think of the grace of that! Think of two brothers sitting down in a country cottage somewhere to deliberate on the Lord’s interests in that place! When you do that, remember the Lord is with you. Have, as it were, a vacant chair in your mind.

Hence, though the assembly in a locality may be small and weak and frail, one would desire to have, as I may put it, “a seller of purple” there, to clothe them all with imperial glory. Why, it may be in a moment or two, an hour, a few days, years at the most, and these saints who form local assemblies, and are

part of the one assembly that He has built, against which the gates of hell shall never prevail, are going up to the highest elevation in the universe, higher than the throne of Jerusalem, great as it is. Oh, clothe the saints with imperial glory, beloved !

But note, you must *sell* the purple. No one of us can clothe them with imperial glory without surrendering carnal appreciations. The price you pay for the purple is the surrender of carnal thoughts. And as the mind of the Lord is discerned and the heart moves towards that blessed, glorious Man in heaven, shall we speak of *surrender* ? It seems to be a

word out of place. An exchange of a carnal appreciation, a natural, fleshly, and unspiritual appreciation of God's people, to be able to clothe them all with imperial glory !

Now, dear brethren, think of all the saints—of all believers—in Edinburgh, every one of them, whether in the church of Rome (and there are undoubtedly the people of God there), or in every sect you can conceive of in the city. The assemblage of all these persons in this city is the assembly of God in Edinburgh, and one would desire to have the purple to clothe them all with imperial glory. One would not look down disdainfully upon one

single believer, but would clothe each one, even a little child who has believed, with imperial glory in our thoughts. That is the way the Lord forms His assemblies locally.

Now this wonderful vessel is appearing in Philippi, and the adversary is going to oppose it. And he has a woman—note the imitation—a damsel, with “a spirit of Python,” as it reads. This woman, under the influence of Satan, attempted to ally herself with Paul and Silas. “These men are the servants of the most high God,” she cried. “This did she many days.” Now Paul bore with that, and we may have to bear with Satanic at-

tempts to wreck the assembly which the Lord has formed in a locality. I have seen it, and so have you—Satanic attempts to wreck it, not by the introduction of what is palpably wicked, but by a seductive and subtle attack.

“These men are the servants of the most high God.” Paul would have noted at once that that was not the voice of the Spirit. And the most abominable wickedness (I say that advisedly), the most abominable wickedness, alas, spiritualism, is being brought in and an attempt made to ally it with the truth. That, alas, is happening, I have no doubt, in this city. Even churches are

being built for the habitation of those who hold communication with demons, and these very scriptures are being taken up to support this diabolical traffic. Now, is this thing going to prevail against the assembly? Remember the Lord's words, "The gates of hell shall not prevail against it." I suppose the gates would represent the considered and accumulated power of the enemy.

Now the Lord is going to verify, at the gates of Europe, His promise to Peter. Paul at last, taking up the name of Jesus Christ, casts out the demon, thus shewing the place of power that the assembly had, and that Paul had as of it locally for the time

being, and as of it universally too. There is no power of evil in the universe that will prevail against the assembly ; none ! The Lord on high, that once lowly, humbled, crucified, suffering Man, is gone up higher than all heavens, angels, principalities and powers being made subject to Him. That is the situation. We have the assembly on earth that the Lord has formed, and in localities assemblies which He has formed and is forming for His own delight, where He is loved, and known, and welcomed, and treasured, and against which the gates of hell shall never prevail.

But mark, those who stand for the defence of the truth will

suffer. Paul and Silas were brought before the magistrates, and their clothes were rent off and the command given to beat them. Beloved, are we prepared to suffer for the defence of the truth? The truth will ever have defenders; the Lord will take care of that. May it be ours to be among those in our poor feeble measure to stand with indomitable faith in the Lord on high.

The greatness of what is in the assembly is seen in that these men, though in the inner dungeon, with their feet made fast in the stocks, are in communication with heaven. Think of that! At midnight—one might

have thought that their spiritual energies were waning then ; far from it—at midnight, in praying they were praising God with singing. And the prisoners were listening ! The presence of the assembly in its place here, as formed of the Lord, will have this wonderful effect, that the prisoners will hear, and it will reach out to the proclamation of the gospel. What happened ? “Suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison shook.” God will interfere to release souls from the manacles that hold them and will set them in liberty ; so that not only the number of assemblies is increased, but per-

sons are added to them, to the glory of God. Note the two scriptures, "The Lord added to the assembly daily" (Acts ii. 47), and "The assemblies . . . increased in number every day." (Chap. xvi. 5.) May the Lord give us a greater sense of what He is doing on this line, for His name's sake. Amen.



BOOKLETS BY R. B.

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