

The Assembly
as the special interest of Christ
on earth.

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THE ASSEMBLY

AS THE SPECIAL INTEREST OF CHRIST
ON EARTH.

THAT which is of special interest to God on earth at any given time must also be of deepest interest to those who know and love Him. In the days of the patriarchs, individuals such as Enoch, Noah, Abraham and others, were of special interest to God; after their time Israel and Jerusalem became His special interest; and those who walked with Him and were in the current of His thoughts were also always deeply interested in that which was the special object of His thought and care.

While the Lord Jesus was on earth the special objects of His interest were His

few disciples, who had left all and were following Him; to them He told out the secrets of the Father's love as He alone knew it, and in their company He was in measure understood, while altogether unknown and misunderstood by the world.

Now that He has returned to His Father and taken His seat at the right hand of God, His chief treasure has come to light, for the bride of His affections has come into being—the bride that will be His companion for ever—the bride He loved and gave Himself for, and that will be His suited consort in the day of His glory. To-day the church, His bride, is here on earth; and to-day that church is His special interest. This being so, we do well to be interested in, and occupied with, the church—His assembly, and in the measure in which we love Him, this will be so.

So far as I see, the assembly is considered in four distinct ways in scripture, and each has its own peculiar import and signification, although in some respects the different aspects in which the assembly is viewed overlap each other.

In the first place, the assembly is viewed as composed of, and including all

the saints who live on earth between the time when the Holy Ghost was given, and the coming of Christ into the air. (1 Thess. iv. 16, 17.)

In the next place, the assembly is considered as composed of all the saints who may be living on earth at any given time between these two points.

In the third place, the assembly is viewed locally as comprising all believers in the Lord Jesus in a town, city, or locality.

And finally, the saints when gathered together in the name of the Lord Jesus, and in recognition of the truth of the assembly, are viewed as being *in* assembly, when they are thus gathered together, whether all or only part of the saints that constitute the local assembly are thus assembled.

PART I.

As touching the universal character of the assembly, as including all the saints living on earth from the day of Pentecost to the coming of the Lord, it is spoken of in scripture as the *body* of which Christ is the Head; the *bride* of Christ; the *holy*

city; and as growing unto a *holy temple* in the Lord.

Eph. i. 20,
22, 23. Having been raised from the dead and set as Man at the right hand of God, Christ is given to be Head over all things to the assembly which is His body, the fulness of Him who filleth all in all. In this aspect the assembly is derived from Christ and has received gifts from Him its Head in heaven. He has given apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers, for the perfecting of the saints; with a view to the work of the ministry, with a view to the edifying of the body of Christ; so that the body may grow up to Him the Head in all things. These gifts by Him are for the whole assembly viewed in its totality during the whole of its sojourn on earth. The truth given through the apostles and prophets is preserved in the scriptures, maintained in the assembly, and made known and received by the Holy Spirit. The evangelists, pastors, and teachers are still with us, they have been given by Christ and prove their appointment by their ministry.

The assembly viewed as the body of Christ is the prepared vessel through which He, the Head, expresses Himself,

and by which He carries on His work on earth. As a man uses his body to express the purpose of his mind, so Christ uses the assembly, His body, to perform His pleasure; consequently there should be no movement in any part of the body, the assembly, apart from the direction and control of the Head, for it derives all its vitality from Him who is its Head. All wisdom, grace, love and power are vested in the Head, and the body derives its character from what the Head is; it has no character of its own, it simply gives expression to the character of its Head.

The assembly in this comprehensive aspect, is also viewed as the *bride of Christ*. It is called out from the world, and is being formed in view of the day of His glory—the world to come—when those espoused to Him, during His rejection by the world, will be displayed as the bride of His affections and will be His helpmeet and companion for His own delight and joy. As such the assembly is the object of His love for which He gave *Eph. v. 25-* Himself, and as such He will present it²⁷ to Himself all glorious in the day of His manifestation in glory. Therefore while the assembly viewed as the body

united to Christ the Head in heaven is for His use and pleasure, so the bride is to be the object of His affections and companion when He shall come to be glorified in His saints and admired in all who believe in that day, and for ever.

ii Thess. i, 10

Yet even now, before the marriage of the Lamb takes place, Christ has His delight in the assembly, for He loves her; and the assembly expresses bridal affections for Him as she longs for Him to come, and as in loyalty of heart she seeks to be faithful to her absent Lord. His great love to us has won our love, and we love because He first, and constantly, loves us. May He receive a deeper response from our hearts while we wait for His appearing!

Rev. xix, 7

1 John. iv, 19

I need not say much as touching the assembly viewed as the *city*, as I suppose the "holy city" spoken of in the book of Revelation presents to us some of the characteristics of the bride—the characteristics that will be in display in connection with the administration of the Lord in relation to Israel and the nations on earth; while true bridal affections will be known and enjoyed by Christ and His bride in the presence of each other in the

Rev. xxi, 2, 9, 10 &c.

rv. 24, 26.

holy city. Of this—the city of the living God, we can take present account, for we are said to have already come to it. *Heb. xii, 22*

I take it that the first revelation of the assembly by Christ to Peter was in relation to the city aspect. Jesus said to him, “On this rock I will build my assembly and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” *Math. xvi, 18.* As I understand it, Christ is still building the city the assembly and it will come out by-and-by as the heavenly city having the glory of God, *Rev. xxi. 11.* when every stone shall have been built into its place, and every feature thereof will display the character and perfect workmanship of Him who is its Builder. It will be seen in that day that hades’ gates have not prevailed against His assembly, and that although bombarded and assailed by all the powers of evil for well nigh nineteen hundred years, it will be displayed in His likeness all glorious, impregnable and perfect.

The assembly in this inclusive aspect is also growing unto a *holy temple* in the Lord. *Eph. ii, 21.* It is destined to be the holy shrine where God and Christ will dwell, the most holy vessel filled with glory, the dwelling place of God. The oracle will

be there, for God will put himself in touch with men, and every part thereof will be expressive of His glory.

Without presuming to exhaust our subject, I think scripture presents the assembly to us in this its most comprehensive character as the *body* of which Christ is the living Head in heaven, and also as the *bride*, *city* and *holy temple* in the Lord, and that the last three aspects are more particularly in view of the world to come.

PART 2.

In the next place, we will briefly consider the assembly in its general character as composed of all the saints on earth at any given time between Pentecost and the coming of Christ into the air.

Viewed thus, the assembly is also affirmed to be "*The house of God*" and "*one body in Christ.*"

As the *house of God*, the assembly in the days of the apostles was viewed as consisting of all its parts, so much so, that *1 Tim. iii. 15.* Paul could tell Timothy how he should behave himself in the house of God which is the assembly of the living God.

All true christians living at that time constituted that house then, and all true christians living now constitute it at the present time, and over it Christ is Son. *Heb. iii, 6.* It is the same house to-day that it was in Paul's day, although there is not a single person in it now on earth who was in it then. Persons have passed out of it, and others have been builded in, but it remains the same house—the house of God. This may be illustrated thus. We will suppose a certain regiment engaged in battle against Napoleon on the plains of Waterloo a hundred years ago; that same regiment exists to-day although there is not a man alive who composed it when it went to war with Bonaparte. Likewise the house of God is viewed as complete on earth at any given time, and is the same house in which the Spirit dwelt in apostolic days.

The assembly—the house of God—is the holy edifice in which He dwells, and in which all the saints on earth are builded together for a habitation of God in the Spirit. *Eph. ii, 22.* In His Spirit God occupies His house on earth and in that house He dwells. As the house of God it is also the pillar and base of the truth; the *1 Tim. iii, 15*

whole cycle of truth has Christ and the assembly as its base and support. The assembly was needed to complete the word of God; apart from it, the link that connects the truth together would be missing; for without the assembly nothing could be made perfect. *Col. i, 25.* *Rev. Trans.^m* *Heb. xi, 40.*

God is greatly interested in His house, for therein His character is learnt, known and expressed; He has taken possession of, and fills that house as the earnest of His filling the heaven and earth with His glory in the world to come. Those who compose it partake of its "fatness," and by the knowledge they gain of God in it they are encouraged to draw near to Him in the holiest of all, and as there, they drink of the river of His pleasures.

Ps. xxxvi, 8 The assembly is also a "spiritual house," which thought leads us to the *household* of God, in which we are brought into contact with each other, and where all the bonds which bind the household to Him, whose household it is, and to each other, are realized, enjoyed, and responded to. In short, the house of God is here to-day; it is composed of all in whom the Holy Spirit dwells, it is God's habitation and it is His household on earth.

I need not say that the house of God is not a structure built by man, however costly or imposing that structure may be, but built of living stones who have been redeemed by the precious blood of Christ, and which have been built in by the Holy Spirit.

Also all the saints on earth to-day are viewed as "*one body in Christ.*" It is *Rom. xii, 5.* evident that the thought presented in this aspect of the assembly flows from the truth considered in our first part, viz., The assembly being the body of Christ; yet I think the terms "one body in Christ" and "one body" have more particularly all the saints living on earth at any given time in view; and present the relationship of the saints to each other. The apostle says, "We being many are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another." This is stated to the end that the assembly may be preserved from clericalism, and that no individual member should think more highly of himself than *v. 3* he ought to think, but give place to the other members of the body, although their gift and office may differ from his own, for all the members have not the same gift or office. *v. 4.*

1 Cor. xii, 13. It is by, or in, one Spirit that we have all been baptised into one body, therefore the Spirit should have liberty to use any individual member for the profit of the whole. This would free us from human arrangement in the things of God, and the Spirit would be acknowledged as the source of the word of wisdom or knowledge that may be given to the assembly. And as there is only one Spirit in the whole body there should be only one mind in all the members of that body.

In one body, Jew and Gentile have been reconciled to God, by the cross of Christ, and because we are one body we should endeavour to keep the unity of the Spirit in the uniting bond of peace. *Eph. iv, 2.* The spirit in which this can be carried out is with all lowliness and meekness with long-suffering, bearing with one another in love, for all are members one of another.

But it may be asked, Can the unity of the Spirit be broken? Looking at the unity of the Spirit as referring to the "one body" considered in its intrinsic character as the work of the Spirit, the unity—or one-ness of the Spirit cannot be broken. But if it is a question of the experimental and manifest unity to be

expressed by those who compose the one body, the unity in this respect can only be maintained by them as by the Spirit they walk in lowliness and meekness with one another. This latter thought seems to be the point in the scripture referred to—Eph. iv. 3.

The assembly is therefore *one body*, even as it has only *one Head*, and is formed by, and made to drink of, *one Spirit*; and as one body it includes all the saints on earth. Therefore “bodies of christians” or “christian bodies” is a thought entirely unknown to scripture, and can have no place in the reckoning of faith.

PART 3.

I come in the next place to a more limited view of the assembly, that is to say, the assembly as composed of all the saints in each individual city, town or locality, such as the seven separate assemblies that were in Asia as mentioned in Rev. ii., iii., and the assembly in Corinth, or Jerusalem, or in any place where there are saints at the present time.

Rev. ii, 1

In this aspect of the assembly, while all the saints in a place are included in and form part of the universal assembly as considered in PART 1, and in the general assembly as considered in PART 2, yet they are also looked at as being the assembly of God in the place where they may for the time be located, and as having certain responsibilities attaching to them locally in which no other assembly in another locality has the same share or part, consequently quite a different line of ministry, and a different set of exhortations, warnings or promises, may be sent by the Lord to one assembly from those sent by Him to another. For He who walks in the midst of the golden candlesticks takes note of the general condition and state of the assembly in each place, and deals with them accordingly, for while there are certain general relationships, privileges and responsibilities common to the assembly viewed in its general character, there are also certain special privileges and responsibilities attaching to each local assembly.

As viewed in this limited or local way, the assembly is said to be "*God's temple*"; *God's husbandry*, 1 Cor. iii.; "*Christ's*

body," 1 Cor. xii.; and the "*candlestick*," Rev. ii., iii.; and is spoken of in scripture thus as the assembly more frequently than in every other aspect put together.

Each local assembly is viewed in all these aspects and is thus taken account of by Christ in the locality where it has pleased God to set them. They are not *the* temple of God, *the* body of Christ, *the* candlestick to the exclusion of other assemblies, but each assembly is thus designated in the place where it is. All the saints in Sardis were the candlestick for the support of the light of God in Sardis; and the saints in Philadelphia were the candlestick there, as all the saints in any place to-day are God's candlestick in that place. Likewise the assembly in Corinth was characteristically the temple of God; God's husbandry, and Christ's body in Corinth. It is not the thought that there are divers temples of God, or that Christ has many bodies, but that each local assembly is these *characteristically*.

Considered as "*God's temple*," the assembly is viewed in its *holy* character, "for the temple of God is holy, and such are ye." The Corinthians were

sadly lacking in holiness in respect of their walk and associations. Therefore the Spirit of God calls their attention to what they were as God's temple, sanctified in Christ Jesus; and uses this to promote practical holiness in their walk and ways.

They had not long emerged from Paganism with its unholy practices and idolatrous ways; therefore the Apostle says to them, "Do ye not know that ye are God's temple and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?" Being God's temple, they were responsible to be in accord with its holy character, and to answer to the claims of the Spirit of God who dwelt in them; they were responsible not to allow any thing among themselves at any time that would be inconsistent with the holiness of God. Consequently, a fornicator being found among them, they were called upon to act in accordance with the holy character of the temple of God, and put such a person away from among themselves; they were locally responsible to do this as the assembly of God in Corinth.

The saints in Corinth were also said to be "*Christ's body.*" This thought is con-

nected with the universal assembly being the body of Christ; but in Corinth, the assembly as composed of the saints there were also characteristically viewed as "Christ's body," as the whole company of saints in any place are to-day. Not that there is a separate body of Christ in each locality, but that the assembly in each locality is characteristically Christ's body and this characteristic depends upon the fact that those who compose it are members in particular of the assembly viewed universally as the body of Christ.

One of the thoughts presented in the assembly being Christ's body in a locality is the inclusive unity of all the saints in that locality—they are all united together, therefore they are not to act independently of each other; but it is worthy of note that the assembly in Corinth was spoken of as God's temple, before it was said to be Christ's body. Its holy character in relation to God is first enforced, then the relation of the saints to each other is considered. In the former, responsibility in relation to the holiness of God is pressed; in the latter, how they should act towards one another. This is ever God's order, for the wisdom

that is from above is first pure and then peaceable. We must be right with God according to His holiness, or we cannot be right with the saints.

James iii. 17.

As touching responsibility, *all* the saints in a city, town, or locality are locally responsible to act for God in matters that come within their local sphere; the assembly in Corinth had to deal with the wicked person there. They could not transfer him to another assembly to be dealt with, nor had another assembly any authority to deal with him. Besides this, we are individually responsible at all times, wherever we may be, in respect of the relationships that exist between ourselves and God, Christ, the assembly generally, and all men. This is a matter of righteousness which we are called upon to follow, but which will only be carried out as God is known, and as the truth has been apprehended by us. Nevertheless, our responsibility does not cease with our lack of knowledge, nor with our lack of faith, for we are responsible to know and to act upon the knowledge of Himself that God has been pleased to place within our reach, but at the same time, our response and answer to our responsibility will ever

be according to the measure in which we really know God.

No doubt all the defection at Corinth might be traced to their deficiency in the knowledge of God; the Apostle had to tell them that some of them had not the knowledge of God, and that he said this to their shame. Had they known God better, they would have been delivered from man, for they would have known that man as such has been judicially ended by Him in the cross of Christ; had they known God better they would not have sanctioned the presence of a fornicator in their midst; they would not have been in danger in respect of idolatry; they would not have desecrated the Lord's supper, nor have had infidel thoughts as to the resurrection of the dead. But notwithstanding their ignorance, their responsibility remained—they were God's temple and should live as such.

Is it not a fact that the vast majority of saints to-day have little or no idea of the responsibility that rests upon them to collectively carry out the mind and will of the Lord locally? But if even a few are to be found in any locality in whose hearts the truth as to God's temple and

Christ's body has shone, they will seek to carry out the responsibility that rests upon all the saints there, even if the other saints in the place do not.

The assembly in each locality is also viewed as "*God's husbandry*"—God's tillage. They are His garden plot and are under His culture, and it is from them that He receives His precious fruit in the locality where they are. He gets nothing from the world, but in the hearts of His saints He works to the end that there might be a sweet savour of Christ—that there might be fruit for Himself. When he comes into His garden may He find fruit that shall be sweet to His taste!

The saints in every place where their lot may be cast are also the "*Candlestick*," or lampstand in that place, and their responsibility as such is to support the light of the revelation of God there. Christ is the Light, and the assembly is the lampstand in which the light is set; failing in its responsibility to support the light, the assembly will ultimately be rejected as the vessel of testimony on earth.

But Christ still walks among the golden candlesticks—the local assemblies; and

He takes note of the state of each, and in His infinite wisdom draws near and deals with each assembly accordingly. He encourages, He rebukes, He calls to repentance, He warns and chastens, and we well know that His unchanging love is behind His every action towards them, and that He is deeply interested in each assembly because He loves them; for the assembly is still His treasure—His chief interest on earth.

PART 4

We have considered the assembly as including the whole company of saints called out from the world by the Spirit while Christ is away. Also the assembly as composed of all the saints on earth at any given time during His absence. And we have also considered the assembly viewed locally in every place where saints are found, but there is yet another use of the term "assembly" presented in scripture that requires our consideration; and in this aspect it may be even more limited, and refer to a smaller number than the assembly as embracing all the saints in a town or locality.

In the aspect to which I now refer, the term "assembly" is used in reference to saints as assembled together in the Lord's name, and when thus assembled only; all or part of the saints in a locality may be thus assembled, and when together they are *in* assembly for the time being. When they have separated from each other, and have gone to their homes, they are no longer in assembly in this aspect; but whether in their homes, at their daily occupation, or gathered together, they are at all times in the local assembly in the place where they live, and are also included in the general assembly everywhere.

The apostle, in writing to the Corinthians, refers to this view of the assembly in chapter xi. 18, in the words, "When ye are come together in the assembly." Also in chapter xiv. 19, he says, "In the assembly I would rather speak five words with my understanding that I might teach others also, than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue." And again in verses 27, 28, "If any man speak in an unknown tongue, let it be by two or at most by three, and that by course, and let one interpret. But if

there be no interpreter, let him keep silence in the assembly." Also in verse 34, "Let your women keep silence in the assemblies."

It is evident that the term "assembly" is used in the foregoing passages in reference to the saints as gathered together, and that it can only be applicable to them in this aspect at such times. This is at once seen when we consider that the women are to keep silent in the assemblies; for it is clear that they are not called upon to be silent in the assembly as including all the saints locally (as considered in PART 3); were it so they would not be permitted to speak even in their homes; as of course they are at all times in the assembly viewed in its local character as embracing all the saints in the locality, as they are also always in the general assembly.

We can also understand that there may be those in the assembly in a town or locality who may for the time be unfit morally to be gathered together in assembly, and may thus be debarred from the exercise of assembly privileges, such for instance as the man who had been put away at Corinth. Being put away

from among them, this man was denied the company of the saints, and debarred from the privileges of the assembly as gathered together, but being a saint he was still included in the assembly—"Christ's body"—at Corinth, and was under discipline there. There may also be others in the assembly in a locality who through ignorance of the Lord's desire for them, or who from other causes, may never assemble together thus, and consequently never avail themselves of the privileges of the assembly as viewed in this aspect.

This leads us to the existing situation that obtains in professing christianity at the present time. The moral state of the saints was bad at Corinth even in the days of the apostles, and was even worse in Asia when the epistles to the seven churches were written; but the state of professing christendom is still worse to-day, and the call has gone forth, *ii Tim. ii, 19,* "Let every one that nameth the name of the Lord depart from iniquity." *20, 21* Vessels to dishonour must now be separated from, even though these vessels profess to be christians; it may consequently be necessary to walk apart from some who

are included in the assembly viewed as including all the saints in the locality in which we live; for if others are not walking in accord with the character of God's holy temple, and are ignoring the claims of Christ as to His body, this is no reason why those who have light from the Lord should not endeavour to respond thereto, so that they may be vessels to honour and meet for the Master's use.

Where any, if only two or three, are exercised before the Lord as to this His desire for them, they can assemble in the name of the Lord Jesus in fellowship with all who thus assemble, and be in the exercise and enjoyment of assembly privileges as thus gathered together; they can thus come together in assembly and count upon the Lord being in their midst according to His unfailing word, *Matt. xviii, 20* and they may count upon Him to lead them in prayer and praise, and to teach them by His Spirit through whomsoever He may be pleased to use at the time. And although other christians in the locality may, from various causes, not be assembled with them, those who are thus gathered together can at all times act according to the truth incumbent upon

all the saints in the locality—the truth as to God; the truth as to Christ; the truth as to the Spirit; and the truth as to the assembly both as viewed generally and locally.

They can thus be together in assembly, but they should not think or speak of themselves as being *the assembly* in the locality, for, as we have seen, the assembly in the town or locality includes *all* the saints in that locality; but as and when gathered together unto the Lord's name in the recognition of the truth, they are in assembly for the time being.

It was in the assembly as thus gathered together that the prophets prophesied and taught, and where the Lord's supper was commemorated, and where thanksgiving and praise were offered. Godly order was to obtain there, for God is not the author of confusion but of peace. And if discipline is necessary on account of sin having been committed by some one who had been accustomed to be gathered together with them, the saints when gathered together are to carry out the needed discipline in the name of the Lord Jesus, and in an extreme case, they may have to walk apart from him and

1 Cor. xiv. 33

1 Cor. v.

thus deprive him of such assembly privileges as can only be realized in the company of the saints. On the other hand, if saints in the locality who are not accustomed to be thus gathered together with them, are known to be walking disorderly, those who are exercised as to the claims of God's holy temple, walk in separation from such.

Being thus in assembly as gathered together unto the name of the Lord, and the Lord being in their midst, they have the assurance that if they are called upon to deal with matters which lie within their own sphere of responsibility they can count upon getting the mind of the Lord thereon, and if that is so, what is done by them on earth is ratified in heaven, and is done for the whole assembly on earth.

How very gracious of the Lord to make this provision for His poor saints—a provision which secures to them all the good granted to the assembly at the first, for it secures to them His presence who is in the midst of even two or three if gathered to His name in accordance with His will and word. And while all the saints in the locality are responsible to respond to the claims of God's temple,

that responsibility will be sought to be carried out by those who are thus seeking to act according to the holiness of God and to please Him in a day of ruin.

They can thus be together in assembly, in the truth of the assembly in its totality as the "*body of Christ*," in loyalty to Christ the Head; and in the truth of the assembly viewed generally as the "*house of God*," and the "*one body*"; and also in the truth of the assembly as "*the temple of God*," "*Christ's body*," and "*the candlestick*" viewed locally.

But I repeat, it would be wrong for such to take account of themselves as being *the* assembly in the locality, or even to assume to be the "Lord's gathered saints" except when they are actually gathered together.

I suppose it was out of the assembly as thus gathered together that Diotrephes unrighteously cast the saints; he denied to them the privileges connected with being together in assembly; and I suppose that when scripture refers to an assembly in a house, as in the house of Priscilla and Aquilla, that it has the saints in view who were wont to assemble in their house, or who were living in their

III John, 4, 10

1 Tim. XVI 5
1 Cor XVI. 19

house at the time, and not as including all the saints that were in Rome.

May the Lord graciously grant that His assembly, that is so precious to Him, may have a larger place in our thoughts, and that it may be better known by us in the varied aspects in which it is presented to us in the scriptures, and that the truth may greatly affect us as we remember that the assembly whom He loves is still His chief interest on earth.

E. W.