

TRUTH *for the* LAST DAYS

NO. 1.

ASSEMBLY
PRINCIPLES

. . . BY . . .

F. B. HOLE.

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I.

On what Ground should we meet?

THIS question assumed great importance in the minds of many Christians about a century ago, and at the same time that part of the Word of God, which gives His thoughts and purposes concerning the church, became remarkably luminous and clear. The hearts of many were enlightened and they acted in obedience to the truth that they discovered. All that ensued has passed into history; but the failure that marks all that is entrusted to man's responsibility having supervened, a general unsettlement of mind has occurred, and to-day the question with not a few has gained fresh significance and added urgency. We therefore address ourselves afresh to the task of answering it.

Our answer in brief must be the old one, viz. :—*We should meet on the ground of the whole revealed truth as to the Church of God, whether considered in its universal or local aspect.* These are words quickly penned and easily read. What they involve, however, is not to be expounded or discerned in a moment, and we propose to patiently investigate the matter step by step, dividing what we have to say into clearly marked sections.

First of all then we have to remark that,

Truth is revealed in order that we may obey it.

It is not made known to us to satisfy our curiosity, nor to afford topics for discussion, nor even primarily to

Assembly Principles

enlighten our minds, but rather that our minds being enlightened we may be controlled and moulded into practical obedience to what we learn. If the gospel is preached it is "for obedience to the faith" (Rom. i. 5). If "the mystery" is made manifest it is "for the obedience of faith" (Rom. xvi. 26). If believers are turning aside to law after making a start in grace the question asked is "who did hinder you that ye should not obey the truth?" (Gal. v. 7).

This fact may well exercise a solemnizing effect upon us. We can at once understand why our Lord said "Take heed therefore how ye hear: for whosoever hath, to him shall be given; and whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken even that which he seemeth to have" (Luke viii. 18). To most of us the acquisition of knowledge is a pleasant thing. There is a sense of exhilaration as Scripture and the truth it contains open out before our minds; but such exhilaration tones down into sober and sometimes even deep exercise as we face the responsibility of a walk that puts the truth into practice and expresses it. Truth may be to our mouth as sweet as honey but when received into the inward parts and digested the power and even bitterness of it are felt. (see Rev. x. 9, 10).

**A considerable part of the truth deals with the
Church of God and this part is as much to be obeyed
by us as any other.**

A large part of the truth bears upon us as individual believers, and there are many relationships in which we stand singly, though not alone. We are, for instance, children of God. Each of us is a child, though there is

a family. Still a moment came in the ways of God when all the children were to be brought into a unity of a new sort. Of this the unwitting prophecy of Caiaphas, recorded in John xi., spoke. "He prophesied that Jesus should die for that nation; and not for that nation only, but that also He should *gather together in one* the children of God that were scattered abroad." (vs. 51, 52). This gathering together in one took place by the coming of the Holy Spirit, consequent upon the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus.

The church of God then has been formed. Into it we have been brought by the reception of the Spirit of God, and to it we belong whether we recognise it or not. The Epistles of the New Testament unfold to us its calling and privileges, together with the order that should mark it in its present pilgrimage on earth and the responsibilities attaching to it. That calling, those principles, its order, its responsibilities are all *ours*; and consequently to be answered to in a practical way by us each, as the Epistles plainly show. Not one Epistle is simply an exposition of truth. Every Epistle applies the truth expounded and brings it home in a practical way, showing the bearing of it. In some cases a good deal more is said by way of practical instruction in the light of the truth, than is said in exposition of the truth itself.

We *are* a part of this wonderful corporation, the church of God, and we should diligently seek to be instructed in that to which we belong so that we may obey the truth as to it.

We need not however go outside the Bible for any detail of the truth that demands our obedience.

All truth is found in the Holy Scriptures.

This we say not because it expresses what has been commonly held in the past amongst so-called "Protestant" Christians, but because Scripture definitely asserts this for itself. "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God . . . that the man of God may be *perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works*" (2 Tim. iii. 16, 17). Had it said that Scripture had been given that "babes in Christ" might be perfect there might have been some apparent ground for arguing that though Scripture was sufficient to perfect babes it was hardly sufficient to perfect the believer so advanced spiritually as to be entitled "a man of God." Or, had the passage stopped at the perfecting of the man of God it might have been said that though Scripture does perfect as to the broad principles of truth it does not furnish us all we want as to details of practical conduct and work. But no, Scripture thoroughly furnishes the man of God in a detailed way unto all good works. It covers *all work* that can properly be called "*good*."

This is a fact of great importance because there have been those who would set up standards for the church of God, whether of love or holiness, that go beyond anything stated in Scripture. But the "love" which is more loving than the love enjoined in Scripture, and the "holiness" more holy than the holiness enjoined in Scripture are not true love nor holiness at all.

The Truth of Scripture as to the Church of God very largely falls under two heads : First, the Body of Christ ; Second, the House of God.

Of these two the former is wholly a New Testament idea, the latter finds a place in the Old. The first mention of the house of God in the Bible is Genesis xxviii. 17; though not until redemption was typically accomplished was that house even typically established amongst men on earth (See Exodus xv. 2, 13; xxv. 8). From the moment that the children of Israel were redeemed as a nation the house of God was found in their midst, and when the house ceased to be in their midst their national existence ceased likewise. But just before the house on Mount Moriah ceased in A.D. 70, God had constituted His house in a new way altogether. Believers in Christ, receiving His Spirit, were as living stones "built up a spiritual house" (1 Pet. ii. 5). They were "builded together [*i.e.*, both Jew and Gentile] for an habitation of God through the Spirit" (Eph. ii. 22). The house of God has taken now a character which involves a nearness and intimacy of relationships Godward which in earlier times was impossible, for we also read, "ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow-citizens with the saints, and of the household of God" (Eph. ii. 19). Those who are of the house are also of the household of God, and by His Spirit God now dwells in His house in a more intimate and vital way than was possible aforetime.

In Old Testament times there was no thought of the body of Christ, for Christ Himself was as yet unrevealed and therefore in the nature of things it could not be. Christ however being come, and having died and risen,

the Spirit was shed forth and He baptised believers, whether Jews or Gentiles, into one body, and that one body the body of Christ. Previously the Lord Jesus could truly say "a body hast Thou prepared Me" (Heb. x. 5), and in that sacred body He suffered. There was "the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once" (Heb. x. 10). Now He sits in heaven in a spiritual body and the only body He owns here is this one body produced by the baptism of the one Spirit who proceeded from Himself, the glorified Head. In that body Christ is to be set forth and displayed in His moral features, in this world.

Both the Body of Christ and the House of God express what the Church is as a matter of actual, practical fact upon earth, and not something that is a mystical, theoretical idea for Heaven.

It is not at all uncommon to see and hear the phrases "the mystical body of Christ" and "the invisible church." Those who use these words may mean what is right but the phrases themselves are, we believe, misleading, since they obscure, if they do not deny, the truth that the body of Christ is an actual fact. It exists on earth to-day as much as in the apostolic age, though its manifestation is marred by the intrusion of man's will and man's ways. It would be true therefore to say that it cannot be pointed to in concrete shape as in the age of the apostles and must be thought of *abstractly* by us. We must have our thoughts abstracted from what we see around and formed by what we find in Scripture. But truth which we can only perceive in an abstract way is as much true and real and actual as that which we can find in concrete shape.

Consequently it all bears upon us in a thoroughly practical way. It is intended to regulate our relations with the Lord Jesus, with God and our fellow saints; and to do so here in this world, and now. Neither of these great facts are made known to us as things to be brought to pass presently when we are in glory, and only made known to us now as an encouragement and stimulus, but as things actually subsisting to-day so that all our ways are to be regulated by them.

In its practical bearing the truth as to the Body of Christ lays special emphasis upon the supremacy of Christ as Head, the pervading energy of the Spirit as Power, with the consequent unity and love and spiritual growth of the Body.

This is very evident if we turn to the passages where the church is spoken of as the body of Christ. The first is Romans xii. Here the truth of the body is not expounded but only alluded to in very brief fashion to emphasize the variety of gift found amongst the members, so that all may be done in diligence and love.

In 1 Corinthians xii. the subject is expounded at length. The church as the body is shown, by the illustration and analogy of the human body, to be an organic unity but composed of diverse members. It was formed by the baptism of the Spirit. Those brought into it were submerged as to their natural characteristics, whether natural or social, and consequently made one in the all-pervading energy of the one Spirit. But then of course those thus formed into unity are and remain individuals, and so the gift of the Spirit also means an individual "drinking into" or imbibing of the one Spirit, so that each individual member is possessed and

controlled by the one Spirit that animates the whole. Consequently in this chapter it is the Spirit who is manifested in the Body. The various gifts are manifestations of the Spirit (verse 7).

But the Spirit who brings all this to pass is the Spirit *of and from* the ascended Christ. The body therefore is Christ's (verses 12 and 27) and there He administrates. By-and-by as Lord His administration will cover the whole earth. At present the church is the sphere of it as far as the earth is concerned. The will of God according to the Lord's administration is to be found in the church here below (verse 5).

The practical bearing of this is seen in the care and consideration and sympathy, whether in suffering or honour, that is indicated in the latter part of the chapter; also in the love so divinely eulogised in Chapter xiii., and in the healthful directions of chapter xiv. which regulate the exercise of gift in the assembly. Chapter xii. gives us the *power* resident in the body—that of the Lord and the Spirit; chapter xiii. *love* as ruling the body; chapter xiv. a *sound mind* as regulating the body; All this sets before us the body of Christ here on earth in function according to the divine intention as to it.

In Ephesians we have the body of Christ viewed in the height of its privileges according to the eternal purpose of God. The Cross of Christ is the basis upon which its formation rests (ii. 16). Its function is to be "the fulness of Him that filleth all in all" (i. 27), *i.e.* to be His complement or counterpart—that in which He is fully expressed. The height of its privilege will be publicly attained when Christ is manifested as "Head *over* all things *to* the church" (i. 22). Of this there was a type for a brief moment when Adam was set as head

over the animal creation and Eve being made of his body he became head *to* her, as sharing in his dominion.

In chapter iv. of this epistle we get the practical bearing of the truth—"all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace,"—hence growing up "into Him in all things, which is the Head, even Christ," and the body making increase "unto the edifying of itself in love" (verses 2, 3, 15, 16).

Lastly in Colossians the body is spoken of but without much detail since the great theme of the epistle is rather the glory of the Head. However, the responsibility of each member to "hold the Head" is insisted upon (ii. 19) and on the one hand we see the Apostle Paul, a member of the body, rejoicing in sufferings for the sake of the body (i. 24), whilst on the other we find the gracious and beautiful features of Christ, culminating in love and peace, coming out in saints.

The practical bearing then of the truth of the body of Christ is inclusive; inclusive of all saints. There is absolute unity yet diversity in unity. Yet not mere unity, but unity in union with and subjection to Christ; so that He as Head is expressed in His body.

In its practical bearing the truth as to the House of God lays special emphasis upon the presence of God by His Spirit in the Church and consequently upon the Order, the Godliness, the Holiness that becomes His dwelling place, for the House must be in keeping with Him whose house it is.

This, again, can easily be verified by turning to the Scriptures where this aspect of the church is presented to

us. We get two expressions used, "house" and "temple." There is of course a shade of difference between them but as both present the same general idea and have consequently a similar practical bearing, this need not detain us here.

In 1 Corinthians iii. the saints are "the temple of God" inasmuch as the Spirit of God dwells in them, consequently holiness is imperative (verses 16, 17). This thought is greatly expanded in 2 Corinthians vi. 14-18, and the holiness demanded by it is of a very thorough kind, entailing a complete separation from the defiling world with no touching of the unclean thing.

In the closing verses of Ephesians ii. this truth is referred to and the one adjective used in regard to the temple is "holy."

In the first Epistle to Timothy the church is spoken of as "the house of God, . . . the pillar and ground of the truth," and the whole epistle is full of instruction as to the order and godliness which become those who are of it. The character of God should be seen in those who compose His house.

Lastly in 1 Peter ii. the house is referred to—"a spiritual house," composed of those who having come to the Living Stone are living stones themselves. Each is a "Peter" built upon "this rock."

The practical bearing then of the truth of the House of God is exclusive; exclusive of evil, of all that would defame the character, and compromise the holiness, of Him whose house it is. The exclusion may have to go the length of the exclusion of persons as shown in 1 Corinthians v. which follows the truth enunciated in chapter iii. The same thing in principle is shown in

2 Timothy ii. 15-26, following the truth opened out in the first epistle—only here as a matter of practical application it is a case of purging oneself out from evil associations and not purging out the evil-doer.

Immediately our eyes are opened to the truth of the Church as presented in Scripture and we contemplate the putting of it into practice we become aware that the present condition of Christendom, speaking generally, is a total denial of it.

Certain things are so obvious as hardly to need pointing out, such as:—the multiplied sects which deny the unity of the church; the deliberate acceptance of union between the world and the church evidenced in state systems of religion; complete domination by man—so that *man* seals up the word of the Lord, claims to create saints by canonization and release souls from purgatory, etc., etc.—thus setting aside the Lord, as seen in the Romish religion; almost total lack of discipline so that every kind of flagrant evil, doctrinal and moral, goes on under cover of nominal christianity.

Other things are perhaps not so obvious. The distinctive sin of this dispensation has been the practical ignoring, and consequent setting aside, of the presence and operations of the Holy Spirit of God in the Church. Christian assemblies are conducted in such a way as to show complete disbelief in His presence in the church, while admitting it may be that He is present in individuals. One man is appointed as sole mouthpiece and consequently chapters xii. and xiv. of 1 Corinthians are reduced to a dead letter. Redemption is denied, so far as its effects as regards approach to God are concerned, by reconstituting holy places on earth, with

altars and priests who serve a laity shut out from God and, alas, often in an ignorance which never disgraced the common people amongst the Jews before Christ came. On all hands human order and arrangements have displaced the simplicity of divine order as established at the beginning by the apostles and recorded in Scripture. This human order may be to all human thinking very orderly and a complete deterrent to any disorder which might creep in, were we to attempt to follow the simplicity of what the apostles established. Yet all "order" which is not divine order is *disorder*.

Denominations and "churches" have been formed upon the basis of standing for certain truths or views of truths, or of identification with some man who in his day was much used of God. Consequently they lack a breadth and inclusiveness which is divine, since they only contemplate such believers as may share the views or become adherents of the leader in question. They also lack an exclusiveness which is divine, for their zeal generally exhausts itself in action against that which imperils or impoverishes their system whilst real evil goes on unchecked, and every kind of false teaching and unfaithfulness to Christ and His truth is treated with easy-going toleration.

These things being so, the question naturally arises— is the obligation to put the truth into practice still binding upon us? Might we not be content to hold the truth mentally in its outline while avoiding all further complications by just staying where we may happen to be as to our ecclesiastical connections?

The temptation to answer the former question by a negative and the latter by an affirmative has always

been strong, but never stronger than to-day, for the confusion in Christendom steadily thickens. The answer that Scripture permits is however an affirmative to the former and a negative to the latter. The closing epistles, whether of Paul, Peter or John, which contemplate days of difficulty do not for one moment suppose that the truth has become a matter of mere theory divorced from any practical expression of it.

For instance, in his Second Epistle to Timothy Paul speaks of the profitableness of Scripture, not only for doctrine but for correction and instruction in righteousness. If any should be disposed to contend that both the correction and the instruction may be understood as applying to the *mind* only, we should point them to the next verse where the object of all is declared to be that the man of God may be "furnished unto all good *works*." This is severely practical.

In Peter's second epistle he writes of those excellent moral features that are to be added to our faith. Primarily they are things which are to be *in* us, yet even so he adds "if ye *do* these things ye shall never fall" (i. 10). This again is practical.

In John's second and third epistles he has much to say about the "walk" of believers. He speaks of walking "in truth" and "after His commandments." To "walk" in a thing is to put that thing into practice, and this is emphasized just when anti-christian teachers were becoming common and Diotrephes was asserting himself and causing confusion in the church.

The fact is this, the more confusion and defection spreads the more important it is to walk in the truth—to put all truth into practice—even if only a few will do it.

The further question may be asked—can the Truth of the Church be put in any way into practice under present conditions? In what way is it possible as things are to-day?

It would clearly be quite impossible to walk into any building devoted to divine service according to a liturgy, or where all is performed by one man who is an ordained minister, and carry on the gathering according to the principles laid down by the Holy Spirit in 1 Corinthians xii. and xiv. Any who attempted it would be considered as brawlers or as guilty of a "breach of the peace." There is only one way in which the truth as to the Church can be practised and that is by ceasing ourselves to practise what is not the truth, by withdrawing from that which has no sanction from Scripture, indeed is directly opposed to Scripture, in order that free from such disobedience we may be marked by obedience. In a word, we must first "cease to do evil" and then "learn to do well." To even attempt to go on with both would be great disservice to the cause of truth. It would say, in effect, that there is no essential difference between what is purely human and what is divine, so much so that we can go on indifferently with either or both. Against withdrawal it is often urged that such action only ends in making one more sect. But there is nothing sectarian in so meeting as to practically obey the truth. It is sadly true of course that such action might ultimately result in the creation of another sect, but that would be not *because of* such action, but because there subsequently developed a counter-action, a decline, either suddenly or slowly and imperceptibly (probably the latter), into sectarian principles.

**But have we authority to withdraw from Historic
"Church" Organizations apart from advocacy or
toleration on their part of fundamentally false
doctrines?**

A very important question. It comes to this, is human organization, human system introduced into God's ordering of His church, an evil thing—such evil that we must forsake it even if it costs much to do so?

Admittedly, the religious systems and organizations of to-day great and small are largely captured by a very pretentious form of infidelity, based upon great claims to scholarship, usually spoken of as "modernism." But suppose they were not, but instead they stood foursquare on a sound Scriptural basis, ought we still to withdraw from them? There are to-day, as a matter of fact, quite a number of smaller and more or less independent organizations which do stand on a basis of sound foundation truth though ignoring the order of the church as presented in Scripture. Those supporting these organizations are earnest and pious people. Ought we to stand aloof from such organizations?

In the first place we affirm that the imposition of human system and organization upon the divine order, so that ultimately the divine is obliterated, is a very grievous sin. It is not a sin to be attached to any one individual, since it has crept in by slow stages covering centuries, still it is a serious evil. It is a striking fact that at the close of a long passage in 1 Corinthians in which Paul gives us by the Spirit the divine order for the actual assemblings of the church, he solemnly says: — "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.*" (xiv. 37). In this way the Holy Spirit of God, with the prescience that always marks Him, anticipated not only the tendencies prevailing amongst the Corinthians in their carnal condition, but the same tendencies which inevitably come to the front when at any time or in any place carnality prevails; and which consequently have been in evidence through the centuries and are still prominent to-day.

When spiritual power is low and the principles of the world prevail in the church the tendency is to find divine order irksome. It makes certain demands upon a spiritual condition which is not present. It exposes the carnal weakness which is present. Then comes the strong temptation to treat the instructions of Scripture as not binding: useful on many occasions, it may be; interesting and instructive, yet optional and not imperatively to be obeyed; something that *may* be and not something that *must* be. All this however is entirely swept away by the apostolic word. These instructions are "*the commandments of the Lord.*" Are we at liberty then to alter them according to taste?

Certainly not! By way of analogy think of that which was instituted in connection with the law system, which only gave "the example and shadow of heavenly things." We read that "Moses was admonished by God when he was about to make the tabernacle: for, see, saith He, that thou make all things according to the pattern shewed to thee in the mount" (Heb. viii. 5). Moses was faithful in all God's house and the pattern was strictly adhered to. At a later period the permanent house was to be erected in Jerusalem, and we read "Then David gave to Solomon his son the pattern of the

porch and of the houses thereof . . . and the pattern of all that he had by the Spirit . . . all this, said David, the Lord made me understand in writing by His hand upon me, even all the works of this pattern." (1 Chron. xxviii. 11-19. *Read the whole passage*). Again we find that every detail was divinely ordered and *in writing*. In the New Testament we have in writing the divine instructions as to the order of God's spiritual house. Are we accorded any more liberty to tamper with these than was accorded of old as to the instructions for the material house? Again we reply, certainly not!

As a matter of fact, at a later date the Jews did believe themselves competent to alter or add to the divine regulations as to the house; and what was the result? The Lord Jesus when He visited it said, "It is written My house is the house of prayer: but ye have made it a den of thieves" (Luke xix. 46). They also tampered with the divine word generally, with the result that the Lord accused them of "making the Word of God of none effect through your tradition, which ye have delivered: and many such like things ye do" (Mark vii. 13). The strength of the language which He employed on these occasions should help to show us that their sin in all this was not accounted a light one by Him.

But there is more than this to be said. In the second place we point to a plain instruction which Scripture gives us as to the believer's position in relation to a system of outward religion.

Just before the whole Jewish religious economy was swept away by the destruction of the city and the temple the epistle to the Hebrews was written. In it the Spirit of God encourages the Jewish believers by shewing them

that the system of visible religious symbols instituted in connection with the law was only a system of shadows and that they who had fled to Christ for refuge had the possession of the realities by faith. He ends with a call to them to cut their last links with the old and worn out system of earthly religion. He sets before their vision the Christ that "suffered without the gate." His exhortation is, "Let us go forth therefore unto Him without the camp, bearing His reproach" (xiii. 13).

We are to go forth to Him, be it noted, not "without *the city*" but "without *the camp*." Throughout the epistle the reference is not to the order of things—city and temple, etc.—connected with the permanent settling into the land; but to the order of things connected with the wilderness journey—the tabernacle and the camp. One reason for this is that in the epistle Christians are viewed as a company with heavenly associations and on their way to a heavenly rest but as a matter of fact still in wilderness conditions upon earth; and of that Israel's wilderness circumstances were typical. Another reason is that inasmuch as both city and temple were established when God raised up royal authority in Israel, in connection with David, they stand more connected with God's government of the earth, and Israel is viewed as the nation through whom that government should be administered. On the other hand, in the wilderness tabernacle God set forth His purpose to dwell in the midst of a redeemed people and to group that people round Himself. The camp was Israel in an orderly manner surrounding the dwelling-place of God;—Israel viewed not governmentally but *religiously*.

In the day when the epistle to the Hebrews was written the *Shekinah* cloud which had been the glory of

Israel's camp had long since departed ; yet the camp,—Israel's religious system—still remained. It had however sealed its doom by crucifying Jesus without the gate, and the hour had struck for every true believer of Jewish nationality to cut his last link with that system of earthly religion, *though at its beginning it was divinely instituted*. There was now nothing left but weak and beggarly elements" (Gal. iv. 9).

This being so, we have no hesitation in answering the question that we have under consideration as follows :—*If in the first century of Christianity it was the will of God that believers who had been inside an earthly religious system, which in its beginning was divinely instituted, should cut their last links with it and go outside it to Christ, it cannot be God's will in this day that believers should remain inside earthly religious systems which are purely human in their origin and never were at any time instituted of God.*

As surely as you have a religious system of human origin so surely is Christ outside it ; though of course He may be much loved by and very near to many a dear saint who remains entangled in the human system. We have authority to withdraw from religious organizations of human origin that we may observe and walk according to the divine order as laid down in Scripture.

**Moreover, separation from evil and from evil men
is at all times incumbent upon all who fear the Lord
and name His Name.**

This is most powerfully stated with full apostolic authority (*i.e.*, as the Word of God) in 1 Timothy ii. 14-iii. 5. In that passage separation is enjoined no less

than *six times* under different terms. The six occurrences are as follows :—

“**Shun** profane and vain babblings” (ii. 16).

“**Depart** from iniquity” (ii. 18).

“**Purge** himself from [lit. *out from*] these” (ii. 21).

“**Flee** also youthful lusts” (ii. 22).

“Foolish and unlearned questions **avoid**” (ii. 23).

“From such **turn away**” (iii. 5).

If something presents itself to you, and you shun, depart from, purge yourself from, flee from, avoid, and turn away from it, you have certainly adopted an attitude of uncompromising separation from it.

This important passage has however been so much discussed and used in such a variety of ways that we will attempt a methodical yet brief exposition of it leaving the reader to judge. We assume that the reader will open his Bible at the passage and refer to it continuously as we proceed.

Verses 14 and 15:—Timothy is to put believers in mind of the truth and charge them not to indulge in strifes over points of no profit and which have the effect merely of mentally overturning the hearers. Personally he is to make it his aim to be a skilful workman in God's service, handling the Word of God with understanding.

Verses 16-18. There were not only unprofitable strivings about words to no profit but there was worse evil in the shape of “profane and vain babblings” that were going to increase unto more ungodliness, and spread as a canker or gangrene: *i.e.*, they would increase in evil both as to intensity and extent. That there might be no mistake as to what he alluded to, Paul

names two men who were leaders in this "profane babbling"—Hymenæus and Philetus: he specifies the particular point of truth wherein they had erred—in saying that the resurrection is past already: he points out the gravity of the error as seen in its effect upon those who imbibed it—their faith was overthrown. The error was fundamental and subversive of faith in those who accepted it.

Verse 19. In contrast with the human teachings which overthrow the faith of the taught there is "the foundation of God" which "stands sure," or "the firm foundation of God" which "stands." The apostle alludes we believe not to any special truth or word of God but to the general fact that everything really founded by God is immoveable. It carries this seal which has a twofold bearing: firstly in connection with His own sovereignty and omniscience, which guarantees the security of His own; secondly in connection with human responsibility which imposes upon all who profess subjection to Christ as Lord the obligation to depart from iniquity. Here also all is stated in general terms. There is an allusion, we believe, to the incident concerning Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, recorded in Numbers xvi. These men rose up against the Word of God as presented in Moses and Aaron and overthrew the allegiance of some. The message of the Lord on that occasion was twofold. First, "To-morrow the Lord will show who are His" (verse 5); second, "Depart, I pray you from the tents of these wicked men" (verse 26).

This allusion throws light on the passage. Yet the verse we have before us simply states general principles. The believer is to "depart from iniquity" everywhere and always. Iniquity takes different forms and the

“departing” incumbent upon us may be accomplished in different ways as suits the different forms of iniquity. The believer however is never to go on in complicity with any kind of evil. From it, in all its forms, he is to depart.

Verse 20, Having clearly specified the evil that was in question and laid down the general principle governing the believer's attitude towards all evil, Paul now illustrates the matter. In a great house—a large establishment—there are many vessels, differing radically both as to material of which they are constructed and as to use to which they may be put. Some are of the precious metals, gold and silver; some of wood and earth. Some for honourable use and some for dishonour in use. The illustration applied inasmuch as already the church having largely expanded in numbers, it was becoming like a great house, and men of a questionable sort, like Hymenæus and Philetus, were becoming all too common; men who were like vessels of baser stuff put to dishonourable use.

Verse 21 gives us *the application of the general principle of verse 19 to the case in point as stated in verse 18; an application made in the light of the illustration given in verse 20.*

“If a *man*.” This shows that Paul now has primarily before him not the illustration but the application of it to the sad condition then being manifested in the church.

“A man” Because what is enjoined applies to *all* concerned, and yet rests as a responsibility upon *each severally*. It is an individual injunction.

"Purge himself from." The word translated purge means to purify or to cleanse out. It only occurs twice in the New Testament; 1 Corinthians v. 7, where it is translated "purge out," and here. There it is the normal work of purging evil out of the church. Here the abnormal of a man purging himself out of an association which has become dominated by evil.

"From these"; *i.e.*, Hymenæus, Philetus and their associates. If any contend that grammatically we should read "these" as referring to vessels to dishonour the meaning would be no different for they only illustrate these erring men. We believe the word refers not to the illustration but to the men illustrated.

The rest of the verse does clearly adopt the language of the illustration. A disciple faithfully clearing himself from all fellowship and complicity with these teachers of fundamentally false doctrine would be like a vessel to honour, sanctified and serviceable to the Master, prepared unto every good work.

Verse 22, "Flee also youthful lusts." Another application of the general principle to "depart from iniquity." This exhortation does not concern others but oneself. It demands not separation from evil men but personal holiness, without which the former would degenerate into mere hypocrisy. "Youthful lusts" because Timothy who was addressed was as yet a young man. All sinful lusts are of course to be fled from and the believer is to follow or pursue "righteousness, faith, love, peace." The world is full of sin, spiritual blindness, hatred and strife and the saint is to wear in the midst of it the character of Christ, as specified in this fourfold way. Moreover, these things are to be pursued in a practical way and "with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart."

We are to follow "*with*"—this means not isolation but companionship. To "call on the Lord" means to profess subjection to Him and faith in His Name. To do this "out of a pure heart" or "purged heart"—for it is practically the same word as "purge" in verse 27, only it is the adjective and not the verb, and without the prefix, *ek.*, meaning "out of"—signifies to do it not only with sincerity but with the very citadel of the inner man purged by obedience to the exhortation to personal holiness as in the beginning of the verse and the exhortation to holiness in associations, as in verse 21.

Note, we are not told to follow with "*all* who call upon the Lord out of a pure heart"—as often quoted. This would lay upon us an impossible and therefore an intolerable task under present conditions. Many most excellent Christians answering to this description might, for instance, decline the company of others equally answering to the description, under stress of prejudice or by reason of accepting as facts what are not facts. Such, alas! is the infirmity of even the best of saints and such the confusion of christendom. We can however "follow . . . with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart"—as many as may be available and truly the more of such available the more we shall rejoice.

Verses 23-26 show that the saint that obeys the instruction given must avoid strifes and the foolish questions that gender such, while at the same time he must fully expect *opposition* and must meet it in the lowly spirit of Christ and thus he may be used for blessing and recovery of the opposers.

Now, though the Spirit of God seized the opportunity created by the false teaching of Hymenæus and Philetus to give these instructions, it does not appear that the

evil at that moment reached the stage that compelled Timothy and other faithful witnesses to withdraw themselves from the mass of professed believers. Rather the evil was met by the energy of the Spirit; some doubtless were recovered "out of the snare of the devil" (2 Tim. ii. 26), and the anti-christian teachers themselves, repulsed in their efforts, "went out from us" (1 Jno. ii. 19). The God-given instructions remain however, and the time has long since been reached when the action indicated, and that to the fullest extent, has become necessary. It has been very rightly affirmed that "to pursue union at the expense of truth is treason against the Lord," for no union which involves complicity with evil is of God. Only in separation from evil is God's unity to be found.

Let it be noted again as we close this section that the separation enjoined is an *individual* matter. It is a responsibility resting upon "a man" (verse 21), though the individual who faithfully answers to the injunction is led in verse 22 to expect that he will find associates in the position he thus takes up.

Believers who go forth to Christ "without the Camp," and also purge themselves from false teachers and teachings, must now in their gatherings as in all else be governed by all the truth as regards the Church, whilst ever remembering that they are nothing more than a few of those who belong to it.

The position they occupy they have indeed reached as the result of individual exercise and action, yet they are not left to proceed on individual lines, as though everything of a corporate nature had ceased to be. The body of Christ, the house of God, are realities as much as ever, and they are as much as ever members of that body and

living stones in that house, and hence the privileges and responsibilities which are attached to those capacities are theirs as much as ever.

When they gather together they should meet just according to that which they *are*; and act as directed by the Word of God. This they should do if they were only two or three and the number of Christians in their town who for various reasons remain in the camp or in complicity with evil numbered two or three thousand. Christ is still their Head in heaven and may safely be counted on for direction. The Spirit is still here and may safely be counted on for power. The Word of God remains and may still be counted upon for instruction.

Consequently they may still enjoy a measure of fellowship according to the apostolic pattern. Other believers may cling to their sectarian position and names, yet they may rejoice to look upon such simply as members of the body of Christ and to receive according to the Word all such as desire to be received, always provided that they are not disqualified by evil practice, evil doctrine, or evil associations. To receive saints who are prepared to formally "join us" is what every sect will do. To receive saints because they are members of Christ and are not Scripturally disqualified is according to the truth.

There is just this exception, that the outward framework of things—if we may so speak—in connection with rule and service in the assembly, as found in elders and deacons, is no longer available *in an official way* for lack of any authority to appoint. But then officially appointed elders are not essential for the maintenance of an assembly for there were evidently none at Thessalonica when Paul wrote his second epistle to them, for he said, "We

beseech you brethren to know them which labour among you, and are over you in the Lord, etc." (2 Thess. v. 12-13). To "know" there clearly means to "recognize." Such an injunction would only be possible when men who were real "elders" existed but were without official appointment. Nothing to-day hinders elders being "known," where they exist. It is also worthy of note that in the 1st Epistle to Corinthians, the epistle that gives assembly order, bishops or elders are not even mentioned, and further, that in correcting the disorder that prevailed in Corinth the Apostle never once suggests that they should be appointed.

As a matter of fact for quite a long time now saints have been aiming at gathering on the lines indicated; and experience has shewn certain dangers which are always present and threatening to deflect from the truth. We close by naming some of the chief of them.

1. *Sectarianism*. Few things are easier than to slip into this. Those who have sought grace to gather on the lines indicated above have necessarily found themselves outside the religious organizations of the day and consequently separated in all external things from the great mass of their fellow believers who adhered to the organizations. How easy then to become entirely separated from them in heart and affection! How easy to lapse into becoming a select community, compact and self-contained and with no interest in anything lying out-side the community boundaries!

This danger has been accentuated by the large measure of light on Scripture vouchsafed to those who have gathered in practical obedience to the Word of God.

The natural tendency has consequently been to use the light given in the same way as the early Corinthian believers used, or rather abused, their gifts, viz : by using them for their own credit and distinction instead of for the profit of the whole body. Light from God, light on Scripture, may be used in just the same way—to give credit and distinction to the community possessing it, instead of using it for the good of all saints. Then it becomes the badge of a sect and the community sectarian and the tendency is for the “light” to become darkness. The fruit of all this kind of thing is that light, or what passes for being “the light” at any given time, becomes the great test of communion, and willingness to become a member of the community is the all-important thing. All thought of receiving saints—not disqualified by evil behaviour, evil doctrine, or association and complicity with either,—as members of Christ becomes ruled out, and in that case we should find ourselves back again on the old ground of sectarianism, only with much more exactitude in our mode of meeting and in our Scriptural knowledge, but for that very reason the more condemned in our sectarianism.

Saints who gather in obedience to the truth are sure to be accused of being a mere *sect* and a small one at that. Being only a very small part of the church and not the whole they may find it impossible to rebut the charge. Let them however see to it that they flee from *sectarianism* both in their spirit and in the principle of their gathering.

2. *Laxity of principle.* The opposite danger to the one we have been considering and specious because taking many forms. Sectarianism is the special danger of those of rigid and narrow, though of intellectual mind. Laxity is the danger of those with large and catholic

ideals and benevolent hearts. Those would preserve the truth and maintain holiness by exclusion of all but the most select. These would maintain charity and promote amity and union by toleration of an easy-going kind.

But this line of things also is fatal to the taking up of true assembly ground, for in the first place it invariably weakens if it does not destroy, the taking up of the place with Christ outside the camp; since it compromises, and hangs on to the outskirts of the camp for the sake of more catholicity, tending towards a mere inter-denominationalism. In the second place it weakens and often destroys a really clear and uncompromising repudiation of fundamentally unsound teaching and separation from those who promulgate it, as indicated in 2 Timothy ii. 15-26 and 2 John 7-11; its tendency being to unduly stress the spirit of toleration; and also, while ultimately taking action against the evil in its more glaring forms, to admit it in a modified guise.

Thus the way is paved for an abandonment of a walk according to truth, not by one great and decisive step but by slow and almost imperceptible stages. History can furnish us with many illustrations of the way the spirit of laxity works. It would seem that whenever the Church has been confronted with fundamental evil there have been manifested firstly those who have met it with decision and without compromise, and secondly those who have pleaded for toleration and wished to compromise under one pretext or another.

3. *Ecclesiastical assumption.* This springs out of the first danger indicated, indeed is its almost certain accompaniment. Unmindful of the fallen state of the professing church, powers may be assumed for which no divine warrant exists, powers which are quite genuinely felt to

be necessary to preserve the community in its proper form. Decisions and actions of an assembly character, though hastily conceived and executed under pressure of a personal or party kind, may be invested with immense sanctity and made the subject of extravagant claims. Authority may be gradually vested in certain localities or certain cliques and thus a system of metropolitanism or beauraucratic control may gradually creep in, and woe betide the individual saint who has the temerity to question what is arranged or decided under such conditions.

4. *Ecclesiastical independency.* The pendulum may however swing away from these high claims and assumptions, and, to avoid the evils connected with them, the system of independency may be resorted to. In that case each meeting becomes regarded as a self-contained unity, standing on its own basis, independent of any other gathering. The church as the body of Christ, the house of God, a unity composed of all saints everywhere outside of all questions of locality, is either entirely overlooked or else is treated as an ideal only, and hence not demanding practice in accordance therewith. To adopt an order of things which gives us a number of independent local assemblies more or less closely affiliated, or even without any affiliation at all, so that the largest possible measure of personal freedom is allowed to the individual, is to practise that which falls far short of that which Scripture directs.

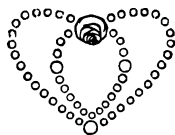
5. *Extravagant discipline unwarranted by Scripture.* This flows naturally out of the first and third dangers mentioned. A sectarian position nearly always calls forth a furore of zeal in its defence. No spirit is fiercer than party spirit and under its influence the extremest

measures are adopted. Yet in the early days before the apostles passed off the scene, the church was threatened by all kinds of evil within, and suitable disciplinary measures were presented by inspired pens. To enforce to-day discipline sterner and more drastic than that which is apostolic may have the appearance of great sanctity and zeal; it is really only presumption and human wilfulness, as though we were wiser than God. The substitution of stern disciplinary action for pastoral care and the faithful dealing of love, which in far larger measure tax one's spiritual powers, has been a very fruitful cause of grievous failure.

6. *Lax discipline.* This as naturally springs out of the second and fourth dangers mentioned. If the idea of catholicity becomes of all importance a large toleration is imperative. If the local assembly as an autonomous unit is the thing before the mind any discipline taken has the boundaries of that local community as its limit, and any discipline attempted may easily be shorn of its power by the contrary action of another autonomous assembly not far distant from the first. When Paul wrote to the Corinthians and urgently called for discipline of the severest sort that is possible (1 Cor. v.) he addressed "the church of God which is at Corinth . . . with *all* that in *every* place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours." (1 Cor. i. 2). The onus of the disciplinary action lay primarily upon the local assembly at Corinth, yet the whole Church was implicated in it. And if to-day the saints who seek to gather on assembly ground and walk in the light of the truth, however few they may be, are called upon to exercise discipline they must in principle act according to this.

If saints are found to-day outside religious organizations of human origin and in separation from evil, and there practising truth, and walking according to the truth of the church as found in Scripture, we believe that they will be approved of God, as to the position they take—they will be meeting on ground which is divine. Let it never be forgotten however that even so, moral and spiritual condition is of the first importance. Correct ecclesiastical *position* without an answering spiritual *condition* is as sad a spectacle as can be imagined, and the precursor of departure. In that case the position is soon lost.

Let us then seek above everything that practical piety, that unworldliness, that communion with God, that devotion to Christ and His interests, which alone can make correct and scriptural position a witness to the truth and for the glory of Christ.



II.

Brief Notes bearing upon Questions raised as to "A Circle of Meetings."

Taking things as they were normally at the beginning there were :—

1. The individual saint.

2. The various local assemblies, at Jerusalem, Antioch, Corinth, etc. These local assemblies each bore the character of Christ's body. In writing to the Corinthians the Apostle said, "Now ye are Christ's body" (1 Cor. xii. 27, N. Trans.). Not "*the* body" as the A. V. has it. Only the whole Church is *the* body, yet each assembly bears the body character in its own locality. Each local assembly also has its own state and responsibility and may be scrutinized and judged separately by the Lord, as Revelation ii. and iii. show. In short, each local assembly had a definite status of its own.

3. The whole Church subsisting on earth at any given moment, which is the *one* body of Christ, and is animated by one Spirit. (See Eph. iv. 4.)

For brevity's sake we shall refer to these three as "the individual saint," "the local assembly," and "the whole church."

1.

At the beginning then, when things were still according to the divine mind, there was nothing, having a definite status of its own, between the individual saint

and the local assembly. The attempt to create smaller circles than the local assembly at Corinth—"I am of Paul," Apollos, Cephas, etc.—was sternly rebuked. There were of course assemblies convened in the houses of different saints (see Rom. xvi. 5; Col. iv. 15, and elsewhere.) Whether these were the local assemblies in their localities, or a number of saints in some quarter of a large city meeting thus for convenience sake, we have no means of knowing. Nor would it help us if we did know. It may be that the many who were gathered together praying in the "house of Mary the mother of Mark" (Acts xii. 12), was such an assembly, but if so it had no status but that of being a part of "the church which was in Jerusalem" (Acts xi. 22).

Again, there was nothing, having a definite status of its own, between the local assembly and the whole church. We do read of the "churches of Galatia" and of "the churches [or possibly as some M.SS. have it—"the church"] . . . throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria" (Acts ix. 31), *i.e.*, the church or churches within certain geographical limits. There is no such thing as "the church of Galatia" which might serve as a precedent for "the church of England," "the church of Scotland," etc.

2.

When we turn from things as they were at the beginning and take things as we find them to-day, the individual believer can happily be discovered with ease, at least in these English-speaking lands. Both the local assembly and the whole church have, however, receded into the realm of abstract truth. They cannot be found in any concrete shape that can be seen and appealed to.

It is possible that amongst the heathen in the early days of missionary labour in any given spot the local assembly might be found in concrete form,—though even this is quite open to question (see Collected Writings of J. N. D. Vol. xx. p. 448).

Confining our thoughts to that which more immediately surrounds us, we may say that about a century ago certain Christians withdrew from many and various unscriptural connections to meet as members of Christ's body on the simple ground of the church of God and its original principles. There came to pass thereby, in Dublin, London, Plymouth and elsewhere, something that was in concrete shape, *viz.*, meetings of saints gathered and formed on the lines and according to the principles of the local assembly. Yet they were by no means *the* local assembly in their various localities, because much smaller than it, being in every case only a fragment of it.

As the movement extended and these local meetings grew in number they got into touch, and sought to enjoy intercourse and practical fellowship with each other according to the pattern of the apostolic church; commending by letters, etc., In result it came to pass that just as there were saints meeting locally and acting in the light of, and according to the principles of the local assembly, though not the local assembly, so there were found pretty generally throughout Great Britain and elsewhere saints acting in the light of, and according to the principles of the whole church, though not the whole church.

Thus things continued for some time. Then the adversary worked and division supervened with its effect in scattering, both as regards the local meeting walking

according to the truth of the local assembly, and the larger number of saints walking according to the truth of the whole church.

As the result of the consequent confusion and distress there have arisen in later years those who condemn the thought of saints attempting to walk in the light of the truth as to the whole church, regarding it merely as an attempt to maintain "a circle of meetings" of a small and obscure sort, and as the main root of all the trouble. At the same time they approve of and support the "local meeting"—that is, the local meeting which opens its portal to receive themselves—even though the said meeting is far removed from being *the* local assembly, and indeed is only one among several other meetings in the same locality, having little or no practical fellowship with each other as the fruit of the divisions that have occurred. There is nothing scriptural, say they, between the local assembly and the whole church; and hence the remedy for our difficulties is to abandon any idea of a "circle" larger than the little circle which may be obtained locally in a "meeting." As to anything larger, each meeting, and indeed each individual in a meeting, must be left free to form their own "connection" or "fellowship" or "circle" as they judge right before the Lord.

That there is nothing scriptural between the local assembly and the whole church is perfectly true, if by "the local assembly" is meant, not some little local "meeting," but **THE** local assembly, which, alas! we have not in any concrete shape to-day. It is equally true, though those who advocate the idea we are considering never seem to lay any stress upon it, that there is nothing scriptural between the individual

Christian and THE local assembly. Why not be consistent, and carry the idea propounded right through to its logical conclusion? The reasoning which would forbid saints having any clearly recognized fellowship *generally* with others throughout the land, so that they may walk together in the light of the truth as to the whole church, is equally valid against a few saints venturing to meet and enjoy any clearly recognized fellowship *locally*, so as to walk in the light of the local assembly. In other words, the reasoning we are considering would shut us up to the conclusion that the whole movement of century ago was a mistake and unwarrantable from Scripture.

If we have no authority for walking in the light of, so as to obey and practise, what is general according to the truth of the whole church, what authority have we for meeting in the light of, so as to obey and practise, what is local and particular, according to the truth of the local assembly? This question is emphasized when we remember that the local aspect of things is, as we may say, accidental and not essential. It is provisional in view of the present time condition of the church. At the coming of the Lord every local assembly will in the twinkling of an eye cease to be, and only the whole church will remain—the whole church in its fullest aspect, as comprising all saints from Pentecost onwards to that moment. The general aspect is the abiding thing connected with the eternal purposes of God.

3.

Some may enquire—Is not Matthew xviii. 20, a Scriptural warrant for a *local* meeting of saints which may not include *all* those in the place? We believe

with great thankfulness that it is so. We believe that though the passage is not primarily prophetic of the last days yet the Lord so framed His words that they do give even two or three authority to gather unto His Name in the days of ruin which have supervened during His absence. But then we believe with equal thankfulness that 2 Timothy ii. 22 is so worded as to be Scriptural warrant for the purged saint walking with like-minded saints in a *general* way. That passage does not stand in a local setting. The Epistle was not written to a particular local assembly but to a gifted servant of Christ. Timothy of course must have been in some locality—be it Ephesus or elsewhere—yet he was not a man in local office, such as an elder or deacon, but a man endued with gift (i. 6), which is universal and not local. The “great house” of chapter ii. 20 is an illustration of what the professing church was fast becoming, of Christendom in fact: not of some local assembly merely. Hence the whole passage including verse 22 must be read in a universal and not in any restricted local sense. Note, however, that in both scriptures a condition is found. In one case it is “unto My Name,” in the other “out of a pure heart.” These are the clauses designed to arrest and cause exercise of heart and conscience.

4.

We shall be asked, Do you then claim that all those saints with whom you enjoy fellowship possess that pure heart, and that all others outside lack it? And perhaps also the parallel question, Do you claim that only those who meet with you locally gather unto His Name? Our answer is that we make no such claims but instead make it our aim to be according to both conditions ourselves, while awaiting the coming day of review when the Lord

will determine the measure in which we have succeeded in our aim. Neither question should frighten us from making it our aim to be according to the truth of both verses ; that is, of walking according to the truth of the local assembly and of the whole church—*of the whole church* as well as of the local assembly.

5.

We may further be asked to give a clear “Yes” or “No” to the question, Do you then believe in “a circle of meetings?” Our answer would be “No, because we believe in something far greater than a circle of meetings.”

Paul's labours in the first century may have produced, in fact *did* produce, what to the ordinary observer had the appearance of being “a circle of Christian assemblies ;” yet it was not that because more than that, for he was being used to bring into evidence the body of Christ.

The labours of godly enlightened men a century ago may have produced, in fact *did* produce, what to the ordinary observer had the appearance of being just “a little circle of meetings ;” yet it was not that for we verily believe that they were used by God to lead some saints back into practical obedience to the truth of the church both in its local and general aspects. During the century which has elapsed much division and confusion may have come to pass but we do not propose to ourselves any different or lesser aim to-day. To walk according to that truth is our desire and not to form or maintain a mere circle of meetings.

6.

If we now turn to those who have, as they tell us, abandoned the idea of a circle of meetings, what do we find? This—that they really can no more get away from some kind of a “circle” than they can run from their own shadow while in the sunlight. It dogs their steps unrelentingly. So many meetings there are, and of such variety, that however highly inclusive a believer may be he cannot possibly embrace them all and has to be content with a “circle” of some kind. What they have clearly abandoned is the idea of settling questions of fellowship *in* fellowship with others, in favour of settling them upon individual lines. Whether these saints meeting here, or those saints meeting there, should be recognized as gathered in the truth and consorted with is, they judge, a matter to be settled by each individual saint for himself—no matter how conflicting the consequent decisions may be—and not settled in fellowship with others already walking in the truth. In abandoning as they think “a circle of meetings” they are abandoning any attempt to obey and practise the truth *as to the whole assembly*.

7.

Having said this much we confess to being keenly alive to the fact that there is considerable ground for someone saying,—But as a matter of fact, you have all so far declined from the understanding and practice of the truth that you have *all* become nothing more nor less than just so many “circles of meetings”—just warring factions, each contending for its own view-point of truth, or its own ecclesiastical actions and decisions. If that were an undoubted fact the course to be pursued by a

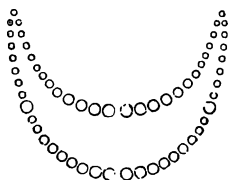
man of faith would be quite clear. He would have to stand *outside* all parties of this sort. We do not doubt that if the state of things resembled that depicted in 1 Corinthians, where the parties or schools of opinion were all inside the one assembly, those who are "approved" (xi. 10), would be those who, while excluding evil-doers (as in chapter v.) move freely among all the saints entirely above and outside of all parties. The position to-day is, alas! much more grave than this. The incipient schisms of Corinth have become open and avowed breaches, which if not sanctioned by the word of the Lord are very serious sin, and to move amongst all would be to condone all the sin which they represent.

For ourselves, we do not think that *all* have as yet fallen so low that there is nothing left but warring factions—the considerable exercise that exists in many hearts testifies otherwise,—though we are alive to the danger. But if we did think so we could not adopt as the remedy a kind of "inter-circle-ism" very akin in nature to the popular inter-denominationalism of the day. If indeed any of us have become entangled in what has become but a circle of meetings, let us by all means abandon the circle in a repentant spirit, (for repentance always opens "a door of hope." See Rev. ii. 5, 16, 21; iii. 3, 19), but do not let us abandon the aim of walking according to the truth of the whole church in favour of everybody doing in matters of fellowship that which is right in his own eyes.

8.

Lastly, we recognize that owing to the sad developments of the past few decades much discredit has been

cast upon the truth and any attempt to practise it, and that consequently there is an increasing tendency for believers to get together outside organized denominational religion in little "missions" and meetings of various kinds, often as the fruit of the labours of some earnest evangelist. These meetings have links with whatever body of Christians the evangelist is connected with; but such links are often of a very slender order in the early history of the meeting. As time passes they become confirmed and powerful. We believe that, if the opening occurs for it, special attention and service may well be rendered to such believers; but surely any servant of God who values fellowship would be careful in this, as in all else, to act as far as possible in concert with those with whom he is walking; and go to such, not to confirm them in their anomalous and imperfect position, but to so instruct them that they may stand perfect and complete in *all* the will of God.



III.

Assembly Ground or Eclecticism?

We may be profoundly thankful to God as we look back upon the wonderful recovery and reaffirmation of truth which began so powerfully to be manifested about a century ago. We may be equally thankful that the truth was not only recovered and affirmed but also obeyed in practical fashion by not a few, and this thankfulness we feel in spite of the fact that as the century has progressed the breakdown and failure, which inevitably marks any movement which depends upon the faithfulness of men, has become more and more manifest, and hence both in principle and practice the truth has been discredited and often abandoned.

The adversary has laid for our feet more snares than one, but it will be sufficient for the moment if we confine ourselves to the consideration of one, and that a diversion from the truth of a very enticing and subtle nature. In referring to it under the term "eclecticism" we shall need perhaps to start by defining exactly what we mean.

Amongst the ancient Greek philosophers the "eclectics" were those who refused to subscribe to any recognized philosophic system but preferred to use their own judgment and select certain ideas from this system, and others from that. Hence as their name implies (*eklego*=to pick out) they chose or picked out this or that in the realm of *ideas* and *thought* and welded what they thus obtained into select systems of their own. Now in this paper we use the word as designating the idea that the thing to be desired is the picking out and bringing

together into one, of all the most desirable *persons*, so as to form a selected and select *company*. To have before one the object and aim of gathering out from less desirable and spiritual people of a select company of more desirable and spiritual people is to pursue a line of things which in this paper we designate for brevity's sake as "eclecticism."

We do not think that anyone well informed as to the movement that began to take place about a century ago will question that it eventuated in the clear recovery and exposition of the truth as to the nature, character, present privilege and responsibility, and future destiny of the church of God, on the one hand; and the gathering out of saints from many unscriptural systems that they might assemble in practical recognition of and obedience to the truth thus recovered to their souls, on the other. If any would maintain otherwise, and contend that what was before these brethren of a century ago was the aim of gathering together all the most select and spiritual to be found in Christendom into one body, we are confident that their contention must fail in the presence of the published writings of that period which remain to us.

A point however, of far greater moment than this is that of *what saith the Scripture?* Could it even be found that this century-old movement was just a new manifestation of the eclectic spirit in the church of God, it would only mean that the whole movement would be largely shorn of its value, for we are persuaded that the only path approved of God or sanctioned by Scripture for the last days of any dispensation is *the return as far as may be possible to the original principles and practice which characterized the dispensation at its outset*. God always institutes that which is according to His mind, and hence

any deviation from or alteration of His principles involves their corruption. Man on the other hand starts his inventions with what is crude and imperfect and his alterations generally mean improvement.

That this is God's way may be seen illustrated in the past dispensation. God made known His mind through Moses and all was perfect as far as it went. Israel however was marked by continuous defection, and prophet after prophet was sent to recall them to that which was established at the beginning. Jeremiah, for instance, prophesied in the last days of the kingdom, and his testimony was, "Thus saith the Lord, Stand ye in the ways, and see and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls." (Jer. vi. 16). But they would not walk therein and consequently they went into the Babylonian captivity.

Later came the movement back to the land in its various stages, under Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah. Through Cyrus King of Persia the door of return was thrown wide open for any Jew. His proclamation ran, "Who is there among you of all His people? His God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem" (Ezra i. 3). Now we have no doubt whatever that this proclamation did in point of fact have a selective effect. Those "whose spirit God had raised" (i. 5) were the ones that responded and went up, and doubtless these were in the main the most pious and God-fearing of the people. Still the movement was not deliberately eclectic but simply a return to the Land and a reverting to the knowledge and practice of the law as given through Moses (see Neh. viii. 1-13; xi. 3; x. 29).

Later again came the more subtle deterioration of this returned remnant. They did not again lapse into

idolatry nor violently disregard the letter of the law. Rather, while venerating its letter they evaded its spirit, and instead of being humbled by it they became filled with a proud self-satisfaction in its possession. Hence the deplorable state of affairs exposed by the prophet Malachi. There was revealed even in his day a few who "feared the Lord" (Mal. iii. 16). They were a kind of remnant within the remnant, but the word to them was "Remember ye the law of Moses My servant, which I commanded unto him in Horeb for all Israel, with the statutes and judgments" (Mal. iv. 4). They were referred back to *all* the words of God given originally through Moses, and reminded that all the Word of God was for *all* the people of God and not only for themselves. This was the last word from God in the old dispensation and the silence was not broken again until the voice of John the Baptist was heard in the wilderness of Judæa. It is quite clear then that the path of God's will at the end of a dispensation involves a return to the principles that marked it at the beginning.

The same thing is to be found as a matter of instruction in the New Testament, specially in the closing Epistles of the three Apostles. Among Paul's farewell instructions to Timothy was this, "Keep by the Holy Ghost which dwells in us, the good deposit entrusted" (2 Tim. i. 9, N. Tr.), and he speaks of all Scripture as our safeguard in the same epistle. Peter writes, "I stir up your pure mind by way of remembrance: that ye may be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandments of us the apostles of the Lord and Saviour." (2 Pet. iii. 1, 2). John speaks to us of "that which was from the beginning," and says, "Let that therefore abide in you, which ye have heard from the beginning. If that which ye have heard

from the beginning shall remain in you, ye also shall continue in the Son and in the Father" (1 John ii. 24). He warns also, saying "Whosoever goes forward and abides not in the doctrine of the Christ has not God" (2 John 9, N. Tr.).

In this connection again we do not at all question the fact that in the main it will be the more enlightened and the more godly of God's saints who will discern God's original will and purpose in connection with His church and respond to it. We have no doubt at all that those who will discern and obey the instructions given in 2 Timothy ii. 16-26 will be amongst the most spiritually-minded of believers, but that is incidental and not the essential feature of the movement indicated. The essence of the movement is a separation unto righteousness, faith, love, and peace in association with those that call on the Lord out of a pure heart. Righteousness begins in the giving to God and His Word their proper place of supremacy and authority. Faith embraces *all* the revealed will and counsel of God. The movement is not in its essence an attempt to weld together all believers of a certain high standard of spirituality and intelligence, though incidentally it may in some degree bring this to pass. It is a movement in accordance with the holiness of God in order that there may be scope for obedience to the whole revealed will of God, for such obedience is practical righteousness.

We definitely therefore raise this question:—In meeting together with a few other saints unto the Lord's Name do you regard yourselves as an eclectic company, banded together by fidelity to certain ecclesiastical procedure or decisions, or to a testimony which you believe has been entrusted to you, or by a superior subjective condition

which you think has been produced in you, so that you are characterized by a spirituality of a higher order than others? Or do you meet as a few saints who value the Name of the Lord and desire to acknowledge His authority and walk in practical obedience to the whole truth—taking up thus true assembly ground—while waiting for His return?

Now this is not a question of merely theological or academic interest. Practical issues of much importance turn upon it. Our behaviour and actions of an assembly character are much influenced by our answer to it, and misunderstandings on the point have been responsible, we feel sure, for many sad mistakes in past days.

We cannot attempt in this short paper to follow out the practical issues in any exhaustive way, and content ourselves with taking up one issue only, that of *discipline*, inasmuch as it illustrates the difference between the two positions we are discussing in a very striking way. There is a considerable body of instruction on this subject in the Epistles and discipline of varying degrees of severity is enjoined culminating in certain cases in excommunication; though excommunication is really the last resort and the confession that all discipline proper is unavailing.

From the beginning of the church's history weakness was manifested in its midst; and the epistles give us full evidence that the churches founded by Paul were not models of all that an assembly should be, but were marked by the presence of many "babes," many who were "carnal" many whose hands were hanging down and whose knees were feeble and whose feet were liable to be "turned out of the way." Worse than this, there were even found in

their midst "unprofitable and vain talkers," men who preached Christ "of envy and strife," and Judaizing teachers with the tendency to bring saints into bondage. Is it surprising therefore that when in these last days saints have gathered together on assembly ground a similar state of affairs has soon been manifested in their midst? Now what is to be done?

This question presents no difficulty at all to those who stand upon eclectic ground. To them the answer is as clear as daylight. Anyone who is not in harmony with the basis of their eclectic association is by that very fact an undesirable and to be if possible eliminated. Here is a brother who cannot accept as right a certain ecclesiastical action or decision and he feels in conscience bound to utter his protest against it. Then he cannot be allowed to remain in fellowship even though having relieved his conscience by his protest he is prepared to do so. Or there are others who are unable to accept some much advocated line of teaching as a sound and balanced setting forth of truth according to Scripture. Then since the eclectic association is committed to this line of teaching there can be no rest until such are removed from the "within" to the "without." It comes to pass therefore that excommunication—no matter whether accomplished by a direct method or by many underhand and devious ways—becomes the sovereign remedy for all ills, in an eclectic system. If you are not thoroughly of their system your place is outside. All this has the merit of extreme simplicity. It has in general the outward form and appearance of scrupulous holiness and sanctity. It calls for no exercise. It tries nobody's patience. It calls forth no expression of the grace of Christ. It appeals to everybody's sense of their own

importance, and it allows free course to the will of everybody who is a part of the eclectic system.

It is therefore not to be wondered at that eclecticism has become very well established in many minds, and that some seem hardly capable of appreciating anything else.

To those standing upon assembly ground, however, the question is not quite so easy. It is of the very essence of their position that the principles of the assembly are to govern them. Now the assembly is the place where the Lord administers and the Spirit operates (see 1 Cor. xii. 4-8). It is the place where the Word of God, given by the inspiration of the Spirit of God, rules and directs (see Acts xv. 13-29, "Simon has related . . . with this agree the words of the prophets, *as it is written . . . wherefore I judge. . . It seemed good to us, having arrived at a common judgment*" N. Trans.). It is the place where man's will matters nothing and God's will as expressed in His Word is the only thing that counts, and hence to affect a discipline which is more rigorous than Scripture directs is not admissible for a moment. The question is not—what befits our (presumably) spiritual and intelligent company?—but what befits the house of God to which we belong, and according to the principles of which we desire to walk? And that question can only be answered in the light of the Word of God.

To pursue this line of things will call for much exercise that Scripture may be rightly applied. Frequently nearly everybody's patience will be tried, for cases will present themselves of such a nature that we have no clear instructions from the Lord to act upon and our wisdom then will be to wait, and wait much upon

Him that His hand may in some way be manifested, rather than take the law into our own hands and act without Him. Grace will continually be called for. All will be made to feel their own nothingness and mere self-will be rebuked. For, after all, whence comes any authority to exercise discipline in God's house? Only from God Himself. As gathered unto the Lord's Name there is authority (see Matt. xviii. 18-20), but we cannot act in His Name save as directed by His Word.

Eclecticism has often rushed in and acted where the saint who trembled at God's Word has feared to tread, as having no authority to do so. The company, or the cause or testimony represented by the company, had to be saved, and hence drastic action was needed,—so they felt—and if no authorization from the Lord existed then some passage of very remote or even obscure application to the case had to be forced in to do duty. In result again and again that which has been called the discipline of God's house has been taken in support of mainly personal or perhaps merely party ends—a very grievous sin. But then the eclecticism which so acts thereby betrays itself as just common and ordinary sectarianism, only in a very pretentious guise.

When saints, however, few or feeble they may be, really gather on the ground of God's assembly they walk according to the holiness of God's house as exemplified and instructed in His Word, and yet they never disconnect themselves in heart and affection from the whole church of God. They acknowledge Christ as Head above, the Spirit as power here below and they know that to "save" what is of God they never need to go beyond the instructions of the Word of God (see 2 Tim. iii. 16, 17).

Indeed they are not overmuch occupied with "saving" a cause or "the testimony," for they know that the Lord has well known all along how to maintain His own cause and to preserve His own testimony from age to age, and that He will do so in the end, and they have no interest save in that. Their concern should be and is to obey the whole Word of God, the whole truth of God; for by such obedience salvation both for themselves and those that may hear them (see 1 Tim. iv. 15, 16) is ensured.

Like the Psalmist we shall do well if we can say, "Lord, my heart is not haughty, nor mine eyes lofty; neither do I exercise myself in great matters, or in things too high for me" (Psa. cxxxi. 1). There are indeed great matters which are far too high for us and which consequently the Lord holds in his own hands and has not delegated to us. He carries on His own work. He directs His testimony and saves it when necessary. He orders and controls His servants. When men, however, well-meaning, attempt to do these things which they were never asked to do they invariably end by signally failing in that which they *are* intended to do.

What we *are* set to do is the less pretentious but more practical work of walking in obedience to the revealed mind of God. We are sent here to *obey the truth*. The truth is a matter sufficiently great and high for us. All truth has come out in Christ, so that He is the truth. All is revealed for us in Scripture so that the Word is truth. The Spirit given to us, so that we may know and obey it, is the Spirit of truth. May we have grace then to bend what spiritual energy we may possess *in this direction*.