

The
First Division
in the Church:

ITS

**ORIGIN, OBJECT, CHARACTERISTICS,
AND RESULTS.**

BY

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LONDON:

S. BAGSTER & SONS, LTD., 15 PATERNOSTER ROW, E.C.

12 for 1/; 25 for 2/; 50 for 3/6; 100 for 6/; post free.



“THE FIRST DIVISION IN THE CHURCH.”

“I wrote unto the Church; but Diotrephes, who loveth to have the pre-eminence among them, receiveth us not” (3 John 9).

IT is noticeable that of the three Epistles of John the first only is general, the two latter being addressed to private persons. This seems to indicate that the points touched upon in them have a special bearing on the last sad days of the Church's history on earth, and are particularly applicable to the closing moments of the last hour.

The spirit and principle of these two epistles have a general and constant application, but the questions dealt with refer rather to local associations than to the wider relationships of the first epistle. These two epistles would thus prepare us for

PARTICULAR AND LOCAL DIFFICULTIES,
just as 2 Peter and Jude help us to understand the *general* state of things in a corrupt Christendom as her last sands are sinking.

And to our hearts how sweet is the thought that He who loved the Church and gave Himself for her, loves her not a whit less in the last days of her feebleness here! His love has anticipated every difficulty, and made full provision for every peril of the last days. "He loved them unto the end." "Lo, I am with you all the days, even unto the end of the age." Surely it is enough for our hearts to have the love and the presence of Him who is able to keep us from stumbling, conducting us safely through the general corruption, or the special conflicts of the end of the age, that He may present us "faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy."

Blessed be God, we are not left in this scene without ample resources, not left to drift with every current; our anchor within the veil is both sure and steadfast. The Comforter remains with us *for ever*—the unbreakable link with an ascended Christ, so that, while we may be tossed by the tempest, we may always be preserved from drifting with the tide of present evils.

The First Epistle.

In the *First* Epistle of John two great truths are unfolded and enforced—the doctrine of Christ and the fellowship of saints. In this epistle the Sonship of Jesus Christ and the brotherhood of all who are now the children of God are the two great pillars—the Jachin and the Boaz—of the house. Upon these two pillars the two commandments of the epistle hang: "This is His commandment, that we should believe on the Name of His Son Jesus

Christ; and love one another, as He gave us commandment" (1 John iii. 23). When we have faith in the Son of God, and love those who are begotten of God, we can say: "Truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ," and "We have fellowship one with another" (i. 3, 7)—that is, we have the fellowship of *truth* and the fellowship of *love*.

From the first, Satan's great object has been to separate truth and love, to attack them by open assault, or undermine them under cover of a profession of superior light and advanced truth; but this comes out specially in the two later epistles.

The Second Epistle.

In the *Second Epistle* the attack is upon the truth touching the Person of Christ. "*The doctrine of Christ*" had been surrendered by many deceivers, and the saints needed a word of warning as to that (see verses 7-11). Anything touching the honour of Christ must be guarded with jealous care by every child of God; not merely by the "elders of the assembly," but by every one who is loyal to Christ. "*For whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God.*" Such an one is *not to be received*, even into the house, nor to be saluted with "God speed."

Thank God for such a warning—so much needed in our day; but let us not be led into an erroneous use of it, for we know too well how ready the enemy is to persuade us to turn

the edge of the sword against those who do abide in the doctrine of Christ, and to cut off those who are walking in the truth. Therefore, before giving the warning of verse 10, the Apostle recalls the commandments which we had "from the beginning," "that we love one another;" "Walking in truth, as we received commandment from the Father" (verses 4, 5).

The Third Epistle.

In the *Third* Epistle it is not the deceiver or transgressor abandoning the doctrine of Christ, but the overbearing brother lording it over God's heritage: he receiveth not the brethren, and casteth out of the Church them that would. This is an attack on our fellowship one with another *from within*, while in the previous epistle our fellowship with the Father and with the Son is undermined *from without*.

But as this is a subject which often occupies the minds of many of the Lord's people, causing perplexity and sometimes stumbling to the godly, it will be well to look more closely into the contents of this short third epistle.

Some of the peculiarities here are most striking. Here only in John's Epistles do we get the word "Church," and it occurs three times. In the first Epistle, the common life of all God's children is the theme; in the second, family life; in the third, it is *Church life*; but in all three the life is assailed. In the *first*, the danger is a spurious profession; in the *second*, false teaching; and in the *third*, unscriptural fellowship. In each case it is something human in place of that which is Divine—the

fleshly and natural seeking to rule out the godly and spiritual. Therefore, in all three epistles *truth* is the only path for our feet, and *love* is the *only* bond of our fellowship among saints.

The course of declension in the Apostle's days finds its counterpart in our days, but the remedy is a fresh laying hold of the truth given at the first.

CHURCH GROUND IS HERE RE-OCCUPIED;

Church truth is set forth, and the responsibilities and experiences of Church fellowship are brought out. Every one who understands this will know how perfectly the facts of recent years accord with this feature of John's third epistle. At the close of an apostate age our gracious Lord brings back a handful of His own to simple Scriptural teaching and order, according to Matt. xviii. 20 and kindred Scriptures. It is thus that the Assembly appears here; it is rather in its *local* aspect, and not as the whole "Church, which is His Body." A number of children of God gathered together unto "His Name" (verse 7) are called "an assembly," a called out and called together company.

The next feature is particularly noticeable. Two brethren are named whose actions are specially mentioned, and we find that they are not of "one mind and one judgment;" in spirit, word, and act they differ widely. More sorrowful still, there are now

TWO PARTIES.

The hateful seed of discord sown among brethren has produced a terrible harvest of

division in the assembly. The weakening of brotherly love, at first allowed, makes way for difference of judgment ; self-assertion follows, and we are staggered by the acknowledgment in Scripture, for the first time, that actual division has taken place. No longer can it be said by the Bridegroom, "My dove, my undefiled, is but one." The living Head above looks down upon the confusion among His members that should have been "knit together in love," and behold, variance, emulations, strife, heresies (sects)! And now we have the two ominous words,

"THEM" AND "US,"

to describe the two separated parties. On the one hand there is the party headed by Diotrephes, "who loveth to have the pre-eminence among *them*"—that is, the Church to which John had previously written without effect (verse 9). We have also those described by the word "*us*," including the writer, Gaius, with the "brethren" of verse 5 and Demetrius, all of whom are in happy association and love as *brethren*.

One little touch is very telling here, and should not be unnoticed. The word "Church" occurs in connection with both of these companies of saints. In verses 9 and 10 it is used twice in relation to "them," and it seems clear that in verse 6 it occurs in connection with "us." It appears the brethren who had gone forth and had received the loving hospitality of Gaius had returned to John and mentioned the action of Diotrephes, while also bearing

witness of the love of Gaius "before the Church" from which they had set out. A further distinction is, that in reference to the "us" who are not received, the word "Church" is used without the definite article—it is only *an* assembly. In his book, "John, whom Jesus Loved," Dr. Culross renders it "*an assembly.*" But among "them" over whom Diotrephes is pre-eminent, who "receive *us* not," it is prefaced in each case with the definite article—it is *the* assembly. Many of us are but too well acquainted with the modern display of this ancient picture.

The central point of the letter is

"THE RECEPTION QUESTION,"

touching the brethren who *ought to be received* by one Assembly from another (verses 5-8), and "the Church," where godly brethren would not be received, is conspicuous (verses 9 and 10). John does not inculcate a peace-at-any-price fellowship, but dwells upon the character, walk, and service of such as "we ought to receive," and then proceeds to unearth the carnal spirit that would not receive them. It is helpful to see how the character of those who are "not received" is given in detail.

First, Gaius, who seems to be of weakly bodily constitution, is in a prosperous state spiritually; of him it is said, "Thy soul prospereth." "Ah," it may be said, "but *that* is not everything." No, it is not everything; but, my brother or sister, if your own soul is really prospering at this moment, you will readily admit that it is a very blessed thing, and a very

great thing—a very good beginning to go on with in any child of God.

It is to be feared that some would make this a *secondary* consideration, or even one to be put last in the case of a brother to be *received*. Intelligence, gift, or perhaps a correct judgment as to the right "*assembly position*," would be made the first qualification. All of these are valuable in their place, but they may be very prominent where the soul is in a languishing, unspiritual condition. At Corinth the saints were enriched in Christ in all utterance and in all knowledge, coming behind in no gift, and yet were impoverished in themselves, and in a carnal condition, split up into factions, and glorying in their shame. There is no word about the abilities of Gaius—though he might have had them—the great thing which he sought to maintain was *soul prosperity*.


No doubt Diotrephes looked down on him as only a simple-minded believer, and since he was so untaught and weak as to help forward the brethren objected to, he had small scruple in casting him out of the Church. But it is further testified by the brethren who came back to John, *that the truth is in him* (verse 3). This is a matter of *great rejoicing* with John, for perhaps he had heard very different statements from another quarter. It is most satisfactory to be able to meet

EVERY "MALICIOUS ACCUSATION"

with such a testimony as this. But not only has Gaius the truth in him, he is also *walking in the truth* (verse 3). He is an exponent

of the truth in his life, an epistle of Christ manifestly declared before all men. Again, this report brings with it such *joy* to the apostle that he says he has *no greater* (verse 4).

Now let us look at the way of Gaius with his brethren. He who prospers in soul, who has the truth *in him*, and who *walks in the truth*, will never become a leading man in the divisions of the Lord's people, for "every one that loveth Him that begat, loveth Him also that is begotten of Him." Therefore it is just what we might expect in Gaius, when we read that the brethren who came and testified of the truth that was in him should bear witness also of *his love* before the Church (verse 6). His love was shown not only to well-known brethren, but to strangers likewise, *i.e.*, to brethren coming from a distance. "Beloved, thou doest faithfully whatsoever thou doest to the brethren, and to strangers which have borne witness of thy love before the Church." His love was not in word only, but in deed and in truth, and the brethren were able to say that he had brought them on their way "after a godly sort." His was no cold reception, for he was a fellow-helper to the truth. "Beloved Gaius," would that more of us were like thee!



THE FIRST DIVISION:

ITS CAUSES AND EFFECTS.

THE *doctrine* of love was doubtless well known in the Church out of which "those that would" receive the brethren were cast. Diotrephes might have discoursed most ably on the subject from time to time, but other considerations were introduced to regulate the nature and manner of its exercise, so that when the subject was judged all round, these brethren could not be received or brought forward on their journey.

As regards brotherly love, the Apostle John and all the brethren might be loved in a sense, but this was not merely a question of love but a matter of fellowship, and here none could be received except upon agreement on certain questions considered to be of greater importance, and if Gaius or others would receive such, they must be cast out of the Church (verse 10) to preserve the peculiar sanctity of what has been called in our day

THE "PURGED-OUT" COMPANY!

This may be called "true love" exercised with great spiritual insight, but it is not according to God.

The difficulty arose in connection with certain brethren that went forth, concerning whom, it appears, John had written previously (verse 9), whom Diotrephes would not suffer to be re-

ceived. It is, therefore, important to get from John's pen a further commendation of them in his words to Gaius (verses 5-8).

We see from verse 3 that John was himself associated with them, both in receiving them when they came and rejoicing in their testimony concerning the love of Gaius, which was given also *before the Church* (verse 6).

He now testifies that for the sake of the Name they went forth; not for party purposes or from selfish motives, for they were taking nothing from the Gentiles. Further, he tells us that to bring them forward on their journey worthily of God is to do well, and "*we ought, therefore, to receive such, that we might be fellow-helpers to the truth*" (verse 8). Truly it seems the only right course to take with such brethren, who not only have the truth, but have gone forth in dependence upon the Lord, and for His Name's sake to spread it abroad freely among the Gentiles. But there was no room for them in the Church over which Diotrephes presided, for the ruling spirit judged otherwise, and all in it must either submit or be cast out.

Doubtless reasons could be urged for these strong measures, for

THE DIOTREPES SPIRIT CAN ALWAYS SUPPORT
ITS OWN SIDE

of the question. It might have been objected that these brethren had nothing beyond the Gospel, and did not understand the wonderful dignity attaching to those who professed to maintain the true sanctity and character of *the*

Assembly of Christ. Diotrophes being doubtless gifted with great insight and precision might possibly have pointed out with marked effect that these brethren had never been taught by John to put the definite article before the word Assembly (compare verse 6 with verses 9 and 10). From the spirit manifested we might conclude that small points—like mint, anise, and cummin—were insisted on, while the weightier matters were omitted. We are not told the exact ground of dissension—all we know is bitter complaints were made against John and the brethren, which he describes as “malicious words”; but, however trivial or needless, the objections urged carried weight, for the bond of love gave way, fellowship was broken, saints were sundered, and the brethren whom we “ought to receive” were shut out of that Assembly.

It only remains for us to look at DEMETRIUS (verse 12) to complete the list of *rejected* ones that John associated with himself under the term “*us*,” as outside the company with Diotrophes designated by the word “*them*.” Demetrius was no doubt one of those spoken against, and therefore his name is specially mentioned by John, who takes great care to free him in every detail from any suspicious charge that might have been raised against him personally.

It appears that when the brethren went back to John with tidings of all that had transpired, Demetrius had tarried at the scene of conflict until a letter should come from the Apostle to guarantee his character, and to commend him

again to any in the company of Diotrephes who would receive the Apostle's words.

"Demetrius hath good report of all men." This is no mean qualification for a servant of Christ, as we see in 1 Tim. iii. 7; but when we are further assured that he had the commendation also "of the truth itself," we should expect such a double testimony to secure his acceptance among godly ones anywhere. But John proceeds to add his own personal testimony, which he takes the precaution to assure Gaius *is true*—not for the sake of Gaius probably, but of some others who would be less ready to trust even the record of John.

We have seen that a good testimony is given to *all* the brethren in question, and that no laxity of truth or doctrine is referred to about them. It was no mere largeness of heart or liberal-mindedness in their case—

THEY HAD LOVE WITHOUT LAXITY,

and it is most satisfactory to find the word *truth* seven times in this short epistle in connection with these excluded brethren. Is it not exceedingly solemn that brethren should be *prated against with malicious words*, who, when the facts are truly stated, are found not only free from every charge, but in every way godly and commendable? Not a single flaw in one of these brethren is pointed out, yet are they all cast out as unfit for fellowship. Our Lord had forewarned His disciples that they were to expect the same treatment that He received, and now the one who had leaned on His bosom, and who could say, "Truly our

fellowship is with the Father and with His Son," is judged unworthy of fellowship in the Church in which Diotrephes was lord; no wonder, therefore, that others are cast out with John.

He had written: "If we walk in the light, as *He* is the light, we have fellowship one with another"; but here it is: "Except ye walk in the light as *we* are in the light we cannot have fellowship together"! Could Diotrephes have charged with evil doctrine, as to the Person of the Lord, the Apostle who so guarded the doctrine of Christ? Could John have been accused of having fellowship with evil *indirectly*, when he teaches that such as bring not *this doctrine* are to be excluded, not merely from the Assembly but from the private house—"Receive him not into your house"? Yet, if John had presented himself at the Assembly where Diotrephes was pre-eminent, he would surely have been refused, as his letter had been—Diotrephes . . . "receiveth us not," and can we be surprised if, in our day, brethren of unquestioned godliness are similarly treated?

Very likely John might be assured by more than one that they still regarded him and all the brethren as children of God, and that they could acknowledge them as Christians, but they could have no fellowship with them *inside* the Assembly.

We gather from the words "*prating against us*," that there was no lack of effort in support of this new mode of procedure. What the "malicious words" were we know not, but *some* accusations were found against John

and the brethren which were readily and constantly repeated till simple ones must have supposed there was truth in them.

But surely there must have been

SOMETHING TERRIBLY WRONG

somewhere to produce such disastrous results. The enemy must have sadly prevailed when the honour of the Lord, the desire of His heart, the truth of His Word, the oneness of His Body, and the reality of His Headship were so set aside by this separating process!

May we not say that the mischief arose from weakening the sense of responsibility between the individual soul and God, and bringing the believers gradually under the power of a false leader?

“Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! It is like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even unto Aaron’s beard; that went down to the skirts of his garments: as the dew of Hermon that descended upon the mountains of Zion: for *there* the Lord *commanded* the blessing, even life for evermore” (Ps. cxxxiii.). But all this was exchanged for the jarring notes of strife and division. Who could have so bewitched these children of God that they should not understand that the Lord not only “*hateth* putting away,” but also “him that soweth discord among brethren”? He who was a liar from the beginning must have deceived them with such words as “*Let the Lord be glorified,*” persuading them that they were doing God

service (see Isa. lxvi. 5), although acting contrary to His plainest commands as to loving one another.

We must now look at

THE FORMATION OF A NEW COMPANY,

designated by the word *them*. "I wrote unto the Church, but Diotrephes, who loveth to have the pre-eminence among *them*, receiveth us not." Here we have a particular Church emerging from common Church ground, and occupying a new and altogether unique position. The discovery has been made that THE Assembly, as they regard themselves, must be very exclusive, must separate from all whom they are taught to look upon as "vessels of dishonour." This is altogether new. In John's first epistle we read: "They went out from us, but *they* were not of us, for if they had been of us they would no doubt have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us." But now a company is formed, claiming to be "the Assembly of God," and disclaiming all saints who are not of their fellowship—a fellowship having power to class with the heathen and the publican those who are still acknowledged to be children of God.

A clear distinction was made, in John's first epistle, between "the children of God" and "the children of the devil"; on one side were those who were "of God," and, on the other, "the whole world lying in the wicked one"; but here a *third* company rises up, not out of the world, but out of the Church, who deliber-

ately separate themselves from those who are "of God," and glory in doing so. An inner circle is formed, having a particular basis of communion, more limited and narrower than the apostles of Christ made known as conveying the thoughts of God.

From the fact that John wrote to the Church (verse 9) it is clear that previously this very Church had been on terms of fellowship with him, occupying ground common to all the Assemblies of Christ, and, further, that John had no other expectation than to receive their fellowship as hitherto enjoyed. But now he finds

A MODERN DEVELOPMENT

of a startling nature—a company of saints occupying a position and maintaining a circle of fellowship that excludes himself in common with many other godly saints. The very one who had warned saints of the many deceivers is himself rejected!

Does not this remind us of Paul's pathetic appeal to the Corinthians? After pointing out that there could be no fellowship with *unbelievers*, he exhorts them to come out from among them, and be separate, and then continues, "Let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God." And, as if foreseeing the fleshly way in which this might be used to cut off saints, or even himself, he exclaims, "RECEIVE US! we have *wronged* no man, we have *corrupted* no man, we have *defrauded* no man; I speak not this to condemn you, for I have said before, *ye are in our*

hearts to die and live with you" (2 Cor. vi. 14 ; vii. 3).

John proceeds to account for this strange departure from the truth, and we are thankful to get at

THE REAL ROOT OF THE MISCHIEF

at a stroke. "But Diotrephes, *who loveth* to have the *pre-eminence* among them, receiveth us not." Ah! here it is—*Diotrephes loveth pre-eminence*—the leprosy is in the head. John had called these believers "little children" again and again, and had watched their growth from babes to young men, from young men to fathers, with peculiar joy, and still they were to him as "dear children" (1 John ii. 12-18); but to see one of them become his *master*, a lord over God's heritage, must have been grief indeed.

John, however, had been painfully reminded of his own early leanings in this direction, when he took a prominent part in the strife among the disciples as to which should be *the greatest*. The very features so conspicuous in Diotrephes were natural to himself. *Love of pre-eminence* had led him to seek a chief place in the kingdom glory (Mark x. 35-37). Party spirit, too, had shown itself in no small measure, in *forbidding* one who was casting out demons in Christ's name—"We forbad him *because he followeth not with us*" (Luke ix. 49). And again, *the spirit of judgment* was very pronounced in the words, "Lord, wilt Thou that we call down fire from heaven and consume them?" (verse 54). Each of these features

called forth a rebuke from his Master, which had not been lost upon him. But for these faithful rebukes, and the lowly grace of his beloved Lord, who can say that John might not so have developed these fleshly features, that, instead of being a help to his brethren, he might have himself become a producer of strife and a leader of division among them?

But he had never forgotten the words of his blessed Lord, "One is your Master, even Christ, and all ye are brethren."

THE LESSON OF THE LITTLE CHILD

(Matt. xviii. 2-6) had not been learnt by Diotrophes, or was completely forgotten, and so we find him having authority in the Assembly, and ruling over his brethren, after the pattern of earth's great ones. This is Church history from very early days down to its most modern developments—whether the Pope, or the prelate, or the leading brother, who seeks priority in the meeting. Fleshly pride seeking domination has ever been the melancholy cause of strife and division.

THE FIRST DIVISION :

ITS CAUSES AND CHARACTERISTICS.

WE cannot say who now represents Diotrephes. Doubtless his name is legion, but "by their fruits ye shall know them." Wherever there is a manifest tendency to self-assertion in the Assembly, to rule the saints, to sit on the judgment-seat, there Diotrephes is to be discovered. Perhaps the meaning of the name may help somewhat—"Nourished by Jupiter." In his early days he might have been dedicated to Jupiter, and nourished in the pride which that heathen deity typifies; but although saved, and led out of his former manner of living, he must have yielded to the tendencies of his evil heart in seeking pre-eminence among the saints.

Without doubt he was a man of ability, with perhaps apparent spirituality, or he would not have secured a following in the Church; but the priestly spirit was in him, and while he might have been clear and mighty in the Scriptures, professing great loyalty to Christ, and leading up the Church to a high position, so as to make it appear absolutely necessary to separate from the brethren,

SELF WAS THE OBJECT.

He was serving, not our Lord Jesus Christ, but his own belly (see Rom. xvi. 17, 18).

Of course this was not apparent to every

observer; "by good words and fair speeches he had deceived the hearts of the simple." But the flesh, though at first unnoticeable, if unjudged *practically*, will feed and thrive on spiritual gift and ability, growing in its proportions, until it claims the mastery in the name of Christ, and usurps the place and power belonging to Christ alone. Worse still, all this may be cloaked under the professed acceptance and even utterance of the truth that our old man has been put off: or even the assertion that the flesh was entirely removed at the Cross, and can never come up again.

In this way self becomes the real object of that which is done professedly for Christ and His people, and soon everything in the Assembly is ruled according to its relation to selfish interest, under colour of outward separation from evil, zeal for the truth, standing for the honour of Christ, guarding the sanctity of His Assembly, and many other kindred objects of a highly spiritual appearance.

Happily for us the Spirit of God has anticipated this state of things, and furnished us with a Divine solution of the whole case, putting into our hands an able test wherewith to "try the spirits" by pointing out

THE REAL ROOT OF THE EVIL—

Diotrephes loveth to have the pre-eminence among them. This is where the difficulty begins in almost every case where strife and division are found among saints. "Only by pride cometh contention," for he that is of a proud heart "stirreth up strife." The trouble is produced

and perpetuated by pride of heart. Whoever *loveth pre-eminence* is under the dominion of the lusts that war in the members, from whence come wars and fightings (Jas. iv. 1). Yes, this is the root of bitterness which springing up, troubles and defiles many, by which the "old paths" have been made crooked, and that which is lame has been turned out of the way. The fruit must be after its kind. Wherever there is love of pre-eminence there will be wars and fightings—it cannot be otherwise. In the last days "men shall be lovers of themselves," and the only thing that can save us from this subtle snare is the love of Christ. The heart must have some object paramount. Christ will not divide the affections: He will either gain the heart's whole interest, or the love of other things will enter in and gain the ascendancy, nay, the *supremacy*.

Oh, may the Lord save us from that pride of heart which is ever ready to find fault, or to cut off, but never willing to examine or judge self, or to rejoice in the grace of God which may be seen in others: so that our souls may prosper "with all lowliness and meekness, with long-suffering, forbearing one another in love, endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

When once this terrible object, *self*, has been enthroned, there is no lack of complaints against the brethren. The very best of them, viewed from such a standpoint, will soon have glaring deficiencies, for while love, according to God, will cover a multitude of sins, love, according to self, will *uncover* them, so that

none can escape unless they bring themselves under the ruling spirit of the fault-finder, no, not even John "the elder."

Who can tell the points of difference between the haughty Diotrephes and the meek and lowly John? When the Lord comes, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the heart, we shall know all, and then, notwithstanding all terrible mistakes, shall every man have his praise of God, greatly though that praise will vary.

We have seen the coming out, the *formation* of this new company. It will be well now to look at some of

THEIR LEADING CHARACTERISTICS,

as described in verses 9 and 10. Now, what is the first thing in verse 9? "*The Church.*" And what is the last thing in verse 10? "*The Church.*" From this we see that this is a company strongly entrenched on Church ground. This is their impregnable fortress, and from whichever side you approach them you see their ensign flying aloft. It is not simply an assembly, but **THE** Assembly of Christ—the only one which He can acknowledge as "My Assembly;" the only company of saints which can claim His Presence in the midst; for they would argue, He cannot be with two companies opposed to each other. The best of all others are but a splendid counterfeit, say they, and the very imitation only proves the genuineness of their Assembly. No other company, therefore, can have the Lord's Presence

or the Lord's Table ; for, although they may meet as believers, they only form a believers' meeting—not *His Assembly!*

In the minds of the teachers of this select company this would be very clear, and they would seek to make it quite plain to others, who would naturally take all for granted as "sound teaching which cannot be denied."

But how is all this fair show shorn of its strength and dignity the moment that John unveils the facts of the case ! They are then seen gathered together not in the *Name* of the Lord, but unto the person of *Diotrephes*.

YES, GATHERED TO A MAN

who is pre-eminent among them ! The original mode of gathering was according to Matt. xviii. 20—"Where two or three are gathered together unto My Name, there am I in the midst of them." But this, though tenaciously held still in the letter, has been cleverly manipulated here, so that whenever the saints come together in assembly, Diotrephes is the real centre and head. How is the fine gold become dim !

We shall presently see that this gifted brother exercises lordship over the saints in the Name of Christ ; but first we must look at some other prominent features of this communion of saints. The reception question is one of burning importance among them, and, that all should speak the same thing, it is very necessary that they should be exercising a united judgment. "This honour have all His saints," and they must feel that a very great responsibility springs

out of such a dignity. Not only must they exercise judgment, but, if necessary, execute judgment also, to preserve the sanctity of the company. And so judgment, which is God's *strange* act, is with them a familiar proceeding. All must come to a perfect agreement to exclude the brethren as unworthy of fellowship; and the most narrow-minded and bigoted, or the merest babe in the circle, can occupy the seat of judgment, and by reason of use having his senses exercised to judge both good and evil, pass judgment upon saintly John "the elder" without shame!

The excluding feature grows out of this: The Lord had said, "He that receiveth you receiveth Me;" and, therefore, may we not say that to exclude the Apostle John, the beloved Gaius, and the brethren with them, was in His sight to exclude Himself? No Christless professor should be received, nor even a believer wilfully holding error which dishonours the Person or work of Christ; but surely a child of God, though weak and uninstructed, or in a low spiritual condition, should be welcomed that he may be strengthened, taught, and lifted into a better state of soul.

How different from this is the principle which mercilessly repudiates the most gracious and saintly believer, equally with the transgressor or deceiver, while it accepts without question many who are in a carnal state of soul! How can it be otherwise when the very centre and head of this company is really, with all his high-sounding words, but a carnal self-seeker? However narrow

THIS NEW CIRCLE

is drawn, the flesh is in the centre, and however lofty its position, the flesh is at the top, so that all the evils witnessed against and professedly separated from, spring up again *within*, with the double danger of being undetected or uncondemned.

It is instructive to see the attitude John takes up in relation to this restricted circle of fellowship. He well knew he would not be received should he present himself, and yet he did not determine to keep aloof: "But if I come." His mind was still toward them. To him it was like an affectionate father losing his much-loved children. He does not propose to discuss the new position occupied, for he well knew it was not after "the old commandment." Nor does he threaten to excommunicate Diotrephes, or *cut off* this troublesome Assembly. He will not use his Apostolic authority; but he says, referring to Diotrephes, "I will call to remembrance his deeds which he doeth." He will seek to convict him of his wrong, and, if possible, to convert him "from the error of his ways" (James v. 19, 20). It would be most unfair to say that here two parties cut each other off. Oh, no; John, Gaius, and the brethren with them, never adopted such a course.

Another characteristic connected with this excluding spirit is brought out in the words, "*Prating against us with malicious words.*" No flaw is pointed out in the doctrine of the Diotrephes company, no charge is made against their teaching; nor, on the other hand, is there

any statement as to their soul-prosperity, but attention is called to the habit of their leader, which, doubtless, would be imitated by his followers. How can you reject saints without judging them? And how can you judge them without speaking evil of them? So John says, "*Prating against us.*" Apparently nothing good was said even of John. All that was "after a godly sort" in Gaius, the brethren, Demetrius, or John, finds no recognition from the lips of Diotrephes; his mission was of entirely another order: to discover faults, to dwell upon discrepancies, to expose weaknesses among the godly, was his special gift. "From the beginning" it was according to Paul's words in Philippians: "Whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be *any* virtue, and if there be *any* praise, *think on these things.*" But this

MASTER OF THE ASSEMBLY

was able to strike out on a new line, and develop a new pattern for the saints to imitate. He had found faults and failings in John and the brethren sufficient to keep up the prating. How unlike the man of Jehovah's tabernacle, "who backbiteth not with his tongue, nor doeth evil to his neighbour, *nor taketh up a reproach against his neighbour: in whose eyes a vile person is contemned; but he honoureth them that fear the Lord*" (Ps. xv. 3, 4). How very solemn is it when one high in the esteem of the Church becomes an accuser of our brethren, a name intended only for the wicked one (Rev. xii. 10).

Very suspicious must be the fellowship of any Assembly that needs to be set forth or bolstered up by such means. We would not say that such an Assembly was not upon the Rock of Matt. xvi. 18, but where the structure must be raised and supported by malicious prating against saints, the Rock is covered by a human quagmire. When any one seeks to raise himself by lowering his brother, and the way in which he speaks of his brother's faults gives the impression that he is free from fault himself, even though in a company professing to have purged out the "old leaven," and to have become a "new lump," is not the old "leaven of malice and wickedness" filling his heart?

Will a father speak against his own children? or brother rail against brother? Not until natural affection has been unnaturally perverted, or destroyed. Neither would Diotrephes and his company—either ancient or modern—"prate against us" unless the "love of the brethren" had been overgrown by the love of pre-eminence.

The next feature shows the consistency of Diotrephes in his evil course. Paul's gracious method—"Brethren, be followers together of me"—is not emphatic enough here:

THEY MUST FOLLOW.

Diotrephes "*forbiddeth* them who would" do otherwise. By a law of spiritual coercion all the Church must be ruled into conformity. None are permitted to differ—there must be one mouth if not one mind, and that not

according to Christ, but according to Diotrophes.

The mind, will, and judgment of all in the circle must be cast in the same mould, in order to dwell together in uniformity.

But how refreshing is it to know that, notwithstanding this universal lording of Diotrophes, there are some here *who would receive* the excluded saints, who are so strongly denounced in the Church, if they were free to act according to their own conscience before God. No doubt that, for the sake of peace or from fear of excommunication, many of those who would receive John and the brethren had not the courage of their convictions. The *rule* of Diotrophes had brought them, almost unconsciously, into a habit of submission. Those of enlarged heart and gentle spirit were compelled to yield to the strong excluding element, and so a union is preserved of human opinion rather than life and love, and a government is maintained of human rule instead of the authority of Christ.

Another notable feature completes this sorrowful picture. Those *who would* have received us are cast "*out of the Church.*" The commendation for reception and fellowship was not that you belong to Christ, that you are a child of God. Vain would it have been to assure Diotrophes that you had Christ, and nothing but Christ, for your standing and aim. The all-important question would have been—What is your judgment with regard to certain brethren whom we do not receive?

Agree to exclude them, and you can share the wonderful dignity, and enjoy the peculiar privileges, of fellowship with us; but, if you would receive them, you must be *cast out of the Church*, for it cannot be allowed that you call on the Lord out of a pure heart unless you purge yourself from these vessels to dishonour.

The Apostle does not tell us whether the leaven spread to other assemblies. That is unnecessary, as each separated company would only be a reproduction of the same in principle—making the same claims to be THE Church of God, the only true purged-out company, under each ruling spirit in their divided state. We are thankful, therefore, to have only one example before us of so mournful a character, and this not for our imitation, but

FOR OUR WARNING,

lest we become partakers of other men's sins. May each of us take heed to the Apostle's warning: "Beloved, follow [imitate] not that which is evil, but that which is good" (verse 11).

We are thankful, too, that we never read of a John party, or a Gaius party, or a Demetrius party. So far as we know, these godly ones never drew away disciples after them. May we ever have grace to say: "PEACE be to the brethren, AND LOVE, with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. GRACE be with ALL *them that love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity.*"