

THE SIN OF CHRISTIANS AS CHURCH MEMBERS.

AND ITS EFFECTS ON THEIR GROWTH IN
SPIRITUAL KNOWLEDGE (HEB. v. 12).

THE especial sin of almost all believers is, that they refuse to recognize the office of the Holy Spirit in this dispensation. God, who in time past spake unto the fathers by the prophets, when the fulness of time was come, spake unto man by His Son (Heb. i. 1); and that Son, when His time of ministry on earth was drawing to a close, comforted those who believed and those who afterwards should believe in Him, with such words as these: "*I go to prepare a place for you; and if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you unto myself;*" "*and I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you to (the end of) the age*" (see the Greek); and again, "*The Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and he shall guide you into all truth*" (John xiv., xvi.). And we know that this promise did not fail; for the disciples being told again by their risen Lord not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father—the Holy Ghost (Acts i. 4, 5)—were all, as we read, with one accord in one place, when the Holy Spirit came upon them and gave them utterance, that they might be witnesses of the resurrection, in Jerusalem, and in Judea, and in Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the earth (Acts i. 8, and ii. 1). The dispensation thus

ushered in is the dispensation of the Spirit. While God spake by His Son, He could not send His Spirit ; but when the Son had ascended, the Holy Ghost was sent to occupy His place to His people until He shall come again. “ It is expedient for you that I go away, for *if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you.*” As the Son’s departure was necessary for the Spirit’s coming, so the Son’s return will end this special office of the Spirit. “ He shall glorify me, for he shall receive of mine and show it unto you :” this provision, precious though it is while the Bridegroom is absent, will be no longer needed when we shall see Him as He is.

In tracing the apostles and the whole Church from the day of Pentecost, we see the vicegerency of the Holy Spirit fully established ; indeed, “ the Acts of the Apostles ” might more properly, if we looked a step higher, be called “ the Acts of the Holy Spirit,” for it was He who directed them in their labours, who gave them a mouth and wisdom, who opened the hearts of their hearers, who knit together in love the believers thus drawn out of the world, and who ruled with sovereign authority in their meetings for edification. Upon all these points much might be said, but the last only can be here touched on. It is the appointment of Him who is infinitely wise, that all the believers in any place should meet together on the first day of the week to break bread (1 Cor. xi. 20 ; Acts xx. 7), and for their common edification ; and were His will carried out, He would make them what He ordains them to be, “ members of one another,” in such order and arrangement, that the body thus variously composed should be perfect and symmetrical, one member supplying what another lacked, and none being able to say to *any*, “ I have no need of thee.” The Holy Spirit, as might be expected from His title as above established to sovereignty in the present dispensation over the redeemed, is the Person of the Godhead who works this symmetry and harmony out of such apparent disorder and incongruity, wherever His authority is acknowledged, and His will obeyed ; and in this connexion His name occurs eleven

times in the first thirteen verses of 1 Cor. xii. We are there told that there are "*diversities of gifts*" for the edification of the Church (whether at Corinth or elsewhere), that there are "*differences of ministries*" and "*diversities of operations*" or workings, that the manifestation or enlightenment of the Spirit is "*given to every man to profit withal*," that "*to one is given the word of wisdom, to another the word of knowledge*," and to others other gifts, the Spirit "*dividing to every man severally as he will*." Now, it is to be noticed that all these gifts are given to the several believers for the edification of the Church, for nothing else is spoken of throughout the chapter; and it may also be noticed, that as when one member suffers all suffer, so in the present ruined state of the Church as a body, in all places, many gifts are only empty names, of which, were the Holy Spirit obeyed instead of grieved, we might again see the realities. In the fourteenth chapter of the same epistle we have many rules respecting the meetings of believers, all of them based on the necessity of each individual believer exercising whatever gift he had been put in charge of for the benefit of the whole, as a solemn duty imposed upon him, which no one could at his own pleasure forego or set aside. The eye, the ear, the head, the foot, are all called on to minister in their measure to the body's good: the body is not all eye, nor does any single member, how important soever, represent or carry on the functions of the whole body.

Now, the prominent sin of almost all believers is, that they despise the peculiar office of the Holy Spirit as the representative among them of their ascended Lord until He come again, and the distributor "*to every man severally as he will*" of those gifts which the Lord Jesus gives for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ (Eph. iv.). In all this—His peculiar office in this dispensation, and the only one in which He works otherwise now to the Church than He did in times past to the fathers, the prophets, and the Jews—He is despised; and a system of man's ordering, with teachers of man's appointment, put in

the place of, and to the utter hindrance of, the order of the Spirit, and His teaching through whomsoever He will. The attempt is made to condense all gifts into the person of *one* man, to whom perhaps the Holy Spirit has given none (for he may be an unbeliever); and a necessary result, productive of even greater disaster, is that those to whom the Holy Spirit has entrusted gifts for the edifying of the body (and many such would be found in every congregation of believers, were they placed in circumstances favourable to the discovery and exercise of them), are effectually prevented from using these gifts for their Lord's glory and their brethren's good, and perhaps from even becoming aware that they possess such gifts at all. One member is made to try to supply that which in Christ's institution "*every joint supplieth*" (1 Cor. xii. 7, 13; Eph. iv. 16. See also Rom. xii. 5, 8); the Lord's order of ministering nourishment to the body by joints and bands (Col. ii. 19) is thrust aside, and "the effectual working in its measure of every part," is made an impossibility. As some one has noticed, the systems of man's getting up go on much better without the Spirit than with Him; and to prove this beyond a question, we have only to consider what utter disorder according to man's notions, what an entire overthrow of all man's cherished institutions, the order of the Holy Spirit would effect, were He to assert His authority in the midst of them, and cause an unordained Apollos here and there, as formerly (Acts xix.), a man "*mighty in the Scriptures*," to go from one church to another, as "*he was disposed*," to be received by "the disciples" of each place on no other introduction than the "*writing of the brethren*," and to "*help them much who believe*," and to convince unbelievers, "*publicly showing that Jesus is the Christ*." The Holy Spirit, speaking through the apostle Paul, might most effectually have put an end to the disorder of the Corinthian Church (read 1 Cor. xi. 21, 22, 33, 34; xiv. 26—40) by appointing a single minister to conduct their worship and the Lord's Supper amongst them, and relieving all the other members of the Church from every duty except that of listening to

this minister ; but as the Spirit's thoughts are not as man's thoughts, He preferred the life and activity of the whole body, though it could be manifested only at the risk of occasional disorder, to the order and quiet of stagnation, of sleep, of death. And even to man's judgment, that order and arrangement must surely appear more worthy of the Holy Spirit, which cannot be maintained when He, the sole and sovereign author of it, is disregarded, than a system which, as we know from daily observation, is carried on with as much outward decency (not to say with more) where He cannot be, as where He is in some measure, and in some of His offices, recognized.

Such is the great and very general sin of believers as bodies or churches ; and its connexion with their prominent imperfections, its bearing on their spiritual state, is intimate and marked. The conversion of sinners is the act of God's sovereignty and grace ; it therefore proceeds amongst the various sects into which the members of the one body of Christ have scattered themselves, unaffected by the failings of the Church. Individuals, too, in all these sects, inasmuch as they acknowledge the Holy Spirit's office as Sanctifier, will be found personally walking in holiness, and bringing forth the personal fruits of the Spirit ; but His especial office in this dispensation of Teacher—of leading into all truth—of showing the things of Christ—is alike disregarded by all, and all consequently labour under lamentable ignorance of the most precious truths provided for them, even the Church's own peculiar portion and heritage with her Lord. Even in the matter of personal sanctification, believers are grievously defective, because they labour about it *directly* as an isolated object, instead of being led to it *indirectly* (and daily progressing in it) by the apprehension of these truths, the first and sure effect of which is to purify the soul, and which have been revealed and are used by the Spirit for this especial purpose. But the loss thus sustained, great as it is, is trifling, compared with that which arises from ignorance of their hope and birthright. How few of those who really love the Lord have been led to see even the fore-

most and the central truth of the Word of God, the coming of the Lord, Jesus Christ, and the glory of every member of His body with Him. Yet without the knowledge of this truth, on which hinge all the dealings of God with the world, it is impossible to put any other revealed truth in its right place, or to see it in its true bearing. That the promises to the first Adam, of dominion over all creation, shall yet be literally fulfilled in the last Adam; that the seed of Abraham shall yet possess the land out of which they had been cast through unbelief; that the Lord Jesus has not foregone His title as King of the Jews, but is, meanwhile, gone into a far country to receive His kingdom; "*this same Jesus who was taken up into heaven shall so come in like manner as*" He was seen to ascend; that He then, as the seed of David, shall sit on the throne of David, and that at His coming He shall bring with Him His bride the Church, to sit with Him on His throne, and to reign with Him; that His Church is to suffer with Him now, if it will reign with Him hereafter; to come out from the world, and to testify against it;—these and other truths, the mention of which would fill pages, are almost universally lost sight of. The Holy Spirit would teach them, but He is grieved; some, perhaps, of our Christian brethren with whom we associate know them, but feel no responsibility to communicate what they know to the Church, which is content to have its knowledge limited by that of the single individual whom it has authorized to instruct it. Believers who are one with Jesus, who are saved, and in His keeping; who have not only in their Father's sight died when Jesus died, but risen in His rising, and are seated with Him even now (if they but knew their true standing) in heavenly places; instead of having for their object, when they meet to break bread, the comforting and edifying of *each other* by their common hope, and the prospect of their glorious inheritance, go week after week to hear invitations of mercy, to be warned to flee from the wrath to come, to lay again the foundation which has been laid long ago; and the result of this is, as may be supposed, that they often know not whether they believe or

not, have no joy, no *assurance*, and therefore no strength to use in the service of Him who has redeemed them. Much has been forgiven them, but they know it not; their love is therefore faint and feeble, their fears ~~many~~ and strong, and their souls oppressed with the spirit of bondage, from which they know not that they have been delivered, to serve their Lord "without distraction." They are exhorted to "comfort *themselves* together," to "edify one another," to "warn the unruly," to "comfort the feeble-minded," to "support the weak" (1 Thess. v.), to "admonish *one another*" (Rom. xv.), to "put out" from among themselves "those that walk disorderly," to "try them which say they are apostles and are not," and to perform every other function which the God of all wisdom has seen good for the body's health; but they neglect them all. How many an Apollos, Epaphras, or Silvanus folds his talent in a napkin now, and how little do we realize—as we nowhere see it—what a body of believers in any place might be if it were "fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual *working* in its measure of *every* part, and making increase to the edifying of itself in love." May those who are elect unto *obedience*, and not unto choosing of what seems right in their own eyes, consider and cease from the grievous sin of countenancing anything which hinders this their Lord's appointment for the good of that which is dearest to Him, even His Church, which He has purchased with His blood.

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