

CHURCHES OF GOD: THE NEW TESTAMENT PATTERN

TOM HYLAND

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FOREWORD

The apostle Paul wrote to Timothy, ‘Give diligence to present thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, handling aright the word of truth’ (2 Tim.2:15). An important area of New Testament teaching relates to what has been called ‘church truth’. It is to be regretted that the word ‘church’ has been used by many in a vague and indiscriminate way, so that the word of truth has not been handled aright in its application to church truth. For example, obvious and important distinctions between what is identified as the Church which is His (Christ’s) Body and what are designated churches of God have been ignored or confused.

What appears in the following pages is the development of a line of teaching on churches of God which takes into account these important distinctions. It represents deep and matured convictions on this important area of New Testament teaching. I am confident that those who read this booklet will derive help and benefit. Those to whom the scriptural teaching concerning churches of God is a valued heritage will find their faith strengthened. Those who desire help in the understanding of God’s purpose revealed in church truth will find this lucid exposition illuminating. Tom Hyland seeks to establish that ‘... apostolic teaching and practice constitute the sole authoritative basis for guidance in the prosecution of the work of God in our own day’. This is a very important proposition and I commend a careful reading of this booklet to all who appreciate its significance.

John Drain

CHAPTER ONE: CHURCHES OF GOD: THEIR AUTHORITY

Before our Lord ascended to heaven after His resurrection to take His place at the right hand of God He appeared to His apostles during a period of forty days and spoke to them ... the things concerning the kingdom of God' (Acts 1:3). Those were momentous meetings, surpassing in importance any gatherings of men for whatever cause since those days. That small group of men gathered around the Lord for those vital consultations was chosen by Him for one of the greatest and most important tasks ever committed to human responsibility. They were men of humble origin and station who sought no prominent place for themselves in the conduct of human affairs. To a number of them the hard, uncertain occupation of fishing proved an almost irresistible attraction. Others had similarly unpretentious aims in life. But the plans of them all had been abruptly shattered by the Voice which one day said: 'Come ye after me' (Mark 1:17) and 'Follow me' (Matt.9:9).

The Lord's Witnesses

This small group clustered around the Lord might be regarded as His cabinet, His council of ministers to whom He disclosed His future plan of campaign. As their victorious Leader He was to return to the Father; they were to remain on the field to carry out His instructions. Jewish in their aspirations, their whole outlook was coloured by the glorious promises with which their own Scriptures teemed. Eagerly and anxiously they questioned the risen Lord regarding His immediate intentions: 'Lord, dost thou at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?' He replied, 'It is not for you to know times or seasons, which the Father hath set within his own authority. But ... ye shall be my witnesses ... unto the ut-

termost part of the earth' (Acts 1:6-8). His immediate plan for them was a mission of world-wide importance!

Further details are not disclosed of those intimate talks of our Lord with His apostles, but an authoritative announcement made by Him is recorded in the closing verses of Matthew's gospel, clearly indicating their scope and the policy which the apostles, as His accredited representatives, were commissioned to pursue:

'All authority hath been given unto me in heaven and on earth. Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I commanded you: and lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world' (Matt.28:18-20).

The apostles must have been astonished at the magnitude of the work they were called upon to undertake. Its immensity and difficulty must have overwhelmed them. How inadequate they were for such a task! How impossible its realization seemed! To all their questionings and fears came this full and assuring answer: '... ye shall receive power, when the Holy Ghost is come upon you' (Acts 1:8) ... tarry ye in the city, until ye be clothed with power from on high' (Luke 24:49).

The Holy Spirit's Help

Having laid the plans and set the objectives, the Lord now discloses the power by which they would be accomplished. The apostles would not be left to their own resources. Difficulties, no matter how formidable, need not deter them. No opposition would be strong enough to withstand the power with which they would be endowed. They would be guided and impelled by One who would take charge of the whole work. Divine power would counteract human limitations. They would not even be left to depend on their own recollection of their Lord's instructions, for the Spirit of God coming upon them in the abundance of His power would

operate with divine skill upon the human faculty of memory and bring to their remembrance all that He said to them (John 14:26). The promise of the Spirit, then, was the complete answer to all the problems that lay ahead. It is an axiom in divine activity that those God calls to serve Him are granted power equal to the demands He makes upon them.

In accordance with the Lord's promise, the Holy Spirit came upon the apostles and those gathered with them in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. That wonderful event heralded a new epoch in the dealings of God with men. It is not at present intended to consider the full implications of that occasion but rather to draw attention to the fact that what happened later in the ministry and methods of the apostles under the guidance of the Spirit of God was in accordance with the instructions specifically set out by the risen Christ before His ascension. Divinely commissioned and Spirit-filled, they went forward engaging in '... the things concerning the kingdom of God' (Acts 1:3). Later they were joined by Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, who was chosen and commissioned by the Lord to fill an important place in the apostolic circle.

The Basis for the Work of God

These facts are beyond dispute. It should be equally evident in the light of them that apostolic teaching and practice constitute the sole authoritative basis for guidance in the prosecution of the work of God in our own day. Apostolic teaching is comprehensive as well as authoritative: its range includes the cardinal doctrines of the Faith, not only in relation to the Person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ, but also in regard to churches of God which were a vital and principal consequence of apostolic labours.

The Faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, expressed in the teaching of the apostles, defines clearly the basis of gathering for His disciples during the period from Pentecost to His second advent. This is an integral part of '... the faith, which was once for all delivered unto the saints' (Jude 3) and there

is no reason to treat it as of secondary importance. To go further and to suppose that the apostolic pattern in regard to corporate testimony may be set aside and some other substituted for it, surely constitutes a grave departure from the Faith. It is submitted that during the past century or so there has been a gradual recovery of truth along these lines and each advance toward the divine pattern has attracted fewer adherents. This is one reason amongst others why so little is heard by many believers of the position taken by churches of God and the objectives which, despite much failure, they pursue.

Truth Recovered

In 1883 a pamphlet was issued entitled: *The Church and the Churches of God: a suggestive outline of truth*, by F. A. Banks. This was heralded by godly and competent students of the New Testament as a great step forward in the understanding of the will of the Lord on this very important matter. It is not contended here that every detail of this outline can necessarily be established. Undoubtedly further truth has been mined from the New Testament since then, but neither has anything appeared which has disturbed the main thesis laid down by this godly and able exponent of the apostles' teaching. It set out with clarity and power what many had been groping after for a long time. There may well be many today whose longings are aptly expressed in the Psalmist's words:

'O send out thy light and thy truth; let them lead me:

Let them bring me into thy holy hill,

And to thy tabernacles.

Then will I go unto the altar of God,

Unto God my exceeding joy' (Ps.43:3,4)

CHAPTER TWO: CHURCHES OF GOD - THEIR PATTERN

In the former chapter, attention was drawn to the authority of apostolic teaching and its applicability in regard to principles of gathering for the people of God in the present day. To the loyal disciple, eager to respond to the Faith of our Lord Jesus Christ expressed through His apostles, one of the most perplexing problems of our times is the confusion and division amongst Christians. Under the guise of tolerance, many believers do not allow themselves to be unduly concerned about this problem; they are prepared to make concessions, to accept the widest area of popular agreement and not venture into disputed territory. Others, though troubled, consider the problem too vast and too complex to be rectified and, rather than grapple with it, they give up the struggle and go with the stream. It is evident, however, that the present confusion and division, traced to their source, are the outcome of departure from ‘... the faith which was once for all delivered unto the saints’ (Jude 3). Error has been perpetuated and systematized to such a degree that it is tolerated without protest by many believers who fail to appreciate that the ultimate and sole authority in such important matters is the teaching of our Lord and His apostles.

The Example of the Early Church

Reverting to the work of the apostles following our Lord’s ascension, the clear and constant pattern of their activities is evident. It is by this pattern that all else must be measured; it has neither been amended nor superseded. The disciples who were gathered together in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost became the first church of God of New Testament times. This church, divinely constituted through the operation of the Spirit of God, was the first of many of like pattern established in vari-

ous parts of the world through the labours of the apostles and their fellow-workers. Once more, attention is directed to the scope of our Lord's commission to His apostles:

1. make disciples of all the nations,

2. baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost:

3. teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I commanded you' (Matt. 28:19,20).

These objectives could only be realised by the establishment of churches of God into which the disciples should be gathered, in which they should be taught and from which divine light and truth should spread to others.

It should be observed that the first words of ministry from the Spirit-filled apostles on the day of Pentecost were strictly in accordance with their commission and the results were in agreement with their objectives: 'They then that received his word were baptized: and there were added unto them in that day about three thousand souls' (Acts 2:41).

Disciples Added Together

Hence, at the close of that memorable day, the Church of God in Jerusalem comprised some three thousand, one hundred and twenty baptized disciples, added together; a clearly defined company separated from the rest of the people and acknowledged as such. 'But of the rest durst no man join himself to them: howbeit the people magnified them' (Acts 5:13). Every church of God subsequently established was composed of identically the same kind of material and likewise its borders were clearly defined.

Things That Differ

It may be well here to differentiate between things that differ. When the word 'church' (Greek, *ekklesia*) occurs in the New Testament it always describes a body of people, but not always the same body of people. No attempt is made here to classify its various uses, but there is no doubt that failure to do so has resulted in much confusion. It is emphasized that what our Lord described as 'my church' (Matt.16:18), which is subsequently designated in Paul's epistles '... the church, which is his body' (Eph.1:22,23), is not synonymous with a church (or churches) of God.

The Church the Body

The Church which is Christ's Body comprises all born again believers who are baptized in one Spirit into one body (1 Cor.12:13). This Church cannot be marred or destroyed, nor can any of its members be severed from it. Its security is not a matter of human responsibility. Membership thereof is eternal in character and is unaffected by death. Our Lord Himself is the Builder, Head and Saviour of this Church. Its building commenced on the day of Pentecost and its completion will coincide with our Lord's return.

The Church of God

As has been indicated already, a church of God is local in character in contrast to the Church which is Christ's Body. The believer does not enter a church of God by means of the new birth; further steps are necessary. Moreover, for various reasons, a believer may cease to be in a church of God, although he can never be severed from the Church, the Body of Christ. These and other contrasts clearly indicate that churches of God are not synonymous with the Church which is Christ's Body. The view sometimes advanced that they are identical, but variously described as viewed from different angles, is not only untenable but has been the cause of much confusion. If apostolic teaching is to be understood, it is essential to differentiate between the various uses of the word 'church'

(Greek, *ekklesia*) in the New Testament. After Pentecost the work of God in Jerusalem spread remarkably quickly:

‘... the number of the men came to be about five thousand’ (Acts 4:4).

‘... believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women’ (Acts 5:14)

‘... and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem exceedingly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith’ (Acts 6:7).

This brought many problems, but divine guidance, as promised, was given to the apostles, and dangers and difficulties were surmounted in a manner which remains on record for our instruction and guidance.

Divine Unity in Jerusalem

One important fact to which attention is drawn is the unity of the Church of God in Jerusalem. In spite of its rapid growth it remained a unit. It is inconceivable that so many thousands of disciples could meet in one building, but no matter how many groups or companies there were, together they constituted the Church of God in Jerusalem. The concept of a number of local autonomous assemblies in a city or town is without precedent in the New Testament. One church of God only was established in a city, town or village. The inter-relationship of these churches will be dealt with later.

The unity of the Church of God in Jerusalem is emphasised in the early chapters of the Acts: ‘And all that believed were together’ (Acts 2:44), ‘And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and soul’ (Acts 4:32). This unity went beyond simply meeting together, it involved the acceptance of joint obligations and responsibilities. The relationship was that of a fellowship or partnership and the history of the Church of God in Jerusalem indicates how completely the disciples were identified in a very real unity.

Giving Effect to the Faith

The purpose for which these churches of God was established is now examined, together with the obligations and responsibilities they undertook. In this chapter an attempt has been made to establish that:

- a) the divine purpose was that disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ should be gathered into a church of God,
- b) the churches of God are not synonymous with the Church which is Christ's Body,
- c) the Church of God in Jerusalem was one, no matter how many places of meeting there may have been in that city,
- d) the Church of God in Jerusalem was the pattern for other churches of God established in the days of the apostles,
- e) all this, on record for our guidance, is embraced in '... the faith which was once for all delivered unto the saints' (Jude v.3).

If what has been written is conceded, then there is cause for deep exercise of heart regarding present departure from the apostolic pattern. It is surely right that those so exercised should seek to give effect to the Faith despite the fact that so many believers are content to follow other paths.

CHAPTER THREE: CHURCHES OF GOD - THEIR UNITY

Attention has already been directed to the initiation of the work of God on the day of Pentecost and, in particular, to the constitution and development of the Church of God in Jerusalem. The prominence given to these matters in the early chapters of Acts is evidence of their importance.

Our Lord indicated to His apostles that they were to begin at Jerusalem, extend their activities to all Judaea and Samaria, and thence to the uttermost part of the earth. To trace these movements in detail is beyond the scope of this brief outline, but an important juncture in the progress of apostolic witness occurred when the work spread to Antioch in Syria and resulted in the formation there of a strong and vigorous church of God. It is important to observe that this development was the result of the preaching of men who were already identified with the Church of God in Jerusalem and that the work was fostered and sustained by the adequate and authoritative help sent from that church.

This was a characteristic feature of the work of God in those days. Churches of God did not spring up independently. They were established by those who were already together in churches of God. The work was one and its development the result of the movements of the Spirit of God, who not only chose and fitted men for this purpose but also directed them to the precise localities in which they were to work. This is demonstrated in the history recorded in the Acts and, from chapter 13 onwards, the narrative reveals the guidance of the Spirit of God in directing the course of the work to the uttermost part of the earth.

Missionary Zeal

While at Antioch, Barnabas and Saul were directed to undertake the journey to Cyprus and Asia Minor (Acts 13 and 14). The Holy Spirit first called these men to the work and then communicated His choice to the assembled prophets and teachers of the Church of God in Antioch: ‘... the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them’ (Acts 13:2).

These two servants of the Lord went out, therefore, with the full fellowship of their brethren. Here, again, there is clear evidence of the acceptance of joint responsibility. The action of the Holy Spirit, the response of the brethren in Antioch and the recognition by Barnabas and Saul of their fellowship, all indicate the deep unity which existed amongst the people of God in those early days. Moreover, Barnabas and Saul not only acknowledged the close fellowship of the brethren in Antioch, but also their joint responsibility with the apostles and elders at Jerusalem (Gal.2:1-10). There was a harmony and cohesion about this undertaking which was the hall-mark of divine authority. On the completion of their mission Barnabas and Saul returned to Antioch, ‘... gathered the church together’, and ‘... rehearsed all things that God had done with them, and how that he had opened a door of faith unto the Gentiles’ (Acts 14:27).

The Jerusalem Conference

At this juncture of the narrative of the Acts there was a crisis in the affairs of the churches of God which was so serious as to threaten to disrupt them into rival factions. It was resolved and surmounted by the conference described in Acts 15 at which delegates from Antioch conferred with apostles and elders at Jerusalem. Leaving aside, for the moment, the particular question which was the cause of those difficulties, division was avoided and harmony preserved by the recognition by the apostles and elders of their joint responsibility for the care of those churches. Here, then, is a clear indication of the relationship of the churches of God to each other. They were not independent but inter-dependent: and their

unity was assured by an elderhood whose responsibility was to consult together and, by spiritual discernment and mutual subjection, to reach unity.

The conduct of the conference of Acts 15 was a model of restraint and wisdom. While at the outset there was ‘... much questioning’ they eventually came ‘... to one accord’ and their decision is stated to conform with the mind of the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:7,25,28). The clear inference is that, without such a conference, those formidable difficulties could not have been resolved. Its outcome was a great blessing to the churches and the signal for a great forward movement in the work of God.

It is sometimes contended that this conference at Jerusalem was a special gathering convened for a particular purpose which is unlikely to recur, and that, therefore, there is no precedent here for guidance in relation to the regular oversight of the churches of God. Doubtless, this was a unique occasion but, if the procedure adopted was necessary and wise, surely it is worthy of imitation. Indeed, there is no authority to discard it, much less to regard as unusual such a valuable means of maintaining unity. The alternative to conference among elders could surely only be independence, disruption and division. History abounds with such sad examples and there is abundant evidence of it today. Those who urge to the extreme the complete independence of each local church today are beset with a wide divergence of view on many matters of crucial importance, and this, in itself, is sufficient condemnation of the unsoundness of their position and demonstration of the wisdom of conference among elders on the model of apostolic example in Acts 15.

The Churches Consolidate

The resolution of the difficulties considered at the Jerusalem conference consolidated the divine movement and enabled further progress to be made. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit the servants of God pursued the objectives laid down by the risen Lord before His ascension.

Preaching and teaching, they went further afield with the result that churches of God were established at strategic points in the Roman world. A striking example of the guidance of the Spirit of God in directing the plan of operations is given in Acts 16: 'And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden of the Holy Ghost to speak the word in Asia; and when they were come over against Mysia, they assayed to go into Bithynia; and the Spirit of Jesus suffered them not; and passing by Mysia, they came down to Troas. And a vision appeared to Paul in the night; There was a man of Macedonia standing, beseeching him, and saying, Come over into Macedonia, and help us' (Acts 16:6-9).

It was not that the message of Life was to be withheld from Asia and Bithynia, for it bore much fruit in both these provinces, and several churches of God were subsequently established there, but rather that the Spirit of God was first guiding these devoted pioneers to Europe. The stirring record of the experiences of Paul and his fellow-workers in Philippi, Thessalonica, Beroea, Athens and Corinth is well known. This journey formed a very important link in the chain of apostolic witness, and the churches of God planted in Philippi, Thessalonica and Corinth were greatly used in the furtherance of the work of God in that part of the world.

The Move to Corinth

Reference is now made to Paul's work in Corinth, because the church planted there occupies a unique place in the New Testament. Paul's two letters to the Church of God in Corinth contain a wide range of instruction in regard to church constitution and practice. They warrant very close attention.

The city of Corinth was an important commercial centre and notorious also for its immorality and profligacy. Paul arrived there alone, fresh from his encounter with the philosophers on Mars Hill. By this time he was

the veteran of many campaigns with vast experience of spiritual conflict. He was one of God's great men, an ambassador of the court of heaven, and yet he slipped into Corinth unknown and unnoticed. In his heart was the message which was soon to make an assault on this stronghold of the devil and gain for Christ a foothold in the province of Achaia.

Paul worked as a tent maker during the week and on the sabbath days he reasoned in the synagogue and sought a hearing for his message among those who gathered there. He was acutely aware of his own inadequacy for the difficult task he had undertaken. '... I was with you,' he wrote 'in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling' (1 Cor.2:3) and yet, with deep spiritual insight into the nature of the problem of Corinth, he laid his plans and decided on the methods he would adopt. Here is his own account: 'I came unto you ... not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the mystery of God. For I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified' (1 Cor.2:1,2). Noble resolve of a devoted servant of Christ!

Opposition to the Truth

When the apostle's fellow-workers, Silas and Timothy, arrived from Macedonia '... Paul was constrained by the word' (Acts 18:5) and his preaching became more aggressive. Then the storm broke, opposition was aroused, and Paul withdrew from the synagogue. But his work there had borne valuable fruit, and a meeting place for the converts was secured in the house of Titus Justus nearby. The opposition was so fierce and so frightening that the apostle needed to be assured and encouraged by a divine vision. Thus strengthened, he toiled on, spending a year and six months in Corinth leaving, on his departure, a church consisting of many believing and baptized Corinthians. The teaching relative to our subject given in the first letter to the Corinthians is considered in the next chapter.

The progress of the work of God in the Acts' narrative to this point has been outlined in order to emphasize its unity and coherence. The principles and methods of apostolic teaching and practice are on record for our guidance, embodied in '... the faith which was once for all delivered unto the saints' (Jude 3). They stand in contrast to the confusion and division of the present day. It is too much to hope for a general return to apostolic simplicity and unity in regard to principles of gathering for God's people for error is too deeply entrenched. It is for each to examine his own conscience in the light of New Testament teaching.

CHAPTER FOUR: CHURCHES OF GOD - THEIR CHARACTER

Attention has been directed to the fact that the establishment of churches of God in various parts of the world was a vital and principal consequence of apostolic labours. This objective was pursued, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, according to the instructions given by the risen Christ before His ascension. It has been observed that these churches of God were of the same pattern as that which came into existence in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, which comprised baptized disciples, added together; a clearly defined, separated company. The unity and interdependence of these churches, and the relevance of the Jerusalem conference of apostles and elders (Acts 15) to the promotion and preservation of this unity have been considered. The spread of the work of God to Europe has been traced, emphasizing the importance of the work of Paul and his fellow-workers at Corinth, and the wide range of instruction given in the Corinthian letters concerning church constitution and practice has been noted.

How the Church Functioned

It is now proposed to examine three terms which throw considerable light on the functions a church of God is intended to perform in its locality. The Church of God in Corinth is described as God's husbandry, God's building, temple of God (1 Cor.3:9,16). Each of these descriptions implies divine origin and divine ownership.

No doubt this company of disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ in Corinth was regarded as an obscure and misguided sect; '... not many mighty, not many noble' were among them (1 Cor.1:26). But, as God looked upon this city in its wickedness and depravity, He saw the Church of

God in Corinth as a luxuriant plot of land, properly enclosed, affording Him pleasure and yielding precious fruit. It was God's husbandry, God's tilled land. Such a place was in the mind of the apostle as he toiled on in Corinth. He and his fellow-missionaries preached the gospel, scattering the good seed of the Word. The seed germinated in the hearts of many, disciples were made and baptized and then were taken and planted in the shelter of God's husbandry. These valuable plants needed careful attention. Apollos came along and watered them with his refreshing ministry and this resulted in divine blessing - God gave the increase (1 Cor.3:7).

Planted Disciples

A church of God, then, under this figure, is viewed as an enclosed plot of land into which disciples are planted and wherein God's ministers may labour so that growth may be promoted and fruit produced for the pleasure of the Husbandman. This is an important divine purpose. Each church of God should be a school where disciples of the Lord in various stages of spiritual development are brought to maturity. For this, labourers are needed. The work demands skill and patience. Some plants need more care than others, but all labour bestowed on this divine plot is well worth while and will be suitably rewarded: '... each shall receive his own reward according to his own labour' (1 Cor.3:8).

A Divine Building

The Church of God in Corinth is also described as God's building. Each disciple in the church had his place in this divinely designed structure. Considerable preparatory work was necessary before it was erected. Paul says of this part of his work at Corinth: '... as a wise master-builder I laid a foundation' (1 Cor.3:10). The foundation of a building is, of course, of the utmost importance. A novice, anxious to see rapid progress, might be tempted to skimp foundational work, but the apostle was a wise master-builder with exact knowledge of the structure this foundation was to support. This was to be God's building and therefore it must be estab-

lished on a divine foundation. Paul wrote ‘... other foundation can no man lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ’ (1 Cor.3:11). In other words, the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ is the only basis upon which a church of God can be founded. What is for God must have a divine beginning and must stand upon a divine foundation. These are important principles and the apostles did not deviate from them.

Living Stones

The base having been well and truly laid, a building began to take shape in the Church of God in Corinth. The disciples who were formerly described as God’s husbandry are now viewed as stones in a building standing as a witness for Him in that godless city. The apostle goes on to say that the foundation he laid in Corinth provided a basis on which others could build: ‘... let each man take heed how he buildeth thereon’ (1 Cor.3:10). In its context this passage is of the utmost importance. A church of God is not only a spiritual nursery where disciples are cared for and grow to maturity; it is not only a building designed by God and standing as a witness to Him; it is also a place to which material may be brought for building purposes. In a church of God men and women are permitted to build for God. The real value of this work will not be apparent until it is tested ‘in that day’. Its worth will not be assessed by its bulk but by its quality.

‘... if any man buildeth on the foundation gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay, stubble; each man’s work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it is revealed in fire; and the fire itself shall prove each man’s work of what sort it is. If any man’s work shall abide which he built thereon, he shall receive a reward. If any man’s work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss; but he himself shall be saved; yet so as through fire’ (1 Cor.3:12-15).

Accountable Service

Providing there is purity of motive, service for God in a church of God is never wasted. Whatever may be the present results of such service, or the assessment of its value by others, in 'that day' it will be tested and appraised by the impartial Judge. Such a prospect stamps the labours of the present with the hallmark of eternity, and reveals in true perspective one divine purpose in relation to a church of God. It is a place where disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ may build for eternity. Standing to the eternal credit of many a devoted disciple, unacclaimed by men, is a deposit of imperishable value wrought through earnest endeavour, in weakness and fear in service for God in one of His churches. No less than this is implied in the powerful passage quoted above! A third description of the Church of God in Corinth is next considered: 'Know ye not that ye are a temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?' (1 Cor.3:16)

A Sanctuary for God

The word translated 'temple' (Greek, naos) is the one used frequently in the Gospels to describe the inner sanctuary in the actual dwelling place of God. One of the most solemn yet striking features of a divinely constituted church of God is that God, by His Spirit, dwells therein. This, of course, does not refer to the building in which a church of God gathers; it is the company of disciples themselves that is the seat of divine indwelling. Notice the assertion '... ye are a temple of God'. This is stated in spite of the fact that some disorder existed in the Church of God in Corinth and that there had been a serious case of immorality. These matters are referred to by Paul and instructions are given so that appropriate action should be taken in regard to them. Such incongruities cannot be permitted in a church of God because of its character as God's temple.

If they are not speedily and adequately dealt with, serious damage will ensue and it is to this solemn possibility the apostle refers in his words of warning, 'If any man destroyeth the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy' (1 Cor.3:17). The word translated

here 'destroy' (Greek, phtheiroo) describes a process of corrupting or marring. This destruction of the temple of God may be brought about in various ways; by the introduction of false teaching, by the spiritual declension of the disciples or by the tolerance of moral evil in the church. The apostles were concerned not only with the establishment of churches of God but also with their preservation in '... the simplicity and the purity that is toward Christ' (2 Cor.11:3). This was their constant anxiety and their struggle against the many forms of evil which attacked these churches is evident from the apostolic writings.

In its character, then, as God's temple, a church of God is a divine dwelling place and as such its purity must be maintained. This calls for the recognition by all the disciples of the impact of personal condition and conduct on collective purity. The words of warning against deliberate desecration of God's temple are solemn indeed.

One Dwelling Place

It should be noted that the term 'temple of God' is used only in the singular in the New Testament. There is no warrant for visualizing the churches of God as a series of temples. The term is again used in 2 Corinthians 6:16, where it is associated with a citation from Leviticus 26:12, which gives a clear indication of its significance. This citation refers to the dwelling of God in the midst of His gathered people Israel and shows that the same feature is present in the New Testament counterpart. The people of God in New Testament times were gathered in churches of God and these together formed one divine dwelling place. It follows that, as churches of God were part of a whole, the quality or character of the whole extended to each part. It is to this the apostle refers when he writes to the Church of God in Corinth '... ye are a temple of God'.

Divine Activity

The solemnity of the fact of divine indwelling in relation to a church of God has been emphasized, and there are other implications of this. In a unique way the divine presence brings a fulness of divine blessing and power. It is in this connection that the apostle uses the words ‘... we are a temple of the living God; even as God said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people’ (2 Cor.6:16). Here is indicated not only divine indwelling but divine activity. God moved among His people of apostolic days, and from those churches, so long as they retained their simplicity and purity, issued divine power and divine blessing. Reflect on the preciousness and tenderness of the promise ‘I will be their God, and they shall be my people’. Viewed in its light the true significance of this subject becomes clear. This line of truth is no bypath but one which lies in the very forefront of our spiritual heritage: ‘... the faith which was once for all delivered unto the saints’ (Jude v.3).

CHAPTER FIVE: THE CHURCHES OF GOD: THEIR CONFLICT

Reference has already been made to the struggle of the apostles and their fellow-workers against the error and declension which threatened the churches of God. This struggle did not take them by surprise. Indeed, as those churches were to be bases of divine operations in the furtherance of the work of God amongst the nations, it was only to be expected that they would be a prime target of the Adversary. Before giving some consideration to the departure from the Faith which occurred in the early centuries, A.D., it is necessary to refer to the early chapters of the book of Revelation for further light on the significance and importance of churches of God.

The book of Revelation was addressed by the apostle John to the seven churches which were in Asia. Without doubt these were seven existing churches of God. The strange view that the letters to these churches (Rev. 2 and 3) give an outline of the entire professing church in the seven stages of her decline, though widely accepted, lacks any scriptural support. It obscures the true relevance of these letters and important information and instruction with regard to churches of God.

John's Vision

John was '... in the Spirit on the Lord's day' (Rev.1:10) and, hearing a voice, he turned and saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands One who declared Himself to be '... the first and the last, and the Living one' (Rev.1:17,18). This vision of the ascended Lord prostrated him. The beloved disciple who once leaned on the breast of the Incarnate Christ lay as one dead at the feet of the risen One, until revived by the tender touch of His right hand. Strengthened, and encouraged by

words of gracious assurance, John is then directed to write the book of Revelation of Jesus Christ. The contents of this book are defined by the Lord (Rev.1:19) as ‘... the things which thou sawest’ (the vision of chapter 1), ‘... the things which are’ (referring to the seven churches in Asia) ‘... and the things which shall come to pass hereafter’ (the prophetic vision of chapters 4-22).

The significance of the vision which he had just seen (chapter 1) is then revealed to John, who is instructed to address a letter directly from the Lord to each of the seven churches represented by the seven golden lampstands. This shows that each was a divine unit accountable to the Lord in regard to its own conduct. But the letter to each of the seven churches, together with the succeeding prophecies, were to be embodied in one book and the whole was to be sent to the churches. Thus the churches in Asia were addressed as a group, implying inter-relationship and joint responsibility. Note the recurring phrase: ‘He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches’.

The Seven Golden Lampstands

The present ministry of our ascended Lord is of the greatest importance. Perhaps too little attention is given to the nature of His office and the extent of the service with which He has been entrusted. In relation to the universe: ‘... he is before all things, and in him all things consist’ (Col.1:17); and He is exalted in the heavenlies far above all, the ‘... head over all things to the church, which is his body’ (Eph.1:22,23). He also holds the offices of Mediator, Advocate, Intercessor and Priest. But the survey of the present ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ is incomplete if it fails to take into account the disclosures of these early chapters of the book of Revelation.

Of paramount importance to Him were these seven golden lampstands of the churches of God in Asia, among which John saw Him walking. Each was a golden lampstand, a unit of divine testimony with responsi-

bility to shed divine light in its locality. The maintenance of that light depended on the spiritual condition of the gathered disciples and this was the concern of the One who walked up and down amongst them. He regarded them with sympathy and affection. He had complete knowledge of their circumstances and their difficulties. Nothing escaped His gaze. Those eyes, which were as a flame of fire, could see to the very heart of things, and, unfettered by human limitations, could make an appraisal of their true spiritual condition. Our Lord's personal concern for these churches and the nature of His activities in regard to them, give an added emphasis to the important place churches of God occupy in His purposes.

The Danger of Degeneration

To five of these churches He says: '... I know thy works' (Rev.2:2, 19; 3:1, 8, 15) to one: '... I know thy tribulation' (Rev.2:9); and to the other: '... I know where thou dwellest' (Rev.2:13). All this is weighed in the balance. Praise where it is merited and encouragement where it is necessary are dispensed with discrimination and impartiality. But the most solemn fact which emerges from a consideration of these letters is that in most, if not all, of these churches there were indications of declension, which, if unchecked, would have serious consequences. It is not proposed to examine in detail the nature of the evils indicated by our Lord in His messages to these churches.

The lessons are clear. Churches of God are liable to departure from the Faith in a variety of ways. There is danger of degeneration from complacency, pride, lifeless formality, compromise with the world, and the tolerance of moral evil. And there is the ever-present danger of the intrusion of doctrines and practices which can only corrupt and destroy. Only by consistent loyalty to the Lord Jesus Christ and to '... the faith which was once for all delivered unto the saints' (Jude v.3) can churches of God continue to exist and function as golden lampstands in divine testimony.

It is clear that the evils which had already gained a foothold in the churches of God during the lifetime of the apostles made rapid advances in the early centuries following the apostolic age. This was envisaged by the apostles themselves. The later epistles of the New Testament give clear indications of it. In his address to the Ephesian elders at Miletus the apostle Paul gave the solemn warning: 'I know that after my departing grievous wolves shall enter in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them ... I commend you to God, and to the word of his grace' (Acts 20:29,30,32).

Increasing Declension

The history of the early centuries A.D. is a melancholy record of increasing declension. Despite the heroic witness of many of God's saints who sealed their testimony with their lives, departure from apostolic simplicity and purity in church constitution and practice continued apace. Persecution stayed the process for a while, but when the emperor Constantine adopted Christianity as the State religion of the Roman Empire the process of departure reached its climax. Doubtless there were faithful souls and groups who struggled against the tide, but in the main, error came in like a flood and apostolic teaching and its authority were discarded in favour of human tradition and expediency.

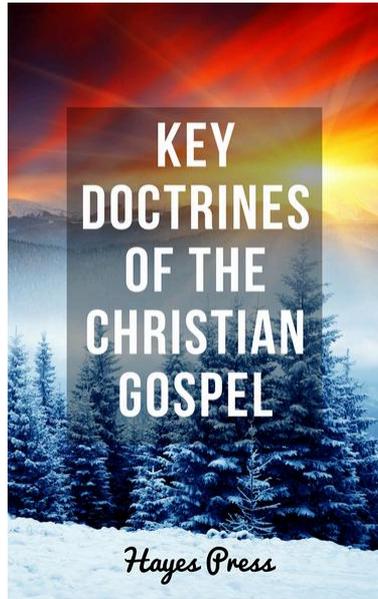
Many of the doctrines and practices which gained a footing in the early churches and corrupted them were of pagan origin: priestly celibacy, confession to a priest, infant sprinkling, baptismal regeneration, the doctrine of purgatory, the use of holy water, virgin worship, prayers for the dead, priestly robes and vestments, justification by works, symbolism of lamps and wax candles, relic worship, and many other doctrines and rituals have been traced by some writers to the mysteries of ancient Babylon, Greece and Rome (see for example, G.H. Pember, *Mystery Babylon the Great and The Mysteries and Catholicism*, 1942, Oliphants, London

and Edinburgh). The adoption of these practices was to have a lasting effect on the concept of Christian worship. Many practices and customs commonly regarded as Christian in their origin are not only devoid of apostolic authority but stem from paganism and this is largely lost sight of in these superficial days. There are many believers in our Lord Jesus Christ who reject the ritual of Roman Catholicism and yet who make no protest at the extensive departure from the apostolic pattern which is evident in many of the so-called Protestant movements. This applies not only to matters of organization and ritual but also to the modernist teaching which is largely a repetition of heresies which were prevalent in the early centuries.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

The object of this booklet has been to establish the proposition that apostolic teaching and practice constitute the sole authoritative basis for guidance in the prosecution of the work of God in our own day. It was indicated there that apostolic teaching was not only authoritative but comprehensive. Its range includes the cardinal doctrines of the Faith, not only in relation to the Person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ, but also in regard to churches of God which were a vital and principal consequence of apostolic labours. Some of the leading features of the churches of God established by the apostles have been pointed out and attention has been drawn to the very serious departure from the Faith in the early centuries. Comment has been made about the present confusion and division. It is contended that what has been presented is an important contribution to the understanding of New Testament teaching on a vital line of truth.

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