

CHURCHES OF GOD:

THEIR BIBLICAL CONSTITUTION AND FUNCTIONS

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CHAPTER ONE: SCRIPTURAL USE OF THE TERM “CHURCH”

The English word “church” is derived from the Anglo-Saxon word ‘cirice’ or ‘Circe’. The Scottish word ‘kirk’ and the German ‘kirche’ are derived from the same source (‘cirice’ in turn comes from the Greek ‘kuriakos’, which means ‘belonging to the Lord’. This word is used twice in the New Testament, in 1 Corinthians 11.20 and Revelation 1.10, where it is applied to the Lord’s Supper and to the Lord’s Day.

The Greek word in the New Testament for ‘church’ is the word ‘ekklesia’, which is from the verb ‘ekkaleo’ (which means ‘to convoke’, this English word comes from the word ‘vocal’, which means ‘uttering sound by the voice’, and signifies to call together), which is a composite of ‘ek’ = out of and ‘kalo’ = I call. Thus the word church means “a called out and called together company of people.”

There are seven uses of the word ‘church’ in the New Testament:

I. The word church is used in a secular sense in Acts 19.32, 39, 41, where it is translated ‘assembly’.

II. Israel (Acts 7.38).

III. The Church, the Body of Christ (Matthew 16.18; Ephesians 1.22-23).

IV. The church and churches of God (Matthew 18.17; 1 Corinthians 1.2, 11.16; 1 Thessalonians 2.14; 2 Thessalonians 1.4).

V. The church of the living God, the house of God (1 Timothy 3.15).

VI. The churches of Christ, and of the saints (Romans 16.16; 1 Corinthians 14.33).

VII. The church of the firstborn (ones) (Hebrews 12.28).

I. Church in its secular use, as in Acts 19.39, called “the regular or lawful assembly,” was “the lawful assembly in a free Greek city of all those possessed of the rights of citizenship, for the transaction of public affairs. That they were summoned is expressed in the latter part of the word; that they were summoned out of the whole population, a select portion of it, including neither the populace, nor strangers, nor yet those who had forfeited their civic rights, this is expressed in the first” (Trench).

The other two references to assembly or church in Acts 19.32,41, have to do with the church that Demetrius the silversmith summoned. It is said that he gathered together the workmen of like occupation to himself, who made silver shrines of Diana, to consider the matter of the serious inroads that the preaching of Paul was making, who was saying, and saying truly, “that they be no gods, which are made with hands.” This assembly of Demetrius came to be one of confusion, as is described in Acts 19.32, but they were all united in their appreciation of Diana, because of whom they reaped their wealth, and for two hours they cried lustily, “Great is Diana of the Ephesians.” This uproar in the city reached the town clerk, who quieted them and told them of the regular or lawful assembly which would deal with matters pertaining to civic affairs, and at the close he dismissed the assembly of Demetrius.

II. Israel was the Church in the wilderness. In Hosea 11.1 we have God saying, “When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and called my son out of Egypt.” Separation from Egypt was a necessity if the will of God was to be done by Israel and the worship of God established among them. God’s demand to Pharaoh brooked no modification. “Thou shalt say unto Pharaoh, ‘Thus saith the LORD, Israel is My son, My first-

born: and I have said unto thee, Let My son go, that he may serve Me; and thou hast refused to let him go: behold, I will slay thy son, thy firstborn” (Exodus 4.22-23). The story is well known concerning the happenings in Egypt in those momentous times. Pharaoh wriggled and struggled amidst the quick descending plagues upon himself and his people to get God to moderate His demand for Israel’s emancipation and separation from Egypt, but with no success. He suggested:

1. “Go ye, sacrifice to your God in the land” (Exodus 8.25).
2. “I will let you go only ye shall not go very far away” (8.28).
3. “Go now ye that are men, and serve the LORD” (10.11).
4. “Go ye, serve the LORD; only let your flocks and your herds be stayed: let your little ones also go with you” (10.24).

The separation of Israel was to be definite and clean-cut: “There shall not a hoof be left behind” (Exodus 10.26), and in due time Israel who were saved in Egypt were separated from it, and became God’s church in the wilderness of that day.

III. The Church, the Body of Christ, is God’s eternal purpose which He purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord (Ephesians 3.11). The Lord was the first to use the word “church” in the New Testament. The LXX manuscript uses ekklesia, church, and synagogue frequently. The Lord chose the word church to define that glorious company of those who have heard His voice (John 5.24; 10.27-28), and have responded, believing in Him as the Christ the Son of a living God. All such are in that Church of which He spoke, “I also say unto thee, that thou art Peter (‘petros’, a piece of rock or a stone), and upon this Rock (‘petra’, “The Rock was Christ” - 1 Corinthians 10.4) I will build My church; and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16.18).

All who are in this Church are there by the Lord baptizing them in the Holy Spirit (John 1.33; Acts 1.5; 1 Corinthians 12.13). No member of the Church, the Body of Christ, can ever be lost (John 3.16; 5.24; 10.27-30), being saved with an eternal salvation of which the Lord is the Author (Hebrews 5.8-9). In consequence, the gates of Hell cannot prevail against even one member of the Church. When complete and at the coming again of the Lord it will be presented by Him to Himself without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, a glorious Church indeed (Ephesians 5.27).

IV. The church of God and the churches of God: this is the only use of the word church in the New Testament in which we have both the singular and plural numbers. The Church which is Christ's Body is only singular, and cannot be plural, for there is but one Body (Ephesians 2.16; 4.4). In contrast to this, "the churches of Christ" are only found in the plural (Romans 16.16). Nowhere in the New Testament do we read of "the church of Christ." This is significant. If only students of the Word of God would conform their language to scriptural terminology they would be saved from falling into error and holding many unscriptural and heretical opinions. There is no branch of knowledge in which such licence is taken in the use of terms as in the study and exposition of the Scriptures, hence the utter confusion that exists, and not the least of that confusion is in church truth.

The term "the church of God" applies to a local gathering of God's people, and it is peculiar to a place, as for instance, when Paul addressed his letters to Corinth he wrote "Unto the church of God which is at (or in) Corinth" (1 Corinthians 1.2). Note that this term does not include all the saints living elsewhere in the world, for he goes on to write: "With all that call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ in every place." The church of God in Corinth did not include saints that were elsewhere, though all were in the same Fellowship (1 Corinthians 1.9). It is perhaps necessary to point out that 2 Corinthians is narrower in its scope.

This epistle is addressed to the church of God which is in Corinth, with all the saints which are in the whole of Achaia; Achaia is Greece, so that all saints in every place, as in the first epistle, are not included.

It is utter folly in exposition on the part of those who glibly seek to expound “Jews, Gentiles and the church of God” as covering the entire race of mankind (1 Corinthians 10.32). “Gentiles,” is “Greeks,” see RV and KJV margin, and does not include barbarians and other peoples. Paul is giving instructions to the church of God in the Greek city of Corinth. They were not to offend their own race, the Greeks, nor the dispersed Jews in their city, nor those of the newly founded society, the church of God.

The first church of God was in Jerusalem, and this Paul sorely persecuted and made havoc of (Acts 8.3; 1 Corinthians 15.9; Galatians 1.13). With the scattering of the disciples and preaching of the word, the churches of God in the province of Judea came into being (Galatians 1.22; 1 Thessalonians 2.14). Then the church in Antioch in Syria (Acts 11.26), the churches of Galatia (Galatians 1.2), of Macedonia (2 Corinthians 8.1), of Asia (Revelation 1.4), and so on.

The local character of the church of God is clearly seen in the Lord’s words, “Tell it to the church,” and “if he refuse to hear the church” (Matthew 18.17).

V. The church of the living God: this is a description of what the house of God is. God’s house is church of the living God, pillar and ground of the truth (1 Timothy 3.15). It is comprised of each several building to which “the temple of God” can be applied, whether in Corinth (1 Corinthians 3.16; 2 Corinthians 6.16), Ephesus (Ephesians 2.21-22), or elsewhere. Each church of God was temple of God, and the whole together formed God’s house. In 1 Timothy 3.15, the emphasis is on conduct therein. Hebrews 3.6 shows its conditional character: “if we hold fast.” Hebrews 10.21-22, deals with the privilege of those therein

to draw nigh into the Holies. 1 Peter 2.3-5 describes the material of which it is built even living stones, and also that the house is a priesthood holy to offer spiritual sacrifices, and royal, to shew forth the excellencies of Him who called them out of darkness into light. 1 Peter 4.17-19 shows that the house of God is the place of the beginning of God's judgement. The house of God is on earth, and is not Father's house, which is in heaven, the place to which the Lord has gone to prepare a place for us (John 14.2).

VI. The churches of Christ and of the saints: these are never referred to in the singular. As we have said before, we never read of "the church of Christ" nor "the church of the saints." It is also important to notice that we never read of more Churches of God being in a city than one. "The church of God" applies to the church in Jerusalem, "the church of God" applies to the church in Corinth, and so on. Churches of God in early days ran into thousands of people. Note what is said regarding the numbers in Jerusalem - about 3,000 (Acts 2.41), about 5,000 men (Acts 4.4), "many thousands" ('muriades', ten thousands) (Acts 21.20); these could not gather all in one building.

We read of many being gathered for prayer in the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark (Acts 12.12). We read of the church in (or at) the house of Prisca and Aquila (Romans 16.3-5; 1 Corinthians 16.19), the church in the house of Philemon in Colossae (Philemon 2). The several companies which formed the church of God in a city were, I judge, churches of the saints or churches of Christ.

VII. The church of firstborn (ones) who are enrolled in heaven (Hebrews 12.28). Firstborn here does not apply to Christ, for the word is plural, nor yet does it include saints on earth, for it is one of the things to which those who are in the house of God have come. It does not include saints in heaven, for these are referred to later as the spirits of just men made perfect (Hebrews 12.23). There is clearly a mistake both

in making verse 28 begin with “the general assembly” and in associating the general assembly in translation with the church of the firstborn ones. It should read “And to innumerable hosts of angels, festal assembly” (Greek: ‘panegurei’). Trench says, “Paneguris was a solemn assembly for purposes of festal rejoicing ... the word having given us ‘panegyric,’ which is properly a set discourse pronounced at one of these great festal gatherings.” This is followed in the original – “and to the church of firstborn (ones) enrolled in heaven.”

Help will be derived from the consideration of Israel in the wilderness. First we have the hosts of Israel in their twelve camps, four encampments, one people who left Egypt to keep a feast unto Jehovah their God in the wilderness. Within this outer circle was an inner one, comprised of the Levites, a tribe which were called out from the rest, a church we might say within a church. The Levites were given the place of the firstborn ones of Israel who failed God sadly in the matter of the golden calf (compare Exodus 32 with Numbers 3.40-51). What we see in Israel is a copy of heavenly things. As the Levites were called out to do service in the sanctuary, so it seems to me that there are angels called out of the innumerable hosts of angels to attend particularly to divine service in heaven.

CHAPTER TWO: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF “OF GOD”

The words which head this chapter occur quite frequently in the Scriptures, and it is of some importance to be quite clear as to what is involved in them. Strictly speaking they imply possession. A church of God is something which is God's; it belongs to Him, but something more is usually involved where these words are used.

Consider a similar construction in the words “a man of Macedonia” (Acts 16.9). The man was evidently to Paul a man belonging to that country, but if we enquire how Paul knew that fact we see that there could be many ways of judging. There might have been a distinctive dress, or a distinctive speech, or the man might have revealed the fact himself. In English we would distinguish between a man from Scotland and a man of Scotland. There is something deeper than speech or dress involved in the latter construction. A man of Scotland has characteristics associated with that country, in mode of thought, as well as of expression. He is representative of his country, and is typical of his countrymen.

We see something of the same kind in the words “a man of God.” He is God's man by possession, and by appointment. He is under the influence of God, and that which he says and does bears the mark of His Master and Owner. His life is a continual revelation of the fact that he is directly under the influence and teaching of God. As a man he does a man's work, but that work differs from the work of other men, and he is in the world as a man to do the will of God and to live a life on earth for God. It is not simply that he is doing something for God, but all men can see that he is God's man.

In the same way a child of God is such by the will of God. He is God's child, and we wish to stress this fact of possession, for too often we use the words "a child of God" when all we wish to convey is that the person has been "born again" and has received remission of sins. A child of God should show out as a child that he belongs to God, and by simple faith and trust in God he can live a childlike life upon the earth. He should never be mistaken for the child of another than God.

There are many other phrases with the same construction, and all imply the fact of possession by God. It is delightful to think of what we are supposed to be, characteristically, whether it be as child of God, son of God, man of God, but we wish to consider now what is involved in the expression "church of God."

We see that a church of God is something which belongs to God in a special way. It is not merely a name given to one of many churches just for the sake of distinction. It was never God's purpose that there should be many churches in a town or city. Consider the following titles in the light of what we have said: Church of England, Church of Rome, Wesleyan Church, Congregational Church, and so on. Was it ever the intention of God that in place of the title divinely given, "church of God," we should have a title which emphasizes the name of a country, or of a man, or of any system of government? Surely not! Such churches may embody things characteristic of English thought and custom, or the mode of worship introduced by an eminent and pious man, but that is very, very far from what is involved in being "of God." Lip service to God, standing for certain aspects of the truth of the Scriptures, setting forth good works, all these cannot make up for the loss sustained in not being able to stand boldly as "church of God."

If any readers are in any church which is not divinely called "church of God" we trust that they will ponder the reason why they are there. What God desired as a church for Himself was intended by Him to be

devotedly His, so that its constitution should be of His making and decree, and those gathered into it should be there according to His calling. It was to do what a child of God as such, or even a man of God as such, could not do. If God had been content to possess children and men of God, He would not have gone further and decreed the existence of a church of God.

It was because He desired, and even needed, something of a collective nature, that a church of God was called into being according to His own will, according to His own decrees as to who should be in it, and according to His own desire to see such a people functioning on earth, not as a mere collection of pious men, but as a people called together “of God.” Such a church was to be known on the earth as distinctively God’s so that in it the word of man would find no place; all that the church did would be manifestly in accordance with the revealed will of God, and such a church would operate among men in a collective way as a man of God would do as an individual.

There can be no question that the Scriptures show clearly that the first church of God which was called into being was manifestly of God, and that other churches of God in other cities than Jerusalem in like manner showed the same thing in the places where their service was rendered. It was a direct consequence of being “of God” that all these churches of God had the same constitution and origin, the conditions under which they were brought into existence were exactly the same.

Those who were brought into those churches were called “of God,” for without such a call they could not be in that which was wholly of God. Their doctrine was the same in all the churches and so was their practice, as we see from such scriptures as 1 Corinthians 7:17, 4:17, and 11:16. It was absolutely impossible that two churches of God could exist and differ in teaching and practice, at any rate so far as fundamental things were concerned. If there were serious differences, as distinct

from minor variations in men's understanding and expression, for all men are not equal in gift, then one of those churches was in a false position. It may have been right originally, and truly of God in its calling, but if false teaching has gained a foothold the day must come when that church would cease to be "of God."

It could not be recognized by other churches of God as functioning according to the divine decrees, for man has a place of responsibility in some measure in these things. It is not today a personal revelation by a voice from heaven which is instrumental in calling a man to a place in a church of God, but there is the word of God, given once for all, and never to be added to by men, which contains all that is necessary to touch the heart and conscience, and to instruct the enquiring child of God. Such a one will be led to a church of God and will find there men of God standing together, themselves having been called in a past day, and now acting for God to receive, after due enquiry and satisfaction as to his spiritual history, the seeker after God, into the church of God. This is as it should be, for God is a God of order and not of confusion. After reception into the church, that child of God will henceforth stand with others in testimony for God, and we close by stressing the fundamental fact that those who stand for God must be "of God."

CHAPTER THREE: THE FIRST CHURCH OF GOD

Stephen refers to Israel as the church in the wilderness (Acts 7.38) and in Nehemiah 13.1 God's remnant people are called the assembly of God according to the Revised Version. The assembly of Jehovah is mentioned a few times in the Old Testament, as in Numbers 16.3 and 20.4, but it is not till we arrive at the New Testament Scriptures that we find the terms church of God and churches of God in general use, and here it is clear that the Holy Spirit has chosen being those to designate those divinely gathered - the church of God, the churches in a city, town or village; and the churches of God being the churches in a province or country, or in wider areas.

The church in Jerusalem was the first church of God (Acts 8.1; 1 Corinthians 15.9); and it was obviously a thing entirely separate from the old system. Those who composed the church had been called out by God, they were the 'ekklesia' of God, called out and called together. The Hebrew word 'qahal', very frequently used in the Old Testament, means "an assembly called together", and in the Septuagint version of the Old Testament it is translated by 'ekklesia'. When God calls out He also calls together. He brought Israel out that He might bring them in.

A church of God is designed to bear witness, as the Lord said, "Ye shall be My witnesses," and that such a testimony was raised first in Jerusalem, where our Lord was crucified, is surely indicative of the rich grace of God. The Lord Jesus said to His disciples, "Thus it is written that the Christ should suffer, and rise again from the dead the third day; and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name unto all nations, beginning from Jerusalem" (Luke 24.46-47).

It is quite clear that the first church owed its origin to the teaching which the Lord gave His disciples. During the days of His ministry on earth He gathered around Himself a company of disciples to whom He gave the word of God – “I have given them Thy word” (John 17.14). That word was life-giving and character-moulding, and resulted in the disciples being gathered in such a manner that He could address them as a “little flock” (Luke 12.32).

In Matthew 16 He unfolded to them the truth concerning what He termed “My Church,” and this, in the epistles by Paul, it is referred to as the Church which is His Body. The gates of hell cannot prevail against this Church, because Christ Himself is the Builder and Saviour of the Body (Matthew 16.18; Ephesians 5.23); and therefore the Body is never associated in Scripture with discipline or rule; but it is clear that when we come to church and churches of God and house of God human responsibility finds a place as to reception into the church, as to internal discipline, and to putting away from the church. See Acts 9. 26-27; Titus 3.10; 1 Corinthians 5.13.

Let us think of the apostles in their responsibility to little flock. On the morning of the resurrection, Judas having gone to his own place, the amazing news of the empty tomb was conveyed to the eleven and all the rest. As the Lord had foretold in Matthew 26.31, the tragedy of the cross had scattered the sheep of the flock; but after the resurrection - the Lord alive and having been seen by the disciples - He drew them together again in response to His commandments.

“And being assembled together with them, He charged them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, said He, ye heard from Me” (Acts 1.4). “They therefore, when they were come together, asked Him, saying, ‘Lord, dost Thou at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?’ And He said unto them, ‘It is not for you to know times or seasons, which the Father has set within His

own authority” (verses 6-7). The kingdom was taken from Israel and given to the little flock. “Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the Kingdom” (Luke 12.32). Power, also, was promised, as we read, “Ye shall receive power when the Holy Spirit is come upon you; and ye shall be my witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, an unto the uttermost part of the earth.”

The church in Jerusalem was to be a witness-bearer to the Lord Jesus, and leading up hereto we note that obedience to the word of the Lord finds a prominent place. It must ever be so. It was so when “He established a testimony in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel” (Psalm 78.5). That law was to be “an inheritance for the assembly of Jacob” (Deuteronomy 33.4). The tarrying in Jerusalem on the part of the disciples gives evidence of their obedience. Having seen the Lord ascend into heaven, and having heard the testimony of the two men in white apparel, they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet. They gathered in the upper chamber, and with one accord they continued steadfastly in prayer, the number of the names gathered together being about a hundred and twenty.

It may be helpful here to mention that in Acts 1.6 the word ‘together’ is ‘sunelthontes’, meaning ‘together of persons’; in John 21.2 the word is ‘homou’, representing place or time; but in Acts 1.15 and 2.1 it is ‘epi-to-auto’, meaning together of purpose; literally, upon the same, or, with the same object in view.

The hundred and twenty, therefore, were together with the same object in view, namely, to obey the command of the risen Lord. So they waited in Jerusalem in the upper room, and while they waited they prayed, and while they prayed they set forth two men, that from them the Lord might choose one to fill the place in ministry and apostleship, from which Judas fell away, that he might go to his own place. The restora-

tion of the number twelve by the choice of Matthias secured a continuance of the governmental number.

When the waiting days were complete, and the day of Pentecost was being fulfilled, we read, they were all together ('homothumadon', unanimously) in one place ('epi-to-auto', with the same object in view) (Acts 2.1); and the Lord fulfilled His promise of John 14.16, "And I will pray the Father, and He shall give you another Comforter." That same day Peter began to preach in the power of the newly-descended Holy Spirit, and he testified, "This Jesus did God raise up, whereof we all are witnesses. Being therefore by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He hath poured forth this, which ye see and hear" (Acts 2.32-33).

In viewing these two scriptures we are reminded of verse 15 of John 14. "If ye love Me, ye will keep My commandments." Obedience to the word of the Lord was a manifestation of their love of the Lord. How much depends on obedience to the word of the Lord! How true that "to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams"! (1 Samuel 15.22). Following up the teaching the Lord gave His disciples prior to the cross, was His ministry during the forty days He was appearing unto them after He rose from the dead, and was seeking the things concerning the kingdom of God; that is, God's rule among His people. The power to do His will, that of the Holy Spirit, was still to come.

On the day of Pentecost the disciples were baptized in one Spirit into one Body, and we were made to drink of one Spirit (1 Corinthians 12.13). We understand that then the building of the Body commenced, that Church of which there is but one, and which is not yet complete. At the same time commenced to function the first church of God, the church in Jerusalem. It comprised the one hundred and twenty who were gathered unanimously in one place, or with the same object in

view. To them were added that day, as the result of the witness borne, about three thousand souls.

We pause here to draw attention to the great need for children of God in these days to pay close heed to the Spirit's use of terms. He is accurate in His use of names and words, and care on our part will have its reward. One writer says, "The first part of knowledge is the ability to give a name to things. The name may be imperfect and provisional, but it is essential to intelligence. To be able to name the object of your thoughts lifts it out of mists and vagueness, and makes it definite and real and present to the mind ... We only reach precision and certainty when we are able to apply the relevant and adequate title" (Beath).

The term church of God, then, is used to designate a company of saints in any one city, town or village. It is never employed to describe anything larger than such a company. But, someone may ask, what of Acts 20.28, where Paul calls on the bishops (overseers) to "feed the church of God, which He purchased with His own blood"? To this we reply, Paul was then addressing the elders of a single church, the church of God in the city of Ephesus, whom he had called to meet him in Miletus. That was their allotted portion of the little flock.

The first church of God and the house of God for a short time were co-extensive, and this gives special emphasis to a phase of truth connected with the day of Pentecost which is largely overlooked. The coming of the Holy Spirit that day is described thus: "And suddenly there came from heaven a sound as of the rushing of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them tongues parting asunder, like as of fire, and it sat upon each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance" (Acts 2.24). The New Testament spiritual house of God was thus filled with the glory of

the Lord. We recall that the Tabernacle and the Temple were so filled when the work was completed. (See Exodus 40.35; and 1 Kings 8.11).

Let us now notice somewhat of the constitution and practice of the church in Jerusalem. The disciples through faith in Christ had received the right to become the children of God, they were then baptized in water on the authority of the Lord's word, and had been brought together with one object in view, that of obeying the word of the Lord. Others were saved, baptized and added, "and they continued stedfastly in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and the prayers" (Acts 2.42). The apostles' teaching was what they had learned from the Lord, and the fellowship was the partnership formed by disciples being together, the fellowship of His (God's) Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. The breaking of the bread was within this fellowship. It was not the first thing as it is with so many in our times. No! They were first brought into the fellowship, and inside that they continued in the breaking of the bread, and also in the prayers.

Note the order in verses 41 and 42 of Acts 2:

- (1) Reception of the word;
- (2) Baptism;
- (3) addition to the assembly;
- (4) steadfast continuance in the apostles' teaching;
- (5) steadfast continuance in the fellowship;
- (6) steadfast continuance in the breaking of the bread; and
- (7) steadfast continuance in the prayers.

The apostles' doctrine is identical with the Faith, and the church in Jerusalem is marked out specially as being a company wherein the Faith

was held and obeyed. Fierce persecution followed the faithful witness-bearing of the church, which came to a head under the activities of Saul of Tarsus, when all of the church, save the apostles, were scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria.

In referring to his work of persecution Paul at a later date says, "They only heard say, he that once persecuted us now preacheth the Faith of which he once made havoc" (Galatians 1.23). In making havoc of the church he made havoc of the Faith, because those disciples were obedient to the Faith. The Faith then was something held, contended for, and suffered for by the first church of God. To be a church of God necessitates a knowledge of the Faith and obedience to it. In becoming obedient to the Faith believers are brought within the circle of the church, to share both its privileges and its responsibilities. The first church of God manifested a divine unity. It had one doctrine and one government.

It has been well said that a church of God, like a child of God, is such, not because of profession only but as the result of a divine operation. There must be a point at which a company of saints is gathered for the first time as a church of God, just as there is a day when an individual becomes a child of God. As a temple of the Holy Spirit each has a definite commencement. The day of Pentecost was that day on which with the first church of God, that in the city of Jerusalem, came into being.

In consequence of the faithful witness borne by the church, in the power of the Holy Spirit, its numbers increased rapidly, so that we read of the men numbering about five thousand (Acts 4.4) "And believers were the more added to the Lord multitudes both of men and women" (5.14). "The word of God increased and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem exceedingly and a great company of the priests were obedient to the Faith (6.7), and by the time of Acts 21 of the Jews

who believed there were many myriads “So mightily grew the word of the Lord and prevailed.”

The great scattering that followed the stoning of Stephen resulted in churches being planted not only in Judea, but northward as far as Antioch in Syria but the apostles and elders of the first church, the church in Jerusalem, continued for a time to exercise a controlling influence among the churches, being as they were the early custodians of the Faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, once for all delivered unto the saints.

As Antioch in Syria later became a new centre from which the gospel went forth in the hands of Paul, Barnabas and others, it was still to Jerusalem, to the apostles and the elders of the first church, that reference was made in matters of real doctrinal difficulty (Acts 15).

In recapping we observe that the Lord in His teaching laid the basis for the church and churches of God. The word of God calls us and calls together a people known locally as the church of God, and wider as the churches of God. The doctrine of the Lord and His apostles contains everything needed for the individual and collective lives of God’s people. Obedience to the word of the Lord is an outstanding feature in those who are in church and churches of God. The term church of God is never used for anything larger than those together of God within a city, town or village. A church of God is a divine unity.

CHAPTER FOUR: CHURCHES OF GOD AS “ONE THING”

In the last chapter the subject of “the first church of God” was clearly set forth, and now we wish to emphasize the importance of getting a right understanding of the constitution and position of the early churches as joined in one thing. We have to face the fact, that today we are surrounded by a multiplicity of denominations in Christendom of all shades of belief.

It is well that our readers should appreciate God’s estimation of such. They are declared to be among the works of the flesh, “heresies”, or sects, parties (RV margin, Galatians 5.20). Such come into existence as the result of human choice, the setting up of the human will in opposition to the divine, choosing this, and rejecting that, formulating their doctrines and practices oftentimes to suit a man, or body of men. Whatever system of religious organisation is found outside the scope of the divine will, as revealed in the New Testament Scriptures regarding the church and churches of God, must of necessity be a sect. It could not be otherwise, for the will of God must be the scriptural standard for all without deviation. The Lord never gave discretionary powers to either apostles or prophets, much less to modern church dignitaries or councils, to alter that teaching given through the Holy Spirit relative to the collective gathering of His people. Let all children of God be guided solely by the Scriptures, and such are bound to find their place in a church of God, the pattern of which is so clearly set forth in Acts 2.41-42.

It is important to note that on the day of Pentecost two things were commenced in the divine purpose:

(1) The building of the Church which is His Body according to Matthew 16.18: "Upon this Rock I will build My Church." When the Lord was glorified (see John 7.39), He poured forth the Holy Spirit (Acts 2.33), and "in one Spirit were we all baptized into one Body" (1 Corinthians 12.13). This is a perfect and eternal oneness which nothing can destroy, and includes all believers from Pentecost to His coming again.

(2) The commencement of a divine unity of disciples on earth in testimony, acknowledging the Lordship of Christ, and subjecting themselves to His authority. Such a company of obedient disciples, together according to His will, is called the church of God.

A church of God does not come into existence by a number of believers, even baptized believers, coming together by arrangement, and formulating acceptable doctrines and church organization. A church of God can only come into being as the result of obedience to the call of God, and simultaneously such persons are called into "the Fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (1 Corinthians 1.9). The extent of the Fellowship is governed by the numbers of Churches in the aggregate. The church of God in Jerusalem was in its commencement the extent of the Fellowship; but as the message of the gospel went forth, and churches were multiplied, we read of:

"The churches of God which are in Judea" (1 Thessalonians 2.14).

"The churches of Galatia" (Galatians 1.2).

"The churches of Macedonia" (2 Corinthians 8.1).

"The seven churches which are in Asia" (Revelation 1.4).

As the number of churches increased, so the Fellowship extended. There are many churches, but only ONE FELLOWSHIP, one community of persons, in one thing for God upon the earth. We never read

of Fellowships (plural). The Apostle writes, “Unto the church of God which is at Corinth ... with all that call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ in every place, their Lord and ours.” All these in every church, everywhere, are included in the words, “God is faithful, through whom ye were called into the Fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” (1 Corinthians 1.2,9).

They had all received a call to “come out” (2 Corinthians 6.17) and also a call into that partnership of (not with) His Son, wherein all are subject to “ONE LORD” (Ephesians 4.5). “Their Lord and ours.” It is important to note that in Scripture there is no independency of churches. All are bound together in one Fellowship. The call of God into the Fellowship can only be effected by reception into a church of God. Consequently there is a “within” and a “without” to the Fellowship. The person “put away” from the church of God in Corinth was therefore put away from all churches of God who together formed the one Fellowship (1 Corinthians 5.12-13). This pattern of teaching is entirely foreign to many claiming to be gathered as Christians. “He that hath an ear to hear let him hear.”

Further, the oneness of churches acting together is seen in such scriptures as 2 Corinthians 8:9:

- (a) In regard to the contribution of the churches (8.1).
- (b) The ministry of the gospel “through all the churches” (v.18).
- (c) “The brother ... appointed by the churches” (v.19).
- (d) “The messengers of the churches” (v. 23).
- (e) “Shew ye therefore unto them in the face of the churches” (v.24).

These references breathe a unity which is of God, the oneness of the churches in fulfilling their mutual responsibilities in ONE THING.

We have seen that “the Fellowship” commenced at the descent of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. At the command of the Lord there was found that day an obedient and waiting people. Into this unity already prepared the Spirit came, and thus it became a living, recognized entity, designed according to His purpose, that herein, His will may be done on earth, “Of His Son” as to both origin, and purpose. “The Fellowship” is therefore an active, living unity of obedient disciples of the Lord, together at the call of God, in churches of God everywhere.

ONE HOUSE

The churches of God are further seen collectively together as “the house of God.” God has not many houses on earth, but one. Never, past, present, or future, has God designed to have more than one dwelling place on earth at the same time.

In this dispensation, God’s house is a spiritual house, composed of living stones, such as have tasted that the Lord is gracious. This spiritual house is not something invisible, it is a visible unity of spiritual persons together as God’s dwelling place on earth. It is not an intangible, undefinable thing which some imagine. It is composed of persons who have recognized God’s claims upon them and are obedient thereto.

“If any man thinketh himself to be ... spiritual, let him take knowledge of the things which I write unto you, that they are the commandment of the Lord” (1 Corinthians 14.37). Spiritual men are those who compare spiritual things with spiritual, accept the truth of the God-breathed Scriptures, and seek to do it, such as have purified their souls by their “obedience to the truth” (1 Peter 1.14,22). God’s house is spoken of as being “the pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Timothy 3.15).

Scattered stones cannot form a house, they need to be builded together. In the New Testament, the great Architect of the universe, and of the Tabernacle and Temple, has given the pattern of His present habita-

tion. Each church of God is a building. "Ye are ... God's building" (1 Corinthians 3.9). These churches were joined together as one temple, one house. "In whom each several building, fitly framed together, groweth into a holy temple in the Lord" (Ephesians 2.21).

Individuals find a place in God's house by addition to a church of God (Acts 2.41-42), and the churches of God in the aggregate form the house of God. "Whose house are we if we hold fast" (Hebrews 3.6). In God's house a right standard of behaviour must be observed, and God has designed that rule and order shall be maintained by overseers fitted and gifted by the Holy Spirit for this work (Acts 20.28; 1 Timothy 3.1-7), and saints are to adopt a right attitude thereto (Hebrews 13.17). The principle of Acts 15 is important as showing the correct way of dealing with doctrinal and practical matters which affect the whole.

ONE FLOCK

Scattered sheep are not a flock - gathered sheep are, and such are seen as being under the care of one Shepherd. The Lord Jesus said, "They shall hear My voice; and they shall become one flock, one Shepherd" (John 10.16). He is the Chief Shepherd, and under Him are those who are entrusted with the care of the sheep in their allotted" charges, in churches of God.

Peter, writing to the elders in the five provinces, enumerated in 1 Peter 1.1, bids them "Tend the flock of God which is among you ... willingly ... according unto God" (1 Peter 5.1-4). There is only one Flock, and the flock spoken of here includes the churches of Galatia and of Asia. The total area of these five provinces is estimated to be about 224,000 square miles, yet there is only one elderhood, Peter himself being a "fellow elder."

The flock of God among them was only part of a greater whole, as may be gleaned from the words "Ye also" (1 Peter 2.5). "Ye also" of the five

provinces, along with others, are built up a spiritual house. Compare 1 Peter 1.2, “Elect unto obedience,” with 1 Peter 5.13, “Elect together with you,” which indicates that they belonged to a larger thing than is seen in the five provinces. The word “tend” in 1 Peter 5.2 and Acts 20.28, is the same word as “rule” in Revelation 2.27 and 19.15, and involves a work of feeding, caring, tending, ruling for God among His together people. To observe these scriptures is the only way given by God for the blessing and ordering of His people. This is no human device of man’s appointing. If any would refute the truth of the elderhood, let them carefully consider Acts 20.28, 1 Thessalonians 5.12, 1 Peter 5.1-4, Hebrews 13.7, 17, 1 Timothy 3.1-7, 5.17. “As for God, His way is perfect” (Psalm 18.30).

ONE KINGDOM

The kingdom of God is the expression of divine rule among His together people. In a kingdom there must be a ruler, and subjects who are responsible to honour their ruler by obedience to his laws. In the past God’s kingdom was entrusted to His people Israel. They failed, were disobedient, “teaching as their doctrines the precepts of men”, becoming a shame and disgrace to the worthy name of Him who chose and called them, and thus brought forth no fruit for His pleasure (compare Isaiah 5.2, 4; Matthew 21.43). The kingdom of God is therefore committed to another nation, “a holy nation” (1 Peter 2.9), a nation of divine choice and constitution, responsible to respond to the laws of the kingdom. We believe the Lord Jesus had this in view, when, after His resurrection, He “appeared unto them by the space of forty days, and speaking unto them the things concerning the kingdom of God” (Acts 1.8). These teachings were embodied in “the apostles’ teaching” and became part of “the Faith” once for all delivered to the saints.

When Philip preached “good tidings concerning the kingdom of God, and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized; both men and

women” (Acts 8.12). In Acts 14.22, the disciples are exhorted “to continue in the Faith, and that through many tribulations we must enter into the kingdom of God.” Obedience to “the Faith” involves a pathway of suffering; but we must press on through these sufferings to our possession and expression of the kingdom of God. It is a forward and continuous movement in the doing of the will of God upon earth.

John writes, “I, John, your brother and partaker with you in the tribulation and kingdom and patience which are in Jesus” (Revelation 1.9). He was a partaker with them in a “kingdom” and this implies that the seven churches to whom he was writing were together in a kingdom. “And He made us ... a kingdom” (verse 6).

He who is destined to be the future “Ruler of the kings of the earth” is their Ruler, and is seen as Son over God’s house walking in the midst of the seven golden lampstands. While these churches had their own peculiar responsibilities in their own locality, they were all linked together in one thing, subject to one Lord, in one kingdom. One book was sent to the seven churches (verse 11). The Spirit’s message to each, was the message to all the churches. “He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches” (Revelation 2.7, 11, 17, 29; 3.6, 18, 22).

All the churches of God everywhere are in “the kingdom” which they collectively express. The keynote of this kingdom is obedience. The churches of God together express that unity in their separated position, and manifest obedience to the claims of the Lordship of Christ, and they only are in that position where the power of that kingdom can operate. “For the kingdom of God is not in word, but in power” (1 Corinthians 4.20). That power is seen in the operation of God’s law relative to immorality in the church of God in Corinth, and collective action in excommunicating such a person is enjoined upon the church (1

Corinthians 5.12-13). From this we see that the laws of the kingdom operate in, and through, the churches of God.

We have pointed readers to that oneness and unity of the churches of God upon earth. For this manifest unity of obedient disciples, the Lord prayed, "That they may all be one ... that the world may believe that Thou didst send Me ... that they may be perfected into one ... sanctify them in the truth" (John 17.17-23). Let those who think lightly of these issues remember that for this oneness He prayed, and for this oneness He died, "That He might also gather together into one the children of God that are scattered abroad" (John 11.52). One Fellowship, one house, one flock, one kingdom, one baptism, one faith, one Lord.

CHAPTER FIVE: SHEPHERDS OF THE FLOCK

“**T**he LORD is my Shepherd; I shall not want.” Hardly any word of Holy Scripture is better known than Psalm 23, which has comforted the hearts of faithful men and women down the ages. King David’s assurance and deep contentment have been shared by many who have in faith appropriated the restful certainty of the Lord’s tender care in the varying needs of daily life. That the Lord stands in this personal relationship to each one of His own, knowing them and their several needs and circumstances, caring for them and preserving them, is a captivating truth, simple enough for faith to grasp and to rest in, yet profound in its implications.

The thoughtful soul, comforted indeed by such knowledge, will go on to recognize the connection between one sheep and others, as well as between the Shepherd and the flock, and will see, too, this expanded thought in the Psalmist’s words, “We are His people, and the sheep of His pasture” (Psalm 100.3). To all who know and enjoy the preciousness of the fact that “The LORD is my Shepherd” there is throughout Scripture an implied appeal to make the personal fact the ground of a wider recognition of the Lord’s purpose and desire to have His people responsive to His guidance and care in collective experience, that is to say as a flock.

God’s gathered people, whether Israel of old, or saints of the present dispensation redeemed and gathered unto the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ, are variously described in the Word by terms which denote some phase or other of their corporate place and service, as, for example concerning Israel - “holy nation,” “kingdom of priests,” “kingdom of the LORD” and concerning His people to-day “holy nation,” “kingdom of

God”, “churches of God”, “holy priesthood” and “royal priesthood”. Of all the terms and the imagery by which their significance is determined, none so captivately reveals the heart of God yearning over and caring for His own, as “His sheep”, “the sheep of His pasture” and “the flock of God.”

Such, as well as the foregoing terms all carry within themselves, obviously and indisputably the essential demand of togetherness, of unity and emphasize the collective side of His people’s responsibility and need. Mingled however with the perfectly simple illustration of His own as sheep, or flock, so very dependent upon Himself is the sobering fact that the shepherd care which begins in Himself is laid by Him upon fallible men under shepherds, whose work it is on His behalf to lead to keep together to feed, and to tend His people as a flock.

This aspect of truth is illustrated prominently in the history of Israel. In Psalm 80.1 God is invoked - “Give ear O Shepherd of Israel, Thou that ledest Joseph like a flock,” and in Psalm 95.6-7 Israel are in view: “O come, let us worship and bow down; Let us kneel before the LORD our Maker: For He is our God, and we are the people of His pasture, and the sheep of His hand.”

Responsibility for the unity of, the leadership and care of, and the necessary provision for, the Israelite community, which had its source in the yearning care of the LORD as “the Shepherd of Israel”, was delegated to fallible men. These had other functions, whether as kings, prophets, priests, or ministers of the earthly tabernacle, but their chief end was to shepherd the LORD’s sheep, His flock. Moses could appeal (Numbers 27.17) for the appointment of a man to replace him in due time, so that “the congregation be not as sheep without a shepherd,” albeit later, in a sad day of declension, the prophet Micah could warn the evil king of Israel that “I saw all Israel scattered upon the mountains as

sheep that have no shepherd” (1 Kings 22.17), and later still Jeremiah wept “because the LORD’s flock is taken captive” (Jeremiah 13.17).

A very solemn element in the failure and eclipse of Israel as the LORD’s flock in a bygone day was the failure of the shepherds. “Their shepherds have caused them to go “astray” (Jeremiah 50.6); “shepherds that destroy and scatter the sheep of My pasture” (Jeremiah 23.1-2). Ezekiel 34 contains in the first half of the chapter a bitter denunciation of the evil shepherds who served themselves and not the flock. Numerous similar statements occur throughout the Prophets. Nevertheless the day is near, we know, when regathered Israel will confess “All we like sheep have gone astray” and when “He that scattered Israel will gather him, and keep him, as a shepherd doth his flock” (Jeremiah 31.10).

Intermingled with much solemn history of failure in Israel as a flock, and with many precious promises assuring future restoration and blessing, there are rich anticipations of the coming Shepherd, Christ! “Behold, the Lord God will come as a Mighty One, and His arm shall rule for Him: behold, His reward is with Him, and His recompense before Him. He shall feed His flock like a shepherd, He shall gather the lambs in His arm, and carry them in His bosom, and shall gently lead those that give suck” (Isaiah 40.10-11): a promise, glorious indeed, but grounded on the fulfilment at the Cross of the awful prophecy – “Awake, O sword, against My Shepherd, and against the Man that is My Fellow, saith the LORD of hosts: smite the Shepherd” (Zechariah 13.7).

“Whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning” (Romans 15.4), and we pass now to the particular applicability in this dispensation of the story of Israel as “My flock.” The Lord Jesus said, “I am the good Shepherd; the good Shepherd layeth down His life for the sheep.” The words from John 10 are related to others in the same chapter which show the Saviour-Shepherd to be setting forth in a pre-

cious way His desire to have all His sheep together under His care and guidance. There is the individual application of course as in the words of His parable of the lost sheep, "I have found My sheep which was lost" (Luke 15.6). But the thoughtful reader will ponder the implications of this relationship. "I am the good Shepherd; and I know Mine own, and Mine own know Me ... And other sheep I have which are not of this fold (i.e., of John's disciples): them also I must bring, and they shall hear My voice; and they shall become one flock, one Shepherd" (verses 14 to 16).

Hearing His voice surely implies a loving and obedient attention to what He says, and to comply: "If ye love Me, ye will keep My commandments" (John 14.15). To such as do so, come the delightful words, "He calleth His own sheep by name, and leadeth them out. When He hath put forth all His own, He goeth before them, and the sheep follow Him: for they know His voice" (verses 3-4). He leadeth His sheep out, and willingly they follow Him, as the hymn says:

"To walk apart with Thee,
Outside the camp, where only
Thy beauty we may see;
Far from the world's loud turmoil,
Far from its busy din,
Far from its praise and honour,
Its unbelief and sin."

Herein is set forth quite simply vital truth of a collective nature which has been lamentably neglected and frustrated by the perversity of sectarian wills amongst the children of God. If it be sadly true that Israel of old has "gone astray" and have been "scattered as sheep that have no

shepherd”; if indeed the Lord when here could survey the Israelite audience as He spoke to them and grieve because “they were as sheep not having a shepherd,” it is manifestly our duty in humility and subjection to ponder the mystery of chaos which has overtaken believers scattered as they are in dire confusion amongst the denominations of Christendom. By no stretch of imagination can they be conceived as “one flock.” Such dissension has indeed rendered ineffectual to a shocking degree the Word and work of God.

Pious persons of eminence in Christendom confess the tragedy of “our unhappy divisions” and account them sinful. The mystery of iniquity operating through the almost invincible self-will of even religious people exhibits a solemn warning of the ease with which the failure of Israel to obey God’s voice may be repeated by His children of this dispensation, and “false shepherds” have played an awful part in the catastrophe. In a day of departure Israel were exhorted to return “to the law, and to the testimony,” and the sure and only resource for the present day is “the Word of His grace.”

A consistent pattern is seen in all the ways of God with men since He first deigned to dwell amongst them and to be served by them; that is unity, togetherness for practical life, service and testimony, and by no means a mystical unity - the face-saving pretence of sectarian Christendom - to be understood though not manifest. Previous chapters have sought to prove this from Scripture, showing that the various collective phases of divine purpose for God’s children, whether in His House, His Kingdom, or The Fellowship consisting of the aggregate of the Churches of God, require His own to be together.

The immediate object of this chapter is to show that, in harmony with that, God has a place and purpose for His gathered out people as a “flock”; a flock over which the Great Shepherd of the sheep exercises in supreme authority and perfect love, a pastoral care. This flock was

called by Him when here on earth a “little flock,” because but a few out of the many clung to Him and followed Him in loving subjection. That the flock today is still a little one is due to the failure of the many “to dwell together in unity” in the spirit of the words already quoted, “If ye love Me ye will keep My commandments.”

For the unity, guidance, protection, and due feeding of the flock the Lord has gifted men for pastoral care to be shepherds under Himself as Chief Shepherd. In another aspect of their service these men are seen as overseers, each Church of God being viewed as ruled and cared for by a circle of such (compare Ephesians 4.11, Acts 20.28, 1 Peter 5.2, 3, Acts 14.23). These are men who should be of mature spirituality and wisdom, without reproach (see 1 Timothy 3:1-7) whom the Holy Spirit has made overseers in the flock; men who should be “ensamples to the flock”; men in whom the saints, the sheep of the flock, have confidence, whose ministry builds up, and whose faith commends imitation.

The primary responsibility of overseers as shepherds is to the Church of God wherein they are. However, inasmuch as the sheep, though found in different assemblies, often far apart from one another, are yet one flock, so elders or overseers are viewed, in the exercise of shepherd care, as joined together in collective responsibility for the whole flock. In 1 Peter 1.1 the apostle addresses saints in Churches of God throughout an extensive area covering five large provinces (the present Asia Minor), and in chapter 5 appeals to the elders in particular, as having a united responsibility to rule, tend, and be ensamples to “the flock of God which is among you.” This wider than local exercise of oversight care is illustrated again in the important conference, to deal with a doctrinal matter, recorded in Acts 15.

By such scriptures we learn how God has legislated to preserve the integrity of the flock. Shepherds of an assembly not only act in harmony, together tending the local unit of the flock, but are seen to have a

wider practical fellowship in oversight responsibility with fellow overseers, whether in their own county or district or still more widely with fellow-elders of all the Churches of God throughout the Fellowship. All in such elderhood have a joint concern and care for “the flock” as represented by the Fellowship worldwide. This is designed to assure an unceasing common exercise to tend all the flock with a shared apprehension of collective need. Along these scriptural lines such men seek to secure that all the shepherds, together with the flock they guide, shall “all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions” among them but that all be perfected together in the same mind and in the same judgement (1 Corinthians 1.10).

It is needful, however, to recall the cautionary words of Acts 20.29-31. The divine pattern sketched above is ever vulnerable to the destructive efforts of the Adversary, the Devil, who, at times is able to find men who, wittingly or unwittingly, lend themselves to his fell design to scatter and destroy what God would have to be gathered; even men of shepherd status and responsibility amongst the flock. How very needful therefore for such to heed the apostle’s warning of “Watch ye”!

May the shepherds of today be found like the shepherds of Bethlehem long ago, keeping watch by night over their flock; may they see the glory of the Lord and may they wait upon and hear continually heaven’s witness to the “Saviour which is Christ the Lord”. So shall they in the glad, soon coming day, when the Chief Shepherd shall be manifested and shall appraise their work, find the reward of faithful shepherd-care of the flock in the crown of glory bestowed by His own pierced hand.

And may the Lord’s gathered people, the one flock, recognize their own duty to value highly the godly labour of faithful shepherds and heed the exhortation: “But we beseech you, brethren, to know them that labour among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you;

and to esteem them exceeding highly in love for their work's sake" (1 Thessalonians 5.12-13, with which read also Hebrews 13.17).

"Jesus is our Shepherd, with His goodness now,
And His tender mercy, He doth us endow;
Let us sing His praises with a gladsome heart,
Very soon we'll meet Him, never more to part."

CHAPTER SIX: MUTUAL RESPONSIBILITIES OF CHURCHES OF GOD

In a past day God's people were constituted a "Holy Nation." The nation of Israel was composed of twelve tribes, each with its own tribal affairs and responsibilities and each accountable so to conduct itself as to contribute to the well-being of the nation as a whole. In the book of Numbers this people is seen in the camp, concerning which the LORD said, "In the midst whereof I dwell." Because of the LORD's dwelling in their midst great care needed to be taken to see that the will of the LORD was carried out in all matters: whether in their service in the sanctuary; their behaviour one towards another; their treatment of sin and defilement in the camp; or in their relations with the nations around them.

That which affected a particular tribe affected the whole nation. Sin in one tribe was the concern of all the tribes who were responsible to the LORD to see the matter properly dealt with (Deuteronomy 13.12-18). How sin in one tribe so grievously involved the whole nation is seen in the sad story concerning Achan's transgression in Joshua 7. Not merely was the tribe of Judah troubled by this wrong-doing, but Joshua says (verse 27) "Why hast thou troubled us?" And then we read, "All Israel stoned him with stones."

If war was to be waged, then each tribe was required to make its contribution to the armed forces (Numbers 31.3-4). In Joshua 22 we read of the concern on the part of the remaining tribes over what they feared was a trespass on the part of Reuben, Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh, which so greatly disturbed them that "the whole congregation of the children of Israel gathered themselves together at Shiloh, to go up

against them to war." Happily their fears proved to be groundless, and so the affair ended peacefully. Instances could be multiplied, but perhaps these may suffice to show that the tribes had common interests to be protected and responsibilities to be discharged if they were to continue to know the blessing of the LORD's presence in their midst. The welfare of the nation depended upon the way in which the tribes responded to their common obligations in these matters.

When we come to the New Testament scriptures we find somewhat similar condition of things presented to us. God's people are still constituted "a Holy Nation" (Matthew 21.43, 1 Peter 2.9); not now composed of twelve tribes as in Israel's day, but nevertheless of companies of God's people gathered together in churches of God. Individuals in the churches have duties one toward another assigned to them by the Lord, and what is true of the individual is also true of the companies of God's people.

It is evident that as the work of the Lord spread from Jerusalem to Samaria (Acts 8.14), and then to Antioch (Acts 11.22), those who were already together of God in Jerusalem appreciated their responsibility and sent help to them, with the result that churches of God were brought into existence in those places; and in the case of Antioch, Barnabas who had been sent from Jerusalem, and Paul whom he had associated with him, remained with the church after it had been planted for a whole year, teaching the doctrine of the Lord. Antioch had become partaker in Judea's spiritual things, and soon they had the opportunity of reciprocating, by ministering of their material things, to which they responded as Luke records: "And the disciples, every man according to his ability, determined to send relief unto the brethren that dwelt in Judea; which also they did, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul" (Acts 11.29-30).

When we come to Acts 15 we have an account of wrong doctrine being disseminated in Antioch by “certain men” who had come from Judea. As a result of this Paul and Barnabas were appointed to go up to Jerusalem about the matter. After the question had been considered by the apostles and elders together in conference, and one accord as to the mind of the Lord had been reached, men were chosen (verse 22) to go to Antioch and convey to the church there the decision of the conference in Jerusalem.

Nothing will work greater havoc and occasion more quickly the downfall of the Holy Nation, by causing disunity among the churches, than wrong doctrine if it is permitted to be held and taught. Wrong doctrine in one church will work like leaven and eventually, unless it is purged out, will affect the whole nation.

Hence arose the mutual concern in both Antioch and Jerusalem over this question. Nor was it a matter affecting only these two churches, as is clearly seen from chapter 16.1-5, where we read of Paul and his companions, as they passed on their way through the cities, delivering to the churches “the decrees for to keep, which had been ordained of the apostles and elders that were at Jerusalem.”

The result of this godly procedure was that, instead of disruption being permitted to develop, it is recorded: “So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and increased in number daily.” Then again, how approvingly the apostle writes of the churches in the provinces of Macedonia and Achaia fulfilling together their responsibility towards the poor saints in the church in Jerusalem (Romans 15.25-27), in ministering unto them in carnal things, of whose spiritual things they had been made partakers.

What a delightful thing this mutual care and responsibility of one church toward another is! How beneficially it operates in the case of individuals in the churches is evidenced in the instance of Phoebe,

who was going from Cenchrea to Rome and towards whom the latter church had responsibilities laid upon it to care for and assist her in whatsoever she had need (Romans 16.1-2). As was the case in the church of God in Ephesus (2 Timothy 2.19), so in Rome (Romans 16.17) they were responsible to separate themselves from those who were “causing divisions and occasions of stumbling, contrary to the doctrine.”

If the unity of the nation is to be maintained each church must recognize its obligation to resist wrong doctrine and retain its separated position from those who promulgate such doctrine. The need in material things which had arisen for the second time among the people of God in Jerusalem became a matter in which responsibility rested upon the churches throughout the province of Galatia (1 Corinthians 16.1); the church in Corinth (verse 2); the churches of Macedonia (2 Corinthians 8.1); and, indeed, one in which the unity of the churches in these widely spread spheres is exemplified in that they together appointed brethren as “messengers of the churches” to carry the bounty to Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 8.19-20, 23).

Only in a community constituted and ordered according to divine requirements can the people of God act together in unity so as to enable them to discharge the mutual responsibilities devolving upon the churches, in the matter of doctrine; of temporal need arising; in causing the word of God to be passed on from one church to another as in the case of the apostle’s letters to Colossae and Laodicea (Colossians 4.16); in the event of saints moving from one town or country to another, and much else in which such mutual responsibilities exist.

How blessed are those who are, by God’s grace, in a community where all these matters can be, and are, dealt with according to the instructions and precedents provided for us in the Holy Scriptures! May the earnest care one for another, instanced in the portions we have referred

to, ever be in exercise among the churches of God which in the goodness of God have been constituted “The Fellowship of His Son Jesus Christ our Lord,” in this our day.

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE MAINTENANCE OF SPIRITUAL LIFE

In the realm of physical experience it is very widely appreciated that the maintenance of the life with which a child comes into the world is a matter of very great importance. Provision, in some cases of a very elaborate kind, is made to nourish and to promote the growth and development of the new-born child. In some lands the health of the people is considered to be of such importance that vast sums of money are expended in pursuance of national schemes designed to safeguard the people from disease, to remove disability and handicap, and to educate and train so that the full possibilities of physical life may be enjoyed.

It is perhaps not so generally realized that what is true in the sphere of physical life is true, with greater significance and consequences, in the sphere of spiritual life. In the miraculous experience of regeneration a person who believes on the Son of God is born again, born of God, born of the Spirit, begotten again through the word of God. The life given to the believing one is eternal life. Christ could say of His sheep, "I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of My hand" (John 10.28). Hence, once a person has received the spiritual life given in the new birth he has entered into a relationship with God which nothing can sever. His eternal security as a child of God is guaranteed.

But when the new birth takes place in a person's experience, a new-born babe is brought into existence. The spiritual life of this babe must be maintained and its powers and faculties developed, so that the full possibilities of spiritual life may be realized. The Scriptures make it abundantly clear that it is God's will that His children should live in the en-

joyment of full spiritual vigour and vitality. The words of Paul to the Ephesians are relevant here: "Till we all attain ... unto a full-grown man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ: that we may be no longer children ..." (Ephesians 4.13-14). Life is not just a beating pulse, nor is spiritual life merely a matter of being saved. Impairment of physical faculties and functions may do much to destroy the enjoyment of life. God has made wonderful and complete provision for His children so that they all should grow and develop, and prove the reality and blessedness of the life which is life indeed.

It may perhaps be pointed out here, in this matter of the maintenance of spiritual life, that whilst the experience of the individual is both necessary and important, the full benefits of spiritual life cannot be known where individualism is insisted upon. Some have chosen personal isolation and insulation, hoping thereby to reach a deeper experience of spiritual life. But the Scriptures neither authorize nor encourage such a course. On the contrary, we, read, "Ye also, as living stones, are built up a spiritual house ..." (1 Peter 2.5).

Separation from the world is a clearly-taught scriptural truth, but as clearly is it taught that separated disciples of the Lord should be brought together in churches of God under the authority of the Lord Jesus. We are assured that whilst certain aspects of life may be enjoyed by individual believers, the fulness of spiritual life demands, not only a standing in grace in Christ, but also subjection and obedience to Him as the One who has absolute authority. This will involve being linked up with other disciples in the Fellowship which is called in the Scriptures, "The Fellowship of His Son Jesus Christ our Lord" (1 Corinthians 1.9).

Examining something of the divine provision for the maintenance of spiritual life, we realize first of all that Christ Himself is the Life. There can be no life apart from Him. Christ is our Life and He is the Source

of all life. Paul points out the serious danger of a man being “vainly puffed up in his fleshly mind, and not holding fast the Head, from whom all the Body, being supplied and knit together through the joints and bands, increaseth with the increase of God” (Colossians 2.18-19). Christ said to His disciples, “Abide in Me, and I in you” (John 15.4). The apostle Paul was one who knew the practical meaning of these words and he could say, “I have been crucified with Christ; yet I live; and yet no longer I, but Christ liveth in me” (Galatians 2.20). Here is spiritual life in its perfection.

To the Holy Spirit as to His activity in the work of regeneration we have already alluded. It is by His power that spiritual life can be sustained. Spiritual life is ever threatened by the flesh, and “the mind of the flesh is death” (Romans 8.6). “If ye live after the flesh, ye must die” (Romans 8.13). The only power that can cope with the deadly flesh is the power of the Holy Spirit. If, therefore, we will know the sweetness of the new life to which we are called we must not grieve or quench the Spirit who is within us. The great instrument which the Spirit uses is the word of God which is spoken of as being “living and active” (Hebrews 4.12).

The maintenance of spiritual life is absolutely impossible apart from the word of God. Shortly before his death, Moses said to the people of Israel, “Set your heart unto all the words which I testify unto you this day; which ye shall command your children, to observe to do all the words of this law. For it is no vain thing for you; because it is your life” (Deuteronomy 32.46-47). In the beginning of this present dispensation the disciples continued steadfastly in the apostles’ teaching. This was the doctrine of the Lord for them. It was their life. With the complete canon of Scripture in our possession we are not only more favourably placed than those early disciples, but also more responsible. There should be a longing for the “spiritual milk” (1 Peter 2.2), and an increasing appetite for “solid food” (Hebrews 5.14).

The faith of our Lord Jesus, which embodies the doctrine of the Lord for His disciples, is healthful teaching. Private reading and assimilation of the word of God must be attended to if spiritual life is to be sustained. It is also very important to realize that God intends that adequate provision be made for shepherds to feed and to tend the lambs and the sheep of the flock. Spirit-given ministry is much needed.

Occupying a unique place in the provision of God for the life of His people is the hallowed service of remembrance instituted by the Lord Jesus. This is identified as “the breaking of bread.” In this also the early disciples continued steadfastly (Acts 2.42). Undoubtedly this service has primarily and properly a Godward direction and activity in which the holy priesthood of God’s house worship Him. But we believe that the remembrance character of the service - “in remembrance of Me” - gives to it unspeakable value in stimulating spiritual life. As we reflect upon our beloved Lord and receive impressions upon our hearts of His divine, ineffable glory, His perfect, sinless manhood, His consummate devotion as Jehovah’s Servant, His immeasurable love as man’s Saviour, His wondrous life, His infinite attributes, His gracious character, His agonizing death, His triumphant resurrection and return to Heaven, His present offices, His future glories, surely in such communion there is life-promoting power.

Another distinctive feature of the true life of the people of God is the access into God’s presence which has been opened for them in the Person and work of Christ. In Acts 2.42 we see that the disciples continued in the prayers. If we are hearing God then God will be hearing us. Those early disciples knew the blessed experience of pouring out their beings to God in worship and adoration, and in supplication, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings. This intimate contact of approach to God in the prayers is indispensable to life, and where it is neglected there must follow serious deterioration in the life of a child of God. May God by His grace enable us all more effectively to lay hold on the life eternal!

CHAPTER EIGHT: SUBJECTION IN A KINGDOM

The Greek word for subjection in the New Testament is ‘hupotas-
so’, from ‘hupo’ = under, and ‘tasso’ = to arrange, order, place in a
certain order; thus subjection means ‘to place or arrange under any per-
son or thing’. The word ‘obedience’ may be a translation of ‘hupakouo’
(from ‘hupo’ = under, and ‘akouo’ = to listen, to hear), which means ‘to
hear under’, with the object of obeying what is commanded. To obey
may also be a translation of ‘peitho’ = to persuade; consequently, the
opposite of being persuaded is disobedience. It will be seen that subjec-
tion has to do with the recognition and acknowledgement of divine order
or arrangement, whereas obedience has to do with hearing instruc-
tions or commands that are given and with the carrying of them out.

We are told in Ephesians 5.24 that “the Church (that is, the Body of
Christ) is subject to Christ.” This is a statement of absolute fact. The
Church is and never will be otherwise than subject to Christ. No com-
mandments have been given to the Church or its members as such, oth-
erwise we should have had a disrupted and scattered Church, a Church
which could never be presented by the Lord to Himself without spot or
blemish or any such thing. One thing and one thing only is required of
all who are in this Church, and that is to believe that Jesus is the Christ,
the Son of the living God (Matthew 16.16). There is no other charter
than this for persons to become members of this Body, and to remain
in a state of divine order as members under their glorious Head.

When commandments are introduced this involves continuous hear-
ing and equally continuous obedience. Herein emerges another form
of subjection, the subjection of a disciple to his Master, a bondservant
or slave to his Lord, a subject to his King. When a person has believed

in Christ as Saviour, the matter of subjection to Christ as Lord quickly arises. Such an attitude of mind is seen in Saul of Tarsus as he lay on the Damascus road, when he said, "What shall I do, Lord?" (Acts 22.10). When we think of his later words, that "no man can say, Jesus is Lord, but in the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12.3), we see how truly subject his heart was to the Lord Jesus, and consequently it was an easy thing for him to hear and obey whatever His commands might be, though his obedience to Christ's commands might bring upon him the bitterest spite of the Jews in Damascus, who watched the gates to kill him, and his disciples let him down through the wall in a basket (Acts 9.24-25). Years after he recounted those scenes as he wrote of his perils and sufferings (2 Corinthians 11.32-33).

The first of the Lord's commands which Paul obeyed was that of baptism, when he was commanded, by Ananias the Lord's servant and messenger, "Arise, and be baptized" (Acts 22.16), "and he arose and was baptized" (Acts 9.18). Insubjection to the Lord's authority and disobedience to His word have resulted in the scattering of the disciples of the Lord. Instead of the plain, simple command of the Lord for His disciples to be baptized in water following regeneration, we have Catholics and others teaching that baptism (or rather sprinkling) takes away original sin, and that babies dying without sprinkling will go to the torments of Hell, not through any failure or sin on their own part, but by the fault of others. Such a monstrous and false doctrine formulated by men in counsel with the devil has bound myriads hand and foot in chains of darkness. The Church of England, with other episcopal churches in full communion with it, teaches baptismal regeneration, a doctrine much like the Catholics, that an infant becomes a child of God by the cleric's act at the baptismal font, a lie of the devil which has also deceived myriads.

Then we have the so-called Exclusives of J.N. Darby who believe in the baptism of infants and bringing them on to Christian ground, a doc-

trine nowhere found in scripture, just another lie of the devil. In order to bolster up this doctrine they have to put infants into Lydia's and the jailor's households in Philippi (Acts 16.14-15, 31-34). We do not even know that Lydia had a husband, far less a family, and Paul spoke the word of the Lord to the jailor and all that were in his house. Wonderful infants indeed to hear and receive the word of the Lord! But not content with such bolstering up false doctrine, they must tell us that the children of the Israelites passed through the waters of the Red Sea, and this, according to them, is proof positive that unregenerated children should be baptized now. Surely they willingly forget that it was the first-born male children of the Israelites that were under sentence of death and would have died on the night of the passover in Egypt had they not been sheltered by the blood of redemption and so saved. Such passed through the Red Sea. Why do they not follow typical teaching to its logical conclusion and not write craftily to deceive the simple? Moreover, were not the sheep and oxen in the sea and under the cloud as well?

If a man baptizes his little children, what about baptizing his cattle also, if he has such? The cattle of the Israelites were also preserved from death, whereas the first-borns of the Egyptians' cattle died. To what limits do some people push unscriptural exposition of God's holy word! The fact is that all Israelites, young and old, were under the blood on the passover night, and all such passed through the sea and were so baptized unto Moses (1 Corinthians 10.1-2). No one then or now should be under water till they have first been under the blood.

Then we have those in so-called Open Brethren who do not require that all they receive to their communion shall be baptized. Muller and Craik when they began their work in Bristol required that all, before they were received and allowed to break bread, must be baptized, afterwards abandoned this and adopted the open table, baptism being left optional; the applicant for fellowship could be received without bap-

tism, if he so desired, a course which is still followed by many open meetings. As well, the co-related practice is followed of receiving children of God from other denominations, based on calling the Lord's table 'the Father's table', and making the breaking of the bread open to all the Father's children; which, of course, they cannot and do not carry out, for many open meetings will not receive brethren from other open meetings, though they know full well that these brethren are the Father's children. But such is just an evidence of the utter confusion of doctrine and practice that exists.

But why do we refer to such matters? Because subjection to Christ and obedience to His commands lie at the beginning of the disciple pathway, and if the Lord's disciples go wrong here, they will be wrong ever afterwards, if their initial error is not corrected. A kingdom worthy of such a name demands unity, arrangement, cohesion. God's kingdom in this dispensation was established among the little flock, even as He said, "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12.32). They were to make the kingdom of God the chief business of their life.

What men of the world sought was not to be their great quest in this world, even as He said: "Seek not ye what ye shall eat, and what ye shall drink, neither be ye of doubtful mind. For all these things do the nations of the world seek after: but your Father knoweth that ye have need of these things. Howbeit seek ye His kingdom, and these things shall be added unto you" (verses 29-31). The Lord's will is "one flock, one Shepherd" (John 10.16). It was to the men of this one flock that He, during the forty days between His resurrection and ascension to God's right hand, was found "speaking the things concerning the kingdom of God" (Acts 1.8). Paul, too, is found in Acts 19.8-10 speaking in the synagogue in Ephesus, "reasoning and persuading as to the things concerning the kingdom of God" (verse 8). This was not the kingdom to Israel

(Acts 1.6), for the kingdom of God had been taken from Israel and given to another nation; that is, the little flock (Matthew 21.43).

Paul's presentation of the kingdom of God in its New Testament setting, as applicable to the Lord's disciples who were gathered together in the churches of God in different towns and cities, stirred up many of the Jews who were hardened, disobedient, and who spoke evil of the Way before the multitude; consequently Paul departed from them and separated the disciples. As it was in Ephesus where divine separation followed the teaching of the things concerning the kingdom of God, so was it in Jerusalem, where Peter called on those who believed his message concerning repentance and baptism to save themselves from this crooked generation (Acts 2.37-42). Those who received Peter's word were baptized and added.

Subjection and consequent obedience are bound up in the closing statement of Peter's address in Acts 2: "Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly, that God hath made Him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom ye crucified" (Acts 2.36). If Jesus Christ is Lord (and who can doubt that who believes the Scriptures?) then it is the privilege of all to be subject to Him. There can be no evasion of this issue. This carries with it implicit obedience to His commands. Obedience is the true test of love to Him, as He said, "If ye love Me, ye will keep My commandments." "He that hath My commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth Me" (John 14.14, 21). Where men play fast and loose with the Lord's commandments is no place for the disciple who would be subject to his Lord.

Elders, who have been constituted such by the Holy Spirit (Acts 20.17,28), and have been recognized as such by men (1 Thessalonians 5.12-13; 1 Timothy 3.1-7; Titus 1.5-9; Hebrews 13.17), have a prime responsibility to care for the flock (1 Peter 5.1-2), and to see that God's word is carried out among them. In such a sphere the younger elders are

to be subject to the older elders: “Likewise, ye younger, be subject unto the elder,” and it does not stop at the younger being subject to the elder, “Yea, all of you gird yourselves with humility to serve one another” (1 Peter 5.5). This presents to saints a worthy example to follow, for they are commanded by the Lord, “Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit to them” (Hebrews 13.17).

Self-will and self-choice have no place in the things of God. First of all we should be subject to the one Lord, Jesus Christ, and obey His commandments as He gives them. Wives are to be subject to their husbands; children are to obey their parents; saints are to submit to their elders; younger elders are to be in subjection to the older elders, and all elders are to be girded with humility to serve each other. Happy indeed is such a people, for then that kingdom has come for which the Lord taught His disciples to pray “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, as in heaven, so on earth” (Matthew 8.10).

CHAPTER NINE: A HOLY PRIESTHOOD

“**A** holy priesthood” - such is the New Testament expression, used by the Holy Spirit in 1 Peter 2.5. There had been an Old Testament order of priesthood. The nation of Israel was represented in priestly service by the house of Aaron, with the ministering Levites in attendance. The priesthood was given to Aaron and his sons “as a service of gift” and they were responsible to bear the iniquity of the sanctuary and the iniquity of the priesthood. They kept the charge of the sanctuary and its service, of the altar and its offerings. The sanctuary was for the service of God and to that service Aaron and his sons were called. It is not surprising, therefore, that much of the instruction given by God to Moses concerning the building of the tabernacle dealt with matters affecting also the ministry “in the priest’s office” of Aaron and his sons. The priesthood was associated with the tabernacle.

Then “Solomon built Him a house,” a house which was exceedingly magnificent, acknowledged and loved by God until the sin of His people drove away from its precincts the glory of the divine presence. It took the place of Shiloh where the Lord had caused His Name to dwell at the first. It was a house of rest for God in the Mount Zion which He loved. David, its visionary, described it as “a house for the sanctuary.” It was the place of divine service. Into it, therefore, was brought the Levitical priesthood, “for the gifts and the calling of God are without repentance,” and it was ordered into 24 courses for the elaborate temple service of God. Some of the “more chief men” were known as “princes of the sanctuary,” others as “princes of God.” The house of God was evidently the place of service of the priesthood of God. And that Aaronic priesthood, which was brought into being in association with the tabernacle and continued to function through temple days until the house

was burned down by alien hands, was only disbanded when the priests went away with the people into a captivity which knew nothing of the service of God. When the house ceased, the priesthood service ceased with it.

It is not then surprising to find that the New Testament “living stones” of 1 Peter 2.5 “are built up a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” Or, as the Revised Version margin puts it, they were “a spiritual house for a holy priesthood.” The principles of divine testimony are unchangeable. Whether in the past or in the present the house of God is ever the place of priesthood service. The house and the priesthood go together. Indeed in New Testament times the same people comprise both. The basis of divine testimony for this present dispensation then is a spiritual house and a holy priesthood. The house is composed of “living stones ... built up” - the priesthood is composed of priests brought together.

Are all the living stones thus built up? Are all the priests thus brought together? We believe not - for this reason. We know that all believers are in the Church which is His Body. Peter, for example, is seen in Matthew 16 as a stone to be built in to the building which rests on the divine foundation, “this Rock”. He was a “living stone” to be built by Christ into the invisible church. But the Lord’s mind was that these living stones should also be raised in visible divine testimony to the world. This is brought out in Ephesians 2.20-22. Verse 20 speaks of the saints (the living stones) in the church in Ephesus as (Greek) ‘epoikodomethentes’ = being built up. They were not isolated individuals. They were built-up on a divine foundation and according to a divine plan. Together in divine testimony they were forming a building for God - just as the church of God in Corinth was “God’s building. And all these churches were forming together “a holy temple in the Lord.”

Therefore verse 22 points out that in this movement of God the Ephesian saints (Greek) 'sunoikodomisthe' = are being built together for a habitation of God in the Spirit. It was one thing to be a "living stone," but quite another thing to be "built-up" in a church of God and thus to have part in the building-together of the living stones which formed the spiritual house. And so to-day. Nor are all priests in the priesthood. The priesthood is ever in Scripture that, body of priests which functions in the house of God. And those believers in the Lord Jesus who have not subjected themselves to their Lord's revealed will and have not taken their place in the, spiritual house cannot exercise themselves in the holy priesthood service although they may rejoice in their priestly calling.

At conversion a sinner is sanctified with a view to a place amongst the gathered out people of God in divine testimony in churches of God. That place, he may fail to take. A living stone is simultaneously quarried with a view to being, built-up and built-together into the habitation of God in the Spirit. That subsequent experience he may never have. And a priest is simultaneously made with a view to his functioning in the holy priesthood in the spiritual house. This he may never enter into. But the unalterable fact remains that the priesthood and the house go together in the ways of God. And not till a believer enters the spiritual house does he participate in the holy priesthood.

Some may consider this restrictive. The point however is, is it scriptural or is it a mere human device? The Book must answer and not the traditions of men, no matter how devout. What then formed the spiritual house of apostolic days? It was the churches of God, fitly framed together, dwelling together in unity of doctrine, practice, purpose and under the godly rule of a united elderhood. They were One people, though found in many lands. They were a holy nation and, happy their state, they formed also the holy priesthood. But some believers today

are in congregations which do not conform to the revealed will of God for the churches of God.

In some congregations there are unconverted folk in other unbaptized believers; in some the adherents' infants are sprinkled; in others there is one-man ministry, some reject the Word in large sections, in most the congregation is autonomous, acknowledging no governmental responsibility wider than themselves. But these are not the principles and practices of churches of God united to form the house of God - neither in apostolic times nor to-day. And if believers will not conform to the pattern of the house they must understand that thereby they disqualify themselves from the privileges of the holy priesthood. The God of the house stipulates the manner of the priesthood.

The Aaronic priesthood attended at the altar. Today the holy priesthood offers up "spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." The place of service is "the holy place" of the Epistle to the Hebrews. The priests forming the priesthood form also the house of God of Hebrews 10.21, therefore they claim in their drawing near the Great Priest who is over that house. Through Him they have boldness of approach in divine service. Aaron's sons presented offerings which expressed in type the Christ who was to come. The holy priesthood today presents to the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ tributes of heart-appreciation of the Christ who has come.

The first covenant had ordinances of divine service and in its earthly sanctuary were offered both gifts and sacrifices which could not, as touching the conscience, make the worshipper perfect. They were only carnal ordinances imposed until a time of reformation. It is in that reformed order of things that the holy priesthood serves today. Christ has entered once and for all into the holy place the heavenly things are cleansed the worshippers are perfected the holy priesthood can now draw near into the sanctuary and the true tabernacle which the Lord

pitched, not man. They have the breaking of the bread to remind them, when gathered on the first day of the week of Him who is the glorious basis of their boldness to enter. And as their spirits are moved in fresh remembrance of Him the sacrifice of praise is offered up.

We believe that the breaking of the bread occupies a unique place in the holy priesthood service. The word of the Lord Jesus was, "This do in remembrance of Me". In the breaking of the bread there is thus a remembrance of Him. The service of the holy priesthood is to offer up spiritual sacrifice acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. This sacrifice of praise is "the fruit of lips which make confession to His Name." We can think of no finer prompting to the sacrifice of praise than the remembrance of Him. Further we judge it to be the mind of the Lord that the first act in the service of the holies should be the breaking of the bread. From this hallowed remembrance the praise of God's people will flow. Some who walk have said that it is taught amongst the churches of God that we draw near by means of the breaking of the bread. That of course is not true, nor was it ever true. Our boldness to enter is by the blood of Jesus alone. His death opened the way.

Indeed since the minds of some are not at all clear as to the manner of holy priesthood service in the House of God we should pause to explain that the saints gather on Lord's day morning at the appointed hour. After a short period for the quietening of the spirit in the Lord's presence a brother takes the loaf and leads the assembly, in thanksgiving. The same brother then takes the cup and again leads the assembly in thanksgiving. The rest of the service is occupied with brethren continuing to lead the assembly in praise and in the singing of hymns addressed in worship to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The service is Godward. The holy priesthood is ministering in the sanctuary sacrifices of praise. At the close of the meeting there is opportunity for brethren so exercised to minister suitably to the saints from the Word. Such ministry, of course, changes the character of the meeting. Sanctu-

ary service is from the holy priesthood Godward. Ministry is from God through His servants to His people. For that reason the holy priesthood service is not to be interrupted by ministry.

As we gather on Lord's day morning are our hearts throbbing with David in his song, "Praise waiteth for thee, O God, in Zion: and unto Thee shall the vow be in our performed"? Are we in our places in good time, in quietness of spirit ready for the drawing near, all of us, brothers and sisters alike, ready to "render as bullocks the offering of our lips"? Are brethren generally exercised that with neither undue haste, nor undue delay, thanks be given in relation to the symbols? Are we exercised, younger and older alike, that after the remembrance there should be a flow of spirit-led worship, praise and thanksgiving, not stereotyped nor stilted, but moving and warm with the freshness of Christ? And let our young brethren remember that their five sanctified words weigh much with God.

CHAPTER TEN: A HOUSE OF PRAYER

Reference was made in the last chapter to 1 Peter 2.5, speaking of our priesthood Godward, “a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood,” and now we are to consider our priesthood manward (verse 9) “a royal priesthood, a holy nation.” Within the offices of this royal priesthood intercessory prayer has its necessary and rightful place, “for Mine house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples” (Isaiah 56.7).

Linking this Old Testament scripture with Acts 2.41-42, we note that it was an obligation upon, and a delight for, those who were saved, baptized, and added to the Church of God in Jerusalem (the pattern of all the New Testament churches) to continue steadfastly in “the prayers” (collective).

The message of Jehovah sounds through Isaiah the prophet to home-born Jew and to the stranger alike, to those who join themselves to the LORD to serve Him and who love the name of the LORD, and that hold fast by My covenant, “even them (mark the foregoing conditions) will I bring to My holy mountain, and make them joyful in My house of prayer ... for Mine house shall be called A HOUSE OF PRAYER FOR ALL PEOPLES” (Isaiah 56.7).

This scripture is quoted by our Lord in Luke 19.46. He is here seen riding upon an ass into the capital to the Hosannas of the crowd; into the capital which should have housed His royal throne, and to the temple which should have resounded to His praises. Alas, the voices which to-day cry “Hosanna,” tomorrow will cry “Away with Him, we will not have this Man to reign over us.” Even now, His subjects are so far removed from that heart-subjection (of which we have read much in this

book already) that they have defiled the temple courts, the precincts of God's house. As He approaches He overturns their money tables, saying, as He quotes from Isaiah, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations, but ye have made it a den of robbers." We can hear His sighs echoing over the renegade capital, "Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem your house is left unto you" (Matthew 23.37-38). What an awful contrast! The house of the God, "My house of prayer." - "A DEN OF ROBBERS."

What has caused this awful digression? Since Isaiah's time God's people have departed from Him; in self-will they followed their own inclinations, instead of His clearly marked path. No longer "joined to the LORD" they neither hold to His covenant, nor serve Him. Non-observance of the conditions inevitably results in forfeiture of the blessing, the inestimable privilege of intercession before high heaven on behalf of all peoples. For this they have substituted the jingle of golden coins and the empty lure of swiftly mounting fortune.

To readers who have read this far we need hardly point out that, we understand, in this age of grace God has no material house, but one composed of "living stones built up a spiritual house" (1 Peter 2.5). It matters not with what carnal glitter or blinding brilliance today that which passes for the house of God may burst upon our sight; if the pre-requisite conditions are not there it is not "My house," but merely "yours," not "a house of Prayer," but a place where God and His blessed Son are dethroned by the very people who vehemently shout "Hosanna" (or its modern counterpart) but who ROB JEHOVAH OF HIS CROWN RIGHTS.

The words of Malachi (chapter 3.7-10) are apposite here. The windows of heaven are closed because men, who should know better, have robbed God; closed against the reception of their offerings and prayers, closed against His blessing manwards. How exceedingly sad! May we

enquire, courteously yet pointedly, did this state of things begin and end here? Certainly not, for in Jeremiah's time we read of Jehovah speaking of idolatry, treachery and unfaithfulness in His house, of the breaking of His covenant, of pastors destroying His pleasant portion, of prophet and priest profaning that holy place and of abominations being committed therein so that it is defiled. (Jeremiah 2.26-27; 3. 20; 5.11; 7.30; 11.10-15; 12.6; 23.11, etc.).

Are these conditions wholly a thing of the past? What says the apostle Paul of the prospect? "But know this, that in the last days, grievous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of self, traitors, headstrong, puffed up, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God; holding a form of godliness, but having denied the power thereof" (2 Timothy 3.1-5).

How different are God's pre-requisite conditions for every age!

1. "Lovers of the name of the LORD"
2. "Joined to the LORD"
- 3 "Serving Him"
4. "Holding fast by His covenant."

Then comes the promise, "even them will I bring to My holy mountain." Isaiah has another word from God of similar purport, "Thus saith the LORD, The heaven is My throne, and the earth is My footstool: what manner of house will ye build Me? And what place shall be My rest? ... To this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and that trembleth at My word" (Isaiah 66.1-2).

Are the above divinely imposed conditions being observed to-day in organized Christendom, whether of Catholic, Protestant or Dissenting persuasion? If they are not, can "your" house be truly a house of prayer for all peoples? Are these essential conditions being honoured, these

characteristics seen, where you worship? As you have read up to now, you may have been exercised (we pray you may be deeply disturbed) concerning your ecclesiastical position in the divided denominations of Christendom, in which God's Son is robbed of His rightful place of pre-eminence and from which there cannot arise that clear, united, potent intercession for all peoples which is one of the purposes of God relative to His house.

The words are being repeated, with incessant monotony, "THY KINGDOM COME, THY WILL BE DONE on earth as it is in Heaven ..." but the expression of that kingdom for this age, as seen in the Fellowship of God's Son, is being avoided and ignored by the majority of believers. It was ever God's purpose to have a kingdom; first His people Israel, then, when they were set aside, those whom He would call out of all the nations (Acts 15:14; Romans 11.11) to be a peculiar treasure unto Himself, a holy nation (1 Peter 2.9-10).

That which answers to the "holy nation" is with us to-day in believers together in Churches of God making up the Fellowship of God's Son (1 Corinthians 1. 9). In our midst is God's house for this day of grace, but, let it ever be recognized, our existence is conditional, dependent upon continual enthronement of Christ as Lord, ruling in our midst in all that is held and practised, "whose house are we, if ..." (Hebrews 3.6). That this conditional aspect of our position may be realized, and the necessary quality of life and subjection maintained with vigilance, is our constant prayer, individually and collectively.

In Peter's day the time had come "for judgement to begin at the house of God ..." (1 Peter 4.17) and it is only as judgement is exercised through every order of our ranks and continually applied to everything of self-will which would depose the Christ of God that we have the right, humbly, to claim this position. If once this discipline, this judge-

ment is foregone “My house of prayer” becomes “a den of robbers,” for we rob the risen Lord of His inalienable rights.

But while, by His gracious aid, the position is maintained we humbly and gratefully apply His words “My house of prayer for all peoples.” WHAT A HIGH AND HOLY PRIVILEGE! What a responsibility! Thus we more than counterbalance that which we seem to lose in our position as a separated people, separated from the world unto the Lord. The enactments of men in high places and the movements of nations pass us by, apparently, unmoved; but, as enjoined, our intercessions are made “for all men; for kings and all that are in high place; that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and gravity” (1 Timothy 2.2).

In the electoral poll we can have no part, “for our citizenship is in heaven ...” (Philippians 3.20), but we cease not to pray for the legislators of this and every land knowing that “the Most High God ruleth in the kingdom of men, and that He setteth up over it whomsoever He will” (Daniel 5.21). Earnestly we pray for the salvation of men of every race and clime; salvation from sin’s penalty and power; we pray for freedom of speech to be maintained, in this and every land, so that the glorious gospel can be preached without hindrance, that many of the guilty sons of Adam’s race may be “delivered out of the power of darkness, and translated into the kingdom of the Son of His love” (Colossians 1.13) before the Lord Jesus Christ comes again.

For His coming we ardently pray, being assured that the peace of mankind and the prosperity of nations are bound up with His personal reign on earth, during the millennium, which will far surpass even the glory of Solomon’s kingdom, of which “the half was never told.” Is this intercession for all peoples deemed, by some, an impracticable thing and the objects for which we pray impossible of fulfilment? Be it so, in man’s estimation, we can but endeavour to please our Lord, who,

though now despised and rejected, is soon coming to be acknowledged by all.

“Jesus ... spake unto them (the apostles), saying, “All authority hath been given unto Me in heaven and on earth. Co 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 Spirit; teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I commanded you (Matthew 28.19-20).

“Then they that received His word (the Lord’s, through His servant Peter) were baptized; and there were added unto them in that day about three thousand souls. And they continued stedfastly in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2.41-42).

Will you earnestly seek His face that He may lead you to Himself as sovereign Lord, that you may be found in this day of spiritual declension “joyful in My house of prayer”?

CHAPTER ELEVEN: MINISTERS AND AMBASSADORS

Believers in the churches of God in New Testament days could be in no doubt about the attitude of the world to their testimony concerning Christ crucified. They were days of intolerance, with clear-cut distinctions between adherents of different faiths. The believing Jew was cut off from his people with fanatical hatred. The believing Greek was regarded as a fool by his philosophical fellows. The converted pagan had to share the stigma of association with the despised sect of the Nazarenes. All who confessed the crucified One realized through much tribulation what the world thought of them and their message.

Little wonder therefore that those early churches fulfilled so magnificently their function of “sounding forth the word of the Lord” (1 Thessalonians 1.8). For they were conscious that there was laid upon them the responsibility to tell out the message of the cross. To them that message went far beyond an invitation to the sinner to accept the atoning work of Christ their Substitute; it included also the logical result that any who professed to accept the Saviour would take their place among those who had already “gone forth unto Him without the camp, bearing His reproach.” The issues were crystal clear. There could be no neutral ground. Those who would obey the Lord must accept the hatred of the world, and they would hear the divine call to a place of privileged testimony among His people.

These issues have become sadly blurred in the minds of many Christians to-day. There is frequent failure to realize the absolute gulf between the cross of Christ and the world; leading to adoption of worldly principles in presenting the message of the cross. Many try to divorce the acceptance of the Saviour from the full implication of the gospel,

leaving converts in hopeless confusion as to the claims of the Lord. Let us consider together how the New Testament churches of God fulfilled the function of being ministers and ambassadors; and as we do so, may God grant “eyesalve that we may see” where much modern evangelical practice is fundamentally out of harmony with divine principle!

The Spirit-portrayed picture in the Acts and the Epistles is brilliantly clear. Every church of God throughout the Fellowship in the first century had a responsibility to make known the message of the cross as widely as possible. Personal testimony of life and lip by those Spirit-filled disciples resulted in the rapid spread of the message throughout a large part of the Roman Empire, despite (indeed partly because of!) fierce fires of persecution. For the most part the movement was spread and maintained by humble individuals in every walk of life who felt their responsibility to tell others of their Saviour. Some were specially gifted as evangelists, pastors and teachers (Ephesians 4.1). They would use such gifts in the public ministry of the Word at the gatherings of the church of God with which they were numbered. “As every man hath received a gift, ministering it among yourselves, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God; if any man speaketh, speaking as it were oracles of God” (1 Peter 4.11).

Let us note clearly that there was no suggestion of a separate class of “clergy” as distinct from “laity.” Responsibility to speak the Word of the Lord publicly rested upon “any man” in a local church of God who had been gifted by God for that purpose. Modern usage of the word “minister” in religious circles has so familiarized many with the idea of a clergyman having charge of a local congregation, that the Scriptural use of the Word is misunderstood. We read nowhere in God’s Word of “the minister” of any church of God. In such places as Jerusalem or Corinth, where they came behind in no gift, many of the brethren would be capable ministers of the gospel.

One sad result of departure from God's will in this matter is that many who are gifted of the Spirit for such work may never develop that gift because they consider it the responsibility of a so-called "ordained minister." A glance at a concordance will satisfy the enquirer that the word most frequently translated "minister" in the New Testament is simply the Greek word for servant ('diakonos'). Again, the word translated 'ministry' may refer to service in preaching God's word (as in Acts 6.4), or to service in an administrative capacity (as in Acts 12.25). This line of thought is commended to believers for prayerful study; for it clearly shows that in regard to the public declaration of the Word, the scriptural functioning of a church of God is very different from popular belief and practice among many Christians.

What then of Peter, Paul, Barnabas, Apollos, Timothy and others who stand out in the New Testament story as men who devoted their whole time to the ministry of the Word?

"What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Ministers (Greek: 'diakonos') through whom ye believed; and each as the Lord gave unto him" (1 Corinthians 3.5).

We preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake" (2 Corinthians 4.5).

Such men were gifted and called by God for this service. They moved among the churches, exercising their gift "for the perfecting of the saints ... unto the building up of the Body of Christ." They pressed ahead to regions beyond existing churches, and pioneered in the spiritual wilderness of paganism. Yet there is no shred of scriptural evidence that those who had been called by God to devote all their time to such service were regarded as "clergy," in contrast to their brethren who devoted their gift to the furtherance of the gospel on a part-time basis. The Lord's will was, and still is, that believers should be functioning together in churches of God, where the public declaration of His Word

should be undertaken by men whose qualifications are a gift from their ascended Lord, and manifest dependence on the power and wisdom of the Holy Spirit in exercising that gift.

The wisdom of God's ways in this matter is abundantly clear, the more so against the unbecoming background of much that is trumpeted abroad to-day in the name of a crucified Saviour. It is sad that many professing to exalt the One who was meek and lowly in heart should give such prominence to the gift or personality of those proclaiming the message! In refreshing contrast we read the words of a great servant of the gospel: "I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified."

Yet it was in no compromising attitude that the first-century churches of God declared their message. If they were servants, they were also ambassadors. "We are ambassadors therefore on behalf of Christ." As a result they were conscious of the dignity of their commission, received as it was from the lips of Him to whom all authority had been given in heaven and on earth. Compromise of His commands was unthinkable. The call to repentance towards God and faith in Jesus Christ must be heralded without reserve. So must the command that believers should be baptized and united together in churches of God, recognizing that the world had been crucified unto them and they unto the world. The fierce enmity of religious prejudices must be challenged at whatever cost: "Do I seek to please men? For if I yet pleased men, I should not be the bondservant of Christ ... then is the offence of the cross ceased" (Galatians 1.10; 5.11).

Where the principles of their commission were involved, those in the early churches of God would not water down their Lord's commands to make themselves popular with men. They recognized the offence, the stigma, associated with the message of the cross. They gladly accepted that reproach, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer

for the sake of the Name. Noble ambassadors they were! Representing the Court of Heaven, they held forth the grand terms of reconciliation to God. In a hostile world this meant hardship, sometimes even unto death because of “the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains” (Ephesians 6.20). Like their royal Master, they were ready to seal their testimony with their blood.

But these are days of easy-going toleration. The broad-minded worldling patronisingly sees some good in all kinds of religion, and so evades the challenge of a crucified Saviour. The broad-minded “evangelical Christian” adopts a similar attitude towards all denominations where the gospel is preached, and so evades the challenge of obedience to the Lord’s commands, in separation to His will. The message preached by many is a pathetic dilution of that so faithfully proclaimed by first-century ambassadors for Christ. Having as a result lost much power in testimony, some resort frantically to the weak and beggarly rudiments of this world to attract people to Christ. However sincere such efforts may be, the Christian who realizes the supreme importance of doing the Lord’s will should ponder well the following illustrations of how the message of the cross is being debased:

1. Making merchandise of the Word of God. The common practice of appealing for money from audiences to whom the gospel has been preached is foreign to the conception of our being ambassadors on behalf of Christ. What ambassador would stoop to beg for support from those to whom he was representing his sovereign? The apostles repeatedly emphasized their concern to ensure that none could suspect them of making the gospel a means of gain (see, for example Acts 18.3 with 2 Corinthians 11.7; also 1 Thessalonians 2.5). When we read, “So did the Lord ordain that they which proclaim the gospel should live of the gospel” (1 Corinthians 9.14), the context shows that such men would be supported by those already gathered in churches of God. This matter should stir the conscience of all believers, for it is a sad reflection on the

divine love which proffers free salvation as a result of the Redeemer's costly sacrifice; and it gives the world an occasion for justifiable criticism.

2.The social and political patronage of the world. In order to popularize the gospel, there is a studied attempt to enlist the support of people who are socially prominent; and if a political figure associates himself with the cause, his influence is hailed as an especially attractive feature. That larger numbers are as a result brought under the sound of the gospel overrides every other consideration. With Paul, we would "rejoice in every way that Christ is proclaimed" (Philippians 1.18); but the fact remains that any who work on these lines have no place in their preaching for the challenge of the cross to the believer, calling him to separation from the world which rejected their Saviour.

One cannot consistently be an ambassador on behalf of Christ and an ambassador on behalf of a political party. For to be acceptable to a political party in a democratic nation, one must carry out a policy pleasing to the people, the majority of whom are still "walking according to the course of this world." The New Testament Christian realized that he should not be unequally yoked with unbelievers in attempting to further the policies of this world. He rightly regarded himself as a stranger and pilgrim whose citizenship was in heaven. He knew that if he followed the Master's will the world would hate him (John 15.18-19). He could not serve two Masters. Were all believers still to follow the Lord Jesus Christ in that spirit, the power of their united testimony in churches of God would be far more effective than the present popular fraternizing with the world. Though but a remnant actually take their stand in witness against such unhallowed affinity, theirs will be the joy and satisfaction of holding high the banner on behalf of the truth.

3.The lure of entertainment. Entertainment had no place in connection with the preaching of God's Word in the New Testament record. Men

who had witnessed the sufferings of Christ, had seen Him in resurrection, and realized that He was at the right hand of God, had no inclination to obscure their message by pampering to the tastes of the flesh. To them this was a matter of life and death. To those who believed through their word, acceptance of the Saviour would often involve persecution. So there could be no suggestion of levity or attractions designed to appeal to the natural man. The message of the cross meant the crucifixion of the flesh; it would ill behove an ambassador of Christ to begin by catering to those desires.

In sharp contrast, some modern evangelism seeks to woo the multitudes by methods which often approximate to the bizarre and the theatrical. People are stirred to emotional excitement. The place given to musical attractions increases, and time to hear exposition of God's Word shrinks in proportion. Of Israel in the days of Ezekiel God said, "Lo, thou art unto them as a very lovely song of one that hath a pleasant voice, and can play well on an instrument: for they hear thy words, but they do them not" (Ezekiel 33.32).

From that scripture alone it can be seen that music has no spiritual value in itself. Only the hearing and believing of God's Word can give spiritual life or edify the believer. If we are helped spiritually by hymns, it is because of the truth of God's Word which they contain, not because of the music. The general prominence given to musical features is typical of the modern tendency to emphasize what is pleasing to the natural man.

4. Compromising the Word of the Lord. To obtain widespread support for gospel campaigns, many Christians will temporarily unite together, limiting their message to the invitation to unsaved people to accept the Saviour. This involves agreement to say nothing about "controversial matters." So such subjects as baptism, separation from the world, and truths regarding church fellowship are ruled out of the preaching. Who

can conceive of such presumption as an ambassador choosing out that portion of his sovereign's message which he will declare? Yet that is precisely what is involved. The glorious appeal of the gospel, inviting sinners to flee for refuge to Christ, is singled out from the comprehensive command of Matthew 28.19-20.

Those who accept the invitation are neither instructed about baptism nor taught "all things whatsoever the Lord has commanded." They are left to drift among the growing confusion of evangelical sectarianism. There they find no agreement on any of the fundamental doctrines of the Lord Jesus Christ. They are assailed with wrong teaching about their eternal security; they find no unanimity as to whether they should be baptized (by immersion) as in New Testament days; they are subject to subtle influences of modern spirit manifestations; they are told that it matters little to what "church" they belong. Alas, that many to whom the newly converted look for leadership should fall so far short of the terms of the Lord's commission to all who would speak in His Name!

The churches of God to-day stand in testimony to the whole counsel of God. Although in acknowledged weakness, they seek to fulfil their function as "ministers and ambassadors" in the spirit of those early disciples – "not as pleasing men, nor seeking glory from men," but in faithfulness to divine principle. Once believers have grasped this positive ideal set before us in God's Word, the importance of separation from movements which fall short of that ideal is understood; for when Christians are called together in testimony to the whole counsel of God, their ministry would be compromised by joining with others who had agreed to differ on many aspects of doctrine.

The speaking of God's Word "in power, and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance" was the means by which the message of the cross was spread in the first century. What additional methods would the Lord have us use? Has His Word ever made greater progress than in the pris-

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tine power of the first Churches of God? Fulness of the Holy Spirit and earnest obedience to the Word of God are still the only essentials for those who would be ambassadors on behalf of Christ. May the Lord stir up many of His children to prove all things, hold fast that which is good, and readily share the “offence of the cross”.

CHAPTER TWELVE: STEWARDS OF THE MYSTERIES OF CHRIST

“Let a man so account of us, as of ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God” (1 Corinthians 4.1).

It is well known to all students of the New Testament that the word “mystery” (Greek, *Musterion*) denotes, not that which is mysterious (in the sense of the English word), but “that which, being outside the range of unassisted natural apprehension, can be made known only by divine revelation, and is made known in a manner and at a time appointed by God, and to those only who are illumined by His Spirit. In the ordinary sense mystery implies knowledge withheld; its scriptural significance is truth revealed.” Various “mysteries” are referred to in the New Testament. It is not our purpose to examine these separately, but each of them calls for the earnest attention of those who are exercised regarding the will of God in relation to the present phase of His dealings with men.

In the passage quoted at the head of this chapter, Paul speaks of himself and his fellow-workers as “ministers of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.” It would appear that the term “mysteries”, in this instance, is used comprehensively of the whole range of truth which was revealed to the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ; and committed to them to hold and to pass on, unimpaired, to the saints of this dispensation. Faithful stewards these men were! They have handed on to us, under God, a spiritual heritage of inestimable worth.

Throughout this book we have sought to set before our readers, under the heading “The churches of God: their constitution and functions,” one line of truth which demands continual emphasis because of the

prominent place it occupies in the teaching of the apostles. We believe these weighty matters to be of paramount importance to all true believers in our Lord Jesus Christ, and we regard the propagation of them to be one of our major responsibilities.

There is clear evidence in the New Testament itself of a rapid declension from the apostles' teaching towards the close of the apostolic period. And history reveals how extensive this declension became during the succeeding centuries. No doubt, as the darkness deepened, a faithful few remained true to God's word in so far as they knew it. Their record is with God and will be revealed in "that day" when all will be manifested in its true light.

But, in the main, ignorance and spiritual darkness covered the earth. The night was dark and long, but eventually light began to dawn again and a precious, if gradual, recovery of divine truth began. One of the greatest factors in this recovery was the English Bible, the effects of which spread far beyond the English-speaking peoples. We cannot estimate the value of the labours of that faithful band who toiled and suffered to give us a translation of the Holy Scriptures in our own mother tongue. For centuries the contents of this precious volume were concealed in a dead language known only to the priests of a corrupt church. It was the light of the Holy Scriptures which led men away from the darkness of that perversion of Christianity which is perpetuated to this very day in some of the great systems of Christendom. Much might be written in tracing the progress of rediscovery of divine truth through the pure ray of divine light which emanated from an open Bible.

There is no need to disguise the fact that the line of teaching relating to the corporate functions of God's people seems to have little appeal to many believers to-day. Certain aspects of truth command a large measure of acceptance among present-day believers, but attempts are continually being made to keep other obvious and important New Testa-

ment teaching in the background because it does not receive popular support. For example, great emphasis is being laid on the personal experience of the believer. Now this is a vital matter, and God forbid that we should appear to detract from its importance. But we must not become so obsessed with one line of truth that we see nothing else in the New Testament. We need to take care to preserve a right balance in the things of God, and this can only be accomplished by taking into view “the whole counsel of God.”

There is to-day a great deal of what might be termed “popular evangelism” which bears little resemblance to apostolic evangelism. Men preach the grace of God and emphasize the necessity for an experience of the Holy Spirit, but go no further. They make no reference to the claims of the Lord relative to baptism, the breaking of the bread, separation and such like matters - these are too controversial. Such is the attitude of many to-day. How can this be justified in the light of the clear mandate of the risen Lord to His apostles: “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 Spirit: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I commanded you”? (Matthew 28.19).

Surely we may not pick and choose among the divine “mysteries”! If we are to be faithful stewards we must guard them in their entirety. We must not only proclaim “the mystery of the Gospel” (Ephesians 6.19); we must give equal emphasis to “the mystery of the Faith” (1 Timothy 3.9). In doing so we may incur opposition, but in this superficial age there is eminent need for faithful stewards of the mysteries of God who will not barter the truth of God for mere human approbation.

One of the lessons of history is that a succeeding generation may let slip what has been won at great cost by men of former days. The apostle Paul was aware of this danger as can be seen in his injunctions to his child Timothy: “That good thing (RV margin: ‘the good deposit’)

which was committed unto thee guard through the Holy Spirit which dwelleth in us" (2 Timothy 1.14).

"And the things which thou hast heard from me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also" (2 Timothy 2.2).

A solemn obligation lies on the present generation to guard, and to pass on in their purity, these precious truths regarding "The church and churches of God" which have such an important place in the teaching of the apostles. And we must not only guard the doctrine: we must also strive for a better expression of it. If we fail to do so, or if we allow these precious truths to recede into the background of our teaching, then we shall never merit such words of divine approval as are written of David: "In his own generation he served the counsel of God" (Acts 13.36).

May we offer here a word of encouragement to beloved brethren and sisters, some in remote parts of the world, who, in the midst of weakness and much discouragement, are struggling to be faithful to their stewardship? Sometimes they may feel overwhelmed and cast down. Perhaps the most heart-rending experiences are those which arise when faithfulness to divine truth demands separation even from some who are loved and longed for because they are fellow members of the Body of Christ. In such circumstances the question sometimes arises in the mind: "Is the struggle worthwhile?" The key to that question is found in the same context as the passage quoted at the head of this chapter: "Wherefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and make manifest the counsels of the hearts; and then shall each man have his praise from God" (1 Corinthians 4.5).

The day of reward for faithful stewards will soon be here. "Well done, good and faithful servant" from the lips of our beloved Master will be ample recompense for "all our struggles" in this life. Let us, then, en-

courage each other in the good fight, and, with a true sense of vocation face the solemn challenge of our times, and seek, in our measure, to be “ministers of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.”

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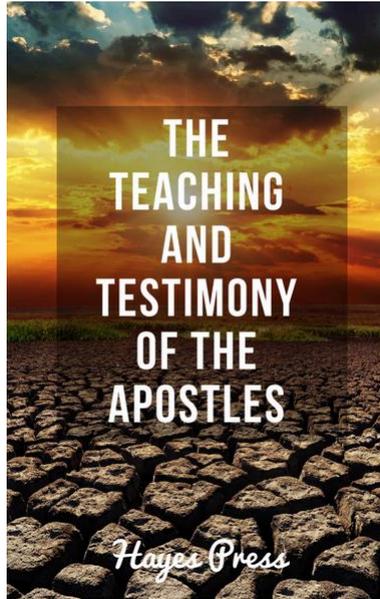
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