

"That the Church May Receive Edifying."

1 Cor. 12: 28-31, 1 Cor. 14: 1-5, 29-40.

"Handfuls of Purpose" Part 3 (Miscellaneous, chapters 15 - 30).

Let fall for eager Gleaners.

Thirty Addresses on Various Scripture Truths and Incidents

by W. T. P. Wolston. M.D.

CHAPTER 26 — "THAT THE CHURCH MAY RECEIVE EDIFYING."

The first epistle to the Corinthians, we all know, differs largely from that to the Ephesians, but what has struck me much lately is the way in which the apostle brings the soul of the saint into the presence of God in connection with the truth of the Assembly. I will turn back for a moment to the earlier part of the epistle to show what I mean, for although many here have been long on the road, there are some younger ones, and it is for them I chiefly speak. It has often been said we are apt to forget the recruits. I say, thank God for the recruits! and thank God also for the recruiting sergeants — those who seek to get them into their places in the Assembly. We all have to learn, and we have to remember there are always those who are just beginning.

It is very interesting to see that of all the epistles in the New Testament those to the Corinthians are the only ones addressed "To the church of God" (1 Cor. 1: 2). This remark holds good also with regard to the second epistle. Both are addressed "Unto the church of God which is at Corinth." The point was that in the midst of heathen darkness there was that which God could claim as His own, and address as His own. There was a spot where He was to be known and revealed, and where He showed Himself to His people. That was His Assembly. There is nothing more blessed for the soul to carry in mind than that. At the same time it is a very serious matter — I feel it increasingly — it is a very solemn thing to have anything to do with the things of the Lord, and the Assembly, just because it is Gods Assembly, not man's.

As you run through the epistle this thought comes out in various ways. Go back to 1 Cor. 3. If it be a question of husbandry — "Ye are Gods husbandry." If Paul and Apollos were fellow-workers they were Gods fellow-workmen. We too are His fellow-workers, we belong to God, if it be in your hands or mine it is Gods work. If it be a question of tillage — it is Gods field; or if it be a building it is God's building — God's temple. So in 1 Cor. 4, if it be a question of judgment of their stewardship, he says, wait till the Lord comes, and "then shall every man have praise of God." This principle renders you independent of everybody, clear of every influence but this — "I have to do with God: I have to say to God." It makes no difference if I be praised or censured of man. It is a small thing to me, says Paul, whether I am praised or judged — "Judge nothing

before the time, until the Lord come." Our souls are set down before God for everything in connection with His people, and His testimony, and His service.

A great deal more of the same kind is in the epistle, and a very striking word is found in the end of chapter 3 (1 Cor. 3: 19). "The wisdom of this world is foolishness with 'God. For it is written, He taketh the wise in their own craftiness." "The temple of God" is in view, and as I come up to this building — and it is God's building — I see written over the portico, as it were, these words, "He taketh the wise in their own craftiness." It conveys to me this thought — If you bring the wisdom of the world into this building you will be found out. When I come to the steps of the building, that is the first thing that strikes me. Remember this is Gods temple, and what is of the world — what is human — will all be found out and judged. Human wisdom is of no use there. There is another inscription inside the building to which I will come presently.

Passing on now to the chapter which I read, it is very interesting to see the way in which the truth that comes out in 1 Cor. 12 is introduced in connection with the parenthesis which intervenes between it and chapter 14 — which of course is a continuation of the subject, gifts and ministry. For many a long day I failed to see the reason why the apostle stopped his instruction as to the gifts in connection with the body in chapter 12. He stops his subject, as you observe, and then gives us the unfolding of divine love — what love is — and what it is not, in 1 Cor. 13, and resumes his instructions regarding the Assembly in 1 Cor. 14. I trust I see the point of it now! No matter what I may have, or you may have in the way of power — because that is what is unfolded in chapter 12 — no matter what you may have in the way of gift and power by the Holy Ghost, it is of no use without love. Manifestly power is not grace; spiritual power is not grace. A man may have a great deal of power in connection with a gift imparted by the Lord, but it is not grace. So whatever may be the greatness or measure of the gift in chapter 12, I do not think it is of the slightest use in chapter 14 — which is the Assembly in function — the sphere and field of its exercise — unless it be baptized into, and permeated with the spirit of chapter 13 — that is love. It is just what our brother was saying this morning — love is everything. You may not have gift, but there may be that which is more profitable — the outflow of that love which is the mark of a soul belonging to, and walking with God.

The supremacy and sovereignty of God in His Assembly is much pressed in chapter 12.

We read in verse 28, how "God hath set some in the church." (1 Cor. 12: 28) If in 1 Cor. 12: 4 Paul talks of "diversities of gifts," then in 1 Cor. 12: 6 he says, "It is the same God which worketh all in all." Evidently in Corinth (and I do not think, beloved brethren, Corinth was the only place where the tendency came out, if I know the history of the Church of God, whether in days gone by, or in our own) there was the working of the human will and mind, and a desire on the part of some to have a place of importance. Manifestly there was no desire on the part of Paul or Apollos to take this place, but there was the endeavour, on the part of some foolish men, to put either them, or others, up (see 1 Cor. 4: 6, 7). Notice how the apostle slays all this factionary work. "It is *God* that worketh all in all." He would slay all schism, and division, and school and party of every kind. If it is a question of the body, it is not Paul or Apollos, but, "Now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him" (1 Cor. 12: 18).

If I think of the church as it is presented here in Corinth, I see that God has set the members in the body according to His own will. Do you know, beloved brother, why you are where you are? Why you are located just where you are? If there be true subjection to God, and subservience to Him, you will feel and own that you are in the spot where it has pleased God to set you, and that is everything. The moment I see that *God has set* that brother in his place, and this one in his, I am content, and say, Thank God for that servant and his ministry! It is his place, not mine, so, if I am right, I neither emulate nor ape it, being just satisfied with my own place and niche in the body (1 Cor. 12: 24). "God has tempered the body together," etc. God has arranged all, for we read, again (1 Cor. 12: 28), "God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers," etc. Here we have not a complete list of gifts, for that we do not get anywhere in Scripture. We have some mentioned in Romans 12, others in Ephesians 4, and many here, but not in any case a complete and detailed list. In each passage the gifts named are seen to be in connection with the special truth the Spirit of God is bringing before the saints at the moment.

Here it is striking to observe that the list includes no evangelist. The reason is not far to seek. The apostle is instructing the saints about their coming together, and the order of the Assembly before the Lord, and it is not there that the gift of the evangelist is in exercise. I feel strongly the force of what our brother said this morning, that the evangelist is of the Assembly, and belongs to it. No evangelist is working according to the truth, unless he is working in conjunction, and if possible, in whole-hearted fellowship with the Assembly, and he then naturally helps his converts to gravitate towards the Assembly. In the apostle's days that was a natural thing, and the convert was like a fish out of water if he did not get amongst the saints. In the Assembly was the power of the Spirit: there the Spirit reigned, while outside, darkness and the devil reigned. Today, in the divided state of things which marks Christendom, it is very different, and I think an evangelist ought to be very careful how he foists his converts into the Assembly. For myself I am very careful how I seek to introduce any who profess to have been blessed by my ministry. I think my brethren are far better able to judge than I am myself of my work. This is a most important principle, and I think I see it in Scripture, Acts 8, where Philip went down to Samaria. Philip is the only man in Scripture called "The evangelist," and a fine warm-hearted fellow he was — a real fisher of men — he caught a great many fish in Samaria, and he thought he had caught a great fish when Simon the sorcerer professed to believe, and was baptized. Philip would have brought him into the Assembly if the Lord in His grace had not sent down Peter and John to detect him and keep him out.

It is a great thing for the Assembly to be exercised about the reception of souls who confess the Lord. I would like to add a little word with regard to the responsibility of the saints generally in regard to the reception of souls desiring fellowship in the breaking of bread. This is far too much left to the two or three who may commend such. It is necessary, and very nice that they should be commended, but we ought to have in our souls more distinctly the sense that it is the Assembly that receives, as it is the Assembly who may have to dismiss or put away. If the saints were more exercised as to this it would be greatly for the profit of the Assembly, and tend to practical fellowship.

And now as to the gifts and their exercise, "God has set some in the assembly; first apostles, secondarily prophets," etc. We still have them, if I may so say, in the writings of the

New Testament. We it are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets" of the New Testament. In other words, our faith rests on that which is revealed in their writings (Eph. 2: 20.). Another subsidiary sense in which prophets still remain, we have in 1 Cor. 14: 3. Pursuing, we read "thirdly teachers." The reason why you get the gifts placed in the order of their value — why you have them numbered 1, 2, 3 — is because the Corinthians were very full of their sign-gifts, and very much occupied with the man who had power to speak with tongues and the like, and they very little valued these other gifts which were of far deeper importance and value for edification. The Lord comes in and puts things in their true place, and estimates the gifts in their real value before Him, as made known by Him, and "tongues" are put last.

Among the rest we read of "helps." That is a very nice little word, "helps." There are many persons who may be helps in the Assembly who may not be the possessors of any very great gift. It is very nice to be a "help," and it is very gracious that God allows us to be "helps" to one another, as well as to be His helpers. I was much struck the other day with a word in Judges 5. There was a great crisis in the history of Israel, and we see a certain company who did not rise to the occasion. "Curse ye Meroz, said the angel of the Lord, curse ye bitterly the inhabitants thereof; because they came not to the help of the Lord, to the help of the Lord against the mighty" (Judges 5: 23). It is a great thing to be always free, and fresh, and simple in heart, and ready to be in the hand of the Lord to do just what He would give one to do. Every one has his own little niche for God, and it is good to remember our Lord's word when He "left his house, and gave authority to his servants, and to *every man his work*, and commanded the porter to watch" (Mark 13: 34). We can all be "helps." The Lord gives us each an opportunity in our little corner, to sweetly and simply serve Him and His people. This is open to every one.

I pass over chapter 13 — a wonderfully choice and interesting subject — for time fails to expound this "more excellent way." Whatever gift you and I may be possessed of, it might be augmented, and if we do not possess any gift, I wonder if we are covetous in the sense of 1 Cor. 12: 31? Brother, are you covetous after this sort? My young brother, are you covetous of "the best gifts"? If not, I have the privilege tonight of exhorting you to be covetous. Mr Darby used to say, "If there were more devotedness there would be more gift." True indeed, and if there were more devotedness to the Lord, more seeking from Him that we might be helpers to His saints, I am sure there would be more gift than there is. The apostle's exhortation is very striking.

What is the "more excellent way"? This beautiful atmosphere of love of chapter 13. You remember the word of the apostle to his son Timothy, "God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind" (2 Tim. 1: 7). These three words bring before me these three chapters: 1 Cor. 12 is "power"; 1 Cor. 13 "love"; and 1 Cor. 14 "a sound mind," and I sometimes doubt, brethren, if we have it; and certainly we have it not if love does not rule our ways and words in the Assembly unto "edification."

I now pass on to chapter 14 for a minute or two. 1 Cor. 14: 1. Prophecy has the double sense of (1) foretelling events, or (2) is that class of ministry which reaches the conscience and brings the soul into the presence of God. You have it beautifully illustrated in the case of the Lord with the woman in John 4 His word, "He whom thou now hast is not thy husband," reached her conscience fully, as she says, "Sir, I perceive that thou art a prophet." Here, however, clearly, prophesying has a wider range than that, for "he that prophesieth speaketh unto men to

edification, and exhortation, and comfort (1 Cor. 14: 3). It is a most blessed line of ministry that. "Edification" builds up. "Exhortation" stirs up. "Comfort" binds up. If the ministry is of a really prophetic character there will be the building up, the consolidating of the Assembly. And there is more than that, "exhortation" which stirs us up. I ask any one who looks over the scene today, Do you not think the saints of God want stirring up? I know I need it, and I am always thankful to the man who stirs me up. The ministry which stirs you up makes you to feel, I must wake up; I must lay aside this or that weight. And more than that — this ministry comforts, it binds up, it makes Christ precious to the heart. May the Lord give us more of that kind of ministry, beloved friends. I am speaking of the ordinary round of ministry in the Assembly day by day.

There is one word that marks this chapter. The keynote of 1 Cor. 14 is one word, "edification." What will edify? That will always be a serious question to every one who possesses any gift. I may think I am edifying the Assembly, and be mistaken. If I do not edify, I think you ought to tell me. If my ministry is unprofitable, I think brothers ought to be faithful to me — while withal they are gracious — and tell me that my ministry is not to profit, and then I trust I shall have grace not to plague you with it. The great point is, what will edify. You find that over and over again in the chapter. It is very important that what takes place in the Assembly should be of that character, and love would desist from continuing ministry which fails to edify. Note how this is pressed in 1 Cor. 14: 12-14, "Forasmuch as ye are jealous of spiritual gifts, seek that ye may excel *to the edifying* of the church." We are bidden also "to utter by the tongue words *easy to be understood*." Often in our meetings there is a good deal that is not edifying, simply because it is not heard. How can you say "Amen" to a brother's prayers if you do not hear them? You may say, The Lord hears. Yes; but if the part I take is to be profitable to others, I ought to speak so that you can hear, and so plainly that you can understand. If it be the giving out of a hymn, or praying, I judge it ought to be in a way that saints can hear. Here is God's Word for it. I am only drawing attention to what is often lacking, and which many are conscious of. I trust the Lord will use His Word. Let us remember profit is the great thing, and what we can neither hear nor understand will not profit either me or others.

Another point I would touch on. Let the prophets speak two or three, and let the others judge" (1 Cor. 14: 29). I apprehend this is an occasion when the Assembly is together. It may be open to question whether a meeting like this where I am now speaking is to be regarded as a meeting of the Assembly. It is, I know, a moot point; but I think "two or three" puts a limit on the number of speakers in a meeting of this kind. As to this I feel speakers need to be individually before the Lord. I name it, because one has heard of not only two or three but more speaking on such occasions; but I take it, the Lord has given us His mind very plainly here — "two or three," and not more.

"If anything be revealed to another that sitteth by, let the first hold his peace" (1 Cor. 14: 30). What does that mean? That the second has to wait till the first sits down? I do not think so. If the Lord gave a revelation to another prophet, he was to rise to deliver it, and the first would hold his peace and sit down. Now there is no revelation, and as another has said: "Order is before power. God is never the author of confusion." Subjection is the great point here. It is beautiful to note the way the Spirit of God looks for profit. What is more profitable than to see a man subject to the Spirit? The prophet ought to be under the control of the power of the Spirit of God, and in

subjection to Him, because he might have risen in the power of the Spirit to speak, and gone on beyond his measure.

May the Lord give us all to know what it is to be always before Him for real profit, not only now, but when we are at home in the little meetings from whence we all come.

The apostle winds up very beautifully with 1 Cor. 14: 39, 40. This is what I see written inside the building, all round the wall, as it were, "Let all things be done decently and in order." Outside the building I saw everything will be detected that is not of God, for "He taketh the wise in their own craftiness." Now, inside there is what suits the presence of God, and what is to mark His servants and His saints in His Assembly. This injunction speaks for itself, and I desire to have the abiding recollection of it in my heart.

It is a wonderful thing when you think that the Church, the Assembly, is now the lesson-book of angels — that angels are to learn, beloved fellow-Christians, the manifold wisdom of God, as they see the Spirit's blessed activity and power in God's Assembly.

The Lord give us each to be more suitably filling our little niche, as individuals in His service, and likewise to know in our hearts the blessedness of being members of that body of which Christ is the Head, so that when we come into the Assembly we may remember it is God's Assembly, and that all things may be done "decently and in order," for His name's sake.

Thy precious name is all we show,

Our only passport, Lord;

And full assurance now we know,

Confiding in Thy word.

O largely give, 'tis all Thine own,

The Spirit's goodly fruit:

Praise issuing forth in life, alone

Our living Lord can suit.

Henceforth let each belovèd child

With quickened step proceed,

To walk with garments undefiled

Where'er Thine eye may lead.

