

Tarry One for Another

The Evil of Individualism

by F.B. Hole

Just as it is necessary to avoid sectarianism if we would walk in fellowship after the apostle's pattern, so it is also needful to shun individualism, which is in some respects the opposite extreme.

To clear away possible misapprehensions, let us again affirm that we fully accept the oft-repeated statement that in days when the outward unity and order of the professing church has broken down, the path of faith becomes an individual one; by which we mean it is a path which must be entered upon and maintained in the energy of individual faith. 2 Timothy 2: 19-22 are clear evidence of this. The responsibilities and privileges there enforced lie upon "every *one*" "a man", and the whole passage is addressed not to a church but to Timothy, a faithful individual, and consequently, when verse 22 is obeyed, those thus pursuing righteousness, faith, love and peace are only individual members of Christ's body who are walking together in the truth.

All that we fully grant, and yet it must also be maintained with equal clearness, that such members of Christ's body who are thus together will only walk in the truth as they are governed by it in its entirety. To ignore the truth as to the Church of God will not do.

Let us assume that such a gathering of saints exists before us. We would then point out to them that, in the first place, they must not assume to be what they are not. They are not *the* Church, nor are they *a* Church, in the sense of being a corporate body with a constitution of its own. They are simply members of Christ's body (which is *the* Church) who aim at gathering together and walking according to its original constitution.

But, in the second place, we should point out that the break-up and failure which has supervened has in no wise relieved them of the responsibility to walk according to all that Scripture indicates as the will of the Lord for His Church. We are not at liberty, if we would obey and please Him, to assert our individual action, or judgment, or ministry, to the over-riding of practical fellowship in these things, whether it be the individual *person* or the individual *gathering* of saints.

The believers at Corinth, as the Apostle Paul wrote to them were carnal and walked as men, consequently they had fallen into sectarianism by forming schools of opinion round favourite leaders. It is equally plain that they also were asserting themselves as individuals in a wrongful way and that this individualism was working havoc in their midst. We will now point out the evidences of the working of this false principle we have them in the First Epistle.

In 1 Corinthians 10 the question of association with idols and idolatry is being discussed. The apostle begins with the history of Israel as the professed people of God, and shows how ruinous such association had proved in their case. This leads up to the exhortation of verse 14. From verse 15 onwards the apostle appeals to them on the ground of that which is set forth in the Supper of the Lord. The true character of the cup and of the loaf is that they indicate Christ's blood and *body*; and moreover of His blood and body they are the *communion* or fellowship. We all share in that one loaf as one body (verse 17) not as so many individual believers. Here we have the Supper of the Lord viewed in its abstract nature and bearing, and individualism is clearly excluded in connection with it.

In 1 Corinthians 11: 17, the apostle carried his corrective ministry further and turns to mistakes and abuses which were amongst them in their actual comings together — their assemblies. We must

distinguish, of course, between the church at Corinth and their actual assembling together in that character. Throughout this article we use the word 'church' for the former and reserve the word 'assembly' for the latter. The saints at Corinth gathered together sometimes in connection with the ministry of servants of the Lord — to listen to Apollos and receive help through him for instance (Acts 18: 2) — these meetings were not 'assemblies' in the sense in which we now use the word, (but they were) i.e. actual convenings of the church as such in subjection to their risen Head acting by His Spirit in their midst. The church might thus meet in assembly for discipline (1 Cor. 5), for eating the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11), for ministry to edification, exhortation and comfort (1 Cor. 12 and 1 Cor. 14: 1-5) for prayer and worship (1 Cor. 14: 9-17).

First of all, then, in connection with their assemblies, he turns to the parties which existed among them and which were clearly visible when they came together 'in assembly' (verse 18) (see N. Trans.) This sectarianism may result in select parties of a very rigid and exclusive sort grouped round the chosen teacher or preacher, but evidently it is, after all, closely connected with individualism, in as much as it springs out of an exaggerated sense of the importance of the *individual* who is made the centre of the party. It ends in saints "holding" the party leader instead of "holding the Head".

In verse 20 the apostle turns to the assembly for eating the Lord's Supper. Here there were grave abuses existent, but we are now only concerned to point out that in eating what they professed to be the Lord's Supper they were really eating "every one *his own* supper" (verse 21). They so individualized that sacred memorial that it became a scene of unseemly disorder, every one eating for himself. Hence the apostle's injunction in verse 33, "Wherefore, my brethren *tarry one for another*".

All this is extreme and horrifying, and would be utterly inexcusable if occurring now that we have the Word of God in our heads in a way that the Corinthians had not. Still we have to watch against subtler workings of the same thing. We do, indeed, break the bread and drink the cup individually, but we do so as those who belong to the *one* body, in keeping with the one loaf of which we partake,

In 1 Corinthians 12 the gift or manifestations of the Spirit are in question. These were found in different members of the body as the Lord in His wisdom was pleased to ordain, but they were given to individuals in view of the whole "To each the manifestation of the Spirit is given for profit" (verse 7 N.T.) and that profit the profit of the whole body as the subsequent verses show.

Now if the gifted member is to sink himself, his self-importance which would naturally be formed by the possession of a gift, and the self-pleasing which might guide him in the use of it, he must be thoroughly under the sway of Divine Love. Hence the magnificent chapter, 1 Corinthians 13 which comes in as a parenthesis.

1 Corinthians 14 picks up the thread from 1 Corinthians 12 and gives us a glimpse of the Corinthian assemblies for ministry, prayer and praise. The individualist got up and speaking with an unknown tongue, he edified *himself* (verse 4) whereas the Divine purpose in the assembly was that *the Church* should be edified.

Verse 26 is very illuminating. In their assemblies every one of them had a psalm, a doctrine, a tongue, a revelation, an interpretation. The following verses give instruction regulating the use of these gifts, and from these verses and verse 31 in particular, we gather that there was nothing wrong in each of them having something to contribute; since *all* might prophesy one by one — not on one occasion, doubtless, but there was liberty for all as the Lord might direct on different occasions. The trouble rather lay in that individualism that led them to degrade the Lord's Supper into each eating his own supper. They degraded that which was the assembly of the Lord where He ruled and directed by His Spirit into a free and easy meeting of a lot of individuals each with his own ideas and his own little bit

which he eagerly desired to throw into the common pot.

The difference between the assembly in function as directed by the Lord and the individualist meeting of the Corinthian stamp can be likened to that existing between a fine-woven linen bedspread and a patchwork quilt. The Bible itself consists of 66 books written in different epochs by different men. Yet a Divine unity pervades it because written under inspiration of the Spirit of God. A similar unity of ministry as prayer or worship will be discernible in the assembly as controlled in its activities by the Spirit of God, and the more so controlled the more it will be discernible.

So completely was the Spirit of God to be in control in the assembly that if a prophet were on his feet, presumably having arisen as controlled by the Spirit, and a further revelation were made to another prophet sitting by, the earlier speaker was at once to accept it as a signal that the time had come for him to stop; and resuming his seat he was to give place to the other.

Under the existing conditions of one-man ministry, and liturgical forms and customs, which hold sway in the religious organisations, all this part of Scripture has been reduced to a dead letter. But it is sadly possible to have gatherings of saints apart from such restrictions and with freedom of ministry, and yet for it to result only in meetings of this individualistic Corinthian type. Indeed it must so result unless we are prepared to keep before us the truth of the Church in its practical fellowship and working. No assembling together of saints today, we repeat, can be more than the gathering of a few of the members of Christ's body, but so gathered they must act in the light of the whole truth of the church if they would be *obedient*.

In concluding our brief review of the Epistle, we might note that *the* use of discipline and exclusion mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5 also involved assembly action. Apostolic energy and action is indeed prominent in verses 4 and 5, for as yet the consciences of the Corinthians were asleep, but the final action to be taken in verse 13 was of an assembly character.

The second Epistle shows us that such action was taken, and that "the many" or the mass of the saints put their hands to it. (2 Cor. 2: 6). They were so stirred to zeal by the first Epistle (2 Cor. 7: 11) that the great mass of them came together and solemnly put the offender away from their midst. Today, alas! saints are often so lethargic that only a few come together to act if such a sad occasion arises and the punishment is inflicted of the "few" rather than the "many".

If we now consider for a little how these apostolic corrections and instructions apply today, we shall be quickly aware of how much need there is of attention to the instructions of 1 Corinthians 14. It is still possible for a few saints to gather together on "assembly" lines though only a fraction of those comprising the Church in their town. Thus assembled they may break bread, or pray, or wait upon the Lord for ministry through two or three of His servants — what we call an "open meeting". Are we free from individualism on these occasions? By no means. How often do we notice thanksgivings and particular hymns of praise and worship, quite excellent in themselves individually considered, yet obviously quite out of keeping with what has gone before or what follows, complete misfits if judged from the standpoint of the Spirit's action in the assembly! How often times of prayer when the same petition is voiced again and again by various brothers, seemingly forgetful that the first who was led to ask it did so as the mouth-piece of those present, to be ratified by all saying "Amen" at the end of his requests; and that therefore, save in exceptional cases, such constant repetition is needless since *all* have already asked it! How often again is there that tendency to coming together, each having his hymn, his prayer, his Scripture portion to be got out at all costs!

Further we have to beware of the individualism which takes a form which has been sometimes spoken of as "independency". This may take the form of an individual saint asserting himself, his

judgement, his actions against the assembly where he is found, or the form of an individual assembly acting in complete indifference to, and as having no connection with, other assemblies equally walking in subjection to the same Lord.

Here some may at once object that we find little in Scripture as to these errors. We grant it. The case of Diotrephes (3 John) bears upon it, but generally speaking these troubles are such as have afflicted the church in these later centuries. Apostolic authority acted as a check on that form of individualism at the beginning. We have become more exposed to it in these last days, when saints have essayed once more to walk according to the truth but without apostolic authority in their midst other than the apostolic writings and even without an appointed elderhood as at the beginning. Their position is similar to that of the Jews who returned to Jerusalem under Zerubbabel, Nehemiah and Ezra, who had no king and a very imperfect priesthood. These externals they had lost, and it would have been folly, if not worse, to have assumed power they did not possess in ordaining a king and more priests for themselves. The loss of these externals did not, however, exempt them from obedience to the whole law.

Hence today, we submit, we have special need of grace and wisdom in this matter. We have no wish to hinder the servants of the Lord, but they must remember that they are members of Christ's body, and if they profess to be walking, with as many as are available, in a path of obedience to the whole truth of the Church, they must bear these things in mind. That which is right for the individual is clearly right for the individual *gathering* of saints also. We must carefully avoid, therefore, the position of independency that is commonly called "Congregationalism".

It is perfectly certain that failures have often occurred in the past both with individual saints and individual gatherings as to these very things, and if the Lord comes not for a while they will occur again. "What then", it will be asked "are we to do?"

Our responsibility is to act under the Lord, that is in obedience to His word. Powers of discipline still remain to the saints collectively, as indicated in Romans 16: 17 and 18, 1 Thess. 5: 14; 2 Thess 3: 6, 14, 15. Even in the very flagrant case of Diotrephes, the apostle contents himself with threatening action if and when he came. He did not urge Gaius or Demetrius to attempt strong counter-action themselves. Individualism or independency is not to be met with counter-independency. The spirit of division cannot be overcome, according to God, by the spirit of counter-division. If in mistaken zeal we attempt so to meet it we always run the risk of making the remedy worse than the disease and of swallowing a whole camel in our endeavours to strain out the gnat.

In writing the above we bear fully in mind that a time may come, according to 2 Timothy 2: 16-21, when individual action is not only permitted by Scripture, but actually enjoined. That time is when evil, having come in, is of such character as to overthrow faith by attacking the foundations. Then, assuming that it gets beyond all assembly action, the individual must act for himself in faithfulness to his Lord.

We owe our position, if indeed we do gather to the Lord's Name, to such individual action in faithfulness to the Lord. *In* the position we are bound to act as governed by the whole truth as to the Church and the apostle's fellowship, and not act on an individualistic basis. If by reason of unfaithfulness the position be *abandoned* or *corrupted*, then once more individual action according to 2 Timothy 2 becomes incumbent upon us in order that a place according to God may be taken up and personal purity maintained.

We have one more application to make of the truth which is before us. A good deal has been said and written during the past fifteen years as to the unscriptural character of the "circles of fellowship". In so far as such "circles" are the kind which says "I am of Paul" etc., or formed to champion some special truth or truths, we quite agree. Yet we must not forget that there was a circle of fellowship in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. In the early morning it consisted of about 120 names, by nightfall it was expanded to over 3000. That circle of fellowship was "the apostle's fellowship".

Later on at Corinth the Divinely-formed "circle" was imperilled by sectarian "circles" not yet openly separated from each other, but parties formed within the Church, the fruit of their carnal condition. In this connection 1 Corinthians 11: 18, 19 are very illuminating. "Among *you*" says the apostle, "there *must* also be sects". There was no such *must* in the case of the Philippians or Ephesians, where the prevailing state was one of spiritual freshness and power. If saints walk in the flesh, fleshly tendencies *must* be manifested. But on the other hand such fleshly manifestations only serve to throw into relief such as faithfully adhere to what is divine and thus are approved of God. There were evidently some in Corinth who would not range themselves under any of the party standards.

Now it is more than likely, when the "Paul" and "Apollos" and "Cephas", parties were forming themselves at Corinth, and some of the more spiritual and faithful souls were declining to join in their movements, that to the careless or worldly-minded onlooker they only appeared to be forming another party. But even if they found it difficult or impossible to prove they were not, and thus vindicate themselves, they were approved of God and in the view of the inspired apostle. With that they had to be content.

While, therefore, we have no more desire to form "a circle of fellowship" than we have to form "a church", we suggest that it may be well to find out first of all exactly what is meant by people when they use the term "circle of fellowship", and secondly that we should make very certain that the proposed remedy for the "circles" of fellowship, against which protest is raised, is not that of *each individual being allowed to form his own circle of fellowship*. Otherwise we are only practising Corinthian-like individualism under a new guise.

We do not want "*a circle*" of fellowship, but fellowship we *do* want. It is a precious treasure. Let us be careful, therefore, lest as an old proverb puts it, we "throw away the baby with the bath-water." Human ideals often incrust themselves upon the truth. In discarding the incrustation it is all too easy to let slip the truth. Rather let us "tarry one for another" as Scripture enjoins.

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