

God's System of a Church

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The origin of most of the differences in opinion which exist among the saints is secret infidelity as to the sufficiency of the provision made by God for the instruction and guidance of His people in the Scriptures. To enumerate all the evil fruits springing from this unsanctified root were both difficult and unprofitable. For our present consideration let one suffice; and that one, full of the deepest interest to even nominal Protestants,* because as well the confessed subject of endless divisions among themselves, as the taunt and jeer of the Roman Catholic. Church system, who can define? Who can describe? Who can even count the number of the systems of churches in England alone, differing in every respect, except alas! their inconsistency with the instructions and patterns given us in Scripture. Yes, this is the real source of all the evil — self-confidence refusing to acknowledge its ignorance, and search the oracles of God on this topic; and therefore we have been given up to our foolish minds. For what matters the Protestant motto being "the Bible, the whole Bible, and nothing but the Bible," if, in direct opposition to this, it has been refused (practically at least) by all, in the modelling of the churches, to go for wisdom to the very copious instructions given on the subject in the same Bible?

*It is strange how the whole of Romanism, as a church system, is based upon truth; pure error is rarely found in her, but truth mis-stated and perverted. To borrow an illustration, each of her doctrines may be aptly compared to some adulterated compound "consisting of so ingenious a mixture of truth and falsehood, so entangled and intimately blended, that the falsehood is [in chemical phase] *held in solution*." The wise man, emerging from her thralldom, is unable to reject the whole of any one of her statements on this subject; but proving all things, and holding fast that which is truth, he uses the Scripture "as the test, making visible the foreign substance and precipitating it to the bottom." See her views of Unity, Infallibility, Absolution, etc.

With the church's unity and importance so strongly portrayed is the Bible, never will the Protestant be able to meet the Romanist in argument without altogether denying these things; nor indeed until able to present a living picture of them in connection with himself. For the only real power in controversy is the simplicity of truth as drawn immediately from that blessed book.

Yet this accusation (of a hardy refusal to bend to Scripture) is perhaps too strong, and it has only been erroneously assumed through ignorance of the written word, that the mind of God has not been expressed concerning church system, *i.e.* that no order or plan has been laid down by the great Head of the church, for the standing together of His saints, in any given place, whilst (from the day of their conversion) they are looking for, and hastening unto, the coming of the Lord Jesus. To meet this supposed ignorance, the present tract purposes to show chiefly from that part of the Book of truth, which is peculiarly the directory of the present dispensation (the Acts, Epistles and Apocalypse),

I. — That the divine wisdom has laid down a certain principle for the communion of the saints, whilst on the earth, viz.

The sovereignty of the Spirit in the mutual dependence of the members; and

II. — That this principle is found developed in practice, in a system appointed by God for the churches; the details of which system are most minutely revealed as to the mode, —

1st. — Of edification,

2ndly. — Of government, and

3rdly. — Of discipline.

For He who knew what was in man left nothing to be dependent upon the petty accidents of time, but detailed in the word, a plan for the collocation of His saints, and that plan so obviously founded upon one great and important principle, as thus to contain within itself a check to all the minutiae of its several parts; no other changes of details, save that revealed, being possible, without a direct violation of the said principle.

SECT. I — If it be asked, on what general principle the communion of saints is enjoined? the answer is obvious, — "On a supposed participation of the Spirit." Such, at least, was the argument of the apostle Peter before the church at Jerusalem: having freely yielded himself in communion to some who, as Gentiles, were deemed unworthy of such high privileges, and being called to account by the apostles and elders of the church, he exculpated himself by showing how those, to whom he had gone, had (though Gentiles) received the Spirit, and, therefore, this being the sole prerequisite to communion), had as good right to it as themselves, the Jews.

Acts 9: 17. — "Forasmuch then as God gave them the like gift (i.e. the Spirit), as He did unto us who believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, what was I that I could withstand God?"*

*Which may stand thus,

First the universal principle — All who have the Spirit have a right to communion.

Secondly, the particular case — These have the Spirit.

Thirdly, the result — They have right to communion.

Would to God that this, which is nothing else than unity in the Spirit, had been remembered! many a rent, many a schism, would it have saved the body of Jesus; but men have sought out many inventions. Look at the churches of Rome and Greece — what is their principle of communion, yea, the very essence of their existence? unity indeed, but unity in error; on the assumption that the church makes the Spirit, and not the spirit the church: in other words, that because their system has been called "The church" from the time of the apostles, therefore it must have the authority and power of the Spirit which was in the primitive church: instead of that, the body which has the authority and power of the Spirit which was in the primitive church alone deserves its name. The Reformed churches, Lutheran, Genevese and others — what their bond? Unity again, but unity in knowledge only: blessed indeed when the gift and consequence of the Spirit; but most evil when, as with them, "assent and consent" to any truth (beyond free pardon and salvation by faith in the Lamb) became the watchword of the citadel; for what is this but the appointing of a word which the weaklings of Christ are often, the strong ones of the adversary never, unable to pronounce?

The standing of the third great division, those called dissenters, is unity in difference; for the great strength, perhaps life, of their systems, rests, by confession of their wisest supporters, on the opposition their dissent produces. The church militant, in truth, is nothing but the manifestation, in this world, of the saving effects of the gospel; uncertain perhaps, by reason of the thick and deluding mists around. How wise and reasonable then, that the only term of admission to its privileges should be the apparently real manifestation of that Spirit, Who (present in whatever weakness) gives by His presence the power of fellowship.

Let us now investigate the peculiar development of this principle in its application to the assembled body. We shall find that the Holy Ghost's presence is made manifest in the assemblies of the

faithful, not so much by dwelling in any individual, as among them all, so as to form a structure, the chief feature of which is mutual dependence, even as it is written (John 17: 22), "Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; that they also may be one in us, that the world may believe that thou hast sent me." And again (Matt. 18: 20), "where two or three are gathered together unto my name, there am I in the midst of them."

The following proofs of this are offered from the word: -

I — (Rom. 12: 3-9.) "I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think (of himself) more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith. For as we have many members in one body, and all the members have not the same office: so we (being) many are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, (let us prophesy) according to the proportion of faith; or ministry, (let us wait) on (our) ministering; or he that teacheth, on teaching; or he that exhorteth, on exhortation; he that giveth (let him do it) with simplicity; he that ruleth, with diligence; he that sheweth mercy, with cheerfulness."

II. — See what Paul says of this church (Rom. 15: 14).

III. — 1 Cor. 12: 4, etc. — see (1 Cor. 13) love as the apostle describes it, a church gift; i.e. one which could not be fully developed save in communion with others.

IV. — 1 Cor. 14: 1-5, and 23-25.

V. — Eph. 4: 1-16.

VI. — Eph. 5: 18.

VII — Col. 2: 19. (See also 1 Cor. 1: 4, 5; 2 Cor. 8: 7; Col. 3: 16; Heb. 3: 13, Heb. 10: 24, 25; 1 Peter 4: 10, 11).

Thus, when the Lord first put His saints together, we see how the principle of His system was the casting of them one on the other, by the Holy Ghost's presence, and free circulation, without restraint, through the whole body. This truth, and not justification (which touches the individual only), is the true "*articulus stantis vel cadentis ecclesiae*."* For a church is not merely a congregation of faithful persons accidentally assembled together (ready like some heap of stones† for the labourer to pile one upon the other); but such an orderly arrangement of them, according to the mind of the great Master Builder, as to be in mutual dependence. In masonry but one way has yet been discovered, in which mutual dependence can be distributed to each part, namely, by the arch; so in things spiritual, one order has been developed by God Himself, and who shall find another?

*To call justification by this name is to be guilty of the fallacy of assuming that what is true of each of its component parts, is true of the whole.

† Or, to employ a figure used in Eph. 2: 20, it is to form a whole. The lively stones are to be built up "a spiritual house," "Jesus Christ being the chief corner stone, in whom all the building, fitly framed together, groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: in whom ye also are builded together for a habitation of God through the Spirit."

SECT. II. — Our next position is, that this same principle is found as the basis of the most minute details of a system, appointed by God for the church, in its mode

1st — of edification;

2ndly — of government;

3rdly — of discipline.

I. We have indeed but one account in Sacred Scripture of a church meeting under ordinary circumstances, which can be quoted in proof that the Spirit's presence among the members, the spring of mutual dependence, is the basis on which church edification should rest — yet it will be sufficient, because 1st., a very full account in itself; and, 2ndly, — this, its grand feature of peculiarity, springs not from anything accidentally present, but from that which is most essential in the structure of a church, viz. the Spirit; and it may therefore fairly be considered a property of all the churches.

See 1 Cor. 14: 22-33.

See also Eph. 4: 1-16. So perhaps 1 Thess. 5: 11, "Wherefore comfort yourselves together and edify one another, even as also ye do."

Thus is embodied, in practice, the mind of Jesus concerning the regulation of congregational meetings, and this is the only recognised mode of edification. Glorious privilege, indeed, for the Holy Ghost Himself to be the teacher in the congregation, speaking now by the mouth of one, now by the mouth of another, as seemeth good to Himself, and exercising among them the various powers Himself has bestowed! The works of the elders were the helps and governments (1 Cor. 12: 28); and, as sacred history testifies, were not as such for the edification of the assembly.

II. Again, in government, the same principle is found as the basis of judgment, even the Spirit's presence among the members, the spring of mutual dependence.

Correctly speaking, the government is an absolute monarchy, the Holy Ghost in the churches being sovereign.* The idea, therefore, common among many, that the principle is that of a democracy, is totally wrong; although, of course, as a number of those who (not being prepared by the Spirit, either for helps or governments) exercise no office in the congregation, far exceeds that of those so gifted; and as all are supposed to have the apprehension of the Spirit's mind (see 1 Cor. 5 and 1 Cor. 10: 15, "I speak as unto wise men, judge ye what I say," 1 John 4: 6, etc). the responsibility rests mainly with the many, even though God† inform their judgments through the few. The only officers, found in the churches, are elders and deacons; for the apostles were for the building, and not continued dwelling, in these congregations.‡ In each of these two offices, then, we shall find the same principle of mutual dependence preserved by the appointment of a plurality of the officers.

*The English translation hides much of the mind of God as to the Spirit's work in the present dispensation. During the first personal manifestation of Jesus, He walked at the head of His disciples as the Master, and Lord, on whom the responsibility of the Father's house rested. He was heir, teacher, their advocate their rebuker, their comforter. When leaving them, He said, I will not leave you "orphans," but "I will send you another Paraclete, even the Spirit of truth," Accordingly, we find the same offices of a faithful guardian attributed afterwards to the Spirit as a teacher, John 14: 26; a witness, 15: 20; advocate, Rom. 8: 88; and comforter, John 16: 7.

†Government is power manifesting itself in order. In a church all *force* is of the Holy Ghost, and the elders seem set in a well-ordered church, for the informing of the judgments of the many, through whom the Spirit acts.

‡To have seen the Lord also was perhaps so essentially necessary to the office of an apostle (Acts 1: 21, 22; Acts 22: 15; Acts 26: 18) as that none, without this, could be an apostle (1 Cor. 9: 1; 1 Cor. 15: 8). It may be well to add a few words on the office of Timothy and Titus. To a careful student of the text, nothing more need be said as to the assumption, "that these were bishops ordaining a lower order of ministers, presbyters;" because as will be shown, scripture makes no difference between the

presbyter and the overseer or bishop. For the expressions, "left behind in Crete;" "be diligent to come to me to Nicopolis, for I have determined there to winter," used of Titus; and, "I besought thee to abide still at Ephesus, when I went to Macedonia;" "do thy diligence to come before winter" said of Timothy: both these had evidently been accompanying the apostle, and were thus probably in their works little else than his delegate.

1st, elders. This office, in some sort, is of very long standing. Ere the Israelites came out of Egypt, we read of their elders. Ex. 3: 16; Deut. 27: 1; they are mentioned up to the captivity, and again after it, Ezra. 10: 7. 8.

Throughout the Gospels they are mentioned as an ecclesiastical government, though a wicked one; as also occasionally in the Acts; and afterwards, as officers appointed by the Holy Ghost among the saints. (Acts 11: 30; Acts 14: 23; Acts 15: 2*, 4, 6, 22.)

*In the perusal of this chapter, we see how the apostles laid aside their apostolic power and authority, when meeting in the church; seemingly preferring the judgment of the Spirit in the collective body to the exercise of His authority in themselves.

See also Acts 16: 4; and Acts 21: 18; and 1 Tim. 4: 14; 1 Tim. 5:17. Compare 1 Thess. 5: 12, 13; Heb. 13: 7, 17, 18, 24; 1 Tim. 5: 17, 19; Titus 1: 5; James. 5: 14; 1 Peter 5: 1.

The word translated "overseer," Acts 20: 28, occurs moreover in Phil. 1: 1 in the plural number, and 1 Tim. 3: 2, where it evidently corresponds with the bishop, or overseer. (1 Tim. 3: 1.)

2ndly, Deacons. The first nomination of such individuals we find in Acts 6: 1-6. (See also Phil. 1: 1; 1 Tim. 3: 8-10.)

III. Again, in discipline, the basis is the very same; mutual dependence in the Spirit's presence among the members. (See Mat. 18: 17-20; 1 Cor. 5; 2 Cor. 2: 6-11.)

A panegyric on this, the Lord's plan, would be needless; yet we may draw near in admiration of the lovely effect, as to the power of service it is able to supply to the redeemed, whilst in their weakness, as set forth in Acts 4: 32, 33, 34.

How lovely also is the mutual subjection pointed out in Acts 15: 2, 22; 1 Cor. 11: 33; 1 Thess. 5: 11; Heb. 10: 24, 25; James 2: 1-9. 1 Peter 4: 8-11.

How strongly also is this equality set forth by the fact that such was the relative position of the members and officer-bearers in the church, as that the epistles are addressed not to the pastors but the whole body. Note this especially in the case of a controversy about carnal things (1 Cor. 6: 1-8). See also the marked pre-eminence of the body to any one or two (Acts 15: 1-4; 1 Cor. 16: 3; 2 Cor. 8: 18, 19, 23; Philemon 2-25).

The wisdom of this arrangement, as bearing upon the glory of God, is manifest; the power and splendour of the Spirit are not concentrated in one, but seen among many, each in himself like one out of many staves, weak, feeble; by himself unfit to contain any thing, associated with others and bound by the golden ring of eternal love, a vessel fit to bear the presence of God; thus it is still true, that no flesh can glory before Him. So also, in reference to the experience of the individual saints, will the same pre-eminence of wisdom be obvious, if we consider the object, concerning them, of a church A church then is the field ordained by the Lord for the Christian initiation into, and exercise in, the science and art of the spiritual warfare:* it is God's first class, for the bruising of self, and development of love. The gospel finds man buried in carnal selfishness and forgetfulness of God, and there meets his cry, "What must I do to be saved?" But as the great object of God is, to lead His saints from this, to the

perfect likeness of Jesus, "in loving the Lord God with all the heart, and all the mind, and all the soul, and all the strength, and loving our neighbours as ourselves," that is, the total annihilation of self, by the restoration of the creature to its true place of dependence on its Creator — self (as unconnected with the glory of God and our fellows) is not recognised in the church. In our separate identity, the rudiments of God's character can be communicated. We may be required to learn and to enunciate the alphabet of the language of God, the religion of Jesus; but He teaches not and hears not His children their lessons beyond the first rudiments separately: the lesson is ordained for a class, and though each may have his own peculiar part in the repetition, the effect produced is of one whole.† No man ever understood the Epistles, none ever felt their power, and the force of their contents, without standing in a church. Without it, love and forbearance, the great Christian duties, are not (we may say, cannot be) displayed; for where this is not, men do not, and will not, save with very few exceptions, take up the infirmities and weakness of the feeble. And lastly, as a witness to the world, though preaching is profitable as the publication by word of the love of Jesus, a church is more profitable; because it is the publication in action of the beauty, and glory of that gospel lived out. The beams of the sun of righteousness are not only bright and beautiful in themselves, but they have overcome the accidental fogs and mists, which hide their glory from the earth, and have found, in the still waters of a church, a spot whence their splendour is reflected. True indeed, that every saint has some light and some heat from the love of Jesus, but most true also that the celestial caloric, like the natural, may be so widely disseminated as to give neither light nor warmth. In the kingdom of nature, as in that of the Spirit, every isolated existence contains caloric, the wood, the iron, the flint, etc.; yet, for light, and warmth, unless it be concentrated, what its value? what its use?

*Including, of course, an intimate acquaintance with the plague of our own hearts, and the power and subtlety of the world, the flesh, and the devil. Bitterly have some of us learnt these lessons — more bitterly far than God intended, because going to the war single-handed, we have at every point been borne to the ground, and when fallen had to rise unhelped, alone. Had we; instead of being knight-errants, stood in an associated band, as God commanded us, our experience would have been gained at less cost to ourselves, and oft-times less dishonour to our Captain. Two are better than one, for the one will lift up his fellow: for woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for who shall lift him up? Union is strength, for thereby our joys are increased, and our sorrows alleviated, by intercourse and love. We weep with those that weep, and rejoice with those that rejoice.

†The analogy is more perfect than may seem; for what are reading and writing but different applications of the same first principles? So in a church, which is God's school for the education of His children, the after lessons are only modifications of the great blessed and glorious rudiments. It is not intended then to deny experience, or its value, but only to assert, that to attempt to gain it without a church is to charge God foolishly with having enjoined that which we could do without. Doubtless the absence of this ordinance is the true cause of so much morbidness and unsoundness in the experience of the saints.

To say that all this was only binding in the then circumstances is little less than infidelity; for it is magnifying the changing and accidental trifles of time and country above the unchanging realities of the spiritual world. Our circumstances are in truth exactly what theirs were; in ourselves as feeble as were they; foes the very same in person and artifice; the object of the conflict the same; the same Spirit, the same Captain of Salvation, the same prize. If the order founded by divine wisdom included strength and mutual support (as it did), it is nothing but madness to have left it; for our only difference in circumstance from them is, that in the increase of the power of the flesh, the strength of the Spirit has been withdrawn, and the strength of Satan in subtlety and malice fearfully augmented.

Oh! that saints had grace to try God's own plan. The effort, though in feebleness, would be blessed — the very position would call out a sympathy of love, a subjection of self, and a harmony, which would be God's testimony of approval, and the church would again become as some conservatory filled with evergreens, and redolent with scent, laden with fruit, even in the midst of the winter of cold selfishness around. Its walls would again become lively stones, knit together by the cement of the Spirit of love; and again would a dwelling-place be found on the earth for the Holy Spirit of the blessed Jesus, in a family at peace and harmony as a witness of the love and holiness of the risen First-Begotten, and men should praise the Lord for the gift of Jesus, saying — (Ps. 133: 1, 2), "Behold how good and pleasant (it is) for brethren to dwell together in unity. (It is) like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron's beard; that went down to the skirts of his garments; as the dew of Hermon, and as the dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion: for there the Lord commanded the blessing, (even) life for evermore." G. V. W.