

Endowment

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There is a danger, growing out of the tendency to imitate what is without or the same unbelief which originated that departure, against which we need to watch. Were we realising that we are not of the world as Christ is not, and looking day by day for His coming, the evil would be seen and judged. But herein we are so apt to fail that the exhortation to watch is ever wholesome.

The danger we now refer to is to settle down on earth, and to escape from dependence on God corporately as well as individually. This sometimes takes the shape of acquiring a freehold meeting-room, or at least some arrangement practically equivalent. It saves the trouble of a constant rent to pay, perhaps the need of self-denial and of drawing on the liberality of others to lighten our own burden. Where is there such a scheme in scripture? Where a hint leading to it?

There is nothing to hinder individual grace either in providing a building, or in diminishing rent where poverty is great. But it is a false principle and a dangerous practice for the assembly to possess itself of the room wherein they meet. It cannot in law belong to the Christians assembling there. They must, in order to legal security, become a recognised body with the dogmas and the polity wherein they differ from all others; in other words, they must be a distinct sect, like the rest of Christendom. They must forfeit the position of fidelity to the one body and one Spirit. They must abandon the confession that they are but a feeble remnant cleaving to the immutable truth of the church's unity in the midst of ruin. For such a plea could command no tenure before this world's judicature, and would expose those who affirmed it to nothing but derision. If dissension sprang up among those assembling, and scattering ensued, to which would it belong? Those who are under grace could not fight for such a thing; the unruly would be sure to claim it with violence; and those who had too easily desired or consented to the first wrong must find out their error too late.

In our pilgrimage let us be content to hire a needed room or building. To pay the rent is the witness that we are content with a tent and an altar in spirit. Let those who do not wait for Christ possess and build for ever. What if there be difficulty here or there? Have we not God to lean on and expect from? Is there not brotherly kindness on the part of those who have to help those who have not? Besides, those who walk in a spirit separate from the world have far fewer claims than those who love the world and its things. Rare will it be that they cannot pay the rent of a suitable room. In the case of a very few, has no one the grace to the use of a private room? How much true worship has often gone up thence? How many souls have therein heard and received the word of life, to say nothing of the open air and its almost unlimited opportunities?

To frame a title-deed which gives legal safety (the one aim of every title-deed) to the assembly, I do not say to one or more individuals, there must be, especially in the present condition of Christendom, the definite position of a sect. But to assume such a position is to surrender what we have learnt of God about His church. And to assume to be His church in due and full standing, instead of being the witnesses of His grace and faithfulness as a few of its members meeting on His ground of faith, and no other, would be the abandonment of our intelligent actual duty. Individual property is the escape from the dilemma, where we pay our dues according to the righteous or gracious arrangement with him to whom it belongs. But to seek corporate possession as brethren is a slip from what scripture tells us, an inconsistency with our hope, a worldly or selfish desire, and a temptation to the violent or lawless when dispute arises, as experience shows not without sad example.