

On "The Church" in a Place, City, or Town

W. Kelly.

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LETTER 1.

Dear Brother,

As you desire to have in a plain and printed form for yourself and others what, in common with those we have regarded as most truly taught of God, I gather to be His revealed mind on this question, here it is.

The principle flows from the great and precious truth that we are called of God to walk on the ground of the "one body" of Christ. If we do not so walk, we cannot certainly be zealous to keep "the unity of the Spirit."

If, as is often the case, the saints who in faith take this only divine stand, as gathered to Christ's name, are only one company in a place, all is clear. No one among us questions their title or their competency any more than their responsibility. If they were but two or three, the privilege abides. They are not the assembly and do not pretend to be so, in the present ruin of the church, where many members of Christ are scattered everywhere in the religious societies, established or not, great or small. But they are bound none the less to walk together on that principle according to the Lord in the blessed Spirit who abides for ever, encouraged and sustained by that gracious resource for the evil day — the assurance of the Lord's presence to validate their acts as truly as when the church stood as yet unbroken (Matt. 18: 18-20). They might have to wait on Him as in weakness, and surely in humility and patience, and love, but in the confiding expectation of His guidance by His word and Spirit. Impossible that the Lord could fail those who are thus gathered in dependence and faith. If will or haste work in leaders or led, there is no guarantee that mistake or even unrighteousness may not soon ensue to the sorrow and shame of all that love Him, and to the dishonour of His own name.

The question of unity is necessarily raised, not merely in a general way by the fact that Scripture recognises but "one body," the church, all over the world, but in a practical way by its never speaking of assemblies, or churches, in a city or town. Of churches in a country or province we do read, but of "the church" in Jerusalem, Antioch, Ephesus or any other. Even dissensions or schisms within are strongly denounced; still more solemnly "heresies" or sects, as Scripture calls parties without. Unity must be kept, and is of the highest price, provided it be not carnal or worldly but "of the Spirit." It is

bound up with Christ's name and glory, not to speak of its rich blessing spiritually for the mind and heart and conscience too of the saints who so walk.

Now the circumstances of the earliest saints thus called put unity to the test in a very manifest way. For by the unexampled power of the Holy Ghost thousands were brought to Christ's name in a day, and in such a sort as to mark them out for the Lord beyond ordinary times, They could not, from the nature of the case, possess public buildings, even if they desired such means of congregating largely, indeed as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them rather, for distribution to such as had need. If they continued as yet in the temple, as being not quite delivered from their old associations, they broke bread at home — not "from house to house" as the Authorised Version says, so liable to give the notion of slipshod disorder. Rooms were available, often "upper rooms," of no inconsiderable size. But though they thus met, Jews now Christians from every nation under heaven, and doubtless they met in many different houses, the uniform language of the Holy Ghost is "the church" or assembly, never the assemblies. Indeed "the whole multitude" of the believers are expressly shown in Acts 6 to have found means of common action, though we are told ere this that the number of the men (ἄνδρῶν) came to be about five thousand. Is it too much to suppose that the believing women may have even then made it double?

I grant that the appointment of "the seven" was not an ordinary matter; and more extraordinary was the occasion which brought "all the multitude" together in Acts 15. I cite them as undeniable disclosures of that common action, by whatever means secured, of "the assembly" in a city, even when many thousands were concerned, which is the sanctioned practice of Scripture from the beginning.

Now if there be any duty which attaches to the assembly more inalienably than another, it is the reception, as we call it, or the exclusion, according to the word, of those who bear the Lord's name. Is it by an assembly? or is it on the principle of "the" assembly? I speak not of a place where all the gathered saints are actually under one roof, but of a city or town where they are numerous enough, as in Jerusalem, to break bread in ever so many different houses. Scripture never recognises church action save in unity. 1 Cor. 5 is not for Corinth only, but for "all that call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ in every place, both theirs and ours." I own and insist in the fullest way on local responsibility where the case occurs and is known, but not to the practical denial of unity in the town or city. Action to be of God must be really, and not in mere form, unless we allow local infallibility, of all the saints gathered on divine ground. If all thus take part, it would be unrighteous to share the responsibility of action without an opportunity of conscientious acquiescence, and the consequent liberty to enquire or even duty to remonstrate in a godly way.

But the isolated action of some saints, or "an" assembly without the rest in one city or place, is practical independency, and wholly opposed to both spirit and letter of God's word. In a province the assemblies here or there act each; and all saints *prima facie* accept the action of each. But there is from the nature of the case, according to the word, no common action. They are not "the assembly in Galatia," but the assemblies of that country. It is never so in a town or city, where, if a local company have the responsibility of the case and of proposing the scriptural act, all the saints have the privilege and duty of joint action. Otherwise it is no longer the assembly in Jerusalem or in London, but a human sort of congregational union after the act, which is in this matter a denial of unity.

I say no more now than that I am as ever,

Yours affectionately in Christ,

To R. A. S. W. K.

LETTER 2.

Dear Brother,

Objections of various kinds are made by those who more or less follow the traditions of Christendom. Under this head cannot be honestly classed the common action which flows from the unity which is so urgently of the Holy Spirit everywhere in the New Testament, and here kept up by that remarkable phrase of Scripture, "the church in Jerusalem," in Antioch, Corinth, Ephesus, or any other. But reasons which even seem to be based on the word of God are entitled to a grave hearing. For Scripture must surely tally with Scripture, though one in no way pretends to solve, to the satisfaction of each objector, every difficulty that may be raised on this question or any other.

Thus it is argued that the church "at the house" (κατ' οἶκον) of this or that person, of Aquila and Prisca, of Nymphas, of Philemon, is proof of "churches" in a city. Nay, rather is it, when duly weighed with other Scriptures, distinct disproof of any such divisive idea. It then becomes part of the evidence for unity; for, while no one denies "the church" in ever so many houses of a city, the saints there are notwithstanding invariably designated "the" assembly *in* (ἐν) the city. The notion of some Greek fathers, and of Calvin etc. since, that it means only a Christian household, strikes one as a mere evasion owing to their traditional prejudices. Neander, though right in the main, shows his inattention to the precision of Scripture by citing ἡ ἐκκλησία ἐν τῷ οἴκῳ αὐτοῦ. Now it is never so written, though it might have been perhaps if all the saints had met *in* one house. The Spirit uses ἐν only of all the saints *in a city*. It is always κατ' οἶκον, absolutely as in Acts 2: 46 ("at home"), or relatively as in the four houses we are now reviewing.

It will not be questioned by any fair and intelligent enquirer that the church in Ephesus, the metropolis of Asia, had been planted before the first epistle to the Corinthians was written thence. Evidently too "the church at Aquila's" (1 Cor. 16: 19) existed then in that city. "All the brethren greet you," in verse 20, supposes souls gathered elsewhere, and the main body too. The active grace of God gathers freely and in all simplicity; but as the Holy Spirit is one and impresses unity on all saints here below, so is there care in a place like Ephesus, not assuredly to hinder the gathering of saints to the Lord's name in more houses than one, but also to guard them all in unity. There may be the assembly here or the assembly there; but the aggregate of the saints in the place were "the assembly in Ephesus," never the assemblies in it or of it. Unity is the governing truth according to the will of our Lord, the Head of the church. So runs His word, which cannot be broken. To have them all meeting under one roof is an earthly notion: the presence and power of the Spirit rises wholly and essentially above diversity of place. Only it is indispensable that as Christ's body they be all gathered to His name in the liberty and unity of the Spirit.

From Rom. 16: 3-5 it appears that Aquila and his wife were at Rome when the apostle wrote his great Epistle to the saints there from Corinth (A.D. 57 or 58); and here again we read of "the church at their house." It may be said doubtless that the saints in Rome are addressed as such throughout, and never in Scripture spoken of as the church in Rome. For my part I admire the perfectness of Scripture and the wisdom of God in so speaking. But it is at once a human and a weak inference that the saints were not the church of God there, because they are not so spoken of. Just consider those at Philippi or at Colosse, in which cities none would be so hardy as to deny them church character. Why then, it may be enquired, were the saints in those places not styled "the church"? Not because they were not; for such a denial would be ridiculous where we hear as at Philippi, of bishops or overseers and deacons — a fulness of order which many true assemblies might not yet possess (see Acts 14: 23, Titus 1: 5). The truth taught in the Epistle to the Philippians brought individual experience and Christian life into relief,

rather than ecclesiastical relationship; as the subject-matter in the Epistle to the Colossians is not the regulation of the church, but the recall of the saints to Christ the Head when in danger of losing the true sense of His glory. So even the Ephesian disciples are addressed as "the saints and faithful in Christ Jesus that are in Ephesus," rather than as "the assembly" there, which last we are absolutely sure they were long before (Acts 20: 17, 28). The reason is, that, though the church is handled in this Epistle from the highest point of view and in all the extent of its privileges, the utmost care is taken first and foremost to treat of the blessings of the saints in Christ, which leads to the individuality of their title in the address.

Yet more obvious is the key to the address in the Epistle to the Romans. It is due to its character as laying down, not church order, but the broad and deep foundations of divine righteousness in the gospel (with the guilt and evil of man that requires it), its consistency with the special promises to Israel, and the practical life of the Christian that flows from it, suits and is due to it. The spiritual mind feels that to address such an Epistle to "the church" in Rome would be out of harmony with the truth in question. For Paul, apostle by call, to address all that were in Rome saints by call seems to be perfection; not because they did not compose the assembly or church there, but because the style adopted is in keeping, as "the assembly" would have been quite incongruous, with the drift of the Epistle. It would be indeed remarkable if the inspired apostle had written otherwise. That they were not the church in Rome is an unfounded deduction or strange doctrine. That there may have been several companies in that great city even then is in no way improbable: verses 14 and 15 seem to indicate groups; and there are, besides, many names recorded in the chapter, unconnected either with these verses or with 5, where we hear expressly of the assembly at the house of Prisc(ill)a and Aquila. Yet the analogy of Jerusalem, to speak of no other, would not only warrant but require the conclusion, that, whatever the number of companies meeting in Rome, all the saints in it formed the assembly there. Of course it was "the assembly" in this house, and "the assembly" in that; but the saints as a whole constituted "the assembly in Jerusalem," Ephesus, Rome, etc., as the case might be. All stood on one divine ground; and it abides for us. Had there been "churches" in Jerusalem without common action, it would have been not "the" but "an" assembly here and another there, not unity but independency, the most opposed of all principles to that of God's church.

Still more manifest and to the point is the evidence yielded by Col. 4: 15, "Salute the brethren that are in Laodicea, and Nymphas, and the assembly that is at his (or, according to some of the more ancient copies, their) house." It is in vain to assume that this was the only gathering of the saints in Laodicea. Properly viewed it would even of itself imply the contrary; for had this been the only company gathered to the Lord's name in the city, it would have been naturally called the church "in Laodicea" rather than "at Nymphas' house," (or according to the Vatican, etc., adopted by Lachmann, and by Westcott and Hort, Nympha's house). It might be argued of course that we are told in ver. 13 of "those that are in Laodicea," as if they were only so many individual saints not gathered at all. But there is really no room for such speculation; for in the next verse following (15) we read of "the assembly (or church) of Laodiceans," just as we might speak of the assembly of Londoners, meaning the assembly in London. "The" Laodiceans as in the Authorised and Revised Versions would be too much; and so with "the" Thessalonians in 1 Thess. 1: 1; 2 Thess. 1: 1. But the case is of moment, in that it shuts us up to a clear issue as to the unity of the church in a city, against the independency of the churches therein. The apostle does not at all identify the church at Nymphas' with the assembly of Laodiceans. Nor does he speak of the churches but of the church of Laodiceans, suggestive of common, not several, action.

Accordingly the "assembly of Laodiceans" expressly goes beyond those meeting at that house;

while the unity of all the saints in Laodicea in no way hinders or denies the assembly at a certain saint's house. Does not this answer well to what has been so happily maintained among us hitherto, the unity of the saints in a city with local gatherings here or there in it? That they all met under one roof (save on extraordinary occasions), and that unity is only to be secured in this material way, is natural enough for those who do not believe in the unity of the Spirit; but it is really a crass idea and a delusion opposed to Scripture. Brethren may have assembled in this or that brother's house; but there was also the capital truth of the assembly "of Laodiceans" or "in Laodicea" (Rev. 3: 14, where the commonly received reading "of Laodiceans" rests only, as far as is known, on the Codex Reuchlini, which Erasmus used, out of some 110 MSS., 5 uncials and 105 cursives). Each meeting had no doubt its local responsibility: but none the less was there unity for all in the city. And who that knows what the church of God is could doubt that what appears in Col. 4: 15, 16, was equally true everywhere else, if there were more meetings than one?

Philemon 2 remains for brief consideration, "the church, or assembly, *at thy house*." By comparison with Col. 4: 9 and other corroborating evidence, it does not admit of doubt that Philemon's house was in Colosse. But it were an eccentric conclusion that this was the sole meeting of saints in the city. It was "the church at Philemon's house"; but it could not be, or it would have been called, the church in Colosse. Other gatherings, one or more, existed there. Here again, if we have proof of a local meeting and of course responsibility, we have not a word to weaken the unity of God's assembly in the city, but rather what distinctly implies it.

Thus every case of the church in a house fails as a solid objection, and rather tends to confirm by other connected facts (which the Holy Spirit carefully states as if to exclude independency), that unity along with local responsibility is of God, and to hold both is essential to all sound and spiritual conception of the church of God. One is far from referring to the late A. Neander as an accurate interpreter of God's mind, revealed in His word, on the constitution of the church. Still he honestly states, in general beyond others, what is found there, even if it condemn his own Lutheranism as well as the rest of Christendom. And thus, in the "History of the Planting and Training of the Christian Church by the Apostles" (Book III. ch. iii, a chapter most damaging to traditional usages), he admits that while companies met in particular houses, without separating themselves from the whole, the "Epistles of the apostle Paul give the clearest evidence that all the Christians of one city originally formed one whole church."

Another scripture has been cited with some confidence, not indeed to prove assemblies with independent action in a city, but to destroy the force of "the" assembly in a city by a citation meant to show its application to provinces. The insinuation therefore is that, if "the church" can be predicated of a province as of a city, the phrase cannot carry with it such unity as leads to common action in a city, because this is clearly out of the question in a province. But is it true that there is any single instance of such equivalence? Acts 9: 31 is alleged, where the Authorised Version based on the received text says that "Then had the churches rest throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria," etc.

Now it does not seem intelligent to plead in bar of this that the uncial MSS. E H L P with the great mass of cursives, two ancient versions, and some Greek and Latin fathers, oppose A B C and some dozen cursives, with most of the very ancient versions and several ecclesiastical writers. At least my judgment is that "the church," as it has the best and oldest testimony, so also ought to be frankly accepted as the true reading. It was probably changed, by scribes who were struck with its peculiarity and did not understand its force, into conformity with Acts 16: 5, where the plural is as right as here it seems weaker than the singular. "The, church, then, *throughout* (καθ with the genitive) the whole of Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace," etc. It is a phrase wholly distinct from what is wanted by

those who advocate separate action in a city; and hence it is absolutely worthless for their purpose. For it is a simple intimation that the church viewed as a whole, wherever it had extended throughout these lands, had peace.

Had the phrase been "the church (or assembly) of Judea and Galileo and Samaria," or "the church in Judea" etc., it might indeed have been lawfully used to neutralise the language on which so much stress is justly laid by those who for truth and practice cleave to the written word. As it stands, the marked difference of phrase destroys the wished-for application; while its unforced sense falls in exactly with the truth of the facts and the interpretation just now given. It is the church as far as it then existed there, the church throughout the designated lands, the church as a unity in this quarter; a sense which none of us questions elsewhere, and of the deepest moment to hold fast, though not the point at present in dispute. Only ignorance could cite it to weaken "the assembly" in a city or "the assemblies" of a province. Unity in the comprehensive sense is conceded on all hands.

I feel thankful for this little research into the wondrous word of God, the perfectness of which ever grows on the Christian who digs into it in faith. May we use its every word to the glory of the Lord Jesus in deed and in truth.

Yours affectionately in Him,

To R. A. S. W. K.

LETTER 3.

Dear Brother, — In this communication I propose to set out as clearly as I can the evidence of Scripture on the question whether the saints in a city were called to meet in the same room, in order thereby to maintain that unity, which in name is universally allowed in our midst, as it is in deed and truth asserted or assumed in the written word. There is a phrase of not uncommon occurrence in the New Testament, which has been supposed to imply the fact, and hence the duty, of the saints' assembling in one and the same company. Is this then the only scriptural way to express unity in a city?

Let us examine ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό in the Acts and the Epistles that we may gather whether the usage there necessitates the meeting in a single place for common action. On the face of the words no such restriction of meaning is taught; for their primitive or literal import is "for the same thing." Sameness of place is not expressed, but rather of object; though it is entirely allowed that the same purpose might be carried out in the same place, or at the same time, and this be implied contextually in the application of the phrase. Hence "together" is a legitimately derived signification, and indeed the most habitual sense in which it occurs in the New Testament. The nature of the case alone determines whether there was also the same time or place. Thus it is probable that it was in the same place when the Pharisees assembled "together" (ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό) to question the Lord (Matt. 22: 34), as it could hardly be otherwise with two women grinding "together." But this we shall see might or might not be. The words in themselves do not settle it, but the circumstances or the context. The phrase itself therefore in no way shuts us up to one "place" in the physical sense. A moral force prevails generally, if not always save in bare outward facts.

The first instance is Acts 1: 15, where the parenthesis informs us that there was a crowd of names "together" about a hundred and twenty. Now there is nothing here to hinder our supposing the 120 gathered into the same apartment; for that Peter stood up in the midst of the brethren was said just before, and immediately after we have his address. The natural inference is that they were all there to hear. But the true meaning of the words is a muster of names "together," and not their being "gathered,"

as the Revised Version puts it. — In the second occurrence, Acts 2: 1, I see no reason to doubt that the disciples were assembled in the same place *together*. But here besides we find ὁμοῦ (the critical correction of ὁμοθυμαδόν, "with one accord,") which is used properly of place, "at the same place," though it too acquires the meaning of "together," even where the notion of place is lost. The brethren were thus waiting for the promise of the Father, as the Lord had enjoined; and all the facts point to their being gathered in one place at this time, when they were baptised of the Spirit in the wondrous grace of God.

But the phrase occurs again in verse 44: "And all that believed were *together* and had all things common." Now we know the sudden and immense spread of the truth even on that day alone. Are we to conceive they were all gathered into one room? The Spirit of God is describing their habitual life in unity, not here their assembling merely, as it would appear. It is in verse 42 that we find the general fact and formal principle, as verse 46 states the particulars, which lent a bright and blessed character even to their every-day life.*

*Since writing this letter I have lit on the following note on the verse in the pious and learned Dr. John Lightfoot's Works (Pitman's edition, viii. 61); "This Greek word ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό is of frequent and of various use in the Septuagint. It sometimes betokens the meeting of persons in the same company; so of beasts: sometimes their concurring in the same action, though not in the same company or place; sometimes their concurring in the same condition, and sometimes their knitting together, though in several companies; — As Joab's and Abner's men, though they sat at a distance, and the pool of Gibeon between them, yet they said συναντῶν ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό. And in this sense is the word to be understood in this story; for it is past all imagination or conceiving, that all those thousands of believers, that were now in Jerusalem, should keep all of one company and knot, and not part asunder; for what house would hold them? But they kept in several companies or congregations, according as their languages, nations, or other references, did knot them together. And this joining together, because it was apart from those that believed not, and because it was in the same profession, and practice of the duties of religion; therefore it is said to be ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό, though it were in several companies or congregations." I have omitted the author's references, as they of course appear included in the much fuller list from the Septuagint, which is given elsewhere in this letter.

In the close of verse 47 we have another and more conclusive disproof of a mere gathering under one roof to which some would limit the phrase. It is well known that the true text of the last clause is: "And the Lord kept adding daily *together* those to be saved." For want of understanding this, τῆ ἐκκλησίᾳ, "to the church," crept in as an explanation; and ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό got relegated to the beginning of Acts 3. But, however taken, it is clear that the words do not mean "in the same place." The Lord was adding His own "together," quite apart from their being collected into "one place." That they would assemble together as much as possible and enjoy the fellowship of saints is beyond controversy; but these were practical results of what the Lord was then doing in His grace. "For there is one body and one Spirit." It is certain that the most solemn witness and sweet pledge of their fellowship as one, the breaking of bread, was not observed in one vast place capable of thousands participating, but κατ' οἶκον "at home," in contrast with the temple. They took the Lord's supper in the houses of one and another of the saints. See again Acts 5: 42, where a similar contrast re-appears, though here teaching and preaching are the point rather than the Lord's Supper. They as yet had no public building suited to such a purpose, but just used their private houses throughout the city. Solomon's porch might be excellent as long as it was available for speaking and testifying to the mass of Jews who frequented it as a sort of religious lounge and promenade; but it is as unfounded as ridiculous to suppose that all the saints could or would have met there for meetings of the assembly. It is certain therefore that the

context refutes the idea that "together" here has anything to do with their assembling in one "place." For if this had been sought, it must have been preeminently in the breaking of bread, and here we learn expressly that it was not so.

The fact is that the phrase is used adverbially in classical or ordinary Greek writers, just as we have seen in the New Testament, for "together." Thus Thucydides, though not using it often, does thereby express (1. 79, vi. 106) concurrence in sentiment or in falsehood without reference to place. For other purposes he with marked precision employs εἰς τὸ αὐτό, ἐν τῷ αὐτῷ, κατὰ τὸ αὐτό, ἐκ τοῦ αὐτοῦ, κ. τ. λ. So Polybius (ii. 326) uses it for "together," Dionys. Hal. (Ant. Rom. iii.), Cl. Ptol. (Geogr. i. 12), and Plutarch frequently, not to speak of other heathen authors.

But it is evidently to the Septuagint, Philo, and Josephus, we must look for more direct and sure illustration of New Testament phraseology; and there the formula occurs freely, and habitually for "together," etc. Occasionally, of course, the place or time, may be the same; but, as in the New Testament, the usage is wider and often admits of difference in these respects where there is community of act or design. Compare Ex. 26: 9, Ex. 36: 13; Deut. 22: 10; Deut. 25: 5, 11; Joshua 9: 2, Joshua 11: 5; Judges 6: 33, Judges 19: 6; 2 Sam. 2: 13, 2 Sam. 10: 15, 2 Sam. 12: 3, 2 Sam. 21: 9; Ezra 4: 3; Neh. 4: 8, Neh. 6: 2, 7; Ps. 2: 2, Ps. 4: 9, Ps. 18: (Heb. 19 and so in the following) 10, Ps. 33: 3, Ps. 36: 40, Ps. 40: 7, Ps. 47: 4, Ps. 48: 2, 9, Ps. 54: 15, Ps. 61: 9, Ps. 70: 11, Ps. 73: 7, 9, Ps. 82: 15, Ps. 101: 23, Ps. 121: 2, Ps. 132: 1; Eccles. 11: 6, Isa. 66: 17; Jer. 3: 18, Jer. 6: 12, Jer. 46: 12, 1. 4; Hosea 1: 11; Amos 1: 15, Amos 3: 3; Micah 2: 12. Comment on these occurrences of the Septuagint is needless. Though they will naturally be of chief interest to the student of the Greek Bible, it is hoped that the English reader may find the search not without profit; as it fully confirms the fact that the phrase admits of sameness of purpose for several companies in as many places.

Here we might leave the question with its decisive answer from God's word; but it may help doubtful minds if we pursue it further. Acts 4: 26 is the next example: "The kings of the earth stood up, and the rulers were gathered together, ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό against the Lord and against His Christ." Of this we have the revealed application in the next verses: "for of a truth in this city against Thy holy Servant Jesus whom Thou didst anoint, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, were gathered together to do whatsoever Thy hand and Thy counsel foreordained to come to pass." Now it is very certain that this gathering ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό of Herod and of Pilate, of the Gentiles and of Israel, does not convey, or bear the inference that they were all assembled "in one place." Scripture declares that they were gathered "together," ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό. Yet Scripture expressly demonstrates, as every reader of the Gospels knows, that they met in quite different places. The chief priests and scribes led Christ to their own council, — indeed to Annas first and then to Caiaphas; the whole multitude of them led Him to Pilate and the Praetorium; then Pilate remitted Him to Herod; and finally Pilate chastised Him in his own place before the cross. The argument therefore founded on this phrase is a proved fallacy, and the deduction from it falls to the ground, as not only without reality but opposed to the sure teaching of Scripture.

1 Cor. 7: 5 also clearly disproves "in one place," and shows that the regular union of married life is there meant. They might even be "in one place," when they were not ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό. In every way the notion is wrong.

Hence there is no solid reason for drawing more from 1 Cor. 11: 20 than the Revisers say: "When therefore ye assemble yourselves together," etc. This would be true if the saints in Corinth met in more buildings than one, though it is assuredly addressed to all the assembly in the city, and not to a part in one place.

Another passage which has been impressed for the service of the assumption that all met in a single place is 1 Cor. 14: 23-25. But it seems surprising that any one should fail to see that the apostle is not describing facts as they were or ought to be, but only supposes a case where "the whole assembly" should meet "together" (ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό), and here by implication it would be in one place. If all were to speak with tongues, it would expose them to the charge of madness; if all were to prophesy, it would force, even on the unbeliever or simple man that came in, the conviction of God's being indeed in or among them. But as we know expressly from 1 Cor. 12: 29, 30, that "all" are *not* prophets, and do not speak with tongues, so this passage rightly understood would rather point to the conclusion that "the whole church" did not as a fact gather into a single place. Here only is it put, and this simply as an hypothesis to correct the unspirituality of the Corinthian saints in preferring the more showy sign-gifts to that really higher exercise of divine power which sets the soul morally in the presence of God under His grace and truth.

The same principle applies to 1 Cor. 5, save indeed that it is a weaker case. If the Corinthian assembly met in several houses, they none the less assembled themselves together, and none more than another put out from among themselves the wicked person. The church in Jerusalem had unity as much as the church in Corinth; yet it is certain that they met in many houses to break bread. So therefore it may have been in Corinth without the least prejudice to their unity. The unity of the Spirit is a reality for principle and practice, and not a mere hope for heaven as independency makes it; but it is quite superior to the accidents of time and place. Is it seriously supposed that for putting away they temporarily abandoned the various places of meeting, and that all met in one building for such a purpose as this, whenever a case of church action occurred? Scripture gives no indication of such a thing for discipline, but shows breaking bread at home distributed over a city. We have already seen in Col. 4 the clear proof, on the one hand, of more than one meeting in Laodicea, and on the other of the unity of all the saints therein as the assembly of Laodiceans. Local responsibility is of the utmost practical value; but it must not be exercised so as to swamp the governing truth of unity in a city or town. And excision is unquestionably laid down in 1 Corinthians 5 as incumbent on the "assembly in Corinth," not merely on the church in somebody's house, which of course was (or might be) but part. The local brethren would naturally occupy themselves with the details, and this neither jealously nor suspected, if grace wrought; but on the assembly in the city, it is as certain from scripture as anything can be, falls the duty of approving themselves to be clear in the matter. The isolation. of the assembly in such a one's house from the assembly elsewhere in the town never occurs to the apostle's mind; and we must bear in mind that the Lord had "much people" in Corinth (Acts 18: 10). It is the fruit of old habits or traditional error, strengthened by the growing self-will of the day, and claiming "the voice of God" from passing circumstances, as clericalism does for its party work.

Mere notification after the act of excision, for example, in no way meets the word of God, but is quite consistent with the congregational system. Scripture requires that the assembly in the city should put away, and not the local meeting independently of the rest. To notify it to other saints not concerned in that solemn duty is a subordinate point, and not what scripture demands; but scripture is imperative that the assembly in the city, and not the local meeting only, should clear the Lord's name. Of course, "the churches" of the province or country would in some way or another learn the fact and act on the decision, and so everywhere, unless unity were given up in every respect. But unity would be given up in a city, if the saints gathered therein to Christ's name (whether meeting in one room or in ten) did not take part as a whole in putting away the wicked person. The independent action of the meeting in somebody's house, where the offender might be, is not the injunction of the Holy Spirit, but his exclusion by all the gathered saints, as in Corinth. Plurality of meeting-places in a town does not change the divine principle, but makes the unity more impressive.

But here I must pause and remain, ever yours affectionately in Christ,

W. K. To R. A. S.

P.S. — As some readers of Letter 2 in the last "Bible Treasury" think I had overlooked the fact of disciples in Damascus (Acts 9: 19, 25), let them be assured that it is not so: the letter shows the contrary. But "disciples" do not necessarily mean "assembly" any more now than then. Even supposing however that the disciples in Damascus or elsewhere were gathered and walked ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ, this would only modify some words quite independently of the argument, but not shake the great substantial fact pressed, that the phrase is altogether peculiar as expressive of another thought. It in no way weakens the difference between the assembly in a town and the assemblies of a country, which a false view of unity will always be found to confound or destroy. That marked and weighty difference is not more indelible in Scripture than bound up with the essential nature of God's assembly on earth; and every saint is responsible at least not to oppose and thwart the Lord's authority concerned in it, even if he be not intelligent enough to comprehend and appreciate it duly. I am quite content to leave the expression in Acts 9: 13 as meaning no more than the assembly *throughout these lands*, i.e. the church thus limited; but the difference abides intact, even if the church were actually said, which it is not, to have then existed elsewhere.

LETTER 4.

Dear Brother, — The principle then, on which within a given sphere church action according to scripture takes place, is the unity of the saints therein. It is the assembly (i.e. of all the gathered saints) in the city, which is commanded to put away from among themselves the wicked person 1 Cor. 5 is conclusive as to this, especially as confirmed by Col. 4: 15, 16. In those early days to meet in private houses was even more common than in later times. The saints assembled, some here and some there, and the word notices this fact; but nowhere is there a hint of some in the city taking action and the rest not. Scripture, as we have seen is careful, while owning the saints gathered in this or that private house, to speak of the assembly as a whole in the place, and to mark that on the assembly as a whole devolves the obligation to purge out the old leaven. Nobody dreams of a central weekly meeting doing any work of the sort; its business is to facilitate, in a wise and godly way, the common action of all the saints in the place. Whether the saints in Corinth met as a fact in one room or in several is not intimated, as it is quite immaterial in principle; and it might be hazardous to affirm one way or another. Doubtless this very silence is to be respected, and we can turn the Lord's command to so much the more ready and universal obedience, because there is no notice of that circumstantial difference. It is the assembly in Corinth, and equally, whether the saints congregated in several smaller rooms or in one large enough. But if the saints met in several, it was not the particular meeting where the incestuous man went most frequently, which alone acted in putting the defiled person out, but all the saints in Corinth. To the assembly therein, and not only to the portion of the saints who might be more immediately concerned with the details of the case, was the charge given. The assembly as a whole is that which Scripture shows to be called and bound of the Lord to act in His name.

Here again unbelief is at work as of old; and after ruining the practical testimony of Christ in the church, it denies that you can carry out this Scripture or any other about the assembly, because in this time of ruin there are but a few here and there gathered to His name. Ecclesiastically, it is the old enemy of despair. But Matt. 18: 20 meets this objection fully and precisely. Before the church began, the grace and wisdom of Christ cut off all real ground for it, giving the authority of His presence to that which is done even by "two or three" so gathered. What tender mercy, and provident care! But this only

where the saints are gathered to His name. They have just the same ratification of heaven, as if all the saints were there; for even then what can compare with the Lord's presence in their midst? And this He expressly declares to be no less assured to "two or three" if they are gathered to His name. To feel and own the ruin-state is of God; to enfeeble the word or its practical authority thereby is evil and of the enemy. It is not "display" that is wanted, or "organisation," but obedience in faith without which all is vain.

Far be the thought that His presence is made good at the expense of His word, or to the dishonour of His Spirit. To be gathered unto His name is the condition of the promised blessing; but they are not so gathered who meet on any other principle than the one body of Christ. Thus is all truth bound together. There is no licence either to scatter the saints or to be indifferent about such a sin or its effects. Those who walk heedless of the one body on earth cannot be keeping the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Since ever in London various gatherings existed, it has been the known and invariable practice for all the saints there to act simultaneously in matters of the assembly, both in receiving and in putting away. When a local meeting agreed to present a name for fellowship, it was carried to the central meeting on the Saturday evening, and, if no valid objection appeared, it was entered on the notice paper, and copied for each meeting in London. After a week's delay for the satisfaction of all, if no godly reason held good to the contrary, the person was received, the name being again and simultaneously before all. Until recently the cases for putting away were named but once; the effect of which was to afford insufficient opportunity of enquiry or objection even to the brethren at the Saturday meeting, and none whatever to the mass of saints in London, who must nevertheless take common part in the extreme act. This, being a plain and injurious anomaly, was at length rectified; and as all were to join in putting out, so all had due notice a clear week before excision, and so could with less hurry and more intelligence and equity take the action required. But, even before this becoming opportunity was afforded, no meeting ever assumed title to act apart from all the saints in London gathered to the Lord's name. The acknowledged principle was that all on the ground of God's church joined in the act. His assembly *there*, not a part of it without the others equally gathered to the Lord's name, was called of the Lord to vindicate His will. It is not a correction in detail, nor even an innovation merely, but another principle, as opposed to scriptural truth as it is to our practice hitherto, to claim for each local meeting in London competency to act, *apart from* all the other gathered saints, in receiving or excommunicating. If brethren were rash enough to allow so radical a change, it would be no less than revolution. To *restrict* the Lord's presence to the local meeting, where a plurality of gatherings exists in a place, is assuredly not faith in, or sound understanding of, Matt. 18 and 1 Cor. 5. It is equally and divinely true, whether there be in a place one meeting, or thirty; and all believe it is "when" and "where" the saints, whether two or three, or whether two or three thousand, are gathered together to His name. To set up independent church-action for each local meeting, in a place where there are many, is to destroy the force of Scripture, which charges it on the assembly in the place, never on some but on all the saints gathered to Christ's name. It is to deny the assembly in a city, which is scriptural, and to imply assemblies of a city, which is unscriptural. It is independency, not unity, of man's will and contrary to God's word. "What! came the word of God out from you? or came it unto you only? If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandment of the Lord. But if any man be ignorant, let him be ignorant." 1 Cor. 14.

It is true that for many years there was looseness as to the circle embraced by the Saturday-evening meeting in London. The desire after help and fellowship blunted the perception of brethren to

the fact that Croydon, Barking, Buckhurst Hill, etc., are in no sense included in London. Still all the gathered saints in London *did* act together; and this was the great matter, even if some outside acted with them, which was a work of supererogation. Better knowledge corrected this comparatively small anomaly; and it was very properly left to the exterior gatherings to take themselves off. Then came a painful procedure — arbitrary interference backed by party, contrary to express understanding, to coerce certain meetings in Kent, notwithstanding the conviction in some or all that they formed part of London as legitimately as Notting Hill, Finsbury Park, or Clapton. No intelligent brother doubts that there is a limit ecclesiastically to London, as to Rome, Ephesus, or any other place; and if will did not work, the saints would have no great difficulty in coming to a sound judgment. Within it the saints gathered to the Lord are bound to act together, as they are equally in every other place according to Scripture.

Nor has any man of weight ever contended for either the weekly central meeting or the common paper as "the principle," as some imagine. Not so. The joint action of the assembly in a place is the *vital* point; and this seems to necessitate, in the judgment of the wisest and most spiritual who have ever been with us, both that meeting and the papers. After years of reflection none has suggested a better means; nor has any suggestion been made which would not infringe on divine principle. One has proposed the communication of what each local meeting *has* done to London and elsewhere! another who admits London unity would relegate all to the central meeting, which would make a clergy and deny the assembly! So little do those who desire change agree, *save* in excluding the vital responsibility of that common action of the gathered saints which is due to Christ and imperatively claimed by His word.

But lo! another voice breaks on the ear from afar. One must make allowance for men accustomed to places where only one meeting exists. They are apt to err in venturing to speak in an off-hand way of such a place as London. One of these invented the sneer of "paper unity," which others were not ashamed to echo. But what has this new voice to tell us? I do not wonder that the Editor of "Words of Faith" apologises, though mildly, for so fresh and bold a contradiction of the known judgment of their departed leader; nor that the writer claims "simply desire to edify!" by suggesting his rash thoughts, which will do nothing if they do not "raise questions." For, without denying the breaking of bread in various parts of a large city, counting many saints, as Rome, Jerusalem, etc., he insinuates that there was one place, marked out by the Lord, and recognised by all, as the centre or assembly! for all purposes of administration!! No more distressing assault was ever made by any one called a brother on the very nature, dignity, and responsibility of God's church; never greater though unconscious contempt — I say not for all we have hitherto learnt, confessed, valued, acted on, but — for God's revelation on a subject so precious to Christ. In the previous page he had gone so far as to speak of one place recognised as the gathering-place of the assembly, and all was connected with that, both for ministry!! and administration. God has taken care by Col. 4: 16 to refute this mischievous nonsense founded on the misuse of ver. 15, and of other like cases.

Thus we are in presence of two efforts of Satan to damage or destroy. One is the radical form of independency, which would abuse local responsibility to overthrow the true unity of the church as a present reality, always binding on faith and practice, whatever the departure of Christendom. But next we have, not merely a party falling into independent action, inconsistent with their own confession of unity in their eager will to carry division, but one of their avowed converts, and of course loud and bitter advocates, essaying to justify the giving up of action to one place in a large city, "as the centre and assembly for all purposes of administration." If this be not the clerical form of independency, adulterating Scripture for its ambitious and evil aim, it will be hard to find it in Christendom. The

organs either of dissent or Anglicanism have never propounded a more aspiring scheme to draw the saints, and even whole gatherings out of their responsibility. What spirit can be at work to suggest such thoughts? Not the Holy Ghost.

It may surprise (as it should warn) some to learn that a line of argument similar to their own is adopted by Dr. S. Davidson ("Ecclesiastical Polity of the New Testament unfolded"), who went over to Independency from Presbyterianism. Not that one supposes the writers or speakers, for the separate action of each local assembly in a place where there are several, to have drawn their shafts from that quiver. It is a far more serious consideration, that it is the same root of unbelief as to the real unity of God's church for present and practical action. The Congregational divine, with the same strange misuse of Solomon's porch, equally urges that all were necessarily and literally together in one place, and equally deceives himself that the unity of the church consists with that human system. No wonder the imputation of independency is felt, which it would not be, if it were not the fact, though of course unconsciously. — Ever yours in Christ,

To R. A. S. W. K.

LETTER 5.

Dear Brother, — It may be helpful in more ways than one if we now test recent proceedings of the gravest consequence by that unity of action, which we have all hitherto professed, and which I believe to be the only scriptural principle, whatever the number of meetings in a place. Some seem by no means alive to the import of what is at stake. In places where brethren are used to but one meeting, they might easily go wrong if they judged from their own circumstances which do not raise the question; as others may err who have yielded to feeling against that which touched them personally, or awakened their indignation. But truth is not learnt or kept thus.

In August 1879, the Park Street meeting shocked with a slight exception the spiritual intelligence and even the consciences of brethren generally by a Declaration sent out *independently of the rest of the saints gathered in London*. In that document they committed themselves to refusing fellowship, not only to a brother whose case was before another meeting, but to that meeting for what it agreed to do that very evening! and to all others, individuals or meetings, which did not clear themselves directly or indirectly from association with either the brother or the meeting in question!! They added that they disowned the present constitution of the weekly meeting as a medium of communication between the local meetings in London!!!

Now such an action as this taken in the Lord's name, even in itself (apart from the fundamental breach in sending it out as an assembly decision, without so much as seeking the acceptance of the saints gathered in London), was not only unheard of in our midst but opposed to what had uniformly been our bearing of old. It was not so as to Plymouth in 1845-6, though the evil there was beyond comparison worse than any thing alleged against the brother or meeting accused in London. It was not so after the Bethesda matter as to Bath, where a new meeting, outside that which had the previous sanction of G. V. W. etc., was begun with the sanction of J. N. D. etc. It was not so later still as to Jersey, whence saints from two meetings (till one collapsed), who had no intercommunion there, were allowed to break bread at the Priory, and so elsewhere, with the consent of the same persons who in the Ramsgate case denounced a less fault as the destruction of the testimony, etc. It was not so as to Newton Abbot, where a party outside the then and still acknowledged assembly were sustained vehemently in word and deed by the same elder brother who from the first would have no less than the expulsion of his still more aged brother; yet was the offence very like his own. It was not so as to

Christchurch (N.Z.), where G. V. W. had stood with the meeting on the one hand, and on the other J. N. D., after hearing two sisters, wrote his sympathy with their seceding friends; yet nobody thought of declaring him out, though surely responsible. Such cases, two of them recent, prove how contrary to all our habitual forbearance with godly brothers in conflicting circumstances were the proceedings of Park Street. They were due to a fierce party-spirit rising up to a not undesired crisis of division, as against brethren who could not consent to such extreme courses, believing them to be alien from Christ and Scripture.

But even if the aim of Park Street had been consistent, righteous, and godly, we are now to see how the hitherto constantly practised principle of the assembly's united action in a place bears on the recent acts, and so on all who accept them.

The Declaration of the 19th August 1879 was sent out in all directions by Park Street, as if it had been the sole gathering to the Lord's name in London. Can any intelligent believer deny that this was in direct violation of the principle we owned? It is in vain to plead the fault of Kennington or any other. The saints in Park Street were bound, if they claimed (as they did) assembly character, to have submitted their proposal to all the gathered saints in London, even if they arrogated to themselves the sudden title to blot out with a stroke of their pen the intermediate weekly meeting, which no sober person could deem justifiable. It was really an act not only independent but revolutionary; unless it be assumed that the assembly even in a small corner of a city can do no wrong, or that the sin of independency is impossible among brethren because they do not call themselves Independents.

Never was a document from an assembly in fellowship so generally blamed and rejected as the Declaration of Park Street. Every one knows there were not a few nor inconsiderable circumstances tending to make anything emanating from that meeting acceptable to all brethren. Even from the least assembly a solemn act would on the face of it be received with the utmost respect. What then must have been the chagrin and amazement of the Park Street meeting, if they ever knew it from their present leaders, that (with scarce an exception beyond the not many daring and determined promoters of division, striving after "the reins" here and there) brethren throughout Great Britain, and Ireland, the Channel Islands, etc., not only rejected the judgment so peremptorily passed by Park Street, but hid away or destroyed the document, some even remonstrating with that meeting more severely than any other had ever experienced in our previous history!

Then followed before the close of August 1879 the notable second document from Park Street, dropping the Declaration, under the pressure of the same strong hand which forced the acceptance of the Kennington judgment on a most reluctant party. Yet it was that abandoned Declaration (in every way an error and an object of censure and shame both in its intrinsic contents, and in sending it out so independently, that it did not even claim to emanate from the assembly in London), which was the occasion of the Guildford Hall agitation, and in effect, though dropped, the policy of the Park Street party.

Turn we now, from the sorrowful and humbling details that intervened, to April 1881, when Park Street made the letter from Guildford Hall the reason for judging the Ramsgate case. Let us forget if we can the strong bias in favour of the Guildford Hall leader and his company, who had fallen into the ditch through zeal for their Declaration, and stuck to it as of God when Park Street itself was compelled to give it up. Let us ignore even the private encouragement given by chiefs of the Park Street party to Guildford Hall in beginning for the third time that phase of the meeting which it was their known resolve to accredit as God's assembly in Ramsgate to the rejection of Abbot's Hill, and so get rid of all who could not accede to such harsh and partial measures. Let us assume that the Park Street meeting

had neither prejudice nor prepossession, was without will or plan, without heat or underhand ways, but all simple and loving, righteous and holy, as suits the Lord's presence. Let us conceive adequate testimony heard and weighed without effort to sway the saints, and the total absence of influence or threat first or last from high quarters.

Supposing then all otherwise to be unimpeachable both before the meetings and during them, there stands before all the solemn fact of independency reappearing once more, and if possible more widely, deeply, and unanswerably. For Park Street took up the Ramsgate question after another local meeting (Hornsey Rise) had gone into the matter and presumed to have the Lord's mind on one half at least (Abbot's Hill), though (strange to say) they did not broach the other half (Guildford Hall) for more than a month after.

What then can be thought of any one not only saying but printing, or allowing others to print, for the guidance of souls, that "it was forced upon them (Park Street), and they were obliged to go into it?" What is the meaning of London brethren circulating the statement that "the same thing might have happened at any other meeting in London or elsewhere, and we should have accepted their decision"? One may account perhaps for such words on the score of ignorance of the facts and the rash supposition of what was just the reverse; but what of those living in town or visiting (as many then did) to become conversant with what was going on, who know that all this is unfounded? They must be aware that our brother wrote under a delusion as to it all; and yet they allow positively false impressions to spread at home and abroad, without any effectual appeal to disabuse the writer's mind. Are Christian men fallen so low as to say not a word because such statements have been or may be useful in gaining the unwary? There are hundreds of his associates who must know that Hornsey Rise in part had judged the matter, as already explained. The statement evidently presents what ought to have been, not at all the fact as it was. If the case had been sound, vain repetition could not have ensued. When a matter is known to be judged as before God, no one thinks of reopening it. Bexley Heath, etc. were notoriously enthusiastic partisans of Guildford Hall. Nobody but enthusiasts heeded their judgment. What a sign of the state of the assembly then! Not even Hornsey Rise could be satisfied, else they would have "accepted their decision," instead of beginning judgment as they did and formally disowning Abbot's Hill. This again did not satisfy; and therefore up rose Park Street which discussed Abbot's Hill on April 21st and 28th, and Guildford Hall on May 3rd, deciding to refuse the one and receive the other.

But the extraordinary fact remains that not only did fruitless independent action mark the meeting in town or country that preceded the intervention of Park Street, but when Park Street did take it up, the same leaven of independency fatally betrayed its presence; for it was expressly given out that Park Street *only acted for itself*, and when its notice was with difficulty entered on the paper, it was said to be only binding on themselves, with information of this given to others! a thing absolutely unprecedented in our doings and sayings, again letting out the sad reality of independency. Now this was a subversion of the united action of God's assembly. There was no proposal to the saints all over London, still less any acceptance by them when it becomes truly the judgment of the assembly in London. It was Park Street only acting for itself, and getting it on the paper solely as notifying that fact to the rest *after* it was done! Unity of action was no longer the rule.

The saints in London who espoused Guildford Hall were thus betaking themselves *pro hac vice* to independent devices. It was the sin of Park Street in 1879 reproducing itself more desperately, yea, irremediably for the present, in 1881. An independent act had been cleverly, but without real conscience work, got rid of in 1879; it reappeared with portentous virus in 1881, and it never ceased its activity till the poison was diffused through all the meetings of that party in London. Think of thankfully accepting such a judgment as of God!

For so imaginatively incorrect is the picture, that not one local meeting throughout London simply accepted the Park Street decision. They each separately judged the matter, "resolving themselves into fragmentary independent meetings;" and each sent a separate decision in a way wholly unexampled to Cheapside for the notice paper.* And so it has been in many assemblies throughout Great Britain and abroad. Independency supplanted unity save with brethren who could not follow Park Street in this open departure, adhering to the ground on which brethren have hitherto stood by grace. And none more zealously impressed on the country meetings the duty of a fresh and conscientious judgment for themselves than emissaries of Park Street or men who had attended the judicial meetings there (in direct antagonism to such as the writer of the Harrogate Letters, who fear to face the facts, paint the case as it should be, and call on the saints to do no more than "thankfully to accept the judgment of our Brethren gathered at Park Street)."

Witness the shameful proceedings at Birmingham.

* North Row, 15th May; Notting Hill, 22nd do; Battersea, do; Hoxton, do.; Stoke Newington, 5th June; Old Kent Road, 19th, do.; Westbourne Park, 10th July; Poplar, 27th do.; Clapton, 14th Aug.; Goswell Road, 28th do. Parts of meetings need not be noticed.

Every brother, however who in this serious trial cleaves to the truth as we have learnt and practised it, knows that according to the word a decision has no claim on the acceptance of the saints till it can be truly and in godly order the judgment of the assembly in a city, and not only in one part of it. He who employs Matt. 18 to justify independent action not only mistakes the Lord's promise, but has already in heart abandoned the divine ground of God's church for a unity which is only invisible, as Protestants generally make it.

The conduct of Park Street and of its followers among the other local meetings in London is the more strange, as the resort to independent action, though so aggravated and general, was simply in order to do this one business. As unity had ever prevailed before, so to unity they immediately returned, after employing independency to effect a purpose which, it is to be supposed, they despaired of accomplishing otherwise. Now I reject this playing fast and loose with a divine principle as unworthy of men of God. Is it not a plain undeniable warning for simple souls, unacquainted either with the details of Ryde and Ramsgate, of Kennington and Park Street, or with the rank and wild growth of party and personal feeling, which was the true source of the mischief and had long been seeking a plausible pretext for division? And I cherish the conviction that the mass of the saints, carried away by fear, favour, influence, companionship, and a crowd of other motives, do in their hearts detest as well as deplore this division; which stands in the most marked contrast with the separation from Bethesda etc., instead of having any analogy, as some have wantonly said.

Ever yours affectionately in Christ,

To R. A. S. W. K.

LETTER 6.

Dear Brother, — When we come to the means of carrying out unity in a place, we must not be surprised that Scripture, though it knows no other principle, leaves open the means which must necessarily apply with some difference of form where the circumstances differ. How little is said as to the mode of receiving souls! Yet is this confessedly a most important question, and sure to test the intelligence and heart of all who love the church of God, especially in the actual state of Christendom, and the sectarian habits of many saints. But notwithstanding endless variety in the circumstances, whether of individuals who present themselves, or of places large and small where meetings co-exist,

there are landmarks of divine truth, which must be jealously maintained, if we would avoid the rocks of sectarianism or the shallows of independency.

In the case before us it is evident that the extremes of independency, clerical and radical, tight and lax, meet in the dislike of a central weekly meeting intended to promote the common action of the saints gathered to Christ's name, as in London. It is not only leading men who are restive if their views are challenged. Quite as impatient, or more so, are those who, conscious of feebleness, ever tend to strive after results by dint of private pressure and the combination which diligently excited prejudice forms. Thence they fear to submit their proposals to the conscientious hearing of other brethren, though these have just the same interests and responsibility as themselves. If we have no confidence save in our immediate circle, the bond is already broken. No wise or faithful soul can trust those who only trust themselves.

Without grace it is impossible that this meeting or any other could flourish. When brethren are in a good state, it will be, as it has been, a great blessing; if they fall into the manoeuvres or violence of party, it cannot but suffer greatly, but proportionately no more than any other meeting. If there be not love actively working and guided by the word of the Lord, the local proposals are sure to be faulty, perhaps worse; if brothers from the other meetings do not feel and act in the like subjection of grace, their suggestions can be of little worth, and may be mischievous. In both local and central meetings there are snares through unwatchfulness and other causes; as each if led of the Lord would contribute what the other might not so readily do to happy results. It is of all moment on the one hand that the exact knowledge of facts and persons which the local meetings should possess be fully appreciated; as on the other hand, if God has cast our lot where there are other meetings immediately concerned, the brethren are not to be envied who would forego the advantage of mature and close scrutiny that the decision be to the Lord's glory and the godly satisfaction of all who are called of Him to share it. He stands by His own order and is faithful to His promise. Were there but "two or three" in a place gathered to His name, they would in the sense of weakness wait the more on Him: but none the less would they count on His guidance and His full sanction. If they were two or three thousand, they would as truly need Him; but they would not slight His will that all saints in the city gathered to His name, whether in one or in twenty places, should carry out that will in unity according to His word. In order to do this not as a dead form but livingly, as all that concerns God's assembly is bound to be, suitable and sufficient means of knowing circumstances beforehand is requisite that they may act together, not in the dark but with holy intelligence.

A central weekly meeting is the only means as yet pointed out which ever commended itself widely to those who labour in the word and doctrine, or more generally to those who seek the edification and order of God's church. Other schemes have been proposed which seldom obtained credit beyond the originator or at most a knot of his friends. They fail, when examined, because more than one would involve sacrifice of divine principle, reducing common action from a reality to show if not worse; or else it would introduce a machinery even slower, more cumbrous, and less satisfactory, than that which, whatever the defects, has well served the interests of Christ and His saints for so many years.

There is no need to say more of the openly independent way, which denies simultaneous action in a place where several meetings co-exist. Brethren in general are most decided against this ecclesiastical error. In ecclesiastical action to ignore other saints in the place, alike gathered to Christ's name, is to sin against the Lord and His word in foundation principles. Think of the apostle's indignation, if the church at Nymphas' had alone acted without securing the joint act of the assembly of Laodiceans! To obey the word of the Lord it was for the assembly in Corinth, and not merely for some of the saints in a

particular quarter of the city, to put away from among themselves the wicked person. Only to notify the facts *afterwards* gives up the practical unity of the saints in a place, and is quite consistent with the most rigid independency, especially if care were taken to make it known without the city as well as within. Nobody objects to notification outside if the reality and scriptural breadth of common action be maintained. But such a making known is mere information and apart from the question.

It has been suggested, however, to send all names proposed for reception or exclusion to the weekly central meeting, without bringing them before the gathered saints at the several meetings in the same city. But this, if a reality, would make the church unchurch itself, and invest the brothers' meeting with the authority which belongs only to the assembly having the Lord in the midst; and what could be more objectionable? It would thus supersede the church to constitute a clergy in the most dominant sense, if the brothers who met there, however wise or gracious, decided who should be received and who should be excluded. If they merely accepted without question the local proposals, where would be the value of such a meeting? For all in this case is really done independently; and there is not even the empty parade of notification to the saints at large, for it is to save this that the central announcement weekly to a few brothers is, supposed to take place. It is hard to conceive a plan more destructive of scriptural truth, whilst theoretically owing the unity of the saints in a city, and the advisability of a central meeting every week. We may dismiss this as (like its predecessor) a giving up of the duty of the gathered saints in a city to act in unity, but (unlike it) erecting a novel ecclesiastical tribunal, which if real would be a nuisance, and if unreal a nullity.

But next those who admit practical unity seek to meet or mitigate some objectors to the central meeting, by placing all the local meetings in direct communication, and acting in one without the intermediate meeting. How would this compromise work? Either as a show of unity without power, if there were no means of intermediate enquiry (and this it is the very design to extinguish); or if conscience were aroused by any self-evident irregularity, a dead-lock would be put on common action till a correspondence with the meeting that proposed the questionable course led to some satisfactory conclusion. The other meetings meanwhile would be kept in painful suspense, till they knew that the proposal was either quashed or corrected, if not carried out in its primitive integrity. In all probability, too, what excited doubts in one meeting might awaken anxieties in others; and so there might arise several distinct lines of objection leading to correspondence, to the great trial of the assembly proposing the action. The general tendency would be to foreclose questions and induce acceptance of dubious measures, to the very possible dishonour of the Lord and lowering of spiritual judgment all round, because of dislike to give trouble or of unwillingness to appear officious.

And why all this tedious, vexatious, and unsatisfactory beating about the bush? It is not only within the means but the only well-proved practice of brethren, for competent men from the various meetings in a place to meet matters face to face. There a fuller explanation makes evident in general the right or the wrong of the proposal. If wrong either in the substance or in the form, how happy for the local meeting to have not an alteration by authority, but a suggestion for revisal! For, if wrongly decided, a matter becomes dangerous, as it is a sin and shame. Defects are always possible. If mere clerk brothers come, or (lower than this) messenger youths to bring a notice and fetch the paper, whose fault is this? Of course one earnestly desires the wisest brothers, one at least or more, from the respective meetings (without hindering any); so as not only to state circumstances when a question arises, but to give grave and holy counsel according to scripture, and thus to promote the fellowship and godly common walk of the saints. Full blessing in any respect can only be where faith works by love; and in this central meeting wisdom and devotedness and humility are deeply called for.

It is quite a mistake that the central meeting necessitates any delay in reception or anything else.

Thus, in places where there is but one meeting, it is usual to bring the name of one seeking fellowship before the brothers, whether at the close of the usual prayer-meeting or at a meeting appropriated to such matters, with adequate testimony of those who have visited the person. If no objection lie, the person is proposed on the following Lord's day and received on the next. The central meeting does not interpose one moment's delay; for it intervenes on the Friday or Saturday evening before the proposal to communicate the case to all the saints gathered to the Lord in the place, if there be ever so many meetings. If delay occur, it is (as the rule) in the particular meeting whence the proposal emanates, rarely if ever from others without the strongest reason which no upright conscience could despise, and therefore carrying general conviction as imperative.

Further, still less does the central meeting even seem to hinder the full and happy liberty of the saints at any particular meeting in according fellowship to such as desire to break bread if thoroughly commended as sound and godly, who may have no intention at the moment of severing their ties with their old associations (one does not speak of those that are heterodox). Such cases do not properly come within the range of the weekly meeting, which simply, as far as this is concerned, takes cognisance of those proposed for reception, and in no way interferes with such as may break bread passingly; a privilege which brethren cannot deny without gainsaying their practice from the first and really changing divine principle. Nothing more clearly indicated beforehand the division now come than the unworthy evasion of duty in this respect, which was growing up for years, chiefly of course among those who compose the new party, but, one grieves to add, not confined to them. It was either narrowness of heart or unbelief, wherever it was found, and, I am thankful to say, to none more odious uniformly than to the late J. N. D., whatever may be the thoughts or ways of those who profess to follow him.

Although familiar with the London Saturday evening meeting for many years, I never saw the least sound reason to question its propriety and value. Mistakes not a few naturally occurred in its course; and just corrections also followed as to composition, character, and working. Even in its least happy condition no local meeting ever repudiated it; and never was it in a more satisfactory and harmonious state than just before the recent party movement which was wholly independent of it, though availing itself of all it could for its own ends, after the vain effort of Park Street against it. For years previously it never forgot its due relation to the assembly, usurping no function beyond its own and acting alike salutarily and without assumption, in aid both of the local meetings and of the saints as a whole, to glorify the Lord in unity, where so many occasions arise to perplex or dislocate, especially in an area of Christians so vast as that of London.

But even then jealousy, which in this division exceeded cruel wrath and outrageous anger, regarded with green eyes the desire to turn the weekly meeting to the best account. Local self-importance was wounded at finding that the brethren from all other parts of London wished (not through suspicion but in love and fellowship) to know every case for reception or exclusion as truly as if arising in their own particular meeting. Thus unity of action became full of interest and vitality. Such as loved not unity but independency resented anything but a bare acceptance of names or notices. Hence they sought to ridicule any approach to a real acquaintance with each common matter, as if it were "a Methodist class for relating experience;" and they vented their dislike more undisguisedly and fatally on the willing ears of an honoured man abroad, that "certain people were having it all their own way at London bridge." The sound or suspicion of such a thing was intolerable; and confirmatory gossip soon prepared the way for the final effort. But the Saturday evening meeting resisted it, and would have done so longer, but itself got swamped by reinforcements, not only from the firebrands of the town rarely seen there before, but from the heated partisans of the country, in support of an

independent and divisive course, due much more after all to the local meetings than to the central meeting even at its worst.

No argument then seems weaker, or less worthy of believers, than laying such a catastrophe at the door of the Saturday evening meeting. Given all manner of destructive forces, with a match for the train, and the explosion is sure. The fact is that the local meetings were far more defenceless and sent the inflammable material into the central one, and thus made the rupture inevitable. The Saturday evening meeting stayed the mischief for a long while, instead of precipitating it. And if there should arise anywhere such spirits at work with a similar end, and animated with a like will, division must ensue, with or without a central weekly meeting. An extraordinary crisis is no safe criterion: how did the meeting work habitually? I am satisfied that, for the ordinary walk of the saints with several meetings in a city, a central meeting, if duly supported from all parts, is of exceeding value for the godly solution of difficulties, with the least loss of time and the most effectual check on personal prejudice or local bias. If any can suggest a real correction on our past method truly and lovingly carried out, it will be welcome to none so much as those who feel that God guided in that meeting, and that the lack of it leaves a blank of great and real danger. Those who claim to go forward on the same divine ground as before can least afford to allow of change, natural as it is in a sect; and those who love and reverence the elder brethren who anticipated them in the path of Christ should beware of seeming even to their adversaries like a young and adventurous group of mariners at this time of day starting in quest of discoveries. By the grace of God I am one of those who dare not either retrograde or innovate, but would persevere, till Christ come, on the lines which I believe grace gave us to occupy for so many years, to the comfort and edification, the blessing and order, of the saints. — Ever yours affectionately in Christ,

To R. A. S. W. K.

LETTER 7.

Dear Brother, — Having now stated the principle (1), met the objections professedly based on Scripture (2), disposed of the theory of more local unity (3), shown that the ruin-state in no way affects our duty (4), applied it to recent proceedings in proof of its vital importance (5), and examined every way one has heard suggested to carry out the principle, different from that which we have uniformly followed since the co-existence of several meetings in one place (6), I must now conclude with a few words of appeal to the conscience of brethren who object without giving a single ground of objection, solid or not. This is easy; is it wise, comely, or gracious?

Singular to say, these objectors are found among the nominal supporters of the Park Street test, which has laid the new ground of fellowship (however much some may seek to disguise or even deny it) for that confederacy. They cannot wholly agree with a central meeting: to their mind it savours of -ism. The principle of unity is divine; its consequent maintenance by a central meeting of brethren is another thing, and goes beyond Scripture. Such are their thoughts, and they are no more than thoughts. For what can be less true or even plausible than that a central meeting savours of -ism? In fact, all tradition in "the camp" stands opposed; and no christians wish for it, save those who believe in "one body and one Spirit." It is well to own that unity is a divine principle; it is better still to carry it out faithfully; and how is unity to be made good in practice, where there are several meetings in a place, without a central means to help it? Why do our objecting brethren preserve so obstinate a silence on this head? If they had the least light, surely love would lead them to impart it. With Acts 21: 18 before me, I dare not say that a central meeting goes beyond Scripture. It looks like this at James's.

But the fact, which strikes a simple mind forcibly, they cannot deny: they are themselves at this moment sanctioning a central meeting of their own — the very one whose ways have brought discredit on the institution! Now if their company had accepted the Park Street Declaration, Cheapside clause and all, if they were really rejecting a central meeting in London, Bristol, Edinburgh, or any other place where they had always carried it out before, we might give credit for present consistency, though lamenting their error, and believing it to be an unquestionable symptom of unsuspected independency, which with logical minds must work to "loose brethernism," or the religious world. No upright person can in peace continue, saying one thing and doing another. What we practise has a graver character than what we merely profess in words and practically deny. It is an evident and habitual compromise, which tends to sap ecclesiastical honesty, as dishonourable to the Lord as degrading to ourselves and our brethren, from whom we really differ while publicly appearing to agree on so important a matter. For it is surely all over with us and the Lord's glory if we fail, not merely in spiritual apprehension and unworldly devotedness to Him and His own, but even in sincerity and truth, with which unleavened bread alone it is our bounden duty to keep the feast.

Yet I understand that abroad this unbelief prevails still more widely than at home, and that not a few brethren in France, Switzerland, Germany, etc., would thus evade the force of what has been in these pages and elsewhere pressed on their conscience. For they avow that *they* do not believe in the united action of the gathered saints in a city, and they consequently seek on this plea to justify the Park Street independent decision as a true assembly judgment!

It is hard to conceive that any accepted as guides, rulers or "chief men among the brethren" could be either so far behind in the truth, or so extraordinarily dull, as not to feel the self-condemnatory falseness of such a position. I do not speak of their presumption in thus openly contradicting the well-known convictions of those they always seemed to venerate when in the full and free and happy exercise of their spiritual judgment through a long life. Of whom is the judgment, if grounds be withheld, most entitled to respect? Of such as G. V. W., etc., who heartily and as before God stood by this meeting? or of those who in a crisis take up a dislike to it, and yet go on with it all the same? For its action is of course felt by and weighs with their adherents throughout the world.

But they too should learn, if they do not know, that the new confederacy which they espouse never now (any more than before the recent proceedings, even in the most ordinary question that concerns the saints) thinks of arrogating to Park Street, or to any other local meeting in London, the right of an assembly decision apart from all the other saints gathered to Christ's name in this place. They still maintain as before (and, as I believe, so far, rightly) the obligation that all the gathered saints throughout the metropolis should *act together*, in order to judge with the authority of the Lord and His word: a unity impossible without the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven; and only possible now for such saints as, gathered to Christ's name, believe in His presence and look for His free action by the word in the assembly. Matt 18: 20 does not treat of this unity, nor consequently in the least degree give it up; but it provides the great resource of grace for a day of ruin, certainly not an excuse for disorder nor for setting aside other scriptures equally needful in their season.

Either then, as I believe, the recent proceedings were a plain and flagrant departure from the divine principle of unity to bring about the wished-for division; or, as these brethren believe, the common action in unity by means of the central meeting (which always ruled before the Park Street innovation, and which has ruled since as it does now) is *a mere tradition of man*; and therefore not only devoid of claim as of God on any conscience, but to be eschewed as a sin against the word and Spirit of God. Why then, as honest men, persevere in what they do not believe? Yet, by this arrangement, merely human in *their eyes*, all in London etc. is regulated, which concerns the weightiest interests of

Christ's name, among those whom they regard as guided by the Holy Ghost on the ground of the one body of Christ! Where is their faith or fidelity?

From either point of view their ground is indefensible; but of the two the lowest morally is the latter. For what can be less worthy of respect than the idea that brethren in London were never ecclesiastically right save during the two short fits of independency we have noticed already? First, in 1879, those in Park Street issued the strange circular called the Declaration soon afterwards dropped on the plea that Kennington had acted. Secondly, and still worse in 1881, they took up the Ramsgate case to decide for themselves apart from all others in London, who as the general rule followed in due course, each meeting separately concluding on this matter! Thus it went forth, to be accepted on the responsibility of Park Street, *or* to be independently judged, as the local authorities might prefer, all over the world!

The *general* character reported of the Park Street meetings, because many attended there from the rest of London as well as from the country, is utterly if not intentionally misleading, and chiefly due to female correspondence or to itinerant advocates of the party. They were expressly for Park Street *alone*, to decide for *themselves*, whoever might be present. Park Street accordingly cannot claim the force or name of an assembly judgment, unless brethren give up unity and sink into congregationalism. The whole affair was a disastrous blunder, fraught with bitter and humbling results; which none but "men speaking perverse things" would wish to be permanent, in order to draw away the disciples after them.

For my part I believe that brethren in London as elsewhere were guided by God during the past in maintaining unity as they have ever done, not as a lifeless theory but as a living practice, and by means of a central meeting where several co-existing meetings recognised it. And were this abandoned deliberately for independent meetings in the same place, I should feel as deliberately bound to abandon those who must be regarded by me as distinctly unfaithful to their trust, and no longer in heart gathered to Christ's name in unity; a mere aggregate of christian societies, and no more saints assembled on the ground of God's church in the place. To this by grace I adhere, assured that this alone is according to the word of God, and that the Holy Spirit is here to give it efficacy for Christ's glory in a true sphere, however circumscribed through the unbelief of Christendom and, not least of all, our own fault. But sense of failure is only the more urgent a call for all who fear God to cleave to Christ and the truth in dependence on His grace.

Ever yours affectionately in Him,

To R. A. S. W. K.

W. Walters. Printer & Publisher, 26, Islington Row, Birmingham.