

The Church, and the Churches

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A tract has been sent me of a departed Christian (A. J. Holiday), which it is far from my wish to criticise. As I told his friends who desired a judgment, though I should greatly prefer their judging his doctrine by God's word, I do not refuse to help as far as I am enabled.

Two points in particular seem to be the great aim: the necessity for the Christian, the member of Christ's body, to join himself to *a* company of disciples, a local assembly or church; and the oversight of elders as the necessary means of the due keeping of the flock.

No sober Christian doubts that in no long time after Pentecost there were local assemblies, not only in Judea and Galilee and Samaria, but among the Gentiles east and west, north and south. And the members of Christ from one local assembly were received in any other, only their identification needing letters commendatory. But all was grounded on their accredited relation to Christ as of His body. This was the foundation on which they originally had their place. Their brethren received them, because there was adequate testimony to their consciences and hearts that the Lord had been adding them together (ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτὸ) (Acts 2: 47). He was building up His church; and these were living stones, members of the one body, even if the phrase "the church" only first occurs in Acts 5: 11. None did then pretend to any other membership. Others too bowed to Him only, even when all the twelve were there to rule with apostolic authority.

There are two divinely appointed symbols, which mark, one the individual Christian, the other the fellowship of the body the Church as in due time was clearly explained in 1 Cor. 10.

Both necessarily take place locally; but both are based on Christ the Lord. The baptism is not to the local representative but to Christ the Lord; and if we seek the details of the formula, "unto the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." Just so with the church symbol; it is the communion of the body of Christ, not of any local body, though observed locally; "because we, the many, are one loaf, one body; for we, the whole of us, partake of the one loaf." There is no word or thought here or in any other scriptures to countenance a local source. The word of God speaks of no membership save of Christ's own body; just as not a word admits of any Headship of the church but His exclusively. The same act of divine grace which makes us members of Christ makes us also members one of another. Any other membership is human tradition, which, as the Lord taught and we may readily verify, never fails to make void the word, though men may think it a good, wise, and needed supplement.

Membership of *a* church is the vast error of Christendom. Rome, I presume, was mother of it, as of so much else incompatible with the truth of the church as God has revealed, though its Greek rival was no less keen for the same special membership: a thing totally unknown to the apostolic day when all the Christians on earth enjoyed but one communion. Hence when the apostle would correct local evils in one place, he wrote "to the church of God that is in Corinth, sanctified [ones] in Christ Jesus, saints called [or, by call], with all that in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both theirs and ours:" a remarkable and emphatic guard against the principle of ecclesiastical independency. With this agree his words against schisms in 1 Cor. 1; "everywhere in every assembly," 1 Cor. 4; his call to judge those "within" (not *a* but *the* church), as the "without" was everywhere also; his words "thus I ordain in all the assemblies" in 1 Cor. 7. Compare also 1 Cor. 14: 33-37.

The Reformation, though a blessed work for delivering from Rome's servitude, and giving back the Bible in our mother-tongue frankly, in no due way attested the church, but fell back on the State to resist the Papacy, and Babylon the corruption of the church, and the denial of its Head. As this was clearly unscriptural, the system of accredited sects followed to our day, the ignoring and negation of the one body on earth united to its heavenly Head by the Spirit's baptism (1 Cor. 12: 13)

So also the apostle teaches in the same chapter that there are distinctions of operations, but the same God that operates all things in all; that to each the manifestation of the Spirit is given for profit, and that whatever the different kinds, the one and the same Spirit operates all these, dividing to each in particular as He pleases. "For even as the body is one and hath many members, but all the members of the body, being many, are one body, so also is the Christ. For also in the power of [or by] one Spirit we all were baptised into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether bond or free, and were all given to drink of one Spirit." People talk of Christ's mystical body where the scripture account does not apply to present practice. But it is plain as words can make it, that here is given the principle and way of the Spirit's action in the body on earth, not for heaven or a future time. Only unbelief can argue that it is obsolete, and not obligatory so far as God deigns to give power in the present scattered state of the saints so lacking in faith, undevoted, and worldly-minded. Further, we are told that as the case is, "God set the members each one of them in the body even as it pleased Him," surely not in a mere local body but rather in the body as a whole. Ver. 27 in no way weakens this truth, but applies it to the Corinthian saints as its local representative, to enforce their responsibility according to privilege, the very reverse of claiming independency. Again, he says, "God set certain in the church, firstly apostles, secondly prophets, thirdly teachers, then powers" [or miracles], etc., putting lower down what carnal levity at Corinth raised to the highest. But without doubt all this energy of the Spirit was in the church now and here; and there remains in divine faithfulness all that is for His glory and our need in the day when the church was stripped of her ornaments.

Eph. 4 gives us the selfsame principle, not as a contrast of the one Spirit with the many instruments of Satan's evil work, but in view of Christ's glory on high and love to His body the church on earth. There too apostles and prophets share the first and the second rank; but we have also the evangelists to gather to Christ out of the world, and the pastors (or, shepherds) and teachers to tend and instruct the saints for their perfecting, unto ministerial work, unto edifying of His body. This was on earth, though for heaven where such working never was nor will be, but in His body here; and it was then the body visible, as the saints were responsible to continue. If it too soon became invisible, it was the church's sin in departure from its place as Christ's one body, its privileges, worship, walk, and ways in general, through unfaithfulness to God.

Is, or is not, the church responsible by grace to maintain this position, not merely "endeavouring" but giving diligence to keep the unity of the Spirit? Internal divisions (σχίσματα) practically opposed and misrepresented that unity; "sects" (αἱρέσεις) or external splits of self-will were its open denial in principle. If we believe in the one body of Christ as the spiritual fact on the earth, we are bound to judge its anomalous state since the apostles departed, as an ever-increasing offence against grace and truth, judging as the Head does by the word, and humbling ourselves. So holy Daniel did for the similar departure of Israel, instead of pleading God's providence and excusing the change. If we are taught by God of the church's unity on earth, bound up with Christ's love and honour, the present ruin is felt as deep shame and sorrow; and all the more, because of the Holy Spirit sent forth, not only to form but to sustain this divine unity in the saints, as He surely would, if they had not allowed the flesh and the world to darken and turn aside and set up other unities incompatible with that of the Spirit, which can only be in faith, love, and holiness according to God's word.

Now one of the first, and widest, subtlest and most permanent contributing causes is the assertion of a local church membership, or of the largest possible federation of churches, in opposition to the only membership known to scripture, the membership of Christ by the gift and sealing of the Holy Spirit. For it is not the new birth or faith in Christ (however essential preliminarily) which constitutes one a member of His body, but the gift of the Spirit. Compare Acts 1: 4, 5; Acts 2: 38; Acts 11: 16, 17; 1 Cor. 12: 13. At Pentecost it began; and so according to scripture the Spirit abides, as for other ends, to effectuate the one body of Christ now on earth, not a mere mystical union on high, any more than membership of *a* church on earth. If the unity had been mystical only, the scattered children of God needed not to be gathered together into one. It was to be here and now since Pentecost, not for heaven only where was no difficulty or danger, "a unity" as the tract says "which none can ever break." Here it was to be as a testimony "that the world might *believe*" (John 17: 21), excluding Augustine's invention of an invisible church, though it will only be "perfected into one" in the day of displayed glory "that the world may *know*" (vers. 22, 23).

Of this unity, whether of God's family as with John, or of Christ's body as with Paul, the Christian forms part. The Lord adds each to the church; and the church is bound to His act when ascertained suitably; but there was no thought of the believer being brought into its assembly "by his own act and the act of the assembly also." It was an act of God's supreme grace, above man's acts, though faith owned it in all concerned. A supplemental or sectional member is not only unscriptural but anti-scriptural, the parent error of no end of errors, and leading ultimately to congregationalism or independent churches, the antitheses of God's church here as Christ's one body.

On the other hand, the remedy of professing to be *the* church of God now, in the departed and broken state of Christendom is in principle as bad as the disease, a mere and false pretension. For in fact the members are here, there, and anywhere. Yea even if all the Christians in a given place were to re-assemble, they would belie the truth in claiming to be "the" church of God, while there is scattering over all the earth. But they are bound to give up every false unity, yet through mercy free to meet on the one divine principle, gathered to Christ's name its ever true centre, and having Him in their midst, were they but two or three, as the Lord anticipated in Matt. 18: 20, and the Holy Spirit enjoins in 2 Tim. 2: 19-22. It is the resource for those faithful to the Lord in the difficult times of last days.

Let us see the effect of this membership of *a* church, not in the Babel of sects great and small, but upon one so earnest and confident of his fidelity to scripture as Mr. H., shared by his associates now as from their beginning. "Joining oneself to a company of disciples called a church" is unknown to God's word, and purely human. He connects responsibility with this false membership, because man has to do with it, instead of the far deeper responsibility of our relationship to God and His Son, all the more as it was sovereign grace in its highest form. Now it is vain to talk about grace, if we offend against immutable morality. But even if fairly right here, scripture insists on what is due from us according to the grace given and our new relationship both as Christians and in the church of God as a whole. Nothing is more ruinous than to overlook or enfeeble our responsibility in this large and lofty respect, because the privileges are so transcendent.

Take his treatment of Matt. 18 (pp. 10-12). The action is in a local assembly, but it, if done in obedience, is not a binding or loosing there only: heaven itself sanctions this issue. Could any thought or word lift it more above mere locality? Yet the utmost violence is offered to dislocate the context in ver. 19 into a parenthesis, instead of the plain and sure fact that the Lord welds together, not only discipline but prayer, under the comprehensive assurance of His presence in the midst of but "two or three" *if* gathered together unto His name. The prayer of the agreeing has this invaluable privilege as truly as the rest, but even this is frittered away into individuality. When he says that "two of you" is the

same word (or, construction) as in 7: 9, and can only be fully expressed by "from among," he is directly opposed to the truth; for this depends on ἐκ in the earlier chapter, which is wholly wanting in the later text. Either he did not consult the Greek Testament or he was quite ignorant of the language. Certainly the statement is inexcusably wrong.

In 1 Cor. 12: 27 "body of Christ" means Christ's body representatively, but not separately from the church, just answering to the opening words of chap 1 and demolishing the error of an independent assembly (p. 13).

The true rendering in Acts 20: 28 is also important, not "over which" but "wherein" or "in which," a quite different sense.

A perversion of the true text in Acts 9: 31 (p. 32) is due to the impossibility of squaring a local church membership with scripture, "the church throughout all Judea, and Galilee, and Samaria." This he makes out to be "the Church of Jerusalem!" preserving its local character even when scattered far away. But it is also quite an error that joining himself to the disciples in Jerusalem was Saul's wish to "join a church." They did not yet know that he was "a disciple." It was simply that Barnabas removed a false impression.

The church was God's organisation and prevailed everywhere in apostolic days. Churches afterwards organised in opposition to Him and to each other. Those who cleave to God's way eschew man's, instead of "forming a federation," as with some who do not believe in the one body here below, any departure from which is independency.

It is true however that the anomalous state of Christ's members leads too often to anomalies of expression. The welcome, as things are, of a godly believer to partake of the Lord's Supper (the special sign of church fellowship) involves the discipline proper to God's house, and should not be extended to any who opposed the teaching or fellowship of the apostles, simple as it was at Pentecost, or the prayers. The rules afterwards added, when faith was no longer living in the Holy Spirit's presence and free action in the assembly, and in ministry, were as unknown as joining a church. Further, it is quite true that "putting out" in scripture means removing the wicked person not only from the Lord's Table or Supper but "from among yourselves," and this because they were Christ's representatively, and valid as done in His name, wherever the church existed.

The last of these wrestings of scripture at which we look, flowing from the error of reception into a church, is the misuse of 1 Tim. 3: 14, 15 (pp. 46, 47). It seems incredible that any simple-hearted Christian could construe such words of the apostle into the narrow circle of a local assembly. The absence of the article on which he relies in no way warrants such an inference, but is required being a predicate, though applied to the church wherever it may be. No one questions that every true assembly represents it locally. But here the church is viewed in its unity as a whole, and the exhortation applies to Ephesus no more than to any other place, subject to and witnessing the revelation of God. Narrowing such words to a local assembly is the natural result of being carried away by a human idea which has no countenance in scripture, and is occupied with its own little sphere, instead of reading our obligations in all the light and height and breadth of God's mind.

But we must also point out the effect of the same system as to Elders or overseers. Now the apostles had a function of authority specially attached to their position as we can see in both the Acts and the Epistles. They could locally appoint, not only deacons for outward service, but elders in a particular church or city. See Acts 6: 3, Acts 14: 23. They were competent to act indirectly by a delegate, where they could not themselves go, as we see in Titus 1: 5. Never was this left to the church; nor could any one undertake the task save as definitely prescribed by an apostle. Hence the marked

difference between "the gifts" for exercise in the body of Christ, wherever it might be, and those local charges, which required to be established by an apostle or his delegates for the occasion. As neither did or could go everywhere, scripture provides an invaluable resource for days in which we have neither apostle nor his definitely commissioned delegate; Rom. 12: 8, 9; 1 Cor. 16: 15, 16; 1 Thess. 5: 12, 13; Heb. 13: 17. These were not said to be elders; but they were important men who had qualities fitting for eldership; and they were to be obeyed, and highly esteemed for their work's sake. This fully applies when there exists not the legitimate authority to nominate officially, as soon and now.

But unbelief is perverse, and calls for elders when their full title fails, while it dishonours gifts which the grace of the Lord does not fail to give. All true ministry is the exercise of gift. But as the truth of the church's unity on earth is no less lost and denied, we cannot wonder that so it is as to both gifts and elders. Mr. H. assumes eldership like the rest of Christendom where all is confusion, with the utmost pretension of being rich and having need of nothing, where it is wrecked as a living witness even of grace and truth, as well as of unity and order, as He set it up. Nor could any Christian show his lack of discernment more than this tract exposes in p. 7, that while most believers of intelligence know what the church, Christ's body, means, there seems to be the utmost confusion in regard to "the churches"! The reason why Christians are wrong as to the churches is because they and Mr. H. are utterly wrong as to the church, and make it compatible with independent churches. No doubt he is right enough in pointing out the spuriousness of the denominational language, as indicating ignorance of both the church and the churches; but he never suspects his own errors. None that holds the church doubts of local churches. It is a necessity for men living, but only a circumstantial necessity. But the essential truth lies in "the" church. One is welcomed locally as being of God's church. Its unity was manifested wherever saints were gathered to Christ's name. It was a true church as truly representing the Church. "But now God set the members each one in the body." No such thing is said of a local church.

No possible terms could more subvert the truth of the church than those Mr. H. employs in p. 7 "They had joined themselves to a company of disciples, called a church, and that church had received them to form part of itself. They had not made themselves a part of the whole church of God. God had done that when He saved them. Neither had the whole church of God received them; but the church that they had joined themselves to had received them, and all the privileges and responsibilities of that God-ordained fellowship became theirs."

This is at bottom the general error of Christendom, not only of the larger corporations of Romanists and Greeks, but of Presbyterians, Congregationalists (Independents and Baptists), and Methodists. One joins a company called a church, to form part of itself. But this is wholly unknown to scripture, which knows nothing of a local church membership, but solely of the church, Christ's body. By receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit, sealing us as believers in the gospel of salvation, we become members of Christ and one of another, members of the one body. Romanism had darkened all the truth; and the Reformation was no recovery of the church, but of the Bible to learn how to be justified, and to escape the yoke of a human priesthood and perverted ordinances. Afterwards, not only bad men broke more freely into delusions, but good men into ever increasing denominations of their own members, their own doctrines, alas! too, of their own politics.

What we have learnt from God is that we ought to feel deeply the church's ruin as God's witness, shattered as it is, and in every way in departure from God's mind, glorying in man instead of being in the dust as to ourselves. The truth of the church taught of God would have kept us from the least pretension to set the church up again, or to imitate what the apostles alone did. But if we have sought to humble ourselves as having taken part ignorantly in this scene of ruin and owning our responsibility

before God for the dishonour of His name, we have found that His word provides for this very state of disorder, as for instance in 2 Tim. 2, 3, 4. When leaven is allowed and covered up, when evil, doctrinal or practical, is sanctioned under the Lord's name, and scripture is perverted to excuse error, what is to be done?

God did not leave it to the saint's heart and conscience only, He revealed His own remedy. If after all godly effort to purge it is vain, I must at all cost purge myself out. Thus He arms the soul which might have trembled under fear of schism, or charge of pride, or of despising the excellent. But the Lord is nearer and far more than all, and the word is, "Let every one that nameth the Lord's name depart from iniquity." Now if assured that I am bound up as I am with irremediable iniquity, am I not to obey? It is all the worse if it be in the house of God: why it should be thus bound, and why saints are not troubled by it, one can leave to the Lord who knows them that are His; but I cannot shirk my own obligation in His name to depart from iniquity.

But this is far from all. He instructs us that "in a great house are not only gold and silver vessels, but also wooden and earthen, and some to honour and some to dishonour." To a state so contrasted with the primitive church things were coming! What then is one called to do? "If therefore one purge himself from these ("the vessels to dishonour"), he shall be a vessel to honour, sanctified, meet for the Master's use, prepared for every good work." What an encouragement to cherish a good conscience in the face of fears and frowns!

Am I to dread being left isolated and shut out from the blessed privileges of Christ's body? I am told to flee, like the one addressed, youthful lusts (for Timothy even was comparatively young), and to pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace "with those that call on the Lord out of a pure heart." We are entitled to expect fellowship according to God, if we have faith for His glory.