

The Church of God

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A lecture on Acts 2: 41, 42.

As I shall have occasion to refer to not a few Scriptures, I merely take these verses as a prefatory notice of the general character and nature of the church of God. But even before these words could be used, another fact still more fundamental has to be observed, on which a few words seem desirable. "There is one body and one Spirit." These two truths are inseparably bound together. The one body (and the church is the body of Christ) depends on the presence of the Holy Ghost. Hence the great force of that expression, "*One Spirit*." It is the one Spirit who forms the one body.

It is by no means true that the Holy Ghost always acts thus; for in the Revelation (Rev. 1) we read of the seven Spirits of God. It is, of course, no question of founding the church then and there. On the contrary, the church was about to disappear from the world. Its decay had set in, and Christ appears as man, walking in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks, not forming now but judging the seven churches. The first assembly is threatened with having its candlestick removed, the last with being spued out of His mouth, when a new state of things follows, where we have no more notice of the church on earth. It is apparent from Scripture that the church is not intended to go on to the end of the world (though it be a common idea that it will; and that through it the whole world is to be converted). Nor is this an unnatural idea, for those who love the church, desire, of course, to see it spread and flourish. But it is well and safe, and due to God, to be guided in our thoughts by Scripture, giving up our own theories, and letting God's word alone govern us. The apostasy and the "man of sin" (2 Thess. 2: 3-12) are what the apostle speaks of before the day of the Lord; and the church, so far from converting all the world even to profess Christ, is not then to be on the earth at all. In that day is the great harvest of blessing.

Scripture shews us then, that first the church is caught up to heaven; then the Jews are taken up again in divine mercy, though the apostates are cut off, and the nations get blessing through Israel; when, after a series of judgments, follows the millennium, and after the millennium the eternal state — the great white throne coming in between. During the period when judgments precede Christ's appearing (Rev. 6-19), the church is not seen on the earth, but in heaven, already glorified. Saints, there are to be, here below, both Jews and Gentiles, but distinct from each other and no longer united in one body. This will not be the church of God. For therein is neither Jew nor Gentile, but Christ is all and in all. All such distinctions disappear in Christ's body.

Indeed the object of God in the church may briefly be said to be that there should be a body on earth to reflect the glory of Christ in heaven. And who is sufficient to effect this save the Holy Ghost? Therefore is He sent down from heaven before and in order to what is described in the verses I have read in Acts 2. And the Lord Jesus is express that the sending of the Spirit could not be till He departed after dying on the cross for our sins as well as to the glory of God. The action of the Spirit of God is not human force, but compelling by the word: suasion, power in conscience and heart, but also new creation, as one must add. Yet it is never power coming in that peremptory way which obliges a man to utter this or that. It may be the case with an evil spirit, never with the Holy Spirit, who does not take him, in whom He acts, out of his *responsibility* to God. We ought to know how true and important this is; for now we are members of His church, and dependent on grace to carry out according to His word. Not only at the start, but all the way through, is this obligatory on the Christian, with constant self-

judgment lest we grieve the Holy Spirit of God.

Man's 'High Church,' of which we hear so much, is low indeed, compared with the church according to the scripture. It is to God's church, as the most vulgar gilt compared with gold tried by fire.

The church, then, is founded on the accomplishment of redemption; on the Saviour's taking His place as Head in heaven; and on the descent of the Holy Ghost, to act in this special relation as the One Spirit to the one body; which action will terminate with the church's disappearance from the earth to meet the Lord in the air. Not that there will be no action of the Spirit of God after that; for as the Holy Spirit had always wrought with regard to man on the earth, so this will never cease so long as man is here below. But now it is the Holy Ghost giving one uniform character to the most diversified ingredients ever called into unity. "By one Spirit are we all baptised into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit" (1 Cor. 12: 13). Nothing like this could have been true of old; nor will it be so in the millennium. In Israel there were the displays of the varied perfections of God; but with that particular nation there was no blending of Gentiles, no forming of one body, but the strictest separation in obedience to God's law.

Doubtless there were no nations as such before the flood; if we go farther back, there was a fallen race, and certain individuals who loved the Lord looked for the Seed of the woman to bruise the serpent, and waited for His coming, as Enoch even prophesied of it. After the flood, God chose a particular man to be the depository and root of promise. To Abraham were the promises made, and to his seed. Look at the seed either in a natural or in a spiritual sense, and there is nothing in this which reveals or even involves the truth of the one body. I know some who cite for this, Psalm 139, "In thy book all my members were written, which in continuance were fashioned when as yet there was none of them"; and Isaiah 26, "Thy dead men shall live, together with my dead body shall they arise," as bringing it in; but to my mind there is not a notion of it in either passage. God takes pleasure in man's body even now, as He also means it to be very different from what it is. But the church was never a dead body at all, and never will be. The application of the phrase "dead body," to the church, is merely a proof of man's perverse ignorance. It is really ruined Israel that is meant, as the context proves. Of all bodies the church is most of all the one living body as baptised by the one Spirit.

But the solemn fact which the New Testament opens before it, is, without disguise — the total failure of all — be he Jew or Gentile; of which the simple and full proof is the rejection of the Son of God. Everything was buried in His grave; all the hopes of man were laid there for the time; and, therefore, the gospel that went out after the cross takes the ground that man is wholly lost. Doubtless, people do not like this, and those who do not, need it most; for though they may be always striving, they can never find rest or peace; and, therefore, it is given up in popular theology that every believer is entitled to enjoy certainty of salvation or abiding peace. No doubt there is a testimony which God in His grace keeps up; but this is independent of Christendom, and opposed by most. The testimony may be kept up here or there, even irregularly by a woman; and there could not be a greater condemnation of Christendom's vaunted order than that God's power and blessing should accompany such irregular preaching. Still more that there should be a greater amount of truth in this eccentric work than is found in the accredited teachers and guides. And whence was that truth got? From what it most of all feared, as well as disliked. I do not speak of conversion only, but of Christ better known; for if there be not a deeper knowledge of Christ, it is vain to speak about the church.

Now, the truth shows us Christ totally rejected by man, and further, forsaken of God on the cross; but on that very cross, where man, and Israel, and Satan did their worst, there even God Himself, in

judging sin, seemed to do worst of all to Christ, if it were not a ground for atonement. But a work was done which laid the basis for God to dwell with men, making us His house and temple, as the Scriptures affirm. For this purpose Christ had come, to prove to the uttermost what man was in his sin, and what God is in His grace, delivering the believer according to His own perfection. For there is this ground-work for the gospel: the Son of God coming down in love to suffer for sin under God's judgment; and the Son of man glorified at the right hand of God, as having obtained the victory in righteousness. How blessed is the resulting message which God is now sending out!

There is indeed, much more in the gospel than forgiveness proclaimed. The nature is judged, the old man annulled; the believer has the comfort of counting himself dead to sin, but also the responsibility of walking accordingly. But how grievous to see that the evangelical mind has never recognised death to sin, and therefore has never known how to use the apostle's answer when branded by his antagonists with a tolerance of sin! Doubtless, this is false; but evangelical testimony is imperfect, falling immensely short of the gospel. They do not understand the privilege of the Christian that he has died with Christ to sin. Of course, those that hold it are called Antinomian! But if you affirm that Christ died for your sins, and do not hold yourself dead to sin, you must be at a loss to stand firm and clear; because, taking the ground of law as the rule of life, too often you are sinning, then making excuses for it, and thereon recurring to Christ for forgiveness. Is not this too much like practical Antinomianism? Is it not the teaching of Paul?

The truth is, that besides being washed from his sins at the start, the believer is dead with Christ to sin that he should not allow evil in any of his ways. Nor is there real power against sin practically, until we take our stand on the ground that we are thus dead, and alive in Christ to God. It is all-important, not to Christians only, but to Christ's glory and His work. And not merely is the Christian brought into this place of being dead to sin and alive in Christ Jesus, but the Holy Ghost can and does dwell in those who are washed from their sins in Christ's blood; and, further, He imprints unity on all who are thus resting on Christ and His work.

Do any, to weaken all this, point to Abraham and the Old Testament saints as being in the same position? Such men do not know what it is to be Christians; I do not say they *are* not: but they do not know their own place and privileges. It is like a member of the royal family through some strange incongruity ignorant of his own lineage, and therefore in no way taking the relationship or acting accordingly. Such is the state of believers who deny the privileges of the Christian and of the church of God.

The Holy Ghost came down in a marked manner at Pentecost. "A rushing mighty wind" shews the permeating force of the Spirit of God. There was not one tongue merely, but *cloven tongues*. (Acts 2: 2, 3) The message is going out to Jew and Gentile, though there be but one Spirit. As long as our Lord was here below, no such thing was possible. There was no unity, any more than action toward the Gentiles. There were those that followed Him, but no binding in one. The Lord prepared them for what was to follow. "The Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things," etc. (John 14: 26) Union is by the Spirit given or sent, not merely by the faith He works in the soul.

As the effect of the Comforter's coming, He makes the church to be the dwelling place of God. He not merely does a divine work in and by chosen witnesses, but makes a divine institution of the assembly — they become the habitation of God through the Spirit. This looks at the church in its earthly position; the body of Christ is its heavenly relation. Hence there is the difference that the habitation of God *may* be entered by those not born of God, still less members of Christ's body. We

know such did enter, in early days. But, viewed in its full privileges, the church of God is not only a question of life, but of the Holy Ghost uniting to Christ, and this as a body. "He that is joined to the Lord is one Spirit." By one Spirit we are baptised into one body. Therefore the idea that the unity of the church hinges only on Christ's becoming a Man is a total fallacy. Incarnation may be and is a step toward it, but is not our union with Christ; it is the union of humanity with Deity, which is not our union at all. When redemption was accomplished, there was a righteous basis for union. Had there been union before redemption, it would have been a slighting of sin. The scriptural place of the church of God maintains the moral claims and character of God with greater fulness than any other. Where the truth is not seen, the law may be talked of, but real holiness in separation from the world is sacrificed or unknown.

After redemption, then, we could be, and are, united to Christ. God could not unite lost man in his sins with His own Son. You will say, Is it not lost man who is united to Christ? Yes: but in the cross of Christ the old man is annulled for the believer; nor is man ever united to Christ till he believes.

Union is not by election, more than by faith, but by the Holy Ghost, "In whom, after ye believed, ye were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise." All sin is judged to the believer, and then the Holy Ghost takes up His abode in him. It is faith founded, not on promise, but on the mighty work of the Lord effected on the cross, and it is only after he believes, that union takes place; for the Holy Ghost is given to him because he is a son, on the ground of his being a believer, and not to make him one, which is a previous work. It is, therefore, when by redemption he is out of his sins, when sin in the flesh is judged according to the efficacy of the work of Christ — then comes the Spirit bringing into the one body, and the Christian is a member of it.

The church is not yet spoken of as in heaven. It is here where the Spirit is, who makes it one. Scripture avoids speaking of the body as on high. God foresaw that people would make excuses by saying 'We shall be one body by and by when we get to heaven; but, so many men, so many opinions — we cannot expect to be one body down here!' Thus does unbelief palliate existing divisions. Do they believe in the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven? It is gravely to be doubted. They believe in His person, Deity, and quickening. But do they believe in His special mission to form and maintain the church of Christ? If you are a Christian, if you are sealed of the Spirit, you *are* a member of that one body; but are you *acting on this*? Are you displaying it in your daily life ecclesiastically? Or, like the mass of Christendom, have you given it up as bygone, and slipped into one of the many denominations? The truth is not changed, and we are bound to walk in it as much now as ever.

What adversaries do, is to essay the wretched and unloving task of showing up the faults of those who are seeking to act on the principle of the one body. Instead of so degrading an occupation, should Christians come and help if they can. Let them prove their superior wisdom and strength by carrying out the truth better, not by staying in evil and error, while criticising those who leave it. There is nothing easier than to misrepresent and abuse those who stand for the truth of God.

"There is *one* body!" Now-a-days, alas! if you are a member of one church, so called, you cannot be a member of another, still less of all. The position of such is essentially sectarian. Ought I then to abide in what I know to be unscriptural? There is *one flock*. 'Yes,' says a modern commentator, 'one flock, but consisting of many folds!' Did one ever hear of such ingenuity of error? There is a *flock*, and no longer a single fold now, still less many folds, as he says. There is no such thing as the penning in of the sheep now; there is liberty to "go in and out and find pasture," but no liberty to do what is wrong. We are not under the restrictions of Judaism. If you have the Spirit of Christ, you are not merely Christians individually, but compose God's church; and if you are members of God's church,

my advice to you is, Seek no other, and own it really. If there are on earth believers who want no other condition but membership of Christ's body in godliness and truth, with them is your place to worship and serve the Lord.

While souls, even if awakened, are hesitating about salvation, it is evident what they want is the gospel, not the church; but when you know Christ and His redemption, it is not then only as an individual, but as a member of one body that you have to act: churchmen, not Christians only, we should value only the church *of God*. Men may be met by all kinds of ignorance and differences; but this does not shake the principle. We learn best "within," not "without" the church.

On the other hand, remember baptism is properly and entirely outside the church (being a question of the individual), and, therefore, should be settled there. The church of God is on the ground that its members have all received the baptism of the Holy Spirit; yet I own, if people refuse to submit to water-baptism, they would be setting themselves in opposition to the institution of the Lord, and, therefore, should not be received as Christians.

It is plain, however, that the church always *did* assemble as such in early apostolic times. Disciples might go into the school of one Tyrannus to listen to a lecture; but this, important in its place, is not the church as such gathered in the Lord's name. In that assembly there are two main facts which call them together: first, the Lord's supper; and, secondly, the edifying one another when met together. (See 1 Cor. 11, 14) The Lord is remembered in the one, the Holy Ghost displays His gracious power in the other; though both may coalesce.

I have but drawn your attention to this great truth; but where is the use of being brought into such a relationship if you are unfaithful to Christ: it is a disgrace and a dishonour to it and to you, if, being member of that one body, you never act as such, but go on in a denomination. Do you ever, not to say always, come together as members of God's assembly simply? Look well to it, that you do no despite to the Spirit in this matter. In order to be a valid assembly of God, it must be open to every member of the body of Christ walking after a godly sort. Refuse none but those who are disorderly in ways, or unorthodox. It is our duty to refuse all, no matter what their name, who are unsound or indifferent as to the humanity of Christ, no less than as to His Deity. So also indulgence in moral evil is intolerable — drunkenness or the like. The church of God is bound to steer clear of all alliance with iniquity.

Of course there are details in discipline; but discipline is only on the ground I have named. It goes on the same basis as receiving, at least, if we confine it to putting away.

There is room for all kinds of ministry in the church of God; and I should not feel it to be such, if there were any exclusion or enfeebling of a single divine gift. "There are diversities of gifts"; but whatever does not leave room for every gift that God has given is not the church of God acting as such.

Far from taking a high or haughty place, I acknowledge that we are very weak indeed; yet, is there not honesty of purpose in cleaving to what we know to be the will of the Lord for us? But we do not pretend to improve on Scripture, nor to assume an authority which neither we nor others really possess. We are bound to obey, but are not authorised to do all that apostles might, either personally or through chosen associates. The church is the place where the Holy Spirit abides and works for the glory of the Lord. God is dwelling there. Does this claim infallibility for it?

What folly in those who so speak! Are *you* a Christian? Then God dwells in you. Does this then make *you* infallible? It is just the same thing with the church. There is infallibility in none but God.

But if God dwell in the church, He is there to make known His mind, and to set right what is wrong. He is interested in it, faithful, too, and cares for all who trust Him. Discipline, in putting away

at least, ought never to be enforced till every means short of this, acknowledged in Scripture and incumbent on the church of God, has been tried and failed; public rebuke, as well as private remonstrance, etc., from suited individuals, might justly precede. Putting away should be the last sorrowful necessity — an act not of any individual, but of the assembly: the reason is wise and good. The best and holiest individuals might, if opposed, have their own minds prejudiced or even their will at work. We ought all to know ourselves better than to desire it to be in the hands of any private individual. It is therefore a great safeguard that the extreme act should be in the hands of the assembly, after individuals, leaders, or other Christians, have failed to bring about repentance.

May the Lord then give you to look to Himself and His word, and to obey it. Do not allow trial of any kind to hinder you; else it is the destruction of faith. Do not allow the faults of those who are on the ground of the one body to hinder you. Love as well as faith should rather prompt you to help them. Bring whatever of strength or wisdom you can to aid their weakness and exposure. It may be that is just the very thing the Lord wants from you. However this may be, if it be God's assembly, it is the call of God to you. May you hearken to Him and obey! For such a truth, as indeed all revealed truth, is obligatory and practical, becomes a dead weight or a snare if you do not carry it out obediently, and will be a register to your reproof and loss another day. If a divine truth at all, it is a truth for all to act on. It repudiates anything of party, however few may be those who have faith to hold it fast and walk accordingly in this present day of expediency and unbelief. But if it claims all in the name of the Lord, it claims *your* adhesion most of all, if you know it to be of God. No difficulties about elders, etc., will excuse you from not acting as a member of the one body according to the word, or from going on with what you know to be a mere sect or denomination contrary to Scripture and grieving to the Holy Ghost, who blesses those who are faithful to what they know, and will clear up, if for Christ's glory, what they do not yet know.

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