



Assembly-Life Experiences

by an old disciple



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Preface

Most chapters of this booklet were published in The Believer's Magazine in 1919. The name of the author was not given, nor the Scottish town where the group of believers met.

A later article in the same magazine entitled "Peterhead and the 1859 Revival" by David J. Beattie (published February 1937) lead to suspicions that Peterhead, Aberdeenshire might be the location of the congregation. This was formed in 1868.

Kilmarnock and the Moray Firth have also been suggested as possible locations.

The booklet recounts a journey of discovery in God's Word. Becoming concerned with the state of their churches this group of believers sort to humbly submit to the New Testament's teaching regarding gathering together unto the Name of the Lord. The document is an inspirational account of how they progressed in the things of God.

Thus saith the LORD, Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls. But they said, We will not walk therein. Jeremiah 6:16

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ASSEMBLY-LIFE EXPERIENCES BY AN OLD DISCIPLE

CONVERSION AND EARLY LIFE

Revival and Ingathering

I was brought to the Lord in the palmy days of Revival and Ingathering of 1856-60. Glorious times were these. There was flow and fulness of the Spirit's power in the preaching, such as I have never felt or seen since. There was less Gospel preaching than arousing testimony to the coming judgement, and the dangers of delay in coming to terms with God. But O the grip that was with the Word, when it was spoken!

And the joy of the saved was simply unbounded. The singing was wonderful - perhaps not as music - but that was the "melody" of the heart, of which the apostle speaks in Eph. 5:19. There was no choir. All sang, and the song of Christ-filled hearts had a marvellous effect on the ungodly. One who shared in these great gatherings - under the blue skies, on the grassy slopes in the Castle Park, Huntly, Scotland, where thousands gathered at the invitation of the aged, Duchess of Gordon, who greatly interested herself in them - has beautifully written:

"Do we recall the hymns we sang,
Can we forget them ever;
The scene with such sweet music rang,
Like heaven and earth together;

We oft since then have sung the same,
But never; O, no never,
Can we forget the joyous strain
Which first we raised together."

But these days of early freshness of evangel power passed, the tide of blessings receded, and the saved were left to find what they could, to help them along their heavenward way. In these times, now sixty years ago, all known Christians where I lived were very good churchmen.

There were some in one denomination, some in another, but all "members" of some "congregation", as they preferred it to be called. The word "assembly" - although wholly Scriptural, and indeed, the only true equivalent of the Greek Ecclesia, used in the New Testament to describe

the people of God as distinct from and called out of the world - was never heard.

The Ministers

A few of the ministers had thrown themselves heartily into the great time of awakening and soul-saving, and had been blessed. A number opposed it openly and bitterly: but the most treated it indifferently. Those whom God used as soul-winners, were mostly men whom the clergy spoke of as "laymen" - implying a College education and an authorisation from their fellowmen was needed authority to preach - and that constituted "a minister of God."

I have long been convinced that this act of God in calling and using in His work, at that time noblemen, gentry, landlords, military men, lawyers, doctors, colliers, farmers and chimney-sweeps, as His ambassadors was a chief factor in loosening the hold that clerisy had held over the denominations.

It opened their eyes to see the whole clerical system to be man's devising, and more of a hindrance to real work for God, than a means used by God.

There were gifted and godly men "in the ministry" then - as there are now - but their success as soul winners among the lost, and as feeders and shepherds of the saved, was due to the grace they had from God, and the gifts they had from Christ, and not from College education or ordination.

As one of the best of them once said to the writer, "Had I not been born again before I went to College, I would not have realised my need of it there. And had the Lord not given me a heart for souls and some ability to win them, the study of dead languages and dry theologies would have been a poor equipment for the work of soul winning."

Church Attendance

We went to church on Sundays, and sometimes got a word to help us, but much more commonly a cold blanket thrown over us, to damp out "Revivalism," and not infrequently, a tirade against "presumption" in being "too sure of our salvation". We came, by experience, not to expect anything better in our churches, for although an occasional brightening up there was, it soon passed away, and the same dry, barren dirge (funeral song) of a read sermon, theological essay, or a "Galatian" Gospel (salvation by works mixed with faith), was resumed. We received no exposition of the

Word, no rightly dividing of the truth, and indeed, very little of the Bible in any form.

Prayer and Bible Reading Meetings

We met together on a week night to pray, and much enjoyed it. Then, it was proposed to have a Bible reading, each taking what part he could. And these evenings over the Word, were times of real help to our spiritual life, as the entrance of the Word gives “light” (Psa 119:130). We saw truths during these simple studies, that never were heard in pulpit ministry. These “irregular” meetings supplied our spiritual sustenance, however we continued with the churches as there was no other way known to us. We had not yet learned, as in the Lord’s mercy we were soon to learn, that God had something better for his redeemed and beloved people than these barren conditions. I have a very clear remembrance, that it was as we followed the little light we had in these days, that we received more light than those who shrank back, and soon lost what they had, and drifted away into the world as backsliders and became corrupt.

Lack of helpful Ministry

It was at this time that we got the truth of the believer’s acceptance in Christ, our union with Him, from the ministry of William Reid, the Editor of the British Herald; Dr W.P. Mackay, who edited the British Evangelist, wrote the book, Grace and Truth; and J. Denham Smith of Dublin, whose ministry was greatly blessed to thousands of believers, in leading them into the light and liberty of the Gospel of the glory of Christ.

Many who gave good evidence of having truly passed from death to life during the palmy years of the Great Awakening, were spiritually starved, by the lifeless, and utterly unscriptural ministry they “sat under” and worldly associations they were involved in.

In their early spiritual lives, they might have been true witnesses for the Lord and diligent workers in His Service, had they received the sound and spiritual teaching that young believers need. But there was little of it among us, indeed anywhere, save in places where a truly born again and spiritual minister was found, particularly in our part of the world. A few older men, such as the brothers Bonar, Whyte, Sommerville in the Presbyterian Churches; C.H. Spurgeon and some others in London, and a dozen or so evangelists who had been in the thick of the Revival, gave us an occasional visit, including Brownlow North, Reginald Radcliffe, Duncan

Mathieson, and Richard Weaver. These visits were few and far between, and only made us still more dissatisfied with the low spiritual condition and barren ministry of our churches.

SEPARATION FROM DENOMINATIONALISM

We had used every means at our disposal, for a full year, to bring about a more spiritual condition in the churches to which we were attached, but with no success. We found that the “Constitution” of our churches, did not allow the changes we proposed, such as refusing membership to the unconverted, cleansing the eldership made up of publicans, gamblers, and avowedly unregenerate men. When we asked for Scripture authority for the sprinkling of babes, the choosing of ministers by vote, the limitation of ministry to one man - and he, often the least spiritual of those able to speak, and in some cases unregenerate - we were told “that these were the standards of our church” and they could not be altered.

Waiting on God and Inquiring at His Word

We were, all this time prayerfully searching the Word individually, for the light and guidance on our path, and I believe there was a real readiness to advance along whatever way God, through His Word, might guide us. There were no assemblies of believers meeting simply in the Lord’s Name, outside of all denominations, in our part of the country, taking the Word of God alone as their Guide Book. Some of us had heard there were gatherings elsewhere, but none of us had come in contact with them, or seen how they were ordered. And after all these years, I can only say, I am thankful it was so. For we were wholly cast upon God and His Word, and did not copy or follow others, who had gone in the path before us.

There is always real power in being taught God’s truth direct from His word, and what we learn thus, we are not so likely to hold loosely or let drop easily. When we only follow in the way in which others have walked, and hold the truths that they hold and practise, without having them brought in the power of the Spirit to our souls, there is sure to be feebleness, and soon a readiness to let them go for something more pleasing. When the truth of God does not grip the conscience and control the heart and life its claims soon cease to be owned in worship, work and walk. A clamour is soon raised by those who are in this condition, for a “wider path,” and a greater “liberty” to do as they like. Where the truth is held as God’s, and its authority felt in the soul, there will be no desire to tone down its

claims, to weaken its forces, or to compromise it for ease, or pleasant companionships.

Separation from the Unconverted and Denominationalism

The results of these months of waiting on God, and inquiring at His Word was, that we found we could no longer continue to remain in the congregation of which we were members. We had no personal quarrel with our minister, or the elders, or members. But the systems we were in, hindered us from obeying what we clearly saw to be God's truth for us to walk in. And the unconverted with whom we were in association, in our churches, did their utmost to hinder every effort made to promote Gospel work in the churches, and to have any reformation made in the way things were carried on. Our souls were bowed down with grief at the worldliness that existed, which was worsening. There was no hope whatever of anything being done to effect a change for the better.

So, one day, with much sorrow and regret we, some twelve of us, parted from those we loved, and left the churches of which we were members, and went forth at the call of the Lord in 2 Cor. 6:17, from association with the world in its religion, and fellowship with the unconverted in their churches. It was the systems, not the members in them, we left, because we saw them opposed to the Word of God.

Personally I have neither gone back nor have I had the least desire to go back, either on a visit, or on some special occasion, nor do I consider that the Word of God gives me liberty to do so.

If I was right in believing that it was obedience to the call of the living Lord by His Word that I separated from these, I am clear that I cannot be led back by that Word, to those systems, nor to any combination of them, from which I separated at the beginning. This is simple, but the scriptural principle that has governed my path ever since.

GATHERING TOGETHER UNTO THE NAME OF THE LORD

It was in no spirit of uncertainty as to it being the Lord's way, yet in much "fear and trembling" lest we might fail in walking in the path He had shown us, that ten of us met in an upper room, with plain whitewashed walls, on the next Lord's Day morning at eleven o'clock. In the centre of

the room was a small table covered with a white cloth, and upon it lay the simple emblems of bread and wine, as appointed by our Lord on earth, and repeated from His place in heaven (1 Cor. 11:23). It was on a Lord's Day morning, in the early Springtime, we gathered (1 Cor 14:23) simply and only unto the name of the Lord - outside the camp (Heb 13:13) of the world's religion, with no distinctive or sectarian name or position. We, who were a few of a widely-scattered flock of God, purchased by the blood of Christ and bearing His name, had now found a way back to where the churches of the earliest day stood, when "all that believed were together" (Acts 2:44) around the living Lord, who was "in the midst" (Mat 18:20).

The Holy Spirit was there to lead us

It was an experience we never had before. We knew very little of the Word, as to what God's assembly ought to be, and we had no gifted teacher or experienced elders to lead us. On the first day of our assembling, we had such a very real and blessed sense that the Lord Himself was there to meet us, and that the Holy Spirit was there to lead us, that all would be well, as indeed, it was. For in the earliest hour of our experience the upflow from our full hearts was unbroken, and the downflow of blessing from God to us through the Word fittingly read, with the brief words spoken, were as the refreshing dew from Hermon on our spirits. It was not to get a blessing that we had gone there, but to GIVE unto the Lord (Psa. 96:7-9) that which is His due. Yet we did get, that "blessing" of His "which maketh rich" and in a fuller measure than any of us had ever experienced before. It was "just like" the Lord, to so encourage us in these first steps of His way, and to lead us into "the green pastures and by still waters" of the goodly land He was setting before us.

Arousing Opposition

This cheer was all needed, for the opposition aroused by our simple assembling in that upper room, broke out like a storm that very day. Some of our fellow former worshippers in the Kirks, (Scottish word for Churches) met us on the way home, and the scowl on their averted faces indicated plainly what was working within them. I could not believe it possible, had I not seen it, that Christian men and women could allow prejudice and bigotry to drive them to the "scorner's chair" and cause them to incite the ungodly to violence toward us. We had dared to leave what they called, the "religion of our fathers", the Presbyterian Free Church of Scotland.

Evidently they forget that only a little further back in 1843, "our fathers"

had severed their connection with the Established Kirk of Scotland, simply because their conscience could no longer recognise State control. Further back still, our fathers' forbears had been hunted on the heather-hills, by the troopers of Claverhouse, because they could not and would not worship God, after the form of Episcopacy and under the rule of Prelacy.

Had we been there as the founders of a New Religion, or had we given up the vitals of "the Faith" to propagate dangerous error, there might have been some causes for regarding us with suspicion, or treating us as outlaws from orthodoxy. But so far as evangelical doctrines were concerned, we held and practised the same as when we were spoken of in churches as "the excellent of the earth" and voted into office in the congregations of which we were then members, with all honours. Simply because we had humbly and quietly acted on whatever our Bibles had taught us, as guided by His Spirit, and in the way His Word had appointed for His people, and as those of the First Century worshipped God, we were ostracised and accounted as "the offscouring of all things" (1 Cor 4:13). In one way we did not wonder at this, for the Word of God has assured us that in the last days "all who live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution" (2 Tim. 3:12) from the world. When the children become bound up in an unholy alliance with the world, especially in its religion, they soon become "allies" with it in its opposition to all that crosses its popular paths, even those who seek to do that which pleases God and honours His Holy Word.

PARTIAL OR FULL SEPARATION

When the opposition became manifest against us in our separated position, some thought it might disarm, if we occasionally went to the Gospel Services, - where such existed - in the systems we had left. Especially those of our number, who had been in the habit of taking part in a Sunday evening United Service of all denominations, should continue to go, if they were willing to have our help. So, for a short time this was tried, but it became painfully evident, that we were out of our element there. The bondage to man's arrangements, which shut out the guidance of the Holy Spirit we enjoyed in our little assemblies, was more than ever felt. The clerical domination of some, who had never manifested any sympathy with real evangelistic work, and who gave no evidence of being born again, became intolerable to our spirits, after tasting the liberty and joy of Divine guidance, on the simple lines of the Word, even in the small measure we had learned them.

Godly Severing from the Mixed

Then the ever-increasing hostility to our new position as a little company of assembled worshippers, without a presiding minister, or a paid pastor, seemed to bring out new forms of opposition we had never known before. Sermons were preached against those “who cause division” - omitting, of course, to add the context, “contrary to the doctrine” (Rom 16:17). For there is “division” (Luke 12:51), that is of the Lord. His work is a severing of the living from the dead, of “the precious from the vile” (Jer. 15:19). We are also “preached at” as “sheep stealers” and “breakers up of churches”. All we had done was, to restore some of Christ’s sheep to their rightful Owner and to their proper pastures and company, who had strayed into forbidden paths, and got mixed up with the “goats”.

A godly severing of Christians from the unconverted, breaks up nothing that has the approval of God. For a “mixed multitude” of saved and unsaved is not a “church”, as Scripture uses the word, and therefore, it is neither “schism” nor “division”, but obedience to the clear call of the Lord (2 Cor. 6:17), to come out of it. We learned that separation was not to be a theoretical or casual experience, but definite and abiding “unto God” and out from the world of the ungodly. If God’s call were thus obeyed, things would soon appear in their real condition, for it is the presence of a few true Christians in false systems that keeps them together, and perpetuates their existence.

A Complete and a final Separation

When this became clear to us, our separation from the world’s religion was no longer partial, but complete and final. I am sure as I can be of anything, that no company of God’s people can be where the Word would lead them and keep them, without being quite separate from all the world’s religious systems, even though bitterly opposed by them.

Any lowering of the standard may secure their toleration, and if the truth that severs the Christian from the world’s religion is toned down, or kept in silence, they may patronize and even desire to fraternise, and come and go for a time, after their own choice and predilection. Where the One Name alone is owned and the one Book honoured in all its claims, there never will or can be affinity or amalgamation, between an assembly of born-again Christians gathered unto the Lord’s Name, and the sects and systems of the world’s religion as such. No more can a believer who has been brought out from these systems, go back to them, or help by his presence to perpetuate and increase them. The path of separation is always and everywhere to be

outside these systems and wholly free from their control, so as to serve and follow the Lord, whose we are, in the plain paths of His Word. The saints of God, who are in them, are our brethren and fellow-members of Christ, and as such to be loved and cared for, so far as they will allow and receive it. But the worldly and unholy systems that keep them in bondage, and in large measure hold them under their evil spell, we abhor.

LEARNING AND PRACTISING THE TRUTH

During the first six months of our existence as an assembly we had very few of the townsfolk coming to our meetings. Religious prejudice was strong, and misrepresentation of our position, the doctrines we held, and the Gospel we preached, kept away many who had known us and wrought with us in evangelistic work. One of the village ministers told his congregation that we were “Mormons,” and warned them not to allow their young people to go near us. Another, procured a pamphlet written by a Presbyterian student in which we were charged with denying the “moral law” as a rule of life, and saying that “we lived sinlessly”, while a third - the most evangelistic of the village preachers - avowed that “we held it to be necessary to be dipped in a river, in order to be saved”, a saying that was accepted without inquiry or question, by many of the Christians who had previously companied much with us.

Searching the Scripture

All this was very keenly felt, and tested our fidelity to the truths we had learned, causing us all the more to search the Word. I often thank God for this experience, for it sent us to the Lord Himself and to the Scriptures, for the help we needed, in these early months of our assembly life. And there was not one of us but had cause to be thankful that it was so, for we had to learn direct from the Book of God all that we knew of His truth. There were none among us gifted to teach, nor did we then know of any other company of believers meeting as we did, from whom we could seek help in matters which were beyond our knowledge. So as we went along we were kept in dependence on the living Lord, and a truly blessed experience it was to us all.

Our assembling on the Lord's Day mornings for “the breaking of bread” (Acts 20:7) was very simple and sweet. Our prayer meetings, held twice a week, were full of the spirit of prayer, and almost all the brethren took

part. In our Bible readings on Wednesday evenings, we took up the First Epistle to the Corinthians - the charter of the church, in which the chief "commandments of the Lord" (chap. 14:37) are given. These concerning the ordering of the assembly gathered in His Name, in its worship, ministry, order, and discipline - were seasons of true edification, all contributing for the help of the whole what they gathered in private study and meditation on the Word. It was when so gathered, that new light came from the Word on many things we had not known before, proving the faithfulness of the Lord's promise concerning the Spirit's ministry, "He will guide you into all Truth" (John 16:13).

Dependence on the Spirit

If there were more of this united reading of the Word among us, in simple dependence on the Spirit to give light on what we do not know, using one and another "as He will" (1 Cor. 12:11) to impart it, there would be fewer "diversities of understanding and judgement", on things of vital and practical importance concerning the assembly position and mutual responsibilities of the saints and of inter-assemblies. Most of these "diversities" - which are apt to develop into "divisions" - arise through one teacher bringing his "views" followed by another bringing in other quite different views, and each dogmatically claiming for his line to be "the mind of God." These conflicting views lead on to opposing practices, which soon mar God's assembly, instead of "one mind" and "one mouth" (Rom. 15:6), all thinking and speaking the same thing (1 Cor. 1:10), attained by all, humbly and patiently learning from one Book, under the teaching of one Spirit. This in the Lord's mercy, we had in good measure, in these early months of gathering as an assembly, and the results were truly blessed.

Ministry through a God-sent Teacher

This time of learning and giving effect to the precious Word of God was followed by a season of help in the things of God through the ministry of a God-sent teacher, who came to us on a visit, intending to remain over the weekend. As God so used his teaching to draw together many of the Lord's people in the area, who had hitherto stood aloof, he continued with us, preaching and teaching Christ for two full weeks. Much prejudice was broken down, and about half-a-dozen of the most spiritual of them, who were helped through his ministry, were brought clean out of the denominations, and added to the assembly, to become true fellow-helpers in the Lord. We learned this in happy experience at that time: that it is not by withholding God's truth that we gain confidence among fellow-helpers

but through speaking it in grace, and in the measure that they are able to hear and receive it.

Fresh Responsibilities and Spiritual Progress

The inflow of numbers to the assembly brought with it fresh responsibilities, in leading on in the Word so far as we knew it, those who had come into our midst, many of them young in years and likewise in grace, with much to learn. They were willing, indeed, desirous of becoming acquainted with their Bibles. In addition to the general meetings of the assembly, there sprang up during that winter many kitchen and cottage meetings in the form of simple Bible-readings, which were times of sweet and seasonable spiritual help.

Before many weeks had passed, there were Gospel meetings begun in some working people's houses, in which some six or more of the younger men who had been added to the assembly, began to open their mouths in making known the Gospel. By this means they developed gifts of preaching, which increased, and their ministry was blessed to a number of true conversions. These young men grew to be a power for good in the assembly and in the town, in preaching the Gospel acceptably, both inside and in the open air. These were times of real spiritual progress and the Lord increasingly added to our numbers.

THE LEADING OF THE SPIRIT

Old Denominational Customs

It had been our custom, in the time of our being in the denominations, to "go to Church" to hear the sermon, and at appointed times to "take the Sacrament", as it was called. There was one man there appointed to do everything, and we who were there as hearers had simply and only to follow as he led us. Everything had been selected by the minister, and practised by the choir. The portions of Scripture had been chosen to harmonise with the sermon.

The prayers were all in ordered form, either read from the Prayer-Book, or memorised to suit the occasion or season. If the minister for the day happened to be a converted man, he sometimes varied the line of procedure according to his own volitions. But there was no exercise of heart among the mute congregation as to what they should offer to God. They simple followed as they were directed, by the minister.

The Evidence of the Spirit's Help

Now all was changed, and we assembled to meet the Lord Himself to “show forth the Lord’s Death” (1 Cor. 11:26). This was according to His Word, and after the example of the early disciples (Acts 20:7), on the first day of the week. There was no pulpit, no minister, no prearrangement. In that upper room where we met, the circle of gathered believers had come to meet the Lord, who according to His own promise was there “in the midst” (Matt. 18:20). When His people come thus together at His call, “unto His Name”, there is God’s assembly, and there is God’s “temple” (1 Cor. 3:16), and His “habitation in the Spirit” (Eph. 2:22). Never before had we realised the Lord’s presence as those of us who assembled there did that morning. We had come to worship by the Spirit of God (Phil. 3:3), and not according to the direction of man. We had a very real sense of the help of the Comforter, who was there to lead out our hearts to God and Christ, in simple yet sacred worship and thanksgiving for Christ.

I had been in great cathedrals where everything to please the senses was called into requisition, where music and all that refined human nature can produce to create a “religious feeling” was in evidence, but where there was little to lead the heart to God, and Christ and Heaven. In that quiet room, in all the gathered circle of redeemed and regenerated souls, the Spirit was presenting the Christ of God. That blessed Spirit brings the truths of His Peerless Person, the virtues of His precious blood, and the values of His sacrificial and atoning death to the hearts of His People. Our hearts “burned” (Luke 24:32), as He revealed Himself to us. This was indeed “fellowship” as the Scriptures speak of it, and this, too, “the communion of saints” - words which most had often said only with lips - but was now enjoyed.

There was much to learn, for we were like people who emigrated to a new land, and scarcely yet knew its climate or its atmosphere, but our spiritual scent discerned it to be a “goodly land” - one flowing with milk and honey, as the Word of the Lord had described it (Exod. 3:8; Eph 1:3). There was full and free flow of exercises toward God, and the liberty of the Spirit in the saints (2 Cor. 3:17) was very sweet in its unity and freedom. There was little in the way of ministry, only some suitable and seasonable Scriptures read and linked together to bring Christ before us, and with this result, that the flow of thanksgiving was richer and fuller than it had been before.

Spirit-guided “Pauses”

Several pauses - which seemed somewhat new to those who had never been in a Spirit-guided assembly of believers before, caused them to wonder if we had lost our bearings, or become “played out” as the world would say. But these pauses were greatly enjoyed by the most of those gathered, and one almost feared to break in upon them. This is always the effect of a pause which is the Spirit’s leading. So it brings the soul into close contact with God, into the happy realisation of the fellowship of Christ, that it is not reckoned as “lost time” as some who know no better have characterised it. But it is the very highest point of the “Delectable Mountains” as John Bunyan termed the place where the soul has its fullest view of the heavenly city, toward which the pilgrim moves.

There are sometimes pauses of poverty as well as of praise, but the spiritual soul knows the difference. It will not for the sake of keeping up “a fair show” break in, even that pause that comes through lack of spiritual power or joy, just to fill up time, or “say something” to break the monotony. However it would only turn to God for His restoring Grace and the renewing ministry of the Spirit to cause the fire to burn and the tongue to utter His praise (Psa. 39:3). The Priestly thanksgiving and praise of an assembly led by the Spirit is that which is described in 1 Cor. 14 and its inner character made known in Heb.10:19-22. It is here as nowhere else, that the spiritual “Pause” of an assembly reveals itself. For while there may be a good “show” apart from real spiritual power in preaching or serving, the wheels will clog and everything drag heavily, where spiritual condition is low in thanksgiving for Christ. Hence the need of all who assemble “according as it is written” to study and to appear before God clean in life and right in soul, with priestly hands full of Christ, so as to respond like a well-tuned harp, to the Spirit’s touch at His call to lead in any exercise in the assembly of the saints.

MINISTRY, AND HELP THROUGH THE WORD OF GOD

The recoil from an one man ministry, elected by or for the people, and made permanent by human ordination, had the effect on some of causing them to suppose that every man was free to publicly preach and teach as he willed, without consideration as to whether he had God-given gift and grace for it. This was very shortly proved to be erroneous, both in theory and in practice. When we came together, to exercise the common functions of our priesthood (1 Pet. 2:5), guided by the Spirit (Phil 3:3), any brother was at liberty to lead the praises and thanksgiving as he had ability, and was of course in a right spiritual condition.

All are not fitted to speak in public

But this principle does not apply to a meeting for the preaching of the Gospel. Some thought for a time it did, and it was tried, but found wanting. For all are not evangelists, nor fitted to speak in public. Only those who are so gifted should thus occupy. When this was seen to be the Lord's way, the next thing to be considered was, how were those so fitted to be known, and how were arrangements to be made so as to give all who were thus gifted, an opportunity to exercise their ministry? Of course, the wide world is open, and there is need for the Gospel everywhere. But our first responsibility was toward the assembly's own Gospel testimony, as carried on in our Hall, on the evenings of the Lord's Day. This had been continued for a time by helpers from other places, who, hearing of our need, had willingly offered their help in preaching the Gospel.

No "Open meetings" nor "Engaged Minister"

But we found that continuous help from elsewhere gave little opportunity for exercising and developing any gifts of preaching, among ourselves. Several young men had proved themselves, being used in preaching of the Gospel acceptably, in cottages and in the open-air. So it was decided that while ALL whom the Lord sent into our midst would be gladly welcomed when they came, none should be specially asked or arranged for.

We had found that if a preacher had no fresh message to give, no Holy Ghost power in his preaching, and no results in conversion, a month was too long to prove his unfruitful ministry. However, if in power, and the people came increasingly to hear, and the Lord working with him, then to stop or cut his ministry short to make room for another, who might be out of condition, to continue, would be a serious mistake.

We had already proved to our cost, that this might damp out the work of the Spirit of God in our midst. So we ceased from the “open meeting” system, in which any man might speak - or, as it sometimes happened, all sat dumb, the audience wondering what they had come for. We ceased, too, from the “engaged minister” method, as we ought always, to be guided by the Lord. We were also to welcome and make room for whom the Lord sends from afar, and as the occasion fits, call from among ourselves, to preach the Word. And God has never failed us.

As Guided by the Lord.

We have servants of the Lord from afar and also from neighbouring assemblies, who come of their own desire to help in Gospel work and in ministry of the Word, at ordinary times. And when we have conferences to which believers from other places come in goodly numbers and from the denominations also, we intimate to a number of well-proved ministers of the Word, whose ministry we have proved to be for edification and blessing, and the date on which we are to have these Conferences. We leave it to these ministers to intimate as the Lord may guide them whether they hope to be with us, in the will of God, on the occasion. And usually we have time for all the ministry needed. We leave it with these servants of the Lord to arrange among themselves, as to when and how they are to minister the Word. For we consider it would be human interference where the Lord alone should guide, either to limit any as to time, occasion or on what subjects they are to speak. What the Lord knows as to our need may not either be what we would choose, or what we would ask to be given. But when we leave it to Him, to give His message to be delivered to us by His chosen messenger, we find He always undertakes for us, and sends the Word in due season.

HOW WE ERRED FROM THE LORD’S WAY

Brought together as we had been, with little knowledge of the Word of God, and no help at all from those who knew and were gifted to teach truths regarding Divine order in the assembly of God, it was no great wonder that we made mistakes in some of our earlier experiences in our assembly life.

The Pattern left in the Word

Most of us had been in denominations where all was done in stereotyped order, without consideration of whether it was according to the Word of God

or otherwise, and could be worked out without spiritual life, and apart from spiritual power. Now, we found ourselves in entirely different conditions. My fifty years' experience has only confirmed the first impressions I had in gathering simply in the Lord's Name, under the guidance of the Spirit, to give effect to the pattern left in the Word.

They were: (1) If the Word of God is to be given heed to in assembly life, a right individually spiritual condition is required in all those who so assemble, and (2) Wherever and whenever this fails, weakness and disorder will manifest themselves. Because nothing less than the Divine power of an ungrieved and unquenched Holy Spirit operated in the souls of the people of God guiding and ministering through whomsoever He will, alone can keep an assembly in true fellowship with God, in godly order and at unity within itself. For a healthy Scriptural position can only be maintained in a right spiritual condition. When carnality of soul, or worldliness in life, and conformity to the spirit of the age and its ways are allowed, God makes us feel that we cannot give effect to His will and way, in our own wisdom and strength. It is just here where we so often go wrong. Instead of owning our low estate, and confessing it to God, we seek some human means of carrying on, "determined not to be beaten". Our first experience of this will ever remain an object lesson to me.

Our failure and lessons learnt

We had, during the first few months of our existence as an assembly, been happy and united. The persecution we were subject to, kept us all, including those seeking fellowship with us whom God was leading by His Word. When this first phase of the enemy's opposition ceased, our numbers had increased, and some who had not left their denominations, and were quite unexercised as to their association with them, came asking to be allowed to "break bread" with us. I believe this was more in the way of curiosity to see how we carried on our meetings, than from spiritual desire to worship God according "as it is written".

Not being well-instructed as to Spiritual order in the assembly, we accorded them the thing they sought for, but with some misgivings. That day, for the first time, our morning meeting was dull, disjointed, and as we all felt, out of the current of the Spirit's guidance. And this failure sent us to our knees and to our Bibles. We had "erred from the way" and God caused us to know and feel it that day. It was a salutary lesson, and it caused us to consult the Lord and His Word in all our future difficulties.

A fallacious argument

It was in the hope that those fellow-believers might be induced to “come out” from the sectarian folds in which they were penned among unbelievers, that we yielded to their expressed desire to visit us to “break bread” on that Lord’s Day morning. I remember well the arguments that were used by one or two who had lately come amongst us, in favour of those visitors being allowed to break bread for that day. First, and chief, it was said that “the Lord’s table being for all the Lord’s people, those believers had as good a right to be there as we had.”

This is a common argument, but it is fallacious, and does not bear the test of Scripture. Neither we nor they, have any “rights” at all, saved those given us by the Lord. And this is not one of them; for be it remembered, our visiting brethren from those denominations did not desire, or ask to be received into fellowship in the assembly, or to put it in exact words of Scripture, they did not “assay to join themselves” to us as a company of “the disciples” of the Lord, as did Saul of Tarsus after his conversion (Act 9:26). They simply and only wanted to share in the act of “breaking bread” and that for one occasion only.

We have no commandment from the Lord, nor any Scripture example for receiving for the breaking of bread those who by their choice and open confession are members of other denominations or churches and believe themselves to be right in retaining that position.

A Divine Order still

It is not “refusing” them fellowship, but pointing out from the Word of God, that the original pattern of God’s Assembly is that the first disciples of the Lord continued steadfastly in the apostle’s doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers (Act 2:42), and that this is the divine order still. If an assembly of believers is asked to reverse this order and to allow one who has no desire for the apostolic “teaching” as it is given to us in the Word, but chooses rather to “continue” in the doctrines and way of his sect, but wishes only to break bread for one occasion, without becoming one of them in real fellowship and then returns to where he has been, he is asking what we have neither precedent or example to give, without setting aside the Word of God.

This was too big a price to pay in order to “gain” a fellow-believer to come with us - even if we were sure he would, and thus were any brought into fellowship in this disorderly manner - though in their action however

sincere they may be. This was far from being the case, with these people who thus sought to break bread with us. Little wonder, if those who claim that the same should be done to others, whom they may bring, and if this is not done at their demand, they will threaten to divide the assembly, or leave it and “set up” another according to their own pattern. We have proved for half a century that where God and His Word is leading on, those led will want to be welcomed, they will “continue steadfastly,” and not “turn aside” to some attractive bypath, nor go back to the sect or to a combination of sects, out from which they profess to have been brought in obedience to the call of God.

In seeking thus to maintain godly order in receiving fellow-believers to the fellowship of the assembly, we have in no case placed any obstruction in the way of those “weak in the faith,” or who have learned but little of the truth of God. We have never either demanded a pledge that those coming into fellowship in the assembly will not go here or there, or take part in this or that outside the assembly.

But we have set before those coming amongst us what we believe to be the Lord’s way for His people and the abiding pattern of His assembly for all time. Our experience in the main has been, that where believers are right with God and subject to His Word, they delight to walk therein. In this we were seeking to act humbly, but firmly on the Word, so far as we have learned it, and ever since we decided that through grace we should continue this to do. The Lord has steadily added to the assembly, and increased its activities in His service, both in spreading the Gospel in the world, and in ministering the truth to fellow-believers who come to hear it in large numbers.

GODLY EXAMPLE AND ORDER IN THE ASSEMBLY

In our renunciation of clerical rule, we found ourselves very much like a people without a Government. Some who saw the danger of disorder proposed that we should “elect elders”, as had been done by the churches in the early times, such as Crete. But when we went to the Scriptures for guidance, we found that it was not the assembly that elected, but the apostles who chose and “ordained” these elders (Act 14:23). None of us could claim to have that power. So we were cast upon God for help in our need.

Prayerful and reverent searching of the Word taught us, that there is to be Godly order and example in the house of God (1 Tim. 3:14, 15; 5:17; 1 Cor. 16:14), but not as in the world's religious systems, to restrain spiritual liberty, but to conserve it. This is not to hinder any who are being led on in the way of obedience to God or to restrain the exercise of any real spiritual ministry, but to repress what is not according to God and to the edification of the believers.

Recognising the Spiritual Gifts

Then, in regard to ministry of the Gospel to the world, and teaching of the Word to the saints, we found that all such gifts come from the living Lord in heaven (Eph 4:11), and that God “sets” in any particular assembly (1 Cor 12:28) as He sees the need, those who are to minister and to care for His people there. That being clear, our responsibility was simply to receive and recognise whatever of spiritual gift the Lord might raise up among us, or send into our midst, whether permanently as in Acts 13:1 or a passing occasion as Acts 15:32, 14, 35, but not to “choose” what might please us, or to gain the approval of others.

In regard to Pastoral care, we learned from 1 Tim 3:1 that whoever desires such a work - God having put the desire for it into their hearts (2 Cor. 8:16), and having the spiritual and moral qualifications for it (1 Tim 3:1-7; Tit. 1: 6-9), they are to be “known” and “esteemed” by their work (1 Thess. 5:12, 13) as overseers, whom the Holy Spirit has qualified for the work (Act 20:28). This is not clerisy, nor is it “every man” ministry, but Divine order and godly example for leading to the edification and blessing of the flock. When gifted men are withdrawn or labourers pass away, it is to God we are to look for providing other, but not to the ballot box.

“Guides” are to be recognised and owned.

In all assemblies, however small, there usually are some who manifest shepherd care, and take a heart-interest in the saints and the service of God. These are the fit men to be recognised and owned as “guides” (Heb. 13:17, 24) not necessarily officially, but always spiritually. When there is true sincerity in thus appealing to God, and real submission to His will and way, in accepting and giving place to whoever He sends us, it is wonderful how God provides. Neither social position or property count at all, in giving place and honour to those serving and leading in God's assembly.

Often a godly employee may be a leader in an assembly, while his employer is a follower, gladly yielding to the man who is his servant in the workshop, the higher place in the church, while the employee is ever ready to own the rule of and the obligation to submit in all things temporal, to his “master according to the flesh” (Eph. 6:5). When these principles are seen in the Word, and accepted as the way of God, there is always blessing and satisfaction in practising them.

Worthy of “double honour”

If a distinction is made, between one gifted to preach and teach, who also works at his trade to earn his own and his family’s daily bread, and one who preaches and is regarded as a gifted “evangelist” or “teacher”, the man who does so at his own expense is surely worthy of “double honour”. He is a witness to all, that there are still men to be found, who from love to the Lord, His people, and His work, are ready to spend and to be spent in service for the Lord. He thus rolls away a common reproach, made by worldly men that “preaching” is a way of making an easy “living”. But when they see a man after his day’s hard toil, going forth as the messenger of Christ to preach and teach, without remuneration as they would reckon it - although there is a real remuneration even here and now in serving God, - they have no argument that they can successfully use to oppose that servant of Christ.

Such free service for Christ constrained by love to Him and to souls, is the best argument against the official clerical position in which so many boast, and from which they enrich themselves.

The men with a Divine Call.

The man who at the definite call of the Lord leaves his boats and nets, to give himself wholly to the work of spreading God’s gospel, either at home or in distant lands, is an exception. Where there is evidence that the man has the Divine call, the right spiritual condition, with the resulting seal of the Lord on his service, then “the Churches of the Saints” are commanded to see that he is ministered to in temporal things (Gal. 6:6). This is not as giving so much pay or remuneration for so much work, but supplying the need of the true servants of the Lord.

What is given is given to the Lord, and it is accepted by Him as “an odour of a sweet smell” (Phil 4:18), a sacrifice with which “God is well pleased” (Heb. 13:16). Bargaining and selling (John 2:16) or engaging and hiring in

the house of God, or in what professes to be service of Christ, are held in abhorrence in heaven and should in no sense be countenanced by those on earth who fear and own His name (Mal. 3:16).

BYPATHS AND THEIR DANGERS

For several years, our numbers increased. Gospel work on the Lord's Day, and at times nightly, when an evangelist came among us on a visit, yielded precious fruit, the converts being taught the ways of the Lord and added to the assembly. For while we never hurried, or even invited any to "join themselves" to us, we did - as the Word of God very fully shows us that those who preached the Gospel did in early times - teach those who believed, the truths of believer's baptism, separation from the world's religion, and gathering unto the Name of the Lord Jesus in the assembly. This was taught not as our Creed or Confession of faith, but as part of "THE FAITH of God's elect" (Tit. 1:1), once for all delivered unto the saints (Jude 3), and also not as a relic of the past, to be admired, but as abiding in the Word of God, to guide and control all our ways, individual and collective, for all the days. These were happy years, full of activity and rich in spiritual experiences.

Troubles began Insidiously.

It is just under such conditions, that the ever-watchful enemy especially seeks to bring into an assembly of believers, elements which, if long permitted to work unchallenged and unchecked, make mischief. Our troubles began in a most insidious manner. Among those whom we received to the assembly's fellowship was a brother, who had a number of years been in what is commonly known as an "Exclusive" meeting, which for some cause had ceased to exist.

For a considerable time, this brother had been sitting at home, unable to find any company of believers in which he could have fellowship. Then he began coming to our Gospel meetings and there formed acquaintance with some of the believers who spoke of him as a "Spirit-instructed brother", who knew his Bible well. Ultimately he applied for fellowship in the assembly and was received, knowing very little of his antecedents, or of his doctrine. He was given a class of young men, who had been converted mostly in our Sunday School and were being led on in the Word, in the form of a Bible Class in connection with the assembly.

Before many months had passed, we were being asked unusual questions by some of these young men, and from inquiries, we came to know that this brother, who still retained his peculiar views, was taking them through the whole history of a controversy which happened over forty years before. By this means he had affected the minds of a number of these young men, suggesting that we as an assembly were “in fellowship with evil”. Where such evil was, or in what way we were associated with it, he gave no information. There was not then, nor there is now, a single individual in the assembly who had ever been “in fellowship” with those who hold or teach evil doctrines. When the statements which had been made were challenged, this man was wholly unable to give any sound or Scriptural reason for his insinuations. So he shortly left us, taking a few younger ones, whom he had misled with him.

Experience Gained.

We had to mourn and be humbled before God, over this - the first division in our midst. With the experience thus gained, we sought to establish those who were added to our number, in the fundamental principles and truths of “The fellowship of Saints”, and thus to preserve those not well established in the truths that form and govern our relations in God’s Assembly from being led aside into bypaths and extremes.

Results of a “wider-fellowship”.

The result of this “exclusive” schism had the effect of causing a few to think in an opposite direction, and we found before long a few crying out for “a wider fellowship”, with liberty to go and come with “the denominations”, and particularly with certain missions. These missions were said to be quite “undenominational” in character, but when this term gave offence to some of their clerical patrons, shortly changed to “inter-denominational” missions. In other words, they were composed of and in affinity with churches of all “denominations”, holding their views, retaining their practices, and defending their position as members of these churches.

In course of time some began in this line of things, preaching and others “singing solos” in such missions. They gradually returned in part to those missions and there they remain, far from being either respected by the members of the denominations with which they have become identified in large measure, or of help to the assemblies in which they profess to be.

“Half-way” Position and Affinity to Religion.

I am perfectly convinced that no such “half-way” position can be long maintained. For as “the churches” become more and more corrupted by avowed sceptical opinions of some of their Professors and Ministers, they must give up most of the vital truths of the Gospel - which Evangelicals among them have hitherto considered “essential” - and become void of that Gospel, which such missions exist to spread. Just as a single cord attached to a sinking ship may drag its lifeboat into the whirlpool, not only thus rendering it unfit to fulfil the purposes for which it is afloat, but bringing it and its crew into jeopardy of their own lives, so affinity or affiliation with “The World’s Religion” as it now exists, soon brings to nought all real testimony of God. And it vitiates the very purpose for which the assembly of God’s people exists on the earth, that is, to be *a lampstand and a light-bearer* (Rev. 1:20) for God and His Christ, among men.

And there are many evidences that those who thus fraternize with all-sectarian missions and movements soon become conformed to their ways. Some, even to the extent of assuming the clerical position, calling themselves “Reverend” - a title given to God alone (Psa. 11:9), donning clerical dress and hiring themselves as preachers and pastors in any sectarian circle in which they can find a “place”, which is after the pattern of the grandson of Moses (Judges 18:30), the vagrant Levite of Bethlehem-Judah (see Judges 17:7,8). Thus they gave up truths they had once professed to own and honour as “commandments of the Lord” (1 Cor. 14:37) and commercialised their gift. Such men lose all conscience toward God.

GOSPEL PREACHING AND MINISTRY OF THE WORD

Visiting Ministers of the Word

In the early years of our assembly life, we had frequent visits of quite a few God-honoured evangelists, men who had given themselves wholly to the work of evangelising the unconverted. They gave all their days and every day, to this work, mostly in places where there were no assemblies, preaching in schools, halls, barns, and cottages, as the Lord opened the doors for His Gospel. Sometimes it was laid on their hearts to visit the assemblies they were used in planting or in increasing, for a special nightly effort in the Gospel, either in the hall where the believers met or in a public hall to which the townspeople would more readily go.

We were always ready to welcome God-sent men, to co-operate heartily with them, and see that, as the servants of the Lord, they lacked nothing,

not only while they laboured among us, but at other times as well. We never invited, certainly never “engaged”, to come for a special time, as if we could determine how long God intended to work in our midst, or to keep His servants among us. In this simple and, I believe, Scriptural course, we have continued. It is a regret to see so many departing from it, to what approximates to the “hiring” systems, so ruinous to all spiritual ministry. We find this is practised in all the “denominations” and “missions”, from whose principles and practices God’s Word has separated us.

But while we have been greatly helped in our Gospel testimony by such visits, we do not rely wholly on them. For an effective, continuous Gospel work, we seek to exercise what gift we have among us, in preaching the Gospel all the year through. And God has very graciously given His help in this, and His blessing on it.

Sunday Evening Gospel Meetings

We have the largest - so stated - Sunday evening congregation in the town, and it is composed very largely of churchgoing people, who often bring their neighbours. We have no choir, use and need no organ, but sing the Gospel, and praise God for salvation, as a people who live it, and are in possession of the blessings it brings. A man of the world told publicly quite lately, that we are “the only church in K- where there is good singing, because all sing.”

The Meetings of our Assembly.

In the ministry of God’s Word to the saved, we have much the same practice. When a brother gifted to minister the truth offers his help for a Lord’s Day or on week nights, we gladly accept it, and seek to give a wide invitation to all God’s people in the place to come and hear. By this means, quite a number have been helped in spiritual life. Most of them have ultimately desired to be in the assembly, though we never press them, but leave God to lead them on by His Word. But we have all year round an afternoon meeting on the Lord’s Day for ministry and exhortation, with the object of mutually helping ourselves and feeding the lambs of the flock with simple truths they need. During the week we have a prayer meeting and Bible reading, in which all are encouraged to take part, and most do. Without such stated ministry of God’s Word, no assembly can grow, or those being brought into it, be “built-up.”

“Conference” type Larger Gatherings.

In order to give fellow-believers in the town and in surrounding places the opportunity of hearing simple, seasonable, and sound ministry of God’s Word, and with the further object of nourishing true fellowship between assemblies in the district, we arrange for the larger gatherings, usually called “Conferences”. Although this name is scarcely a proper definition of their character, it is rather the exposition of Scripture, bearing on personal, social, family and assembly aspects of the Christian life. We keep nothing back that is deemed to be in season and to profit, but in no way curtailing the liberties of the Lord’s servants to come to give help in the ministry, or seeking to control them in the exercise of their ministries. So we have no chairman, no programme, but cast ourselves wholly on the Lord for His guidance, and for the ordering of the meetings; and He never fails us.

Spirit’s Guidance of Choosing a Speaker.

We have never had any cause to resort to a “platform” of “chosen speakers”. Nor did we limit the ministry to certain lines that will offend nobody, or choose the subjects we want to discuss. For what we like, is not always what we need, or what an all-wise God would send us if we are there to hear “the Lord’s messenger, in the Lord’s message” (Haggai 1:13). We do not say it is wrong, or departing from the principles or practices of Scripture, to invite fellow-believers to hear a well-proved teacher, or plurality of such who may come among us to minister on a given subject, if he, or they, so desire.

In gatherings of the character described in 1 Cor. 14, in which there may be several who are qualified and ready to give the Word as the Spirit may guide, we are quite clear that there should be opportunity and liberty for all approved servants of the Lord to exercise their ministry. And all who minister, and those assembled, should be exercised before the Lord and waiting upon Him for the right Word, to meet the present need of those assembled. And we have abundantly proved His faithfulness in sending it by those whom He chooses thus and His messengers.

SHEPHERD CARE, GODLY EXAMPLE AND LEADING

The Service of the Shepherd.

The feeding and leading by example of the Lord’s flock, is a service requiring special fitness and spiritual discernment. It brings the servant into peculiar nearness to the Master. For the special character of His own service in the heavens towards His people here on earth is that of the “Great Shepherd of

the sheep” (Heb. 13:20). And it was to this service that He appointed Peter, after his restoration, on that day by the lake-side, when in the presence of his fellow-disciples, the Lord thrice questioned him, “Lovest thou Me?” and commissioned him to “feed” and “shepherd” His lambs and sheep (John 21:15-17). This is a work very near and dear to His heart. To give them the food suited to their requirements, and to lead them in right paths, just because they “belong to Christ” (Mark 9:41), and are the objects of His Love (John 13:1), is service of the highest kind. If it is rendered from love to Christ, it will assuredly receive His reward (1 Pet. 5:4).

It is a service in which there is little of present recompense. It requires much patient endurance, sometimes calling for much self-denial, and demanding great forbearance, as well as faithfulness. For the sheep are wilful and often prone to wander and stray, and need restoration as well as food, and healing, and also leading. And this means personal dealing, calling for spiritual discernment, firm yet tender leading, restoration of soul, as well as return to the right path. Nothing short of true love to Christ, the meekness and gentleness of Christ, loyal subjection to His Word and devotion of His Service, will enable one to continue to serve the Lord and His people in this shepherd work, and so care for the church of God.

Esteeming the Guides

There are few such shepherds, and although we need them, we cannot create them. Our appeal must always be to the living Lord, the glorified Head of the Church, from whom all true gifts, the evangelists, and pastor-teachers come (Eph. 4:11-12). If we are ready to receive and to own and honour those whom He gives, and to follow their lead in godly ways, He will not fail to give us what He sees that is good for us. But if we refuse their ministry, rebel against their guidance, and blame them as “taking too much upon them” as some did in ancient days (Num. 16:3), the Lord will show His displeasure, and may withhold the gifts we lightly esteem. It is not as in Churches of men, where pastors and preachers have their emoluments and rewards here and now. But those who serve most devotedly and seek neither place or power in the spheres they fill, are either traduced by the carnal, or lightly esteemed by office-seekers.

I have often wondered why so little esteem is manifest toward those who “labour among” (1 Thess. 5:12-13) the saints and why they are so seldom prayed for in the prayer meetings of the assemblies. Evangelists get their full reward of honour and praise, especially such as keep themselves and their work evident. Teachers who can give brilliant and pleasing ministry

are much sought after. But those who shepherd the sheep, going after those who wander, who feed those who are standing still, who comfort the feeble and are betimes called to rebuke and reprove the wilful (2 Tim. 4:2), and to “warn the unruly” (1 Thess. 5:14), are too often blamed rather than encouraged in their service: instead of being comforted they may generally feel depressed. But the Lord knows, and He will not forget anything done in and for His name.

Giving a clear and united lead.

It is of the greatest value to have wise and godly men who have “understanding of the times” (1 Chron. 12:32), and are able to give wise counsel in days of difficulty, having a clear head in times of perplexity. They are ready to face the foe - as David faced the lion and the bear, who sought to destroy his father’s flock - and efface themselves, to save the sheep whom they watch. It is essential to the unity of the assembly, that the shepherds should be found of one mind, acting together, able to speak with “one mouth” (Rom. 15:6) and so give a clear and united lead by example in all that concerns the fellowship of saints and the well-being of the assembly. In the case of a difference of judgement arising, in regard to any path to be pursued, or any form of discipline to be administered, it were better to wait humbly and prayerfully upon God for any length of time, seeking oneness of mind (Phil. 3:3, 15). On the other hand, acting hastily will give the enemy the opportunity he seeks to bring in division, and so mar the testimony of the Lord, as alas has so often happened through untempered zeal and determination to have one’s own way.

Referring our case to God.

The true safeguards against all such ruptures which bring dishonour to the truth and often take a lifetime to heal, is to exercise “lowliness and meekness”. It is so necessary to maintain the “unity of the Spirit” (Eph. 4:2,3) in the bond of peace, with the readiness to “yield” (Phil. 4:5) everything that concerns our own interests, but never yielding to anything that mars the truth. And in the wisdom that is, “first pure, then peaceful, gentle and easy to be entreated, full of mercy, without wrangling” (Jas. 3:17 marg.), we should spread out our difficulties and differences before God, and leave Him to be the Arbitrator and Final Appeal. He will undoubtedly so appear if our patience does not fail.

A somewhat long and varied experience of difficulties and divided counsels, balanced and squared before the Lord, convinces us fully, that there is no

trial, no testing in which God may not be called in, and none too intricate for Him to solve, if we in honesty of conviction and humility of mind, acknowledge only Him, and leave it wholly to His judgement to direct our path (Prov. 3:5,6). Sure I am, there would never be a division to mourn over, or a rash act of discipline to retrace, were we always willing to refer our case to God and leave it with Him.

THE RIGHT SPIRITUAL CONDITION OF AN ASSEMBLY

It has often been remarked, and is constantly kept in prominence in mutual ministry and exhortation among us, that having returned to the Scriptural position of God's assembly, as it is described in the Word, our chief business should be to maintain a right spiritual condition. This will keep in lively exercise the fellowship, functions, and activities of the assembly. Nothing can make up for the lack of such a condition. If it is not found among us, everything will be wrong. And then human devices without number will be resorted to, to keep things straight, but without success. For human systems of religion and churches formed according to man's own predilections, can be made a "success" apart from spiritual life in their members, or without Divine power in their ministry.

An assembly of believers constituted according to the pattern left for our guidance in the Word, cannot but either go into confusion, or will become a ruin, if those that compose it depart in heart from God, and become worldly in life and ways. Surely it is a mercy, that it is so. For a church from which Christ is shut out (see Rev. 3:20) with carnality ruling within (see 1 Cor. 3:3), has little in it to give to God His due worship and praise. What the world needs is true testimony for Christ. Hence there is need of all who guide and minister in such assemblies having Christ ever before them as the object of all their service, which is essential for the individual maintenance of the saints in a right spiritual state, and the fellowship of that assembly in a healthy working condition.

Should differences arise - as they will, so long as the flesh is in function; should dissensions threaten - as they must, wherever man's will is in activity; should parties form - as we know they did in the churches of apostolic times, those who "watch for souls" should seek unto God. And they should act humbly for Him as His Word directs, before these work havoc and break forth into open rupture and God-dishonouring divisions.

An Unsavory and Unpleasant Work.

Some members are lethargic and unwilling to interfere. It is not a work that they like to do. If it is for God, and also to hinder the devil, it should be done faithfully and fearlessly. Phinehas, the priest, would find it an unsavory and unpleasant work to cast his javelin (Num. 25:7) at the guilty pair in the camp of Israel in the day of Baal-Peor (Num. 25:1-8). That act saved the congregation from righteous judgement, received the commendation of Jehovah, and gained for Phinehas a covenant of everlasting priesthood. Faithful dealings with error in its beginnings - always in wisdom and in love - covers or hinders a multitude of sins.

The only motive in Service

It has been our experience throughout fifty year of assembly life, that godly and humble-minded men, if they have the honour of God and the glory of Christ as their only motive in service, seek or claim no place among their brethren, but serve and guide them as the flock of God, keeping a lowly place with a lowly mind. They are esteemed and owned by all the godly. And if at times they are challenged by the carnal, as Moses and Aaron were in ancient days, blamed for “taking too much” upon them (Num. 16:3) by place-seekers and their followers, God always vindicates the character and work of true men in due time, and overthrows all evil counsels that rise against them.

Walking in Love and Unity, clinging to His Word.

It is truly a “good and pleasant” sight on this earth, for God to see a company of His own “dwelling together in unity” (Psa. 133:3) seeking to walk in mutual love, in the truth, and in wisdom toward them that are without, spreading the Gospel among their fellows, and commending the message by their godly conduct and dealings, while ardently and expectantly waiting for the Lord to come.

We live in a day in which everything belonging to Christ in this world, is being assailed, not so much by open persecution as by secret seduction, and Satanic wiles and crafts. For Satan hates with an intense hatred, anything and everything that brings honour to the Lord Jesus, and that exalts His Name. What he cannot destroy by force, he spares no effort to corrupt by craft, introducing that which will work as leaven, so deteriorating its value, that God ceases to use it as a vessel for the display of His Divine power, and as a channel of His Grace, in blessing to others. May we learn to walk humbly and softly before Him, clinging to His Word, and cleaving

with purpose of heart to the Lord (Acts 11:23), so shall we be preserved “in Christ Jesus” all the days, until we see His face.

PRACTICAL HINTS AND SUGGESTIONS

Punctuality

In all assemblings, believers should learn to be in their places in time, or before. Few things disturb the tranquillity of a meeting, than people coming in late, after the hour for assembling has passed. It is recorded that “When the hour was come, He sat down, and the twelve... with Him” (Luke 22:14).

Reverence

“God is greatly to be feared in the assembly of the saints and to be had in reverence of all about Him” (Psa. 89:7). This is due unto Him, and should never be ignored.

Godly Order

One leading the assembly audibly in praise or thanksgiving should face the people and speak so as all may hear. Common courtesy, not to name good manners, should teach this to all.

Singing

Only such as have the capability and can exercise it, should attempt to lead the singing, in any public gathering. And such as have, are surely responsible to exercise it, as the rest are to own and make room for their service.

Intimations

The names of visitors, and additions of the assembly, whose names have already been made known as those received, should be made at the beginning, so that all may know exactly who such strangers are, and be able to recognise and welcome them worthily.

Duration of Meetings

Especially on the Lord’s Day, meetings should be of such length as to allow mothers, wives, domestics, and others, whose duties demand their presence at home, giving time considerations, so that all may remain to the close, and retire in an orderly and reverent manner.

Announcements

Should be made at the close, while all are seated and so may hear and heed them. And it is due to the Lord that they be made audibly, and all wait to hear them before rising to go.

