

CHRIST AND HIS CHURCH

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CHRIST AND HIS CHURCH

I

CHRIST AND THE BUILDING OF HIS CHURCH

(Read Matthew xvi. 13-20 ; Acts ii. 37-41, 47.)

IN this chapter, Matthew xvi, we have the first reference to the church of Christ ; and it comes in here very definitely and distinctly as something fresh and new in the ways of God, while its special character rests upon this—that the Lord Jesus Christ was rejected by His earthly people to whom He came. He had made Himself known to the Jews as the One Who was promised of old. He had proved by many wonders and signs that He was the Sent One of Jehovah, but the heart of God's earthly people had no care for their Deliverer. He was not one that pleased them, nor did they think that He would ever please them, and consequently they rejected Him. It appeared, therefore, that God's purposes for blessing to this world had received a check from those whom we might suppose would be the very last to have hindered the workings of God for their blessing. If there was any nation that had received favours from God it was the nation of Israel, and yet they were the ones who stood out against the Messiah, and refused Him.

It is at this point in the Gospel that we have the first intimation that God would not be thwarted in His purpose, and that the meek and lowly Man of Nazareth

had still something before His heart, something that His hands would accomplish. If the national assembly of Jehovah refused Him, He would nevertheless have His own special company ; and the assembly He would build would be invincible and impregnable. The forces of hostility by man and by the unseen world should not prevail against His church.

But it is of the utmost significance that the declaration of the Lord Jesus with regard to the foundation of His church was announced at that juncture in the life-service of our Lord Jesus Christ when it was clear to Him, as it was clear to His Father in heaven that Israel would not have Him ; and therefore it was that He said to Peter, " I will build My church."

Moreover, the announcement was associated with the confession of the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of the living God. It would be instructive to go through the whole Gospel of Matthew up to this point and see how the enmity of the hearts of God's people against the Lord Jesus grew from day to day, as it were. His gracious ministry produced no yielding effect upon their hearts. There was no softening ; their hearts only grew harder. There is, however, enough in this chapter itself to show us what was really working in the hearts of these persons.

SEEKING A SIGN

The chapter opens with the fact that the Pharisees and the Sadducees came to the Lord, and, not for the first time, asked Him for a sign from heaven. If you ponder for a moment you will see to what heights their unbelief had reached ; for was not the Lord Jesus Christ Himself God's appointed sign that His promises made in the Old Testament were fulfilled ? When the announcement of His birth was made over the plains of Bethlehem, what was the heavenly message to the shepherds ? They were to go to the manger, and, said the angel, " This shall be the sign unto you "—the sign of the Messiah, according to the prophecy of Isaiah to

Ahaz (Isa. vii. 14)—“ye shall find a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes.” That blessed, holy Babe, conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the virgin, was God’s Son from heaven, and the time for the promised blessing had now come.

The Deliverer Himself was present, and the man who had faith in his heart looked at the Babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, and by his faith saw the Saviour. Simeon said, “Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace, for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation.” He saw God’s side of it. Years passed; the Lord Jesus grew to manhood; He came forth from Nazareth to fulfil His ministry. The Father from heaven said at the banks of Jordan, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” The Lord Jesus, by His marvellous humility as well as by the wonders of His power, showed that He was God’s Servant, there to bless them by saving them from their sins. He Himself was the “sign” predicted by Isaiah.

Now the leaders of the people come to Him, and say, “Show us a sign from heaven.” What did it mean? That they disbelieved all that up to that point the Lord had shown Himself to be. They still wanted a sign from heaven, and the Lord told them that no sign should be given them except that of the prophet Jonah. As Jonah disappeared from Israel and went to the Gentiles, so the Lord Jesus Christ would vanish from the ken of His natural earthly people. He would go into heaven; He would preach the gospel to the Gentiles also; and the Jews would see Him no more until they said, “Blessed is He that cometh in the name of Jehovah.”

It is thus shown in the chapter that the Lord Jesus Christ was rejected in the hearts of the Pharisees and the Sadducees. There that poisonous leaven was working. Their teaching was vitiated by their denial of the Christ, the Son of the living God. What they taught the people was something to poison and destroy their souls. Why? Because they disbelieved the Messiah. They refused to accept the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, friends, let us never forget that the great touch-

stone of the ministry of truth is the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ. The man who is not faithful to the glory and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ may speak words intended to do you good, and edify your souls, but if they contain what is derogatory to His Holy Name, however profound his teaching may be, however powerful and passionate his speech, however clever and attractive his sentences, they will be but as leaven to your souls, communicating the corruption of evil to your heart. "Beware", the Lord said, "of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees." They hated and despised Him, and made up their minds that He must die; they would not have Him to reign over them.

POPULAR IDEAS

But there were others who would not receive Him as the Christ; and the Lord spoke to His disciples, asking them what was the popular opinion about Himself. What in general did men say about Him? What did they say about Him in the streets and in the market-places? What was the opinion of the common people—those who heard Him gladly? They said something about Him not evil, not positively dishonouring to His name, and yet in essence they detracted from His glory. Some said, He was John the Baptist, some that He was Elias, Jeremias, one of the prophets perhaps; but they evidently thought He was a good man, a man who would bring them some words from God.

The Lord does not in this narrative condemn this lukewarmness, but it was something that would not do for His church, for His assembly; He does not accept these popular notions. The good seed of the word of the kingdom had been sown, and what had that soil produced? Not the fruit of righteousness and holiness, of sound, wholesome words that spoke well of Christ. They only said, "John the Baptist, Elias, Jeremias, or one of the prophets." The fruit was evil fruit. The good seed was not fruitful, because of the badness of the soil. There was no reception in the heart for the person of the

Lord Jesus Christ, the Christ, the Son of the living God.

Oh, beloved friends, cannot you in these questions of the Lord see this blessed Teacher come from God, looking round amongst men ; and what is He searching for ? Hearts that love Him, hearts that have received the knowledge of Himself as the Sent One from God. And will it satisfy His loving heart if a man says of Him that He is but one of the prophets ? Has He come all the way from heaven to receive only that from men ?

And does He not also look to-day into our hearts ? Is not His heart towards us seeking to know from us what we think of Him ? It is not what doctrines we hold. It is not what creed we confess, but what love, what allegiance of heart there is for Himself. The Lord Jesus Christ stands to-day as He stood of old on the borders of Cæsarea Philippi, the rejected Man. He was the Sent One from God, but man had no heart for Him. And as He asked for hearts then, so He asks still. What is your response, and what is mine, to the seeking of the Lord Jesus Christ ?

THE SON OF THE LIVING GOD

The Lord then turned to His own disciples, His apostles, those who had companied with Him in the days of His ministry, who had learned, but so slowly and dully, that He was being rejected. Now the Lord put the question to them that they might confess with their mouths what was in their hearts concerning Him. "Who say ye that I am ?" It was a personal challenge. The word of the Lord Jesus Christ came direct to their hearts, bringing them face to face with Himself.

"What do you think of Me ?" And Peter answered. Peter was often the foremost with his tongue, but here he speaks, not because he was an impulsive man, not because his affections, as it were, were so near his mouth and so ready to be expressed in words ; but he speaks because of a constraining power within him. He has received a revelation from the Father in heaven concerning the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Lord tells us this, but otherwise we need not have doubted it. For what human heart could conceive rightly of the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ? What human eyes could look upon that Man of sorrows Who was acquainted with grief, and say, "There is the Son of God—the Son of the living God"? It was not the discernment of flesh and blood. The wise men, the noble men of the world, all failed to make such a confession. The wisdom of the world was nonplussed when they saw Jesus Christ. They could not see the glory of God's Son in that lowly Man.

And I call upon you for faithfulness to the Lord Jesus Christ now. The name of the Lord Jesus Christ has been declared in this world for centuries, and men have professed some sort of outward allegiance to that name, but where are the hearts that are absolutely true to Christ in His person and in His glory? Who believe from the very bottom of their hearts that He is the Christ, the Son of the living God? This confession is not a deduction of logic; it was not something that sprang from Peter's own mind or Peter's own feelings, but it was an utterance absolutely true, and appropriate to the occasion because the Father in heaven had made it known to the apostle.

We do not know, but it is not at all likely that Peter was at the Jordan when from heaven came the voice of the Father, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." That was a voice specially for John because John said himself, "He that sent me to baptize with water, the same said unto me, Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit of God descending, and remaining on Him, the same is He which baptizeth with the Holy Ghost. And I saw—and I saw, and bare record that this is the Son of God."

But this declaration by Peter was a special and definite revelation of the Lord Jesus Christ in His glory as, not only the Sent One, the Christ, the Anointed One, but the Son of the living God. It is needful in a day of rejection that there shall be witnesses to the essential glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. And God always finds

them. He found one here, He found Peter, and revealed to him the truth concerning His Son. What is hidden from the wise and prudent is revealed to babes.

And is it not so to-day? The spirit of Antichrist is even now abroad; it is common for men in Christendom to deny that Jesus is the Christ, though John says definitely that such a one is a liar. Moreover, there is not only the denial that Jesus is the Anointed of God, but men also deny the Father and the Son. This spirit of error, the spirit of Antichrist, is now working amongst men. By and by, on the removal of the church, that habitation of the Holy Spirit and bulwark against the spirit of foul and poisonous error, the salt of the earth having gone, then the great evil will spread unhindered over the hearts of men, and how terrible and appalling the state of the world will be! How quickly the corruption will spread when the salt is removed! Let us beware of anything in our hearts or associations that is derogatory to the person of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Lord is worthy of the confession Peter gave, that typical churchman, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." And let me say that this typical confession is not something that we are called to say to one another. I might say to you—and I might be a deceiver—I might say to you, "I believe in the Christ, the Son of the living God," and in my deceitful heart and mind, I might have reserved some thought, some prejudice, some bias against the full glory of the Lord Jesus Christ that you would not perceive. What we say to one another, we are rightly judged by, because we are counselled to judge one another by their words and their actions. But Peter's statement was to the Lord Jesus Christ. And that is what He looks for from you now. He seeks that you should, from your heart, in His presence, looking Him in the face, say, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God."

It is a poor thing to have a creed in one's memory, and to make the confession of our belief a mere memorised recital of good words, sound words, however right and

proper they may be. No, when you come into the church where Christ is All-and-in-all, you have to do with Him ; you have to do with Him Who is the Truth, and He wants the truth from you. He desires " truth in the inward parts ", and let us therefore challenge ourselves whether we can say to Him, " Oh, Lord, I know very little, but I do believe in my very soul that Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God."

This is the way to be blessed in the eyes of the Lord. " Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-jona." Oh, how good and sweet the apostle's words were to our Lord, when men were saying, " Show us a sign from heaven. Show us something we can rest upon, something really from heaven." That wicked and adulterous generation had made up their minds to slaughter Him, and their murderous intent was before the eyes of the Lord Jesus. While those who were led by the leaders thought He was someone good, a man such as there had been many a time before in the Jewish history ; in truth there is but one good man, and He is the Christ, the Son of the living God ; and Peter said, " Thou, Jesus of Nazareth, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God."

There comes thus to the Lord Jesus Christ a refreshing draught in His service. He had not laboured altogether in vain. He had not spent His strength entirely for naught. Here was some fruit that was sweet to His taste. This man had made this noble and true confession in the ears of others as well as in the ears of the Lord Himself. " Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-jona : for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but My Father which is in heaven." Is it not beautiful to see the care of the Father, if I may venture to use the word, for the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ ? " The Father loveth the Son, and hath given all things into His hands." He knew the worth of His blessed Son, and He saw men in this world turn away from that Son ; and so He opened the eyes and heart and lips of this man to speak faithfully and to speak the truth concerning His Sent One. And so Simon was truly a blessed man, favoured of God.

THE NEW BUILDING

But the Lord Himself had something now to say : " I also say unto thee." We have the Father's testimony to Peter concerning the Son, and we also have the Son's saying to Peter concerning the church : " I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church ; and the gates of hell (hades) shall not prevail against it."

What was the rock upon which He would build His church ? " Thou art Peter ", He said. The explanation has often been made that Peter was but a stone, as his new name means, and he could not be the foundation of solid rock on which the church would be built.

The Lord now gives Simon his new name, that spiritual name that He had conferred upon him at His first interview with him. His new name was Peter. It is the name which was his in his relationship to the Lord Jesus Christ. When a man learns the truth about the Lord Jesus Christ he enters a new world entirely, and becomes a new person, and the Lord gave the new name to Simon Bar-jona to signify the new place that he had taken as His confessor. Peter or Cephas was his new name from the first (John i. 42).

Peter had given utterance to what the Father had communicated to him about His Son, the truth of His Person. But the world and the Jewish nation stood apart from this revelation by denying this truth. They were opposed to the Lord Jesus Christ. They would not have Him. He was the Stone which the builders rejected. But the Father had revealed to Peter another foundation altogether, which was of the nature of solid rock, something which could not be overthrown by floods and tempests and storms and man's evil devices. It would stand firm and true. Why so ? Everything connected with the old dispensation, with the Jewish nation, with the earthly promises, had hitherto (so far as could be seen outwardly) rested upon man,—man's faithfulness and man's steadiness and man's reliability ; and hitherto all had failed.

Find from the Old Testament something upon which failure is not written. From Genesis to Malachi the whole testimony of Israel is a complete failure. Everything set up for trial broke down absolutely; and the Jewish nation, which was called into its special position for the particular purpose of upholding the paramount claim of the Holy Name of God as the sole Person to be worshipped, had themselves fallen into gross idolatry. They had abused the privileged position that God had given to them.

THE NEW FOUNDATION

But the Lord Jesus Christ says here to Peter, "There is now a new foundation, a solid rock"; and that rock is the Father's revelation that He has sent somebody upon Whom He can rely; and that someone is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, the Son of the living God. All the disciples on the Lake of Gennesaret, in an earlier chapter, confessed Him as the Son of God, and so subsequently did Martha, the sister of Mary and Lazarus. These confessed Him as the Son of God, as the Jewish remnant will do by-and-by, having been taught to do so in the Old Testament (Ps. ii. 7); but here was something significant—the Son of the *living* God. His was a life over which no power, no living power, could prevail. The gates of Hades shall not prevail against this foundation, because the foundation is the Son of the living God.

I think that I am perhaps saying things quite familiar to most of us here, but while they may be familiar even to all, have we all grasped and truly grasped the full significance of this truth? We learn from this verse that the church of God, which has such a perplexing appearance as we look upon its outward testimony in the world, rests upon this solid foundation, Christ Himself, the Son of the living God.

Here we can find perfect satisfaction. There are many people who are afraid lest the Ark of God should come to grief. And they put out their hands to steady it. But the church of God is safe and secure for one sole reason,

and that is because it rests upon the Lord Jesus Christ in His personal glory ; and nothing can triumph over Him. It is for you and me, who are associated with that church, to confess Him with our hearts and with our lips, and to let it be the truth marking our actions and our associations that we know and believe the Christ the Son of the living God.

“ Upon this rock ”, the Lord says, “ I will build My church.” He *would* do it ; it was then a future thing. But beforehand He makes the announcement, and He makes the announcement in associations of the Gospel history that we do well to mark. There is an indication that events in His ministry had come to a climax ; and consequently the Lord said, “ I will build My church,” to His faithful disciple, the one who was ready to scent danger whenever it was coming, and put out his sword when anything was against his Master. It was on the confession through Peter’s mouth that the truth was made clear as to the formation of the church ; and further, that the gates of Hades should not prevail against it.

This feature of the church when compared with God’s earthly kingdom is quite new. Where is David, the man after God’s own heart, in his glory ? His sepulchre is with us to-day ; the gates of Hades had prevailed over the king. Solomon in all his glory and wisdom, where is he ? His sepulchre also is with us to-day ; the gates of Hades had prevailed. All the great ones of the Old Testament had passed away. The kingdom of Israel as it appeared in its glory had passed away ; the gates of the grave had triumphed over even the faithful ones of Old Testament times.

But with regard to the church, the Lord declared it should not be so ; and that for a very simple reason, which is made clear later on. It was because of the peculiar glory and blessing that belong to the church of Christ, being founded upon His death and resurrection. This special privilege does not depend upon the length of our lives in this world. It does not depend upon our living even for a thousand years or more. “ The gates

of hell " can do nothing to frustrate the peculiar blessing of the church of Christ, because the hopes of the church are heavenly, and the glorious fruition of every purpose connected with the church is in heaven.

CHRIST'S CHURCH

So the heavenly character of the church of Christ is contained here in embryonic phrase. The Lord was going to build His church, His own peculiar church. He had spoken before in the way of parable of that which was peculiar or special to Him. The pearl has to be His own pearl ; He will sell all that the treasure in the field may be His ; and the bride, a later figure of the church, was to be *His* bride. " I will build *My* church." And in the fact of being personally possessed by Christ we have an inexpressibly beautiful and touching feature of the church. The church of Christ is the scene, if I may use the word, of the display of Christ's affections, the exercise of His love, of His brooding love over His church : " Christ loved the church, and gave Himself for it."

In the hour of His rejection, the Lord turns, as it were, to that which was to be His, His very own, His peculiar treasure : " I will build *My* church." Israel may be taken away from Him. The earthly inheritance may not come, but " I love *My* church, and the first thing that I will do, the first object that I will bring into *My* glory when the time comes shall be *My* church, the church which I will build." The building was soon begun. The building is still going on. The building presently will be completed ; and then the church will stand before the Lord in its beauty, a beauty of which the world does not dream, a beauty that the world cannot appreciate, and a beauty that only Christ can know. It is the Bridegroom who knows the beauty of the bride. It is Christ Who will know and enjoy the beauty of the church, and so will every one around Him.

" I will build *My* church. I will build upon this foundation those that confess Me ; those who will say,

'Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God' when the world is against Me, when the religious world and the professing church are against Me; those who are not ashamed to own Me before men—they shall constitute My church, which shall be for Me and with Me in the day of My glory."

The Lord also said, particularly to Peter with regard to the kingdom of heaven, "I will give to thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven", and so on. The promise meant that administration in earthly things was committed to him. The Lord goes back to the term, "kingdom of heaven", and Peter was to bind and loose in earthly matters. We find in the Acts that he did so personally.

PENTECOSTAL BUILDING

Let us now look very briefly at the verses read in the Acts. There we see the Lord had gone on high, and having ascended into heaven, He had sent down the Holy Spirit. It was known in Jerusalem by things that men saw and heard that there had been this visitation from God. The Holy Spirit Himself had come, and men were speaking by His power, and men knew that it was the power of the Holy Spirit, not because of the sound of a rushing mighty wind that they heard, not because they saw tongues of fire sit on this one and that one, but they knew it was the Holy Spirit speaking to them because the words of Peter entered their hearts and consciences and gave them to feel that they were guilty men.

And who could break down the human will that had so stubbornly set itself to resist the Lord Jesus Christ and to crucify and slay Him? There was no power but one; it was the power of the Holy Spirit. It came as a fire, and it melted, as it were, the wall of unbelief raised against our Lord Jesus Christ; and men felt that it was verily true that Jesus Christ Whom they crucified had now been exalted at the right hand of God. He was there in heaven, and this thing in Jerusalem was His doing.

It was at the first a limited company that received the gift of the Holy Spirit, but Peter spoke and his words had effect. Many men believed and were baptised in the name of Jesus Christ, and they were brought out of that "untoward generation"; and the result of his preaching was that to a little company of believers there were added three thousand souls in one day. The Lord was building His church, as He had said to Peter He would do.

You do not find a parallel in the past history of Jerusalem. You do not find a sudden influx of thousands into the nation of Israel. There was nothing like this that went out and brought a company of strangers into their midst. But the very first act of the Holy Spirit was to work in men's hearts, and three thousand, many times the number of the original company, were added to their number. This addition was not due to the striking eloquence of Peter or to anything particularly powerful or attractive in the company of the professors of the Lord Jesus Christ; it was entirely due to the power of the Holy Spirit.

And the Lord Jesus Christ, the exalted Christ, the Son of the living God, had sent down the Holy Spirit, and the Lord Himself by that Spirit was working there in Jerusalem, where He had been crucified, and calling out from those crowds of His betrayers and murderers those who should form His church. Oh, what grace on His part! What love! Again, beloved friends, we see, as it were, those tears when He looked upon the guilty city, and said, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!" Here the Lord gathers three thousand by the power of His Holy Spirit into that new assembly which He was forming. The work was to begin there; and this was the way in which He began building the new habitation of God through the Spirit.

We do not get the definite word "church" in this chapter, except in our Authorized Version. We know this actual designation should not be there, but the word occurs soon after (Acts v. 11).

What we find here is that these people who were converted and baptised were brought together. They formed a new company, and were thereby separated altogether from everyone else in Jerusalem. The feature that distinguished them was fidelity and allegiance to the Christ, Who was crucified in Jerusalem and Who was now exalted in glory. They became part of the church. They were built into that spiritual edifice in this world upon which the Lord still has His eye, and which He is still constructing. He is the Master-Workman; He is the Architect, the Designer; He is the great Workman, Who never rests. His disciples went forth, and preached everywhere, but the Lord was working with them (Mark xvi. 20). And here at the end of this chapter, we read that the Lord added daily such as should be saved.

STILL BEING BUILT

Beloved friends, this work is going on still. The church is building, but the great secret that we must hold fast is that it is the Lord Who is building. It is His work. There is no human power able to do it; no skilful preacher can bring persons into that church. It is the Lord's own work. It is He Who calls, for the church, as the original word implies, is composed of the "called-out" ones. His voice comes to this one and to another one; there is a response, and they come, not only to Him, but also to one another. They are brought into a new union, a new association which has living connection with the Son of the living God. Do you appreciate and value this truth?

Oh, if we could really lay hold of it as something that is so solidly true that nothing can alter it! No power of error or deceit can undo what the Lord does. If one is brought into His church in this world, that one will be in His church in glory, that one will share the love and glory of Christ in the day when He is no longer the rejected One, but comes in His majesty and power, comes to be wondered at, comes to be admired in those that

believe. Then, when we are there in that day of manifested glory, when as part of the church we consciously realise that glory, we shall realise it to be *His* glory. We shall say, "Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto *Thee* be the glory." How good it would be if we could learn to say it now! It is in substance the confession of the church: "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." Give Him then the glory. Because He is the Christ, the Son of the living God, we can give Him no higher praise than this. He is the Super-eminent One, and surely we love to say so, and to say so here in this world where He is disowned. Our neighbours, our friends, sometimes our dearest friends, wound us because they will not own Him; they despise the One we love and adore.

We need to abide true to our absent Lord. Let us beware lest our deceitful hearts set up anything as an idol in the place of the Christ, the Son of the living God. So may we abide with the Lord's help.

II

CHRIST AND THE COMMUNION SERVICE OF HIS CHURCH

(Read Acts ii. 41-47 ; xx. 6, 7 : I Cor. x. 14-22 ;
xi. 20-34).

I SPOKE last week of the promise of the building of Christ's church upon that foundation which should never be shaken, and on that occasion we also saw that the building was commenced on the day of Pentecost. The distinguishing feature of the church is its union by the Holy Spirit with the Lord Jesus, Who had gone on high. The Lord proved His presence there, and His power, and the fulfilment of His promise to them, by sending the Holy Spirit. The fact of the Spirit's coming was demonstrated in Jerusalem by the effect upon Peter's audience. Three thousand were that day turned to the Lord, and were added to that new company which had been formed into a habitation of God through the Spirit.

Now we know that before our Lord went on high—when on the night of His betrayal He held, if we may so express it, His final private interview with His disciples—He sought to ensure their remembrance of Him. He was about to leave them, but they must then remember Him in a particular way. That death, which He was about to accomplish in Jerusalem, must not be forgotten. And He thereupon instituted the breaking of bread for their continual observance.

The Lord was on high ; they were here. He would not leave them nor forsake them. He would always be

with them in the power of His Spirit, Whom He would send ; but the great object of the Lord's Supper was that their affections should not wander away from Him, Who had passed through death for them. That which must necessarily touch the heart of a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ more than anything else is His love, which was unto death. His obedience to the One Who sent Him went as far as death, even the death of the cross.

Now the remarkable fact that stands before us in the second chapter of the Acts is that there was an immediate response on the part of that newly-formed assembly in Jerusalem to this desire of our Lord that they should break bread in remembrance of Him. The church of God was entirely distinct from God's ancient people. The high priest, the Jewish council, had nothing whatever to say or do in connection with the arrangements of the assembly of God. The Spirit of God was there already in the midst of the disciples. He was not in the temple with all its architectural grandeur, but in and with those who love our Lord Jesus Christ.

FOURFOLD CONTINUANCE

And the Spirit of God records here that " they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine, and fellowship, and in breaking of bread and in prayers." These were the four things that were characteristic of these people. No longer is it the teaching of Moses ; it is now the apostles' teaching. It is no longer the natural tribal fellowship which arose because the Jews were all the seed of Abraham according to the flesh, but there was a new fellowship entirely, a fellowship which was the consequence of their being indwelt by God the Holy Spirit, Who had united these disciples of the Lord, and made them one with the Christ of God. And this fellowship expressed itself in their having one heart and one soul, having all things common, being together for one purpose. There was one fellowship, the communion of saints, which is an abiding feature of the church.

The member of the body of Christ is not regarded as an isolated person, not as an individual. He is an individual so far as his reception of the gospel is concerned ; he is an individual so far as his responsibilities are concerned. As a sinner before God a man is, and must be, an individual amenable to judgment, but when he comes to Christ he is thereupon brought into this unity, this holy association, this new place in the church of God, where all are one because the Holy Spirit is there. At the beginning, this oneness was expressed continuously.

But there was also the breaking of bread. This was what the Lord enjoined—the remembrance of Himself in eating of the loaf and in drinking of the wine. That He was absent, so far as the outward eye could see, they knew. But He was present with them to preside at this meeting, and to make the breaking of bread totally unlike those empty Jewish ceremonies which were still going on in Jerusalem. It was a living act on their part in the presence of the living Lord, of remembrance that He, the Son of the living God, went down into death on their behalf, for the glory of God.

There were the prayers which are mentioned also. These were the regular prayers of the church as the church. The disciples had the extraordinary privilege of being able to unite their hearts in earnest supplication at the throne of grace, the Spirit Himself interceding for them and in them. It was not one man praying for another, but it was the continuance of them all acting together in prayer. They each had their individual prayers in the privacy of their own circle, but what is spoken of here was true of them all when they were together. So they continued steadfastly in the prayers of the assembly.

We ought not to overlook the importance of assembly prayer. Two or three may pray anywhere, and at any time, having some specific desire before them ; but that is not necessarily assembly prayer. The assembly prayer is when members of the body of Christ come together with the united purpose of seeking the face of the Lord

in earnest supplication ; and, being together as such, the Holy Spirit makes intercession for them unitedly with groanings that cannot be uttered. Such prayers are fruitful in blessing.

You find that when the church was praying in Jerusalem, the whole place was shaken—a remarkable token that God hears and answers united prayer. And it is still so. In the present broken and scattered condition of the church it remains true that we may continue steadfastly, if we will, in the assembly prayers. Let us not forget to do so.

BREAKING OF BREAD ESTABLISHED

We find that the breaking of bread was an established practice among these new church-members. The practice was there so fully and so definitely established that we are told in the 46th verse that they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple and breaking bread at home, did eat their meat, or food, with gladness. Here a distinction is drawn between eating their food and breaking bread because elsewhere we do find breaking of bread used with reference to an ordinary meal—in the last chapter of Luke (xxiv. 35), for instance. Here the breaking of bread was not the ordinary meal ; it was the remembrance of the Lord Jesus according to His own appointment before He went on high ; and the Holy Spirit, to prevent confusion, joins it with the ordinary partaking of food. They ate their food with gladness, but they broke bread at home, not in the temple. And they did so daily. Their hearts were in continual touch with Him Who had so recently gone from their midst. It was a real thing to them too, because not so many days, very few weeks, had passed since some of them actually saw Him when He said to them in the upper room, "This do in remembrance of Me."

They may have recalled the very tone of His words in the upper room, when He looked into the faces of the eleven, and said, "This do in remembrance of Me." Could they refuse obedience to Him ? Was it a hardship

for them to do this day by day in remembrance of Him? It was real to them in Jerusalem, but we ought not to forget that though many centuries have passed since the Lord uttered those words, the Holy Spirit can still make them vivid and real to us also, if we will. If we are together, sensible of the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ in the midst and waiting upon the Holy Spirit to act among us as He will, will you tell me that He cannot make the voice of the Lord and the presence of the Lord a reality to our hearts?

Then why is it not always so? Is it not because we lack faith? Because we come into the presence of the Lord in a way that we should not come into His holy presence? We come in perhaps as if we are going into our dining-rooms to sit down to a meal, forgetting that the Lord is there, in His assembly. The breaking of bread was a real memorial to those persons in Jerusalem, and it can also be real to us now. The Lord is in our midst; the Holy Spirit also is there; and in spite of all our weakness and failure His presence becomes a real thing to our hearts.

So it was then at the very beginning in Jerusalem. And so we find later in Acts xx. at Troas. There, in that town, the disciples met together in accordance with their practice on the first day of the week, the day of the Lord's resurrection. And we know it was a weekly practice because the apostle, who was on a journey to Jerusalem, and anxious to get there as quickly as possible, tarried at Troas seven days expressly (so we may gather from the scripture) that he might break bread with them, and also use the occasion of their being together to discourse to them concerning the things of Jesus Christ.

And it was not, as the ordinary text might seem to imply, that the disciples came together to break bread and that Paul came in amongst them as a stranger; but the correct rendering is, "when *we* came together." It was the joint act of them all, Paul and his companions as well as the local brethren.

They met together as the assembly, and the express

purpose of their coming together was to break bread in remembrance of the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul's discourse to them was a secondary matter ; breaking of bread was put first, as it always should be by the assembly of God, the reason being that the breaking of bread is the express wish of the *Head* of the church. The Lord Jesus in His supremacy, in His authority, as being Head over all things to the church, has signified what His will is in this respect, and we delight to respond to that request of His.

BREAKING OF BREAD IN PRACTICE

I pass on to notice what the apostle says in 1 Corinthians with regard to the breaking of bread from a doctrinal point of view. In the Acts we have the historical references to the practice which are all the more forcible because they are introduced incidentally in the course of the narrative. Luke, in writing the Acts, does not draw particular attention to the breaking of bread, but he mentions the custom as he proceeds with his history, showing that it was a part of the church's regular procedure. So in this unobtrusive way, its observance in Jerusalem and at Troas is noted.

Because the Lord Jesus laid down so few particulars about this ceremony—if I may use this rather cold word—the saints of God are in danger of abusing it. Let me put it in the first person ; *we* are in danger of abusing this precious privilege of remembering our Lord Jesus Christ in the breaking of bread.

The apostle in his Epistle to the Corinthians, in the two chapters that we all know, the tenth and the eleventh, makes two distinct references to this subject, each having its particular teaching for them and us.

Looking at the tenth chapter very cursorily, we see that the breaking of bread is spoken of in contrast with idolatrous feasts. These saints of God were for the most part recent converts from idolatry, and were accustomed to the orgies that went on in connection with the worship of false gods. And we know it is an easy thing and a

common failure to bring into the church the habits of unconverted days.

In our unconverted days we served ourselves. In our case, it may not have been in the worship of stupid idols, but it certainly was in following the desires of our own mind, and in having our own way, and in listening to the voice of men like ourselves. Hence the truth that was spoken to correct the Corinthians applies in principle to ourselves.

THE CUP OF BLESSING

These people had imported some of their former idolatrous ways into the assembly in connection with the simple remembrance of the Lord Jesus Christ; and the apostle warns them to flee from idolatry (x. 14) because the evil power of Satan was behind all idolatry, and would defile the saints. He said, if I may try to paraphrase the words to help a little, "This new feast, this breaking of bread, brings you into the closest and most intimate association with one another as well as with the Christ of God. What does the loaf set forth? What does the cup set forth? It is association with Christ and the fellowship of the whole assembly." "The cup of blessing", the apostle says, "which we bless, is it not the communion (or fellowship) of the blood of Christ?" The closest and most intimate fellowship with Christ was expressed by the cup. And the apostle, in the earlier verses, had reminded them of how such association in the things of God was regarded in Old Testament times.

He refers back, as you will remember, to incidents in the history of the people of Israel when they went through the wilderness. Then they all ate of the same spiritual meat; they all drank of the same spiritual drink; and he adds one thing in connection with the drinking of the water, miraculously supplied from the rock; he says, "And that rock was Christ." The Israelites all outwardly partook of the benefits of the smitten rock—Christ. They all drank of the cup of blessing that the smitten rock in the wilderness had

provided. But how many of them fell in the wilderness because of their association with idols? God smote them, and most of them failed to reach the promised land. And these things, the apostle says, "were written for our admonition." They are solemn warnings against defiling association.

The remembrance of the Lord Jesus Christ is a most holy occupation. We then come into close contact with Christ, and in a particularly solemn way: in connection with His blood. "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the *blood* of Christ?" And therefore this service is so holy. We are touching what is holy, and therefore, since we touch what is holy in the remembrance of the Lord Jesus Christ, what manner of persons ought we to be? What godliness there should be in us! What separation from all that is defiling and contrary to the Christ of God!

We are apt to consider only the fact that we are called to take the cup of blessing. We think of it mainly as the cup of blessing. We bless God for it. Our hearts rise to Him in thankfulness because of the privilege which is ours to be at the Table, and to share one with another that cup of blessing.

But let us go a step further. Let us not forget that holiness becomes the house of God, His habitation through the Spirit. And this question of holy behaviour is so serious because on these occasions we are all so closely and intimately connected with the Lord Jesus Christ. This, I suppose, is one reason why in this passage we have the cup mentioned first: a reversion of the usual order. We might suppose that the apostle would speak first of the bread, and then of the cup, but instead of the historical sequence, he speaks of the cup first, and then the bread. He speaks of the blood before he speaks of the body. Now the blood of Christ is that which cleanses us from all sin, and removes it finally; it makes atonement; it is the ground of fellowship in the light of God; and therefore we are forcibly reminded by it first of all that in participating in these extraordinary and unparalleled privileges we are engaged in a most holy

occupation. Communion with the blood of Christ behoves us to maintain separation from everything that is inconsistent with the holiness of the name of Christ Jesus our Lord.

THE SYMBOLIC LOAF

The loaf which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? Here, we have communion, or fellowship, named again. This time it is in connection with the body of Christ. Now, the body of Christ, we gather from this passage, has a twofold signification. First, the loaf represents the body of Christ, which was given for us, that holy body in which He bore our sins upon the tree. "This is My body", the Lord said, referring to that sacrifice which He made of Himself in order that our sins might be purged.

But there is more. In the second aspect the body of Christ signifies the whole company of believers, forming His church or assembly. "As the body is one", the apostle, speaking of the natural body, says in the twelfth chapter, "As the body is one, and hath many members . . . so also is Christ." What does He mean? He means there that Christ is the name of that new man, the mystical man, consisting of the heavenly Head, Christ, and the church, His members; they are together looked upon as one.

The body of Christ then includes all those that are His, all those who are associated with Him as the Head. Accordingly, the apostle says in this place, "For we", many though we are, "for we being many are one bread, and one body." He does not mean here the body of Christ as that sacrifice which was given for us, but that body which by the Holy Spirit is formed of those that belong to the Lord Jesus Christ. These are the body of Christ.

And therefore we have this remarkable fact that two or three gathered together in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ for the remembrance of the Lord in His death see before them in the loaf a symbol of that one perfect body which is the church of God for which Christ gave Himself.

There may be but two or three members present, but there before the Lord they are entitled to behold in the one loaf, the one body united to Him by the Holy Spirit ; and we ought not to forget this side of the truth. The manifold extension of the church of God, throughout the centuries so far as time is concerned, is there represented in its unity at the Lord's table every time that we are together for the breaking of bread.

The Lord would not have us to forget, however feeble, and few, we may be, however scattered the saints of God may be, however ruined the condition of the church at large may be, He would not have us to forget that He died for the whole church, the one church. The thought before Him was that they, however many and diverse, should be one ; and He intends them to be one now. They are therefore one by the Holy Spirit ; and they will be one in glory throughout all eternity.

Before the bread is eaten, the loaf is broken, of course. It is passed to all, that all may partake. The thought of unity is prominent in this chapter. This intimate association between the saints of God is, beloved friends, what God calls us to maintain in this day of brokenness. We ought never to give up this testimony. As we look about us, and see conflicting parties on every hand in Christendom, the Lord reminds us that His own are still one, one body. We belong to that one body for which He gave Himself. "The gates of hell [hades] shall never prevail against it." He said, "I will build My church", and He will do so. And because He said it, we believe and rejoice in it. The reason for our assurance lies in the fact that He died, and overcame death by His own mighty power, and is now risen on high.

So that the question of association comes out specially in this tenth chapter ; we are all partakers of the one loaf. And great responsibilities devolve upon us because of this truth, though we cannot now pursue them further.

I want now to say a few words on the following chapter with special reference to this service of the church.

LORD AND CHRIST

In the eleventh chapter, as we know very well, we find a different view of the breaking of bread is taken. Here the question before the apostle is the proper behaviour of the individuals present to eat the Lord's supper. They are there, each having a separate responsibility. It is not a question of their all being one and all being merged in a spiritual unity; but individual conduct is here considered. It is a matter of one and another person being judged and chastened of the Lord. Responsibility comes in, and this is why the title of the Lord is different in the eleventh chapter from the tenth. In the tenth chapter, as we saw, it is Christ—"the blood of Christ"; "the body of Christ." This is the official title of the Lord as the One to Whom the church in its unity belongs; "*Christ* loved the church, and gave Himself for it." But His Lordship is brought in when the connection is specially with the truth of our responsibility to Him, Who is our Lord.

The apostle makes it manifest that it is possible for persons to come together and participate in the Lord's supper and yet not to eat the Lord's supper at all. The Corinthians came together, and the result was that they ate their own supper. They brought their own food and their wretched selves with them. "Self" was prominent in their minds all the time they were together. And though they made the usual motions with their mouths their hearts were far from the Lord.

THE SOLEMNITIES OF THE GATHERING

The Lord looks upon this assembly with sadness, and in His authority and power He judges those who are present to remember Him in His death, but who forget His living presence. He still walks as the Lord in the midst of the assembly, and we ought to remember this when we are together. Because, when we consider it, can there be a more solemn engagement for us on this earth? Is anything more solemn than being together to

remember the Lord Jesus Christ when He died,—*when He died*? We may have seen our dear ones pass from us. Oh, such a solemn fact, is it not, when those we love most dearly leave us, and we see their faces no more? But, after all, what is the death of our dearest ones in comparison with the death of the Lord Jesus Christ? The Lord of life, the One Who had fullest power over death, that He Himself should go down into death, and *such* a death, the death of the cross!

When we gather together for the breaking of bread, and look by faith again and again to Calvary, recalling those incidents of shame and suffering, they become almost familiar to us, but yet fresher and fuller every time they are before our hearts. Surely this is so. We know it is the most solemn occupation of the saints of God in this world. And therefore there is the constant need for circumspection in approaching to take part in the remembrance of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The apostle assumes that the Corinthian saints understand that the Lord is there, at His supper. He is spoken of as supervising, so to speak, what is proceeding at the remembrance of His death. The apostle had delivered to them what he himself received of the Lord. As we think of the fact of this special revelation it adds to the seriousness of the subject. The apostle could tell them that the Lord in glory had spoken directly and specially to himself with regard to His supper. Paul, the chiefest of the apostles, was not present with the eleven in the supper-room before the crucifixion; but the Lord spoke directly from heaven to him that he might have it from His own lips in glory that this supper was to be observed by those who loved Him.

Paul speaks of the supper being instituted on the night of His betrayal. "For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, that the Lord Jesus the same night in which He was betrayed took bread: and when He had given thanks, He brake it, and said, Take, eat: this is My body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of Me. After the same manner also He took the cup, when He had supped, saying, This cup

is the new testament in My blood : this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of Me." " My body ;" " My blood ;" " Me ;" there was the fact of His own personal presence behind (not in) the bread and the wine.

The supper was a memorial of Him in His death, but it was a memorial of Him, the living One. It sent their hearts back to Calvary, but He was present ; this was the point. They had houses to eat and drink in, if it was a question of satisfying hunger and thirst ; let them eat their necessary food at home. But at the Supper the Lord was there. His death and the manner of His death occupied their hearts.

And if they realised by the Holy Spirit that He was present, they would automatically, so to speak, fall into their proper posture of adoration before Him, as they remembered that He, the One before their hearts, had been veritably crucified. When Thomas saw His hands and His side, his ejaculation was, " My Lord and my God." And it will be so with us too when we are before Him, and His hands and His side come into our view, that from our hearts will spring involuntarily, by the influence of the Holy Spirit, the cry of worship, " Our Lord and our God."

Such worship is not something that can be arranged beforehand. It is not something that we can concoct in the privacy of our own homes. Worship springs unprompted from our hearts by the working of the Holy Spirit when we are together. Only we are to be careful that our hearts, when we do come, are in such a state that the Holy Spirit can act within us.

And what state is this ? The right state is that of having the Lord Himself before our hearts. I have come to remember Him. No, put it in another way. I say beforehand, " I am coming at eleven o'clock to remember Him." And this thought will surely set me right. If there is anything upon my heart and conscience that ought not to be there, the very thought, the very assurance and confidence that I am about to be in the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ will cause me before I arrive to confess my sin to Him. If it be the

sin of forgetfulness or unpreparedness, confess that to Him. And He will faithfully forgive my sin, and cleanse me from all unrighteousness, so that I may come there a clean person, a pure vessel, cleansed by water, the word, prepared to be used by the Holy Spirit. Then the Holy Spirit will bring before me fresh thoughts of our Lord, fresh views of His person and His work, fresh memories and fresh joys; and the heart will leap up gladly in praise and adoration to Him. Let us not take everything for granted, as if there were no need for serious exercise of heart, when we come together to show the Lord's death.

BEHAVING UNWORTHILY

This passage in 1 Corinthians xi. is often read partially. We read the verses (20-26) that bear directly upon the Lord's supper, but when we reach those (27-34) that speak of eating this bread and drinking this cup of the Lord unworthily, there is a shrinking from these words, because of their solemnity. "Whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord." Whereupon some say at once, "I cannot come; for I am sure that I am not worthy to come." But on examining the scripture we find that it is not a question of my worthiness in coming. The unworthiness is in connection with my behaviour when I am there. "Whosoever shall eat and drink unworthily"; clearly, it is the way in which the thing is done.

The sin at Corinth was the allowance of *self* at the Lord's table. One was drunken, one took his own supper before another; it was self clamouring for the upper hand and the foremost place. And self can be indulged in many ways. There may be a contest as to who shall be first in giving out a hymn, or who shall read a scripture. There may be a display of self in all sorts of ways. If a person reads a scripture, I may say, "Well, I am not going to follow that." A certain person prays or gives thanks, and I may inwardly say, "Well, I shall

not say 'Amen' to that.' And who is speaking? *I myself*, that wretched self for which Christ died. There it is raising its shameful head in that very holy presence.

Then it is that I eat and drink unworthily. Then it is that I am in danger of being guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. I forget the solemn meaning of these emblems; I forget the sacred presence of my Lord; I ignore the guidance of God the Holy Spirit. And what is such conduct but sacrilege in the house of God? What can I expect but discipline, the exercise of the serious discipline from the Lord, of which warning is given here?

Oh, beloved friends, these grave words are not placed in close conjunction with the Lord's supper for no purpose. It is not for us to suppose that they apply only to persons who lived long ago, and not to ourselves. No, they apply to each one of us. Everyone of us, I am grieved to say, is in danger at the Lord's supper of eating and drinking unworthily, in an unworthy manner. If you think you are not in such danger I am not able to agree with you. Though I can only speak for myself, all the members of the body of Christ sprang from the same fallen race; they all have the same fallen nature within them. Christ has condemned that old self, that evil nature, by His sacrifice upon the cross; and, beloved friends, if we do not keep it in the place where He has put it, under His feet, then it will make its appearance even on this exceptionally holy occasion of remembering the Lord in His death.

Let us see to it that we judge ourselves, because the Lord is holy. "Be ye holy, for I am holy." Without this we cannot acquire a condition of practical holiness that is fit for His presence. There is a practical holiness which the Lord enjoins on us, and we are in danger of forgetting our responsibility in this respect. There is great danger of this for the simple reason that when we come together from time to time there is no recognised organisation, no outward ceremonial, no agreed constitution designed to guide our own thoughts and to prevent any unwarrantable intrusion by those who are not entitled to speak.

Therefore there is a constant risk of falling into some kind of improper behaviour, and so of losing the sweetness of the remembrance in the scriptural way of the Lord Jesus in His death. And, beloved friends, it is there, most surely, that we learn more of the love of our Lord Jesus Christ than we do anywhere else, because in His sufferings, in the darkness through which He passed, in all that terrible time on the cross, we are led by the Holy Spirit to see the love and glory of God shining out even in that dark hour. We remember Him in His death, and our hearts rise in worship and thankfulness to God the Father, Who sent Him, and to God the Son, Who gave Himself to go obediently even unto death, the death of the cross.

III

CHRIST AND THE VARIOUS MEMBERS OF HIS BODY

(Read 1 Corinthians xii.)

THIS scripture (1 Cor. xii.) is one of several in the New Testament that deal with the subject of the membership of the body of Christ.

We saw last week that the oneness of the body of Christ was symbolically represented at the Lord's table by the one loaf. There the fact of corporate unity was set forth in connection with the remembrance of the Lord Jesus in His death, but in this twelfth chapter of First Corinthians we have brought out very distinctly the diversity that exists in the body of Christ.

The body of Christ is one, and in this respect is quite distinct from the unity of the nation of Israel. That nation consisted, as we know, of twelve tribes, and those twelve tribes were represented before the Lord on the table of shewbread by twelve loaves, one for each tribe. There was a national unity expressed in the fact that the tribes were all there, and the whole nation was thus represented, but the fact of their having the joint responsibility of administration in government was set out by their being twelve loaves. In the church of Christ, however, there is but one loaf. And this more intimate unity exists in spite of the fact that the body of Christ is made up of believing Jews and Gentiles, bond and free, of all classes and conditions of men. They are all brought together, and welded by the Holy Spirit into a single corporation.

But then the church is not a community, a congregation of people who are all precisely alike, all identical in character, capacity, and condition before the Lord, and therefore make up a solid mass of similar particles, so to speak. There is a diversity among the members of Christ, necessary for life, for living action towards one another, and for testimony for God in the world. Therefore the Spirit of God uses this figure of the human body to represent the relationship of believers one to another in the body of Christ, and, above all, in their connection with the Head on high.

UNION WITH THE HEAD

It is often overlooked in speaking of the body of Christ that the body is of no account at all apart from the Head. The headless body of Goliath was only a proof of his final defeat. The body of Christ upon the earth without its Head is really unthinkable, and we can easily rob ourselves of the beauty and force of this truth by forgetting that there is a real, vital connection between the saints of God as a whole and the Lord Jesus Christ on high. He is the living Head there, and because He is the living Head there, the body of Christ on earth lives also, and will live, and must live, so long as the Head remains intact in glory.

This fact is a source of comfort to those saints of God who are really tried and troubled by the present condition of ecclesiastical affairs, which are so different from what we find in the Scriptures. Perhaps some persons are apt to be cast down, and to say, "What is to become of us? What is to become of the saints of God? What is to become of the church of God? Is it all to be wrecked? Is it to go absolutely to pieces, and its testimony to be destroyed utterly?" Never; because of this unseen, but real, connection with the Lord Jesus Christ on high.

And this connection—if you will allow me to dwell on this point for a moment—this connection of the body with Christ does not depend upon ourselves in the same

way as our personal communion with Christ depends upon ourselves. To take an example, we know very well that we may go through a day in happy intercourse with the Lord Jesus Christ, but this is the result of some conscious effort on our part. On the other hand, because we are lackadaisical in our ways, and allow things to drift, and temporal matters to usurp the chief place in our hearts, we may lose altogether the sense of the communion which we have, and which, as children of God, we should enjoy with the Father and the Son.

Therefore, the enjoyment of individual communion, viewed in this way, depends upon ourselves. But the wonderful connection of the church of God with the Lord Jesus Christ does not depend upon ourselves. We are baptized into one body by the Holy Spirit of God, and it is the Holy Spirit of God Who is the powerful link between the saints of God as the body of Christ upon the earth with the glorified Head on high. And as long as the church is on earth the Spirit abides in that habitation of God.

And we can thus take comfort from the remembrance of this fact. But we must also bear in mind that the active care exercised by the Lord does not remove from us all responsibility in connection with the church. This is enforced by scripture also. We have our own responsibility as members of the body of Christ, and in this twelfth chapter we have brought out the activities that go on amongst the saints of God for their edification, for their spiritual joy, for their peace, for their power to witness for the truth in the world. The Spirit of God shows us here that all the saints of God are mutually dependent one upon another; that their common welfare and spiritual growth rest upon individual effort, individual faithfulness, individual communion with the Lord Jesus Christ.

You will see that at the commencement of this chapter, the apostle refers to the sharp distinction they should draw between the power of the Holy Spirit of God acting in the assembly and the counterfeit action of

the emissaries of Satan—demons, who, through idols, exercised a destructive effect upon men.

The Corinthians, in their natural state, were accustomed to those things, and therefore they might be deceived when they were displayed in the assembly of God. Consequently, the apostle gave them a test whereby they might prove what was of the Holy Spirit and what was of an unclean spirit ; and this test was the Lordship of Christ. The Spirit of God invariably glorifies the Lord Jesus Christ, and calls Him “ Lord ” ; but an unclean spirit never does this. Never ; he is there to degrade, if possible, the Person of the Lord Jesus and remove Him from the attention of the saints of God. The apostle writes, “ I give you therefore to know, that no one, speaking in (the power of the) Spirit of God, says Curse (on) Jesus ; and no one can say, Lord Jesus, unless in (the power of the) Holy Spirit.” (New Trans.)

DIVINE AGENCY AND THE GIFTS

Then he proceeds in the fourth, fifth and sixth verses to show that the actions which take place in the assembly of God for mutual edification and comfort, arise from the agency of the Spirit of God, of the Lord Jesus Christ, of God Himself. He says, “ There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God which worketh all in all.” There the great fact that he establishes is that whatever ministry is really worth having amongst the saints of God comes to us by the power of God working in our midst. This may seem a very simple and elementary truth, but it is one of real importance to us, because we may find ourselves in a very small company of people, where we may have elements of weakness staring us in the face every time we are together. And if we suppose that our resources are entirely in the hands and hearts of those that are assembled together, we shall be depressed perhaps by this poverty-stricken condition. Despair seizes us for

the simple reason that we have forgotten the existence of the Spirit of God ; we have forgotten the Lordship of Christ ; we have forgotten that God Himself works all in all in the assembly. In short, we have overlooked the threefold encouragement of these verses.

Paul says, first of all, There are many gifts, various gifts, in the assembly, but there is one Spirit Who gives them. The same Spirit distributes His gifts in the assembly to one and another as it pleases Him. He is the ruler. He appoints. There is no human governor ; there is no human arrangement at all, but the various kinds of gifts all spring from the same Spirit. You must have noticed in this chapter how the phrase recurs over and over again—" the same Spirit." There is one Spirit, the One Who came down at Pentecost, the One Who dwells in the church, the One Whom the Lord promised to be with us for ever. It is not a human, not an evil spirit, but the same Holy Spirit ; He gives the gifts.

But, secondly, a man may have a gift, and may be concerned to know how and when he is to use it. For direction in this matter he has to look to the Lord, as may be gathered from the teaching in the next verse. They had differences of administrations, which means the ordering of the time when the gift should be put in exercise. There was the regulation of the movements of the soul, ordering a man when to speak and when to be silent ; what place he is to speak in, and what place he is to desist from visiting. All such activity is under the direction of the " same Lord."

You find instances in the Acts. Those that assayed to go into Bithynia were not suffered to go by the Spirit of Jesus (Acts xvi. 7). The Lord spake to Paul in Corinth, telling him that He had much people in that city, and the apostle remained there for eighteen months, teaching the word of God. And so you find the Lord exercising His prerogative of government in the midst of the church. The man who has a gift by the Holy Spirit has no right to use it except as the Lord directs. The Lord will not allow anyone to use His gift for his own pleasure, but only as He means him to act in the midst of the

church. If it is a question even of singing praise collectively in the assembly, the Lord Jesus Christ says, "In the midst of the assembly, will I sing praise unto Thee" (Heb. ii. 12).

So that the Lord administers whatever processes are in progress in the body of Christ. And then the apostle says, "There are diversities of operations, but it is the same God which worketh all in all." He makes it clear that it is God Himself Who is active—not that the Spirit is not God; He is; not that the Lord Jesus is not God; He is. But the apostle sums up the Trinity in a word, and shows us that God Himself is intimately interested in all the affairs of the assembly of God. He worketh all things in all the assembly. The words are so framed that there is no loophole of escape from His operation. There is no little obscure member whose functions are left out of it. There is no little deed that is done, no action such as giving out a hymn, nor any simple act performed by any member of the body of Christ, but God Himself is the One Who works all things in all. What a holy character this truth imparts to assembly activity! And how effective for the well-being of the assembly!

THE MANIFESTATION OF THE SPIRIT

We have spoken already of the Spirit bestowing the gifts in a general way (verse 4). The apostle goes on to speak more fully in the seventh and the following verses of the manifestation of the Spirit: "the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal." What are we to understand by "the manifestation of the Spirit"? The manifestation is the act of making the presence of the Spirit plain and patent to others. What is hidden is certainly not manifest; and the Holy Spirit Himself is here in this world in an invisible form. The Lord Jesus Christ, God the Son, was manifest in flesh; He was seen of angels, as well as men. He was an object of sight and hearing to the apostles and others. He was manifest in the world; but the Holy Spirit is not incarnate, and therefore His presence and His action

are concealed for the most part. The manifestation of the Spirit is through the members of the body of Christ.

The fact whether this person has a gift or that person has a gift is known only to the Spirit, except when the Spirit manifests Himself in working through this person and that for the exercise of the gift. Hence the apostle speaks here of the "manifestation of the Spirit, which is given to every man to profit withal."

Take the first example given. A certain man has the word of wisdom; there it is in his soul. It is a power of discerning spiritual truth which he has within himself. The Spirit has given it to him, and he enjoys it himself. But so far as the rest of the assembly is concerned, they are ignorant of it, until the Holy Spirit leads that person to use the word of wisdom for the comfort and the well-being of his fellow-members. Then the action of the Holy Spirit is made manifest. When a brother stands up and gives a word of wisdom, then I say to myself, "That is of the Spirit of God. That man is speaking as led of God. I know there is something in his word that I can put into practice in my life. I feel the power of the Spirit of truth behind it."

So the apostle gives us a rule, as it were, by which we may judge the working of the Holy Spirit among the members of the body of Christ. When those possessing gifts are actuated by the Holy Spirit of God, they do something or say something in the assembly which is to the profit of the fellow-members. Such useful exercise does not arise simply because a person has a very happy thought that came to him during the week, and now thinks he would like to communicate it to everyone else on the Lord's Day morning. It does not at all follow that the word from God which was very helpful to himself is also a word of wisdom on that particular occasion for others. Who is to judge what is suitable for all those assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus? It is the Spirit of God Who manifests His controlling and influencing power by choosing and directing the ministry in a way most helpful to the saints of God.

And so you have this catalogue of diverse ministry

which gives us the manifold manifestation of the Spirit : the word of wisdom, and the word of knowledge, both of which the apostle is careful to say are by the same Spirit. Then he says, " and to another faith by the same Spirit ; and to another the gifts of healing by the same Spirit." Why do we find in this varied list the repetition, " by the same Spirit " ? Because we are so apt to approve only of the particular gift that pleases us, forgetting the variety in the Holy Spirit's operations.

There are some, for instance, who are very pleased with an exhibition of knowledge. A person who can run very quickly from Genesis to Revelation and point out this, that, and the other throughout the pages of Scripture commands their admiration. They say, " What a knowledge of the Scripture he has ! " And the exhibition of knowledge—the fact of his possessing apparently an intimate acquaintance with the truths of Scripture—appeals to them.

The word of knowledge is here stated to be the manifestation of the Spirit ; and it has its place as a means of instruction ; but then I ought not to say, " I like the word of knowledge, and prefer it to anything else." The Spirit of God may see that I need a word of wisdom first. This is something different from the word of knowledge, because wisdom is the right application of the truth of God to the troublesome and puzzling circumstances in which we often find ourselves.

A person gives us a word by the Holy Spirit, which, like a flash of light, shows us the way. We may have been praying and puzzling for a long time as to what was the right thing for us, and at last some one is led to give the word of wisdom. Then we know what is the will of God. He has set before us that truth of scripture which has shone as a light upon our path.

To be able to do this is a high attainment in ministry to the saints. I suppose only that person can speak the words of wisdom who is humble and lowly in himself ; who has the fear of God before him ; and who lives in communion with the Son ; for only the Lord Himself can teach us how to apply His truth to the manifold

difficulties that arise day by day. But the wise person is the one who sits like Mary at the feet of the Lord Jesus, and hears His word—that word which is always capable of helping us, and of preserving us from the errors to which we are liable. This is how to learn to be wise, and the Holy Spirit then gives us the word of wisdom, that is, the ability of putting it so that it will help others. We read in the Proverbs, “The tongue of the wise useth knowledge aright” (Prov. xv. 2).

This service is not necessarily and always a word spoken in the assembly meeting. A word of wisdom may be spoken in private life between two members of the body of Christ. And if we can even in a private way speak a word of wisdom to a person who is distracted and perplexed in the things of daily life, it is of great value: it is something which will advance the spiritual health of the whole body of Christ.

Let us remember that the Spirit of God gives all these things. We would probably like to possess the gift of healing; but the Spirit of God puts first the word of wisdom; and the word of knowledge and faith comes before it too. Faith is the power of taking hold of God, of laying hold of His word, and of counting upon Him in the face of every difficulty, and of every foe. There are those that have this faith which is given them by God the Spirit. We are all believers, but not every believer has the faith that is spoken of here—the faith that removes mountains, the faith that opposes Satan and quenches his fiery darts, the faith that is always triumphant, the faith that walks even on the waves of the sea.

NINE GIFTS, ONE SPIRIT

As the fruit of the Spirit in Gal. v. 22, 23, is ninefold, so there are nine gifts of the Spirit enumerated here for the help and blessing of the church; but you will notice that in the eleventh verse the apostle says, “All these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally as He will.” So there is no confusion in the body of Christ. In the human body all its

members are co-ordinated, and they work together for a common purpose—the health and activity of the whole. And so it is in the body of Christ, the reason being that God's own Spirit is working there. However many the gifts may be, He controls and uses them all for one purpose, that is, for the blessing of all the members of the body of Christ and so to the glorification of the Head of the body, Christ Himself.

And it is added that He, the Holy Spirit, divides severally to every man as He will. Thus the power and authority of the Spirit of God are present in the midst of the church. I think we ought to be very jealous of the authority of the Spirit of God amongst the saints, lest it should be disregarded.

The Lord Jesus has sent down the Holy Spirit into this world, and His dwelling place is in the church. His presence is denied, of course, by the world. Alas, it is denied largely by Christendom; and we who know the glory of Christ, His faithfulness to His word, and that He sent His Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and that God the Holy Spirit still dwells in the midst of His saints—how often we do not recognise His presence! Ought we not always to bow to His authority? Ought we not to wait for His leading? Ought we not ever to seek to be in such an attitude of soul that He may use us as He will?

This necessity for dependence applies to sisters as well as brothers, to silence as well as speech. For the Holy Spirit answers the expectation that is in the hearts of those that are together; and we all must wait for His movement. Did I say *wait*? Yes, in our worship we have to wait; we always have to wait for the direction of the Spirit of God.

But the word "waiting" in this connection is sometimes misunderstood. Let me seek to make it quite plain for the youngest of our friends here to-night. We come together at eleven o'clock, shall we say? for the breaking of bread, and we sit together quietly perhaps even for a quarter of an hour, *waiting*; but are our hearts inactive during that time? Is there nothing Godward passing in our souls? Is the mind a blank, as it

were, waiting for some person to break the silence and to speak aloud ?

If so, you are waiting in a wrong sense. The Spirit works in the hearts of those who recognize His presence, and would do so in the hearts of all that are together. At eleven o'clock, the appointed time, the Lord Jesus Christ is there. The Holy Spirit is there. The worship and the remembrance of the Lord Jesus Christ in His death should begin at eleven o'clock. It is not at all a question of something audible being the essential feature. Waiting is the dependent attitude we take before the Lord Jesus and the Holy Spirit. We are together to remember the Lord, and He brings to our hearts His holy word ; the Spirit brings before us the glory of Christ, the beauty of His Person, the marvels of His sacrifice ; and we break out in adoration and praise to Him, as our hearts are led back to consider Him when He laid down His life for us.

Oh, beloved friends, the Holy Spirit is verily present amongst the saints, and He works, surely works, on these occasions, if we really believe in His presence, and forbid the rising up of the impatience of our flesh.

“ SO ALSO IS CHRIST ”

In the next three verses, (12-14), the apostle goes on to speak of the oneness of the body of Christ. He says first : “ For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body : so also is Christ.” The apostle has been speaking about the gifts—the word of knowledge to one, the word of wisdom to another, faith to another, healing to another, and so on—but then all men have not gifts. The apostle now speaks of the whole body, which consists of numerous members. They are all one, though there are many. There is a variety in the body, all the members having their respective differences ; but by reason of these differences they contribute to the health and efficiency of the whole body of Christ.

This unity is not something to be constructed by

ourselves, the members ; it is not something that is a result of losing our individuality, for instance, and so becoming one with others. That is not the way in which the body is formed. We find that it is formed by the connection of the members with the Lord Jesus Christ. There is a remarkable expression here : " All the members of that one body, being many, are one body ; so also is Christ." The apostle is evidently speaking of the Head in glory and the body here upon the earth, constituting one spiritual " man ", Christ being the Head, and all the members the body. When he says, " So also is Christ," that mystical man is designated by one name—Christ.

We have an analogous instance in the Old Testament where in Genesis v., speaking of God's creation of man, we read, " Male and female created He them, and blessed them, and called *their name*, Adam." The two, husband and wife, were looked upon as one flesh bearing one name. Both were one, and the oneness in Eden is alluded to in Ephesians v. 30-32, in connection with Christ and the church in her bridal aspect. Here then you have the intimate unity existing between the body upon the earth and Christ in glory : " So also is Christ." Christ and His body are described as one.

For " by one Spirit ", he says, " we are all baptized 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." There is an allusion apparently to the two Christian ordinances—to baptism first, and to the Lord's Supper in the drinking into one Spirit. The allusion does not imply, of course, that baptism by water has anything to do with the formation of the body, but the apostle uses that well-known term to describe the action of the Holy Spirit when He came down and formed that new unity. He baptized all believing Jews and Gentiles, bond and free, into that new thing, which is called the body of Christ, in which they are all one.

But the apostle also uses a second figure, " We have all been made to drink into one Spirit." And this use perhaps explains or helps to explain why in 1 Corinthians x., speaking of the Lord's Supper, the cup is mentioned

before the loaf, because there the question treated in the verses is one of communion, of association ; and " drinking the cup " especially implies our communion with Christ and our communion with one another. Accordingly the apostle says here, we " have been all made to drink into one Spirit. For the body is not one member, but many." All the members share the operations of the one Spirit.

THE FOOT AND THE HAND

Paul goes on to show how the various members composing the church of God are dependent one upon another. There is an interdependence between all that make up this holy body of Christ. No one person, no one member, can isolate himself from the body, and maintain an independence. " If the foot shall say, Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body ; is it therefore not of the body ? " The seriousness of such a spirit of independence lies in the effort to get away from practical connection with the body of Christ. It is not only that a foot assuming to have no connection with the hand does an injury to the hand, but the whole body is affected. The apostle asks, " Is it therefore not of the body ? "

If the foot, or the hand, or both of them, were severed from the body it would be a different matter, but each forms an essential part of the body. What is the body without the foot ? It is an incomplete thing. A maimed body is imperfect, and its well-being is interfered with. Therefore there is a necessity for the presence of each member in the body, and for its activity. If the foot does not act, of what use is it ? Though it exists as a part of the body, it is a useless member. It does not help, and all the members are affected. They all suffer because it does not do its duty.

Do we not see the application to ourselves ? The functions of the foot and the hand, walk and service for God in this world, are not to be divorced. Both are necessary, because we should walk before the world as

those that belong to Christ, just as truly as we should serve to the glory of Christ. This applies equally to one member or more. The person who serves actively and diligently but fails to walk in the fear of the Lord is injuring the body of Christ. He is making a great display, showing much activity, as a rule, but there is not a consistency of life. There must be the right and faithful walk as well as the devoted service. The same principle applies to the eye and the ear and the other members.

CARE ONE FOR ANOTHER

I need not go through these verses in detail. The gist of them is that all the various members have their duty and relation one to another, and they are all helpful to each other. All the members need "to have the same care one for another." We are put together in a spiritual association by the power of God and the action of the Spirit of God; and being there, we have a responsibility, not only to the Lord, our Head, but we have also a responsibility to one another. We have by love to serve one another. We have to help one another in the things of the Lord. We have to contribute to one another's spiritual joy and peace. Where anything can be done to advance another's knowledge of scripture and of the Lord Jesus Christ, it is our business to do what we can in that respect.

We sometimes forget our responsibility to our fellow-members that are so near to us. We think of lands and islands far away, and of people far away, who are removed from us by natural inclination and habit and so on; and we forget those by whose side we sit week by week, whose faces we see, and with whose voices we join in praising the Lord, kneeling with them at the throne of grace. It is so easy to forget that we all, far and near, are members of the body of Christ, and that our responsibility to them all is greater than to any others upon the face of the earth.

The members of Christ should have the same care one for another. This requires thought; it requires wise

action ; it requires self-denial. It requires a certain amount of personal loss and self-sacrifice oftentimes to be real helpers one of another. Sometimes we may fail, and be covered with confusion when we try to help others. We must not be discouraged ; there is our responsibility. We cannot avoid occasional failure, and we cannot alter the fact that we are bound to serve one another.

The tide of spiritual vitality in the body flows down from the Head in heaven, and it comes to my fellow-member as it comes to me. This living energy binds us together practically in the discharge of our mutual affections and responsibilities. The apostle says in the twenty-sixth verse :—“ Whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it ; or one member be honoured all the members rejoice with it.” There, I think, is summed up the effect of this unseen work of the Spirit of God amongst the saints, which we often overlook to our loss, because it is distinct from oral ministry in the assembly.

Very often what we do and say in the privacy of our lives as the saints of God in prayer and Bible study, in the practice of Christian virtues, in seeking to follow Christ more closely, has an influence, apart from our knowledge, upon our fellow-members about us. We exercise an influence upon others without trying to do so. We know very well that when sometimes we come into the presence of certain persons a feeling which we had not before takes possession of us. A certain amount of joy, a certain amount of peace, an indescribable elation comes to us, and seems to help us and do us good. The shake of the hand, the very look on the face, no word being said, are often enough to illustrate the powerful influence for good that one member of Christ can shed upon a fellow-member.

This may be true of a young person, as well as of an older one. We exercise the greatest beneficial influence of this kind upon others, in so far as we ourselves receive from our Head in glory that which He alone can give us of life and communion, of holiness and power. Oh, may

we covet this power of being of real spiritual value to others. There may be only two or three around us ; this does not matter at all. It is not a question of numbers in any way. The whole secret is for *me* to be right with the Lord for myself, to allow the Holy Spirit Who dwells in the church of God to influence me in my life and action. If this be so, then the selfsame Spirit Who works in the hearts of all the saints of God, Who produces His fruit in me, will use me, perhaps silently, for the help and blessing of others.

THE LOCAL ASSEMBLY

The apostle up to this point has been speaking of the church of God as the body of Christ, regarding it in its entirety. He looks at the whole of the saints of God on the earth at one time. I hardly think that scripture warrants us in saying that the church of God, that is, the church of God composed of all the believers in Christ from Pentecost to the day of His coming, is described as the body. The body is the living thing at any given time here on the earth, though associated with Christ in heaven. Those saints who have fallen asleep and are now in Christ still form part of the assembly which Christ is building, but the body of Christ is the living organization on earth. The Lord Jesus Christ was here in the body prepared for Him, and He was the Faithful and True Witness for God. When He went on high He formed the church which is His body, to be a witness for His name, speaking to all in the world of the Christ Who is gone on high.

In the twenty-seventh verse, Paul does not repeat what we have in the thirteenth verse: we are "all baptized into one body ;" or what we have in 1 Corinthians x. 17, "we, being many, are one bread and one body ;" or as in Romans xii. 5, "we being many are one body in Christ." In these passages, he is speaking of Christians generally, of what is true of all believers wherever they are. But here, he says, "Ye are the body of Christ," that is, those to whom he was writing, the

assembly at Corinth. He means they were so in a representative way. They were responsible in their measure, according to their limitations, in the same way as the saints of God everywhere. They did not in themselves form the complete body, but they were its representative. The assembly at Corinth was representative of the whole assembly of Christ.

“Ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular.” They singly were members of the body of Christ. It does not follow that Corinth would have the same variety in the manifestation of the Spirit that was in the church at large. We know that in an assembly of only two or three there could hardly be a dozen gifts amongst them. But the distribution of gifts is not the point here. They were the body of Christ so far as receiving their due share of blessing from Christ, the Head in glory. Two or three, whoever they might be, will receive a measure of the gift of His grace in the same way as the whole body. The Lord Jesus Christ is not unmindful of those who in weakness and feebleness represent Him here upon the earth. He regards them as His body, and as members of His body. Not that they have on this account any ground for self-satisfaction, or anything wherein to boast. The truth was stated for the comfort, and also for the reproof of those at Corinth ; but we cannot now dwell further upon this interesting truth.

APOSTLES, PROPHETS, TEACHERS

The apostle goes on in the twenty-eighth verse to speak of what gifts are in the church generally. “And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues.” These are what God hath set there normally. He does not here refer to the saints as the body, but as the assembly ; and so he speaks of those gifts bestowed by Christ when He ascended up on high, and gave gifts to men.

The first three, which he places in order of importance,

are apostles, prophets, teachers: they seem to be personal gifts. Thus, the apostles were so many persons that were bestowed upon the church. They had no successors, being given for the definite purpose of laying the foundation of the church. They passed away when this work was done. They laid the foundation: there were no more added to them, because their particular service was not continued (Eph. ii. 20).

The prophets of the church were gifted to communicate the mind of God about the truths and blessings consequent upon the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus, while the apostles communicated the mind and will of God in the New Testament order of things for His newly-formed assembly. The teachers follow these two as those who expounded to the saints of God the instructions given to the early church through the superior gifts.

And Paul puts these three classes first of all to correct the extraordinary and harmful mistake that had been made at Corinth. In this assembly they were esteeming above everything else the showy gifts of tongues and healings; and the apostle quietly reproves them by this very order. The gift of tongues was very well and useful in its place, but the main object in the exercise of gift was the edification of the church. This was the great test of value, and therefore the apostles, prophets, and teachers come first. God has set them foremost in the assembly, and Paul, himself the chiefest of the apostles, has put them first. We must keep them there, that is, their writings.

Other gifts, as helps and governments, remain in the assembly, and will remain to the end. This list shows the great variety of gifts bestowed. But the apostle shows they are not all apostles, they are not all prophets. They are distributed proportionately in number and quality. There is a variety to meet all the needs of the saints and to fulfil the purpose in God's mind for the help and blessing of the church.

It will be seen that the whole tenor of the chapter is to show how God is working amongst the saints for their

comfort and edification, for their building up on their most holy faith. He is doing His work still. The danger is that we may miss being benefited by that work. We may be in such a frame of mind or in such an association that the divine work and the divine purpose will pass by unheeded by us, and we may then be unhelped by what He is doing to edify and encourage His saints.

I am not now alluding to what the Lord is doing for us individually, but rather of what is true of the assemblies of the saints and of their relationships with one another. We may receive a full share of these blessings if we will. The love of God is active ; we know the Holy Spirit is not idle. The Lord Jesus Christ never sleeps or slumbers. He is doing His work. How is it that we are not benefited more than we are ? Where is the hindrance ? Where is the fault ? What is wrong ? Is there anything wrong with God, with the Spirit of God, with the Head of the church ? No, beloved friends, the fault is with ourselves. We do not put ourselves in that attitude, in that frame of soul, to receive the benefits of the working of the Spirit of God.

COVETING THE BEST GIFTS

The apostle says, " Covet earnestly the best (or the greater) gifts." Do not be on the look-out for tongues. I think this exhortation may be taken in two ways. Sometimes it is regarded as meaning that a person is encouraged to have a holy ambition to possess some great gift in the church ; and no doubt, this view is right, though very few such ambitions will be realized. But does not the apostle mean more than this ? Does he not mean that all the saints should desire that God would work in their midst by the greater gifts, that is, by the gifts for edification ?

Supposing, if it were possible, that a person spoke with tongues in our midst to-night, and that there was no interpretation, and, therefore, no edification. What would be the benefit, as the apostle asks later on, to the saints ? No benefit at all. There would be no edification, no promotion of love, holiness, wisdom or knowledge.

Such a display would not be for the glory of the Lord. It would not be by the Spirit of God. But what is for the building up of the saints and for the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ is the mark of the greater gift. Let us desire this for ourselves. Oh, the poverty-stricken condition in which we are! Then, are you often on your knees asking God to speak through His servants to bring home His word in power to your souls? Are you asking Him to speak to you through the mouths of others? It may be by a simple brother, for the Lord can speak to your soul through anyone.

But, supposing there are no gifts, what then? The apostle says, "I show you a more excellent way." And this he does in the next chapter. Prophecies may fail, tongues will cease, knowledge may vanish away, but there is one thing that will always remain, while the church is on earth; and that is love, the love of God, and the love of saints. And we ought to desire to cultivate love within us, to let love do its work upon us; because, as says the apostle in another place, it is love that edifies. A person may stand up in the assembly, and deliver a most moving and touching address, but if there is no love in it, if the Spirit of God is not bringing the love of Christ to me through his word, it will not help my soul, it will not bring me nearer in walk to the Lord Jesus Christ.

This exhortation I leave with you: "Covet earnestly the best gifts", and look out for that more excellent way of love which is within the reach of everyone of us. Let us love one another because Christ has loved us and given Himself for us. He has set us the example. He has given us an incentive. He loved us when there was nothing lovely in us. He died for us when we were sinners. This unselfishness should be the character of our love. Do we love just those who are pleasant and agreeable to us? What about the cantankerous ones? What about those persons to whom we can hardly get near? Do we love them and pray for them? "Covet earnestly the best gifts", and study that more excellent way given us in the thirteenth chapter.

IV

CHRIST AND HIS LOVE, CARE, AND PURPOSE FOR HIS CHURCH

(Read Ephesians v. 22-33.)

THE verses in this section of Ephesians which are to be particularly before us this evening are the 25th to the 27th. We have there the special relationship of the church to Christ—what it was originally, and what it is now, and what it will be when the purpose of God concerning it is fulfilled. And we see at once that in these verses a very remarkable and special character is assigned to the church, which is shown to be the peculiar possession of Christ Himself.

And when we consider these verses in the light of the Epistle as a whole they become still more remarkable, because, as you are all aware, the Epistle to the Ephesians speaks of the church as the vehicle through which God will display His glory in connection with the future government of the whole universe. The world now is a spoiled thing so far as man is concerned, and God knew from the beginning it would be so ; but His overriding purpose was that the world, and everything connected with the world in both the heavenly and the earthly departments, should eventually be resplendent with His glory and become a credit to His Eternal Name. His purpose was that the world, and all in it, should be ultimately associated with His Son ; His purpose was to head up all things in Christ, as we find in the first chapter. This was predestinated before the world was. It was all planned by God. The failure of man that is so

broadly written in the scriptures was no surprise to God. He had His mystery, His secret; and this was that Christ should rule righteously over all things.

THE CHURCH CALLED FOR HEAVENLY GLORY

But there was a further thing, which is, if we may say so, still more astounding. When we think of God we are not surprised that He knows everything, that the end is as easily and constantly before Him as the beginning, but the wonder grows upon us when we learn from this Epistle that along with Christ in that place of supreme glory, when all things are consummated, will be a bride, an associate in that glory. And that associate in His reign, in His government, and in His glory, will be—not Israel, not the earthly people, not a people at all so far as this world is concerned,—but the church of Christ, composed of those that are called out from the world of sinners; for that is what the word church means. They are called out by God, for His Son.

We see, therefore, that from the beginning God had the purpose that, directly His Son was crucified, rejected as the King of Israel, He would call out those who should be associated with Christ in His heavenly glory, and form the church. He called them even from the Jews themselves, those wicked people whose hands were red with the blood of their Messiah. He called them out from the Gentiles, those that had consorted with the Jews in the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus. And in His grace He made them first of all sufferers with Christ with the object that by-and-by they should be with Him in glory and share His glory.

Since this high and heavenly calling is set out in the scriptures, we ought to enjoy the knowledge of it. If a person knows the tenor of his father's will, which will ultimately bring him into possession of vast estates and a powerful position in this world, that knowledge must influence his present conduct. It must be a comfort to him while he is waiting to enter into that position; and so the revelation of the future of the church is made

known to us now, so that we may encourage our hearts amid our suffering by the knowledge of it. Do we find it so? Do we seek to understand what God's purpose is with regard to us when our pilgrim days are done?

This Epistle, of which we have now read a very small portion, is quite explicit with regard to the future destiny of the church. But there are some thoughts contained in these few verses to which I would draw your attention now. I do not refer to the exhortation to wives and husbands. That has its place, and will have its greatest effect upon those who are wives and husbands if they understand the truth concerning Christ and the church.

LOVE IN THE ETERNAL PAST

The apostle says, in the 25th verse, "Christ also loved the church, and gave Himself for it." Now, if you look very carefully at this passage, you will see that it contains a truth which sometimes escapes us through reading it casually, and not thinking carefully about it—"Christ loved the church" it says. Of course He loved the church, and we fully accept His great love for the church; but when did He love the church? Christ loved the church before He gave Himself for it; and so we have to go back a long way. We must go a long way beyond Calvary. We must go beyond Bethlehem's manger. We must go beyond the earliest record of the earth's history. We must go back to the volume of that book in which it is written, "Lo, I come to do Thy will, O God." The church was then before His eternal mind. Then He saw the church, and then He loved the church. Before we were, the great and deep, the divine affections of the Lord Jesus were concentrated upon the church. "Christ loved the church."

It was love to the church, therefore, as well, of course, as His love to the Father, that brought Him down. He saw the treasure in the field, and He sold all to acquire it. He saw the one pearl which was of great price, and He gave all to obtain it. But the purpose of love began when He saw it, and when did Christ see the church?

Ah, long, long ages before we were, Christ's heart, Christ's eyes were upon us, and His love was upon His church. Oh, for hearts to appreciate the vastness of what is unveiled to our thoughts in this verse !

"Christ loved the church", and if He loved it so long ago, if He loved it when He died for her, does He not love her still, in spite of her broken and faithless condition? In spite of the sad spectacle upon the earth of the church in division and dissension and strife, anger and wrath prevailing where love and concord should reign? The affections of Christ do not change; and therefore, we can rejoice in the unimpaired love of Christ for His church in the face of everything, every failure, every sin, attached to the church in her position in this world. The love of Christ remains the same.

This eternal love of Christ gives us to understand a little more clearly what was in our Lord's mind when He heard the confession of Peter, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." He said, "Upon this rock I will build My church." It was *His* church then. He had it there before Him as His. The building has been going on for centuries, and it will go on until the last living stone is placed in the edifice. But He the great Architect, Who had His plan before Him, His design in His mind, saw all the church complete in His beauty when He said, "I will build My church." He knew that Israel would turn away from Him; that the Jews would rise up against Him and crucify Him, but He declared, "I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it." His church will be displayed perfect and complete in the day of glory.

Well then, the love of the church was the prevailing motive in the heart of Christ, when He gave Himself up for it. Now, see what this statement involves. The Lord Jesus Christ does not here bring forward through the apostle the value of His sacrifice, that is to say, of the atonement that He made, of the propitiation for our sins that He accomplished at the cross. That is not the foremost thought in this verse, though included, but here it is the surrender of Himself and all that He was.

He gave Himself up for the acquisition of the church. He gave *Himself* for it. As the Lord Jesus approached the hour which was before Him, He, and all that was in Him, was involved in what He was going to do for the deliverance of His church. He gave up, not merely His life, though that was true. He laid down His life; but we are to learn that He offered up His whole self.

And it was not a man doing this; it was not an Abraham, nor an Isaac; it was not Job nor Isaiah giving himself up; but it was the Son of God. You find the truth is put individually in the Epistle to the Galatians; "The Son of God, Who loved me", that is, the individual person, "and gave Himself up for me." There the great surrender is true for each one of us here tonight. We can take the fact for ourselves; but do let us also broaden our outlook, and think of the whole church, because "Christ loved the church, and gave Himself for it."

The Lord knows every one of those that are His; and it is a stupendous thought that our Lord Jesus Christ in those dark hours of suffering upon the cross had every one of His redeemed before His soul. There was a great load of guilt upon Him, but that aggregate load was made up of a great many, I might say, little loads; the load of my guilt, the load of your guilt. Each one of us was represented there, and the Lord suffered for each individual. But there is also the truth that we have here: the whole sum and substance of those that make up His church were before Him when the Son of God and Son of man gave Himself up for the assembly. Such was the tremendous, incomprehensible price that the Lord Jesus Christ paid for His church. So when we think of the self-sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ expressed most of all in His death, let us have these truths before our hearts; first of all, He gave Himself for me, and next, He gave Himself for *all* the church. All those composing the church were redeemed in the same manner and by the self-same loving sacrifice.

This then is the past event that is spoken of in connection with the church. We look back, and we can

survey by faith the love of Christ, as we remember that He gave Himself up for His church. In the 26th verse we have the purpose of Christ in this. There was an object in it. It does not say that He gave Himself to deliver the saints from the just consequences of their sins. This is true, of course. It does not say that He died that they might have eternal life. This is perfectly true, and we find it expressed in other parts of scripture ; but we find here what is the Lord's great purpose in connection with the church at the present time.

SANCTIFYING THE CHURCH

And the first thing mentioned is sanctification ; “ that He might sanctify it.” What does sanctification mean ? It seems to mean here that the purpose of the Lord in giving Himself for the church was to separate it out of its natural environment, and to make it something exclusively for Himself. If a vessel were appropriated for use in the tabernacle of Jehovah, it became a sanctified thing. There was a sacredness about it. It was something reserved for use in the holy habitation of Jehovah.

You know that the heathen king, Belshazzar, defied God, and brought out the vessels of His sanctuary that his father or grandfather had carried from Jerusalem into Babylon, and he displayed them upon his banqueting table. He and his lords drank out of those holy vessels to their gods of gold and silver and wood and iron, desecrating the vessels of Jehovah. He was putting them to an improper and unholy use ; they were sanctified ; they belonged to Jehovah. And Belshazzar's lips and the lips of his thousand lords had barely left the goblets from which they were drinking when his immediate doom was seen written upon the walls of the palace.

God intervened in Babylon, jealously guarding those sanctified vessels. They were but material things, but they illustrate this great fact in our verse that the purpose of Christ in connection with the church was to

sanctify it, to set it apart from Jews and Gentiles for His own use and for His own testimony in this world. It will be also true, I think, in glory that the church will have its own proper and exclusive place. The church will not be absorbed amongst the redeemed of Old Testament days, but her special sanctification for the Lord Jesus Christ will be seen in the glory. The church will ever have its peculiar place. This truth we may touch upon again later.

But let us remember, that here and now, the church including all the members—and if you are a member of the body of Christ, it refers to you—is sanctified, that the purpose of Christ in giving Himself for the church was to set it entirely apart from the world and all its belongings. If a person went back from the position of the church into Judaism, he crucified the Son of God afresh, and put Him to an open shame. It was deliberately denying the sanctification by the blood of the covenant, the separate place that Christ had designed for the church by His death.

And so this purpose of sanctifying comes home to us in a practical way. We can have nothing to do with the world, either Gentilism or Judaism. Any forms of antagonism to God and Christ and the word of God we are to shrink from with horror because of the place that Christ has given us. We have been made holy, and we are to maintain that holiness, because He is holy, and His purpose is to sanctify us. Such is the character, the holy character, given to the church by its calling. The "holy calling" is also mentioned in another place (2 Tim. i. 9).

CLEANSING THE CHURCH

But there is something else which follows, and that is the cleansing of the church. Notice the order; sanctification comes before cleansing. This teaches that Christ calls us to Himself and makes us His own before He begins to deal with us. The Lord knows very well what we are naturally: we are the reverse of being holy. We are defiled by nature and practice; but still the Lord

puts His mark upon us as His own, and we are sanctified. But then He begins to deal with us in order to make us fit for the place that He has given us.

A benevolent rich man may go into the slums, and select a poor ragged boy, that he may adopt him as his own. He says, "For my own pleasure I want to make this outcast boy heir to my fortune." Now, he selected that boy for himself in his rags and his dirt, and in all the unholy associations in which he was brought up, with the twist given to his mental and his moral faculties by means of his circumstances. He knew all this, but he nevertheless made this selection; "I am going to have this boy for my own." And he takes him in hand. Does he leave him just as he is? Can he bring this boy into his own house, and display him as his own son in the condition in which he is? He has to cleanse him. He has to educate him. He has to deliver him from all his former associations. He has to bring him into such a state as to be an honour to the position that he has given him.

And it is so with the sinners of both the Gentiles and the Jews, whom the Lord called to be part of His church. He set them apart for Himself. He took up Saul, the persecutor, the blasphemer, the one who hated Him from the very depths of his soul, and He called him to Himself; but He cleansed him. That hatred of Christ was changed to the deepest love for Christ. Instead of persecuting those that were Christ's, he served them and gave up his very life to serve them. There had been a change wrought. All the old things were removed, and something which was new was substituted for them. This was the work of Christ. That was how He wrought with one member of the church, and that is how He is working with all the members of the church, "cleansing them", as it says, "by the washing of water by the word."

Now, you will see that there is no reference in the verse to the blood of Christ. It is "the blood of Jesus Christ, His (God's) Son, that cleanseth us from all sin"; that is quite true. But that is not the teaching here. The point here is the progressive cleansing going on at the

present time. The Lord Jesus, my dear young friends, has you in hand. He wants to educate you ; He wants to bring you up in His ways, in such ways as are in accordance with His own mind and will. There are things about you, in your words, in your thoughts, in your associations, that are not agreeable to Him ; they are not according to His mind, and He wants to cleanse you from them. And how will He do it ? He does it by His word. " Already ye are clean by the word which I have spoken unto you ", the Lord said to His disciples. He had been instructing them for very many months, *breathing out to them of the love of God*, and of those things that were proper to the kingdom of heaven ; and they were clean to that extent with " the washing of water by the word."

But then, this cleansing is a process which is always in progress ; and that shows us the importance of continual reference to the word of scripture. The Lord Jesus Christ uses His written word to show us where we are wrong, to touch our consciences, to awaken our affections. You remember the instance, so often referred to, of Peter, who denied the Lord. And yet the Lord told him beforehand that he would deny Him with oaths and curses. But though His word fell on Peter's ear, it passed out of his mind, because he thought that such a sin would not be possible in his case ; in fact, Peter said so. He said he would not deny the Lord ; but the Lord spoke what was true. He knew Peter better than Peter knew himself. And by-and-by Peter did deny the Lord with oaths and curses, as the Lord said he would. Then, after the third occasion, we read that the Lord " looked upon Peter," and the result of the Lord's look at Peter was that " Peter remembered the word of the Lord, and he went out, and wept bitterly." There was the word cleansing Peter's heart. The word showed him to be an unreliable apostle. He was an unfit person ; he was unworthy to be a disciple of such a one as the Lord Jesus. He was not worthy of His love ; he was not worthy of His trust. A man who could blaspheme the name of his Master, and do it over and over again, what use was he

in the apostolic band? Oh, what terrible thoughts and self-accusations passed through the mind of Peter as he went out, weeping bitterly!

So the Lord was cleansing his heart; but He had not completed His work with him, because we find that, after His resurrection, the Lord Jesus on the shore of the lake of Galilee, referred again to this shameful failure, as recorded in the last chapter of John. The Lord spoke to Simon Peter very tenderly, but His word was still cleansing him. He said: "Simon, lovest thou Me? Do you really love Me? From your very heart, do you love Me?" And Peter had to look down into his heart to see whether his love was true or no, and when he looked down into his heart, it came back to his mind as a flash, "What did I do on that night of betrayal? I denied Him with oaths and curses. Is it really true that I love Him?" And eventually, Peter was obliged to say: "Thou knowest all things. Thou knowest that I love Thee. I cannot say very much about my love to Thee; but Thou Who knowest all things, knowest that deep down in my heart I do, I really, love Thee." And that was how the Lord was cleansing Peter by the washing of water by the word.

Do you think this account was only written to record Peter's actions, that we might know the truth about Peter? It is also the truth about everyone of us here to-night. We are capable of doing what Peter did, and if we are not careful we may do a like thing. We may be placed in similar circumstances, and when the test comes to us we too may fail. We may say what is not true, and take on our lips shameful words against the Lord Jesus. But the Lord is very gracious, and He will use His word to cleanse and restore us, as He did in the case of Simon Peter.

But you see how important it is to have the word of the Lord in your memory. Peter had it in his memory, although it was not before his mind. It however came back to him, when the Lord looked at him. And so you must seek to implant the word of God in your memory. You must read it, and make it your own; and then the

Lord can use it in this great work of cleansing you as part of the church with the washing of water by the word.

CHRIST PRESENTING THE CHURCH TO HIMSELF

Well now, in the next verse, we come to the future destiny of the church ; “ that He might present it to Himself a glorious church ” or a church in glory. Let us be very clear about this word. What does the Lord by His Spirit mean by the church in this verse ? Is it all those that were baptized into one body on the day of Pentecost ? Is it only those ? Is it only those that lived in apostolic days ? Does it apply only to those alive to-day ? No, it means the whole of the church from the day of Pentecost until the Lord Jesus Christ comes for His saints. Those who are upon the earth at any given time are sometimes spoken of as the body of Christ, but here the whole of the church is in view as those who will form the church in glory. The Lord had them all in mind.

Therefore, we must remember that this verse will only find its fulfilment when the Lord shall come and shall have transferred the entire church from this earth, whether sleeping or waking, into the Father’s house on high. Then He will present it to Himself a church in glory. That will be when the Lord Jesus Christ has brought to Himself, and before Himself, the whole church. She will then be in a state of absolute perfection, and will appear just as Christ has created it for Himself. It will be His own personal handiwork, unspoiled by defect or sin.

We have a figure of this perfection and union in the second of Genesis, in the case of Adam and Eve. We know that God surveyed the newly-created earth and all the animals that came before Adam, and amongst them all there was not found a helpmeet for Adam, none suited for the place that Adam was given. Adam was set in the world to govern it for God ; the lower creation was placed under his rule, but in God’s purpose it was not good that man should be alone. It was necessary that

he should have an associate. And amongst the living creatures that God had produced there was none that in God's estimation was worthy to take a place with Adam. And therefore God determined that He Himself would provide a bride for Adam. Accordingly He caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and from Adam's side He builded Eve, the woman, in all her primitive perfection and beauty, for sin had not then entered into the world. And when Adam awoke from his sleep, there before him was his bride, in her charm and her glory, with no imperfection whatever, absolutely fresh from the hands of God Himself, built by the omniscience of God in such a way as perfectly to match and suit her husband, Adam, and to be the object of his affections.

And we find here an allusion to this incident. The peculiar creation of Eve is a figure of the church, which is built for Christ and which is the result of His passing through the deep sleep of death. And in the glory of His resurrection He finds the church by His side in glory, and He presents it to Himself a church in glory, a helpmeet for Him, one who will sit with Him on His throne and rule with Him. Then wondering worlds will look upon the bride of Christ, and will extol His name because of the beauty and glory of Christ which are seen in the church.

This is the future prospect. This is the ideal before our blessed Lord as the Lover and Sanctifier of the church. He has this in mind, and to this end He is nourishing and cherishing His church, and waiting throughout the years and centuries as they go by, until God's time shall come, and He shall present the church to Himself in glory. "Not," it says, "having spot", no defect of any kind within, no heart of disloyalty, no reserved affection of any kind; spotless within; also without "wrinkle" or outward deformity of any kind; nothing will be in or upon the church but what is compatible with the glory of Christ. So that when Christ in His absolute perfection of love looks upon His bride, He sees everything that gratifies His eye.

NO SPOT NOR WRINKLE

“Not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing.” What a glorious picture this is, beloved friends, of the ultimate result of what is going on silently in this world! We can only, by faith, take in words like these, and let them sink into our minds without analysis. Yet they do give us a very different idea of the reality of things from what we often entertain when we come together, a score or more of persons, we will say, to break bread. All of us are very weak, all failing, all apt to make mistakes, not one of us is anything to be proud of; and we think, “What a poor lot we are!” And it is true; but when we read verses like these we see that a work of the Lord is in progress. We realize from them that all over the world there is not only the work of the gospel, which calls sinful men and women into the church, but also the active work of the Lord Jesus Christ is sanctifying, cleansing, nourishing, cherishing the church, caring for all those that are His, and keeping them from getting further and further away from Him.

This work of the Lord is going on continually. Christ does His work, though we fail to do our share. We do not do what we ought to do. When we take a service in hand for our Lord, we do it very imperfectly and unworthily. There is no question about our inefficiency. But while we are unprofitable servants, the Lord Jesus Christ is the Perfect Servant. So when we are depressed by seeing the failure of human service, we can go on our knees, and thank God that the great work that matters is being carried on by the Lord Jesus Christ, and that He will carry it on to the finish. He will consummate it in glory, and by-and-by the day for its display will come.

And the blessed thought for us all is that we shall be there in that day of triumph and victory. Every one of us, those that know our Lord, those that are members of Christ now, at this moment, we shall all be there in that day of glory. We shall see Christ in His glory, and Christ will see His glory in us. He will see the work that He has accomplished. He will see those whom He has

taken up, those that were black and defiled by sin, shining in the resplendent glory that He has given them. "The glory which Thou gavest Me I have given them"; He will accomplish that word to His Father; and we shall be there without a spot. We shall be holy and without blemish. If you look at the first chapter, you will find that those words "holy" and "without blemish, or blame" appear there also (verse 4), where we are regarded personally. It is a part of Christ's purpose to have before Him those that are holy and without blemish, individually and collectively; and the choicest to Him of those in that vast company will be those who form the church.

OLD TESTAMENT SAINTS AND THE CHURCH

There are some who have thought that because we speak of the exceptional place that is given to the church, we, by that claim, disparage the Old Testament saints, and set ourselves up to be better than Abraham and David and Isaiah; but that is altogether a mistake. Whatever religious pride we may have now—and we may have it, for most of us have a little bit of the Pharisee about us which comes out now and again—there will be no pride there. One star may differ from another star in glory, but there is no pride among the stars, because they have just the places that God has given them in the firmament of heaven. And so we shall have the place that God gives us in His purposes and that Christ gives us because of His love, and because of His work for us. And then we shall have our hearts absolutely full of praise and worship to Him, because of the glory He has given us. If a thought of pride could come in, there would be a spot, a wrinkle; but we are told there will be no spot nor wrinkle.

No, the exceptional place of the church is the one which God assigned to it in His eternal plan; and the reason for this distinction lies in the special character of the church in that she believes on Christ in the day of His rejection. Israel will come into blessing by-and-by,

but it will be in the day of Christ's glory, when He is manifested in glory to this world. The Old Testament saints believed on Christ before He came, but the great feature of the church is that when the Lord Jesus is cast out by His own people, when the world hates Him, when there is nothing that is more obnoxious to a worldly man than the name of Christ, the church loves Him. We put Christ first, we bow our knees to Him, we adore Him, we worship Him, we remember Him in His death, we serve Him day by day ; nay, when we eat and drink we do it in His name ; Jesus Christ is everything to us. And because the church believes on Christ, and suffers with Christ in the day of His rejection, God in His righteous purposes and ways gives the church the exceptional place of association with Christ in glory.

Now this doctrine is true, because we find it in the scriptures. It ought therefore to have its rightful effect upon us, and whether you understand it fully or not, you can certainly see that the church has a grand and glorious future. It is therefore a glorious future for you, and for all those that are associated with you. A great responsibility lies upon you if it be true, as to what manner of person you ought to be in this world. If such will be your position in heavenly glory by-and-by, what kind of person ought you to be for Christ Jesus now ? If He loved you, and gave Himself up for you, as He did for His church, what have you given up for Him ? What are you giving up for Him day by day ? What sort of a return are you seeking to make for His love ?

The Lord has not left these things altogether a secret, to be disclosed when He takes us home to the Father's house. He will have many secrets to tell us when we are there, but these He has told us now while we are in this world. This He has done that you and I might be more devoted to Him, while we wait for His coming again. May He grant that this may be the result in all our hearts of His precious unfoldings for His name's sake.

V

THE CHURCH AT PENTECOST

(Read Acts ii. 1-8, 12-18, 22-24, 32-47.)

THIS chapter, as we all are aware, gives us the history, the divine history of the birthday of the church of God. To speak about the church of God is to speak about a difficult subject. And because the doctrine of the church is encompassed with peculiar difficulty, a great many believers ignore it altogether, and confine their attention and their service to individual Christian life. Nevertheless the church of God has a paramount claim upon every believer, whatever the difficulty may be to understand its present position in the light of God's word. Moreover, the greatness of the difficulty is, after all, a matter of fancy rather than of reality.

THE EXALTATION OF CHRIST

Whatever then the difficulty may be in understanding ecclesiastical truth, and in conforming to it, the subject is of the utmost consequence to each believer for the reason that the church of God is associated with two great facts of scripture history—two facts which are of transcendent importance.

The first fact is the exaltation of the Lord Jesus Christ. His glory in the heavens lies far above all principality and power and might and dominion and every name that is named. There God the Father has conferred upon Jesus of Nazareth the highest dignity and glory. He Whom the heaven of heavens cannot contain is in that place of ineffable glory. The Man

Christ Jesus, the One Who was crucified, the One Who was in the grave, is now at the right hand of the throne of God, and all power is given unto Him in heaven and in earth.

Because of this fact the church was founded. The church began upon earth because the Lord Jesus Christ was glorified in heaven. The church was formed here, but there was a living connection between the company of believers so formed upon the earth and the Lord Jesus Christ in glory. You cannot match this fact throughout all the wonderful revealings of Holy Scripture; and, therefore, I say that the church of God has an unique claim upon you and upon me because of this character.

The Lord Jesus Christ is in the glory of God, and the church upon the earth is connected with Him there. Moreover, I, as a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, form, apart from any action of my own, apart from any choice of my own, an integral portion of that church, and as such I am associated with Him there in heaven. It is a thought which ought to awaken the deepest chords of praise and thanksgiving to God that such a thing could be. You may say that heaven is far away, that it is a long distance from W—— H—— to the right hand of the throne of God, and you may think that because it is so far away you may neglect it without personal loss, and that it need not concern you now. But if you despise your privileges, you will miss the personal blessings they bring.

THE DESCENT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

The other historical fact, which we also have in this chapter, is that as surely as the Lord Jesus Christ is there on the right hand of the throne of God, the Holy Spirit of God, the third Person of the blessed Trinity, is here upon the earth; and His habitation upon the earth is that house which He Himself formed at Pentecost, the church of God. The Spirit dwells not in temples made with hands; He is not to be found in those vast architectural wonders, raised by man in the name of the Lord

Jesus Christ, but He is veritably dwelling here in that unseen temple made holy by His presence. Is it not an incomprehensible marvel that the Spirit of God should be dwelling here? Night and day, week by week, year after year, He is here in this world, for He came at Pentecost, not on a transient visit, but to abide.

How terrible to ignore this fact! We read in this second of Acts that the sin of the Jew in denying and rejecting the Son of God was great and heinous in God's sight. What then must be the gravity of the sin of Christendom to-day in denying, denying in practice, if not in profession, the holy presence of the Spirit of God amongst the followers of the Lord Jesus Christ? How few believe Him to be dwelling, not only in one here and one there, but dwelling in them all corporately, uniting them in one perfect company, however spread abroad upon the earth; and each and all being in consequence associated with the Lord Jesus Christ, the Head in glory of the church!

We must, in order to have right and holy thoughts concerning the nature of the church of God, take fast hold of these two central truths. The Lord Jesus Christ is at God's right hand; and having given Him that heavenly glory, God has also given Him for His own special possession a people, which is His church; and in order to maintain that church, in order to support, to feed, to energise that feeble company of believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit of God is sent down here. The world cannot see Him nor receive Him, but you and I, if we believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, are bound to acknowledge His presence—to listen to Him, to give Him place, to heed Him for our guidance, to be under His continual sway. If we do so we shall then enjoy that sweet and gracious fellowship with our Lord Jesus Christ in heaven of which the world knows nothing, but which those know best who humble themselves most and allow the gracious Spirit of God to do with them what He will.

WAITING FOR THE PROMISE OF THE FATHER

In reading this chapter we find that there was in Jerusalem a waiting company of people, very small in number, probably less in number than there are in this room to-night, but they were assembled in Jerusalem, and were all animated by a common interest and a common purpose. Every one in that room had a personal knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ; and their latest knowledge of Him was that ten days before He had led them out as far as Bethany and while speaking to them there He was parted from them. As He ascended up into the heavens out of their sight, the strings of their hearts almost broke. He, the One Who loved them so, the One Who had spoken to them words that never man had spoken before, the One Who had died for them and risen again, was leaving them. He was fading from their sight, and they stood gazing and gazing, and hoping that He might immediately return. They were comforted, as we know, by the two angels, who told them not to stand gazing into heaven, for in due time the Lord would certainly come back.

But before that happy event there was something of profound importance to take place; and the words of their Master came afresh to their ears and to their memories. For He had bidden them go into Jerusalem and to wait there for the promise of the Father, "which", said He, "you have heard of Me." Now they remembered what was said to them in the upper room after the institution of the Lord's Supper. The Lord had then made the astounding statement, "It is expedient for you that I go away"; and they needed some faith and enlightenment to understand how such a thing could be. "It is better for you that I go away, than that I should stay here. I go to prepare a place for you." This was blessed news to hear of a place for them in the Father's house, but in connection with the expediency, He said "If I go not away, the Comforter will not come, the other Comforter. The One Who is coming will come to take My place, and He will be to you even more than

I have been. He will dwell with you, not for three years, but will abide with you for ever. He will be with you, never to leave you. He will be with you in any place where you may be, no matter how widely separated on the face of the earth; and He, the Spirit of truth, will guide you into all truth."

Accordingly they went back to Jerusalem, to wait there for the promise of the Father, as the Lord had bidden them. How did the disciples wait? What was their attitude, while waiting? We find they spent their time in prayer. They were in the temple blessing God, as Luke tells us in his Gospel; but here in the Acts, we find them continuing in prayer and supplication, not each in his private chamber praying separately, but each and all assembled together. They were praying that the words of the Master might be fulfilled, that the promise of the Father might be given. The Lord had said to them, "If ye being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him?" Accordingly those who were there had the authority of the Lord to ask God to give them the Holy Spirit. We find it on record that God did send Him. Therefore, it is no use for us to quote the passage in the Gospel of Luke (xi. 13) as the scripture which gives us warrant to ask God to send the Holy Spirit now. Those one hundred and twenty persons who were assembled took their stand upon that promise. They prayed and received the answer, and we shall be centuries behind the time if we ask for the Holy Spirit to be sent now. He is here. How grievous to neglect His presence!

EARLY MORNING PRAYER

The disciples waited day after day in that attitude. When the fiftieth day came, the day of Pentecost, there they were all together, very early in the morning, because it was only the third hour of the day (9 a.m.) when Peter began his address. That day they had learned the happy experience of an early morning prayer

meeting. Those who have taken part in such early meetings know what freshness they have ; they know the preciousness of the occasion ; they know the power there is in the prayers. Persons who leave their beds in earnest self-denial that they may be together very early to wait unitedly upon God for His blessing are never disappointed. It is a true saying, that God is no man's debtor. He is no debtor to you nor to me. If we give up anything for Him, oh ! how much He gives us in return ! If you have not proved this goodness of His, prove it now for yourselves—" Prove Me now herewith "—God gives us the challenge to prove Him.

Here is a notable instance of God's faithfulness. Those men and women were unitedly praying for the outpouring of the Spirit, that the promised Spirit should come ; and He came while they were together. He came suddenly. The Holy Spirit came down to this prepared company, as in the early part of the New Testament we find the Son of God coming to a prepared company. The way of the Lord had been prepared by John the Baptist. At his preaching sinful men had confessed their sins and had been baptized in Jordan confessing those sins. There stood this company of penitents feeling what sinners they were in God's sight. And to that prepared company Jesus, the One Who should save His people from their sins, came at the appointed moment to be baptized also. Then the Father witnessed that His beloved Son was there, and the Holy Spirit abode upon Him as He came up out of the water.

SOUND AND SIGHT AND SPEECH

Now we have the Holy Spirit of God coming to this prepared company in Jerusalem, who were waiting for Him. There were audible signs that the Holy Spirit had come. There was the sound of a rushing mighty wind. They heard His presence, but He was unseen. He was " blowing " there whithersoever He pleased (John iii. 8), but He was undoubtedly present where they were assembled.

It was specially needful at the outset that it should be made perfectly clear that the Holy Spirit had arrived. Hence there were not only audible but visible signs also, for there appeared to the disciples cloven tongues like as of fire. There were not many spirits present. There was but One, for the word says "*It* sat upon each of them." The tongues were cloven or divided, the reason for which we soon learn. The disciples were made able to speak with other tongues, the Spirit giving utterance to each one as it pleased Him. The wonderful works of God, the fact that Jesus Christ was glorified at God's right hand could not now be confined to one nation; God's exalted Christ must be proclaimed to all men everywhere. Hence they received power from the Spirit to speak with tongues for that purpose, but while there was diversity of utterance there was one directing Power. The same Holy Spirit rested upon each of them and of His power gave power to each, ensuring unity of action in their witness for Christ. Thus was the great fact substantiated that the Holy Spirit had come, and Peter stood up to speak under the influence and power of the newly-come Spirit.

When it was dedicated the cloud of glory filled Solomon's house, and that glory was so great that the priests could not stand to minister because of the glorious presence of Jehovah in His earthly and material temple. Now the Holy Spirit had come down and formed another house, a spiritual temple, wherein He was to dwell. And now His was a genial gracious influence. None were overpowered by the presence of the Spirit. None were afraid of His manifestations in their midst.

The disciples were all under the power of the Holy Spirit and were filled with Him, but the influence of the Spirit upon them was of a character that was suited to the faith and love within them. For they were prepared for the reception of the Holy Spirit Who had now come. And what had prepared them? The Lord Jesus Christ had drawn together this company by His own words. He came unto His own things, but His own people received Him not. Then He gathered together those

who believed on Him ; they followed Him and He taught them. He made them His own company. They loved Him ; they welcomed Him when in the course of His ministry He came to them. Lazarus and Martha and Mary did not follow the Lord in His wanderings, but oh, how pleased they were when He visited their house !

THE BLOOD AND THE OIL

And so, as the result of the Lord's own service there was this company in Jerusalem which belonged to Him. But there was a special feature which marked this company. The great fact, never true before in the world's history, was that the Lord Jesus Christ had died for their sins. He had shed His precious blood. The work of eternal redemption had been accomplished by Him. The blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleansed them from every stain. These men and women were all clean, whiter than snow, purged in conscience by the efficacious blood of the Lord Jesus. This waiting company in Jerusalem was composed of prepared persons.

In the old types, the blood of the sacrificial victim was put on the ear and the hand and the toe at the consecration of a priest and the cleansing of a leper. Wherever there was sprinkling upon a person, the blood came first, and then the oil was applied upon the blood. The figure of the Holy Spirit followed the figure of Christ's work of atonement and purging ; and it was so historically at Pentecost.

These people assembled in Jerusalem and praying were a purged people. They were made clean by the work of Christ and, therefore, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and took them up for His immediate service. At once they began to speak with other tongues. They all were clean vessels filled for His use.

ANNOUNCING THE ASCENDED CHRIST

And Peter full of the Holy Spirit, spoke to the multitude. What was the great subject of Peter's preaching

that day? He said many weighty things, according to the short account we have here. But the keynote of it all was this, that the One Who had just been crucified and slain in this world, God had now exalted. The apostle brought home their guilt to them, "You with wicked hands have crucified and slain Him, Jesus of Nazareth. You know what He did among you; you know that He was a Man approved of God. God set His seal upon Him; everything He did showed that He was God's righteous Son, yet you took Him and put Him upon the tree. Now God has exalted Him to His own right hand."

And Peter's soul was filled with the glory of his Master. Taught by the newly-come Spirit, he was speaking of the work and excellence of the Lord Jesus Christ. He said nothing about himself, nothing about the church, but the one theme of his heart was the glory of Christ—what the Jews had done in despising Him, what God had done because He was so dear to Him. "This is My beloved Son", the Father said with the voice that came out of the glory-cloud upon the Mount of Transfiguration. The Lord Jesus was now taken up into the glory. He was now glorified with that glory which He had along with the Father before the world was.

And from that day to this, Christ once crucified now glorified has been the central theme of the Spirit's testimony. If you listen to anyone speaking to you, and find that the subject, the discourse, the theme, is not in accordance with the theme we have here, the exceeding glory of the Lord Jesus Christ, you may set it upon one side as being of very third-rate value. The real value of testimony by the church of God to the world is measured by the value it sets upon Christ.

What a subject for the preacher! If we had even a thousand tongues, how feebly could we tell out the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ! Yet the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ is the ABC of the church's lesson book, and the church should be growing in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ all the while she is here.

Christ is also the test for each individual. I do appeal

to you to consider what place the Lord Jesus Christ has in your heart. Does your heart thrill at the name of the Lord Jesus Christ? Are your energies given up to Him? Is He first and foremost in your life? What is He to you daily? I do not ask whether you have been delivered from your sins, or whether God answers your prayers and gives you joy in your heart from the happy circumstances given you from day to day. But I do ask what is Christ to your inmost affections? Have you anything in your heart that answers to this first appeal by the apostle of the Lord to the Jews at Jerusalem?

Peter declared that the exaltation of Christ explained everything: "Therefore being by the right hand of God exalted . . . He hath shed forth this, which ye now see and hear." The Lord Jesus was above; hence there was power below. The people said, "These men are drunken, they are full of new wine." Of course they were not; it was absurd to suppose such a thing at that hour of the day. But it never entered into their minds that the marvels of the tongues were due to the One Who was recently crucified and Who was now in supreme power at the right hand of God. Being astray as to the truth about Christ they could not understand what took place.

Hence we see this great concourse of people gathered together in Jerusalem, full of amazement at what they were hearing each in his own tongue concerning the wonderful works of God. They ask, "What meaneth this?" And the answer is, "Jesus Christ is exalted and glorified." This fact Peter makes known to them in his powerful speech. What he said was shared by all those with him, for the church at Pentecost was characterised by this special feature that they were one and all full of the importance of the exaltation of the Lord Jesus Christ, as revealed to them by the newly-descended and indwelling Spirit of God.

THE EFFECTS OF THE ASCENSION

I really believe there are a great many Christians who never get further than the apostles at Bethany. There

they stand gazing up into heaven while the clouds hide the Master from their sight, and they say to themselves, "He is gone so far away from us." They do not understand what the ascension of Christ has secured for them. They have not listened yet to the voice of the Holy Spirit in their hearts, telling them from the word of God that far beyond those clouds, through all the heavens, Jesus the Son of God has passed; and He is now seated on the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens.

What a difference this knowledge makes to me! I know that yon Glorified One is my Saviour, that He is the One Who died for me, and that He is the One Who has united me with Himself by the Holy Spirit. What is the whole world to me in comparison with this knowledge? There is nothing on earth to match it.

And I repeat that this truth is of immense importance. If you forget everything else which is being said, do not forget that the reason for the church of God being here in the world from the day of Pentecost to the present time is because Jesus Christ is exalted, and that the beginning of the church synchronized with the exaltation of the Lord Jesus Christ and the descent of the Holy Spirit.

This is the first and foremost thought that should fill the heart of every member of the body of Christ, the church of God. Moreover the Holy Spirit abides here to keep the hearts of the saints in practical touch with Jesus Christ on the throne. This is a fact, beloved friends. When I say it is a fact, I mean it is something that has been done, that is accomplished. The presence of the Holy Ghost on earth is as true a fact as Jesus Christ dying on the cross and now glorified on high. Is it not so?

Yet how many people get to the cross but never get any further. They do not get into the heavens by faith and rejoice in what is there for them. They hope to go some time or other to the place of many mansions, but the fact does not enter into the minds of everyone that Jesus Christ is already there, and that He is glorified by the Father, and that because He has been exalted the Holy Ghost is here as that "other Comforter" for them

individually while He dwells in the church as the temple of God.

In the verses at the close of this chapter, we have some of the characteristics of this newly-formed community in Jerusalem, and we will now turn to these.

THE EXPANSION OF THE CHURCH

Peter makes it quite clear to his audience that this great gift of the Holy Ghost was not for a privileged few only; it was not to be confined to those who attended the early morning prayer-meeting. But it was for others too if they repented and were baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. And the result of the apostle's preaching was that men were pricked to the very heart.

It was the Lord's Day morning and one of unexampled blessing for the believers; but it was not a pleasant experience for those who were listening to Peter's words. His words pierced their consciences like drawn swords, and they were convicted of guilt. They said, "We are sinners", and this is no pleasant feeling. Peter said, "You are amenable to God's just judgment", and they felt it was true for they had killed the Prince of life. "If what you say is true, that we have crucified the One Whom God has exalted to His right hand, what are we to do?" Then Peter said, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of that One you have crucified. Save yourselves from this untoward generation."

As the result of this testimony, there were three thousand persons united to the original company. And the converts withdrew themselves from the evil and adulterous generation that had despised the Lord of glory and crucified Him. Thus the Lord added to that new assembly formed in Jerusalem three thousand souls in one day, showing what His Holy Spirit did. Of course, He can do similar mighty works still. And I believe He is even now saving more than three thousand souls in one day, if we consider His work all over the world. But He does not do this in one place, because the people of that particular place would probably become very

exalted in mind. They would not be able to bear such a great work of the Spirit without despising other places not so favoured.

We may be sure, however, the Spirit of God is never idle. He is ever at work drawing souls to Christ, and will continue to do so until the church is complete. Nevertheless, we have before us in scripture the fact that three thousand souls were drawn to Christ, and added to the church formed at Pentecost. We see this new company in Jerusalem, apart from the high priests, Annas and Caiaphas, from all the Sanhedrin, from the scribes and lawyers and great men, and from the crowds in Jerusalem come up to keep the feast of weeks. There was the temple and its courts with the lowing of the oxen and bleating of the sheep for sacrifice; but divinely considered, it was a desolate place. Here in this little company in some back street of Jerusalem was the Holy Spirit, not in that magnificent building which took Herod forty-six years to complete. The Spirit of God passed by the temple made with hands, and came to blood-bought, blood-washed souls, to dwell in them. Oh, what an honour!

We stand in wonder as we see the cloud of Jehovah's glory in the temple on Mount Moriah in the days of Solomon long past, but there is a greater wonder here. The Spirit of God comes to dwell amongst fishermen, common people, ordinary folk of daily life. But why to these? What characterised them was not their wealth, not their position in society, not their external piety, not even their exceptional devotion to their Lord and Master; but the one special feature about them, one and all, was love, regard, adoration for the Lord Jesus Christ.

BLESSING AND PRAISING

If we really believe that the Lord Jesus Christ, the One Who loved us and died for us, is at God's right hand in heaven—we are constrained to praise and worship Him. If we recognise His position in the highest glory, ought we not to show it, ought we not to sing His praises, ought

we not to recount His excellences ? Beloved friends, it is a sad day when the saints of God have to pump His praises out of their hearts. They should bubble up spontaneously. You ought to praise Him because you cannot help it, because your heart, as it were, refuses to be silent. You love Him so much that you want to tell Him how much you love and adore Him. Oh, let us not forget to praise the One Whom God has so highly exalted.

WITH ONE ACCORD

We find that this little company of believers was quite apart, quite separate from all the inhabitants of Jerusalem. They continued together "with one accord." Before the Holy Ghost came they had various ideas, as we read, for instance, in the last chapter of John. There we read that some of the apostles said, "Let us go fishing", but they were not all of this mind, only a few of them. There was nothing in this project to give the whole band a common interest, and to act "with one accord." Now they act as one ; and what is it that keeps them together ?

Now let us carefully consider this question. What will keep together those who quarrelled for precedence on the night of the Lord's betrayal ? At Pentecost we have the company at its beginning, together "with one accord." There is no contentious talk, no disorderly conduct ; but we see an united church in its primitive simplicity and power. What is it that keeps them all continuing steadfastly together ? That unseen presence, the presence of the Holy Spirit of God.

When the blessed Lord Jesus Christ came into the house in Bethany, Mary could see Him, and Martha could see Him. None can see the Holy Spirit in the house of God. He is in the church, but He is invisible. We can only observe the effect of His presence. And there is one invariable effect of the presence of the Holy Spirit, and that is that all eyes are directed by Him to the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. In this way all hearts, all minds, all mouths are united, and all act "with one accord."

No babe in Christ need ever go wrong about the working of the Holy Spirit. What is not in accord with the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ may with safety and certainty be rejected. It is not of the Holy Spirit, and cannot help you. But if a person is doing all he can to make you think better of the Lord Jesus Christ, you say, "He is right. I want a little more of this. It is the apostles' teaching, and will suit me very well." The doctrine of Christ is the test given us in scripture to decide what doctrine is of God, and what is of man.

THE APOSTLES' DOCTRINE

The disciples "continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers." We must not think this continuance refers to the first day only. It means they went on in this way. These were their new habits.

The Holy Spirit gave them a new power of understanding the scriptures as well as new revelations of truth. In the Old Testament time God had given the prophets, and the writings of Moses, and the Psalms. And those who were gathered together were familiar with the Old Testament scriptures. But we read that they continued in the apostles' doctrine, and the apostles' doctrine means the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching which they delivered to the saints at the beginning. But perhaps we may say more about this later.

FELLOWSHIP

Coupled with the apostles' doctrine is fellowship. Fellowship is a beautiful word, and one peculiar to the church of God. Briefly it just means that everyone who is in the church of God has a common interest and a common title founded upon the person and the work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Hence those who are in the church of God are irresistibly drawn together; and the Holy Spirit works in them for the spiritual well-being of the community,

If I am looking out for a person that I like, who has a fellow-feeling with myself, for whom I have a personal affinity, probably I can find but very few who are suitable. Fellowship in that sense is necessarily very limited, but in the church of God there is no limitation of that kind at all. The fellowship that is spoken of here in Acts ii. is that all who were brought together into that new company loved the Lord Jesus Christ, all had been equally cleansed and redeemed by His precious blood, all had been put on a common platform as belonging to Him, all had received the Holy Spirit, and each and all formed part of that new creation by Him. The apostle Paul speaks later on of the church under the figure of the body, and we know that each member of the body of Christ is a member of the body equally with the rest. It may have to perform a special function of its own, but so far as the common interest and interdependence are concerned all are alike. And this fellowship is the particular feature that we find here.

BREAKING OF BREAD

The breaking of bread is also mentioned at the very first. I wonder if the disciples observed the breaking of bread on the very day of Pentecost. We are not told that they did, but that they continued in it. At any rate, it was no doubt a great experience for the eleven apostles especially to carry out the Lord's wishes in this respect. Just a few weeks before the Lord had asked them to eat the bread and to drink the wine in remembrance of Him. Now they do it for the first time as the church. The memorial was very real to them. They could recall His very looks when He said, "This do in remembrance of Me." The very tone of His voice was fresh to their memories in those early days. The Holy Spirit made the recalling to mind of His death real too, because they had not to depend entirely upon their own memories. One of His functions was to bring to their remembrance the things which the Lord had said. Therefore, unspoiled by sin or coldness, or even lukewarmness,

it was their happy experience in the power of an un-grieved Spirit to remember the Lord in the way of the breaking of bread. Moreover, they continued stedfastly in eating the Lord's supper. There must have been a special sweetness and joy and power about the celebration in those first fresh days of the communion of the body of Christ.

They continued stedfastly in the breaking of bread. They were not content with an occasional observance. And do not let anything trivial keep us from the breaking of bread. Let us do it continually, stedfastly. It is sweet to-day, and as real as it was at Pentecost. The Holy Spirit of God is here, and the Lord is true to His promise, "Where two or three are gathered together in My Name, there am I in the midst of them."

THE PRAYERS

In addition to the breaking of bread they continued in prayers too. This does not mean individual prayers offered at any time and in private. It refers to the definite prayers of the assembled company, as such, because they could now all pray as one. What had made them one? The Holy Spirit of God. They were united by Him in heart and desire.

I am sure we do not realise sufficiently what power there is in the assembly prayer-meeting. The prayer of those whose petitions are united in the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ must bring down much blessing. Nothing can keep blessing away from the saints in their walk and service when the church of God prays in its corporate character and privilege.

Let us then continue stedfastly in the prayer-meeting like these people of old. If you stay away from the prayer-meeting, of course you will not get anything of the corporate blessings they did. You do not want these gifts of grace, and so you do not unite to pray for them. We attend because we are poor, empty vessels, and want to be filled. We also have the priestly privilege of interceding for others. And we are sure to succeed because

we know the grace of our God, and because we bring to Him a Name which He would not on any account disown or disclaim.

THE EXPRESSION OF UNITY

“And they continued stedfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. And fear came upon every soul. . . . And all that believed were together, and had all things common.” Their collective behaviour reflected the unity there was in this new company, and behind it was the power of the Holy Spirit making them suppress all selfish interests and act as one. They were all together, and they had all things common.

Moreover, they sold their possessions, showing that their faith and hope was in a heavenly Christ, Whose kingdom was not of this world. A Jew who believed in the immediate coming of the kingdom on earth would not like to part with his freehold. He would wish to retain his inheritance until Messiah reigned on the throne. But these believers had learned the “better” thing that Christ gives. They had a “better” inheritance undefiled, unfading, reserved in heaven for them.

They “parted them to all men, as every man had need.” The mind of Christ was in them, and they thought of others, not of themselves. The Holy Spirit had come down and His first business, so to speak, was to fill them with self-denying love like the Master. For Who was it that, when He saw a pearl of great price, sold all that He had that He might have it? It was the Lord Jesus, Who, though He was rich, for our sakes became poor that we through His poverty might be rich. The Holy Spirit casts out all selfishness from their hearts. Hence there was a lovely representation reproduced in Jerusalem of the Man Whom the Jews had killed and crucified. In the hearts and lives of His followers the meek and lowly Saviour was living again in that guilty city.

Is there a similar testimony to-day? If we belong to Him, let us have the ways of Christ, our Master. Let it not be said that the members of the body cast shame

upon the Head ; but let the Head direct all their words and acts, and may His Spirit fill all those that are united with Him in glory.

VALUING CHURCH TRUTH

I close by impressing upon you to keep it much before your heart that the church of God is the most precious thing we find revealed in God's holy word. I say this with all due consideration. Israel was and is very precious to God ; although the chosen nation is now wandering homeless on the face of the earth, its place of ultimate blessing is here on the earth, while the ordained place of the church is association with Christ in glory. And we have this assured destiny before us. We have the certain hope of sharing His glory. While waiting for the fulfilment of this hope, we are privileged to share Christ's rejection by the world. Presently His glories will be shared by us because we are connected with Him in His heavenly exaltation. All this and much more is associated with our place in the church of God.

Lest we should allow the difficulties and perplexities of assembly life in its present dark and broken condition to obliterate from our hearts the real nature of the church of God about us, the truth concerning it abides unchanged in the scriptures. And we should accustom ourselves to look at things relating to the assembly in the way that God looks at them in His word. We need to have His mind about the church in its entirety, and therefore let us ever go back in thought to the beginning of its history. Oh, for those days of Pentecost ! Let us look back with satisfaction and praise upon what happened on that memorable day, when the Holy Spirit came down from heaven and took up His abode in the hearts of saints individually and collectively upon the earth,—and He is remaining here to this day. Moreover, that Holy One will abide until the church is numerically complete, and the Lord Jesus comes to claim His body and His bride, and to take all that are His to be with Him for evermore.

VI

THE CHURCH GROWING AND MULTIPLYING

(Read Acts ii. 41-47; iv. 31, 32; vi. 1-4, 7;
ix. 31; Ephes. iv. 7, 8, 11-16.)

WE were considering last week the establishment of the church of God at Pentecost by the descent of the Holy Spirit sent down from heaven by the exalted Lord and Christ. The church was then formed, but it was needful according to the purpose of God that this church should extend itself territorially, that it should expand numerically, that it should develop potentially, and become a great witness for the absent Lord throughout the world. And the subject now before us is how this development was brought about. In dealing with it we might consider historically the whole of the Acts of the Apostles, which describe the way in which the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ and faith in Him were spread in those early days; and we might further consider the remainder of the New Testament after the Acts, for the Epistles give us that holy teaching whereby the growth of the church is permanently secured. But in the time available we can only look at the matter from a general point, as the Lord may help.

WHAT GROWTH AND MULTIPLYING MEAN

I take it that the growth of the church, meaning by the church the assembly of God's people and not a material building, is its growth in love, that peculiar love which is of God, and in holiness, and in righteousness, and in faith, and in faithful testimony to the Lord

Jesus Christ Himself, and also in intelligence concerning what God has been pleased to reveal in His holy word. All this detail is comprised in the growth of the church, which includes the growth of the individuals.

But there is also multiplying in connection with the church. The church originally was founded in a place, in Jerusalem, and probably in outlying towns and villages also, while in other places in Galilee as well as Judea there must have been those who had believed on the Lord Jesus Christ in the course of His ministry. And these too with those in Jerusalem would have been baptized by the one Spirit into the one body of Christ. Still, while a local church was first formed, it was the purpose of God that it should spread throughout the whole world, that it should multiply its companies, and that it should increase numerically. And we know historically that this result was brought about by the spread of the gospel story of our Lord Jesus Christ.

You will probably have noticed that we find these two words, "growing and multiplying", used with reference to the children of Israel. They occur in Stephen's address to the Sanhedrin (Acts vii. 17). The sons of Jacob went down into Egypt, seventy-five souls, and in a short space of time they grew and multiplied to a miraculous degree. This increase was in such a striking manner that it attracted the attention of Pharaoh, the king of Egypt. He was alarmed and took drastic measures to put a stop to the marvellous increase which God was giving His chosen ones as the seed of Abraham, who He promised should be in number as the stars in heaven and as the sand upon the seashore.

But the growing and multiplying in Egypt was by natural means. Here in the Acts you have the history of something which is altogether different from the ordinary enlargement of families and nations. You read of a few persons in Jerusalem, persons of little account so far as the world went, but believing in the Lord Jesus Christ and confessing His name, and from them emanates a power which spreads in a single day among those in that city to a marvellous and incredible extent.

INCREASE OF THE CHURCH IN JERUSALEM

A man from Galilee stands up and speaks of what God has done to the crucified Jesus, and the power of his words enters the hearts and consciences of those who listen to him. As a consequence, three thousand souls are born again by the power of the burning words of Peter. It was a phenomenon altogether unknown in the world's history until that time. A man speaks and three thousand persons pass from death unto life; what does this event mean? It means that the power of God has come down. It proves that the Holy Spirit is here, as promised, that Peter was full of the Holy Spirit, that he was speaking words that were not his own, but words charged with living and divine power by that same Spirit.

Through this Spirit-given witness, a great company of guilty men were brought to confess Christ and to be baptized in His Name, to leave the untoward generation that had crucified the Lord Jesus, and associate with the company that bore His name. These three thousand souls in Jerusalem were added to those that believed; and this was how the church grew and multiplied even in that day of its birth at Pentecost.

Day by day the progression went on. Day by day the church increased. As we read, "the Lord added . . . daily." Men here, women there, children too, heard the same words of grace and power; and the same mighty result was wrought within them. They were brought to own the name of Him Who was crucified in their midst so very, very recently. Fifty days or so had passed, that was all, since that awful event.

But the preaching proceeded and the converts multiplied amazingly. Whole-hearted devotion filled the hearts of the disciples. They were prepared to give their lives for Him, Who had suffered for them. The mighty change was the power of the Holy Spirit of God. Let us look at the effect as it was displayed in its simplicity and its power there, for it is a lesson that we, as those that belong to the church of God, must never forget. The

power for growth in grace, the power for multiplication in numbers is now what it was then ; the same mighty, changeless Holy Spirit of God is still here to see that the church makes its proper advance and that it does its work in announcing the glad tidings everywhere throughout the whole world.

The church rapidly increased in Jerusalem, so that we read of a multitude that were together, of a multitude of people believing, (Acts iv. 32 ; v. 14 ; vi. 2). Jerusalem was very thickly populated at that season of the year and great numbers of visitors to the feast were also lodged in the immediate vicinity ; but there was the fact that grace was working mightily among the Jews from other lands, and also among the bloodstained betrayers and murderers of Jesus Christ of Nazareth ; the good seed was springing up and bearing fruit abundantly. God had mercy upon that guilty city that had slain the righteous, the Holy One. Their sin was at their very door, but " where sin abounded, grace did much more abound ", and so large numbers were brought to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. A great company of the priests also were obedient to the faith.

SPREADING OUTWARDS

But while the testimony to the exalted Christ was to begin at Jerusalem, it was not to remain there. God saw to it that the word of the gospel should go out elsewhere from that centre. Accordingly we find that persecution arose to disperse the disciples. A valiant witness for the Lord Jesus Christ had to surrender his life for his Master. Stephen died, and received the crown of martyrdom ; but the persecution that began with him spread with unmitigated fury throughout Jerusalem.

Once the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem felt that they could injure the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ in the person of His witnesses, they threw their energies into this work. Impelled by the evil one, they set themselves to stamp out the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ in Jerusalem by persecuting His followers.

But the Lord had foreseen that persecution would come upon His disciples, as first of all it came upon Him. He had said to them, "When they persecute you in this city, flee ye into another." Accordingly the believers in Jerusalem were all scattered abroad except the apostles. But in other places they did not cease their work of witnessing for Christ. They went everywhere preaching the word. And wherever they preached the word, the same Holy Spirit was behind the preaching, and the preaching was effective, so that men were brought to confess the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Throughout Judea, and Galilee, and Samaria men heard of the death, the resurrection, and the glorification in heaven of Him, Whose words many of them remembered, Whose miracles they had seen, Whose gracious presence they had missed from their streets. Now they heard that He had shed His precious blood for the ransom of souls, and that God had received Him into glory on high.

The Holy Spirit was with the preachers, and the word of God had its effect in saving many souls. But we find that those persons who believed the gospel were all gathered together into the new company formed at Pentecost. Those who believed, the new converts, were added to those who already believed, and we read that throughout Judea, and Galilee, and Samaria, the church (for this is the true reading in Acts ix. 31) had rest and was edified. It was one church, one assembly; many meetings, many towns, many villages, but one assembly. Why were they all one assembly? Because One Spirit had come down to form the one body. As there is but One Holy Spirit, so there can be but one church, and as there is but one Head, so there can be but one body.

We read, therefore, that the whole church throughout those provinces had peace. Being edified, walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, the church was multiplied. There was growth up to this point, and throughout this book we continue to read of the progress of the word of God in the enlargement of the church. It was not only in Samaria, and in the districts immediately around Palestine, but through-

out Asia Minor and into Europe and Africa the word spread, and everywhere men were brought to know our Lord Jesus Christ. Yet the remarkable result was that although so many in so many places confessed Christ, there was never more than the one assembly, united to the one Christ on high and inhabited by the one Holy Spirit, Who had come down to form that holy temple unto the Lord.

So then without going further through this book for evidence, we can safely come to this conclusion, that the growth and the multiplication of the members of the body of Christ continued from Pentecost onwards. And all the time of which we read in the New Testament, the increase continued. There was no cessation; the church was a continually growing thing, for behind it was the energetic power of the Holy Ghost.

THE WORK OF GOD IN BUILDING

The church is called the church of God, because its origin is of God, and it is the power of God by His Spirit that accounts for the presence and continuance of the church in the world to this day. Though sadly ruined, it is still the church of God. We are apt to judge of a thing only as we see it, but scripture shows us what is behind the scenes in the history of the church. And there we have the mighty power of God, in contrast with the outward failure of man.

“ I commend you to God, and to the word of His grace ”, the apostle Paul said when he was speaking of church declension to the elders of Ephesus, “ I am going to leave you, but remember God is for you.” “ Ye are God’s husbandry, ye are God’s building ”, as the same apostle wrote to the Corinthians (1 Cor. iii. 9). God is calling out of this world a special company, which He calls His assembly, and, when He has finished it, it will be for the praise of the glory of His grace.

There is also the present work of the Lord Jesus Christ in connection with the formation of His assembly. I think a very refreshing subject to take up as a study is

to look through the Acts of the Apostles for the references to the activity of the Lord Jesus Christ. We are apt to think of the Lord Jesus only as One Who has for ever left this weary world, Who has done the mighty work of eternal redemption here so completely that nothing needs to be added to it. It is indeed blessedly true that He has finished His work, having glorified God the Father here upon the earth, and that now He is seated at God's right hand, His work finished, and He is consequently resting there: and this side of the truth it is most necessary to know. It is establishing to the heart and conscience to be persuaded that the great work of atonement is completed and that a seated Christ is the abiding proof of it.

But there is another aspect of revealed truth to remember. We ought to know that the Lord Jesus Christ is still active. When Peter, taught by the Father, made his remarkable confession, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God", the Lord Jesus Christ said, "Thou art Peter, and upon this Rock I will build My church." When is that work of building His church carried on? When He went up on high, He then commenced to build. Who was it that added together those that were being saved? We are told that the Lord "added to the church daily such as should be saved." The three thousand souls at Pentecost were those that He brought into His assembly. They were living stones placed by the Builder in that new building, in that spiritual house which was to grow up by His own mighty handiwork.

Though ascended, the Lord Jesus is said to be active on earth, working with His servants (Mark xvi. 20). As we go through the history in the Acts we find it is so. Who was it that looked down from heaven and spoke to Saul of Tarsus, arresting him in his course of persecution? It was the Lord, Who had a special purpose in doing so in connection with His church. "I will reveal especially to him that Christ and the church are one, and that the church has a heavenly and a glorious calling. To him I will communicate the mystery of Christ and the church, hitherto not made known to the sons of men."

The Lord Jesus Himself spoke directly to this man, "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou ME?" It was a real, verbal challenge, a real Person speaking real words to the man's heart. It was not a noonday dream; he was smitten to the ground, and the persons around him heard the sound of the voice. It was a substantial vision, right here in the world, and was the result of the special agency of the Lord Jesus at work in the formation of His church.

We may take comfort from the great fact. When here the Lord said, "My Father worketh hitherto, and I work." You and I may possibly be idlers in the Lord's field, but the Lord is never idle. He is at work continually; He is building His church, adding stone by stone, day by day, as it pleases Him. The Lord has a purpose before Him that the church may be completed, and until His church is completed, He will never cease from His labour. He has also a work for each of us to do for Him, but we will come to that later.

THE PERSONAL ENERGY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

We need to remember that these divine Workmen, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, are all concerned in the building and maintenance of the church, yet men despise the church because of its outward failure. God has revealed in His word the truth concerning the essential nature of His church, and He has associated its establishment on earth with the special agency of the Godhead—God the Father promising the Spirit, God the Son shedding the Spirit forth at Pentecost, and God the Holy Spirit forming the assembly.

A more correct title of this book containing the history of the early church would be the Acts of the Holy Spirit, not the Acts of the apostles. All through it the acts of the Holy Spirit are recorded. Whatever the various servants of God did in preaching and teaching, they did as they were animated by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit was behind Peter, Stephen, Philip and others guiding and controlling them and their service. If, for

instance, the servants of the Lord wanted to go on one occasion into Bithynia, the Spirit suffered them not ; it was not the will of God that they should go at that time (Acts xvi. 7).

Is this directing government of Christian service a thing of the past only ? Has the Holy Spirit departed from the church ? Is the church an empty tenantless wreck and ruin ? No, the Holy Spirit is still here to take up those who desire to be used by Him and to use them in this glorious work of edification and evangelization, so that the church may continue to grow and multiply. Before we think about what our service should be, let us think of that blessed Holy Person Who is at work in connection with the establishment and the development of the church which will ultimately sit with Christ on His throne and reign over the earth in His name.

THE EDIFICATION OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

The work of the Holy Spirit does not cease because of human failure, though it may be hindered. In the Acts we get historical examples of His work outside and inside the church. When we come to 1 Corinthians xii., we find the nature of His work in the assembly. The Holy Spirit gives His gifts to aid the spiritual life of persons in the church. He gives a word of wisdom to one, and a word of knowledge to another. He provides just what is needed for the growth and development of each assembly, so that it may not be lacking in any one spiritual grace.

What is the great object of those diversities of gifts exercised by "that one and the selfsame Spirit" ? The 12th and 14th chapters of this Epistle show that they are exercised for the edification of the saints, for the express purpose of building up the church in the faith of God's elect.

Edification means a building process. Christ said, "I will build My church", which implies that He will continue to add living stones to His assembly founded upon the rock. He can raise up stones to be witnesses for Him,

for He gives life to dead stones, so that they become living stones, and are immediately brought into and made part of that spiritual house. This is the Lord's work in building His church.

But there is also the edification or building up of saints in their most holy faith, widening their knowledge of the truth, deepening their love for Christ, quickening their activities in worship and service. Who does this? It is the Holy Spirit, working in the midst of the assembly, giving through this one and that one the necessary ministry for the edification of each and all.

We are none of us perfect, we all are lacking in one respect or another. There is One Who knows what we lack, and there is One Who can give it, One Who is prepared to give it. God's Holy Spirit abides in the midst of the assembly for this purpose. He sees one member who is declining in devotion to Christ, and He brings His word to bear upon that person's heart and conscience. He shames him, He makes him to feel that he has received so much and given so little, that he is spending his life for himself instead of living for his Master. He makes the backslider in heart to feel that he has been disobedient to the plain teaching and holy precepts that are contained in the Holy Scripture. By such means the Spirit quickens the sluggish energies to greater activity.

In many such ways the Holy Spirit carries on His work among the saints. Because you are one of the assembly, the assembly is the place where the Holy Spirit ministers to you by means of others, speaking through them to you for your spiritual advantage and blessing. Correction is not a pleasant experience. You do not like the things that hurt, but very often the things that hurt most are the things that do most good. A cunning doctor often disguises his bitter medicine, nevertheless it is the bitter medicine that does good to the patient. There is no remedy in its sugar-coating.

But the Holy Spirit does not disguise the word of truth. He does not use the sword concealed in a scabbard. The truth comes home to you, and you know it is the truth about your naughty ways, yet you say, "I do not like

the man who is telling me this. I do not like his speech. I think he might correct his own conduct, and not talk about me." You ought rather to say, "Is he speaking the truth of God, and does that truth apply to me and condemn me?" If the exhortation proceeds from the Holy Spirit, it will be to your spiritual loss if you refuse to receive it and take it home to yourself.

All the members of the body of Christ need exhortation, correction, and instruction from time to time, and these varied requirements of the assembly are met by the word brought to us by the Holy Spirit through the mouths of this one or that one. It may be simply the inaudible speaking of the Holy Spirit within ourselves. Many can say that some of the sweetest thoughts of the things of God in connection with the Holy Scriptures have arisen within us in the assembly, without a sound to be heard. Often and often, in those sweet silences of the gathering which are of the Spirit, He speaks to our hearts in a still small voice. Oh, for ears to hear and hearts to receive what the Holy Spirit would bring before us at such times! He is truly the great and capable Teacher; He will guide us into all truth; and He always will lead us on if we will only let Him. He is here with us to work in the church to the edification of all by means of the gifts that He Himself has given.

THE LORD GIVES PERSONS TO HIS CHURCH

In Ephesians iv., we have yet another side of this subject. We there read again of gifts, but they are spoken of in connection with the Head of the church, the One Who ascended up on high, and not, as in Corinthians, with the Spirit Who has come down from above. The exalted Head is the One that gives gifts unto men, and we are told that He gives "some apostles, and some prophets, and some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers." He gives the persons; the men themselves are His gifts to His church.

There is thus a slight difference between the gifts that we read of here and those we read of in Corinthians. In

Corinthians we read of the Holy Spirit giving a word of knowledge, a word of wisdom, or the like through one person or another. He impels one person to pray, and another person to prophesy, and so on. There the gift is the thing that is done, the action, the use of the organs of speech in the assembly ; but here in Ephesians, the Lord, as Head of the church, gives certain persons for the benefit of the assembly. He gave apostles ; Paul and others were actual persons who were given to secure the establishment and the growth of the assembly.

In Ephesians we are not shown how the unseen Spirit works through this one and that one in a variety of ways for the benefit of all. Here we learn that a particular person receives a particular gift from the Lord, and that gift brings responsibility to use it for the spiritual well-being of the whole church. If the Lord Who went away from this world bestowed a gift upon any of us, then we are directly responsible for its use to Him Who gave that gift. We shall have to answer to Him ; and that is why the Lord is spoken of here as the Head. The apostles, prophets and others were all in relation to the Head from Whom they derived their usefulness to the church. By and by they must all stand before their Lord and Head to give an account of what they have done.

We are not responsible to the Holy Spirit in exactly that way. The Holy Spirit has not taken His place in the church on earth for the exercise of supreme rule and authority, except that He has the authority which is proper to Him as proceeding from the Father and the Son. As Isaac figuratively represented the Son, so Abraham's servant represented the Spirit. But the Lord Jesus is in the place of authority and power and supremacy in all that concerns the assembly, and He has bestowed upon the church her gifts, those persons who are responsible to Him for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.

We have no apostles now. The early apostles have all passed away, but we have the apostolic writings. All that is needful for us to know we possess in the Scriptures,

for the apostles and prophets have once for all laid the foundation of the church. We have the writings of the prophets as well as the apostles. Luke was a prophet ; Mark was not an apostle, but he was a prophet. These two prophets wrote the mind of God about the life of Christ, each for a particular purpose in the scheme of divine instructions for the church. So in their writings we have the apostles and prophets as the foundation upon which the church rests.

EVANGELISTS

The evangelists too, thank God, are not missing among Christ's present gifts to the church. They are those who go out anywhere and everywhere preaching the word. Philip was an evangelist, and he went down from Jerusalem to preach Christ in the city of Samaria, and then went down into the desert. He was a man under the influence and direction of the Spirit of God to make known Christ where He was not named. He was a gift bestowed by the Head to go out into the world in service that Christ might build His church. Philip was to find the stones for his Master, so that they might be wrought into the spiritual edifice. He sought in the quarry of wickedness and shame for dead souls for His Master in connection with His formation of the church.

Thus the evangelist belongs to the church ; he is a gift to the church from its Head ; his work is intimately concerned with the growth of the church. If he is concerned only in getting a confession from a man's mouth that he believes in the Lord Jesus Christ, and if he then leaves the convert to shift for himself, he is not doing his full work. His work is to see that the convert becomes part of the confessing body of persons upon the earth, which owns the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ. The evangelist should not omit to instruct the new recruit in what the word of God reveals as the truth about the church.

PASTORS AND TEACHERS

Pastors and teachers are also necessary to the growth of the church, and in the list given here the pastor comes before the teacher. Probably the pastor and teacher was often a double gift united in a single person, though not always so. A pastor is one who feeds the sheep of Christ, not one who stands up and talks a great deal of airy stuff about the higher criticism of scripture, and usually leads his hearers away into a mist of darkness, where they cannot follow him. Such are persons who "understand neither what they say nor whereof they affirm." A man who is a teacher of that sort is certainly no pastor. The pastor that Christ gives is one who feeds the hearts of His saints.

We who love the Lord Jesus Christ hunger to know something more about Him. There is nothing that we value more than some new thought or some new glimpse of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is sweet to us because it is about Him. And the pastor knows how and shows us how to bring Christ into the things of daily life, into the workshop, into the busy street, into the home, into the various circumstances in which we find ourselves. We need instruction and advice about these practical matters because sometimes young Christians are not as wise as they might be, though they mean well. For instance, they sometimes talk about Christ in the office, perhaps, when they ought to be doing their duty to their masters, and that is not a wise nor a righteous thing. Again, we sometimes talk to people with a view to help them, and instead of that we drive them further away from the truth, and we never have another opportunity of saying what we would to them. We are so unwise, and need to be taught how to present Christ.

The pastor is a wise person who brings the truth of God before me and down to me, so that I feel that it is just the word that I want in my present associations. For example, here we are to-night, all differently situated. I cannot say what truth will suit you, and you cannot say

what truth will suit me exactly. But the Holy Spirit of God knows my need and brings the word before me by means of another's wise conversations, so that I see at once the truth I want. It sheds its light upon my pathway. The pastoral gift is something to covet.

How can we become pastors in the church of Christ? I mean in a very simple way, of course. We can only be useful in this service by first of all proving for ourselves the adaptability of the truth of Christ as it is revealed in the word. When we have proved the value of a thing for ourselves, we can with confidence recommend it to others. If we find a scripture that helps us in the worship and service of Christ, it is absolutely certain to help other people in the same way. We may, therefore, with confidence recommend to others what we have found good for our own souls; and so in a simple way we can feed the sheep of Christ.

Teachers are gifts employed by the Head of the church to lead on the saints in knowledge of what is revealed in the word of God.

THE WHOLE BODY GROWING

Without dwelling further on the various gifts, I want to draw attention to the direct reference made in this scripture to the growth of the church. In verse 16, we read, "From Whom" (that is, the Head) "the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love." Here all the saints are viewed in the unity of the whole body, which makes increase of itself because of its association with the Head in heaven. This is of immense encouragement. If you are really a confessor of the Lord Jesus Christ, and belong to the one body of Christ, you are included in this supply of vital energy communicated for all.

We are told that the connection between the Head and the body is so intimate, so profound, so far-reaching,

that "every joint" and "every part" are affected. Consequently the spiritual well-being of the whole and of its parts also is secured. It follows that normally each member should contribute to the health and efficiency of the whole body of Christ. We are necessary to one another and to all fellow-members. If one member suffer, then all the members suffer in consequence.

How important I am then to my brothers and sisters ! The fact that my own soul is in touch with the living Lord in glory will have a helpful effect upon all that are present in the assembly. But suppose, for instance, I go to the breaking of bread with an ill temper in my heart, I may sit down and say not a single word, but there is a smouldering fire of evil feeling within me. I am a silent hindrance in worship and prayer to every brother and sister that is there.

I ought not to have come in such a condition. I ought to have confessed this sin. I ought to have owned it to the Lord in private. I ought not to have come unwashed into the holy assembly. What I wish to convey is that without saying a word it is possible to mar the worship of God in a whole meeting by my personal failure. This is because every part of the body contributes to the efficiency of the whole. This statement applies to sisters as well as brothers, to young as well as to old, to every part of this wonderful structure which the Lord is energising. We are all so united one to another, that if anything is wrong in one person, it has an ill effect in others. The converse is also true. Let me come with my soul happy in the Lord, let me come empty of self and full of the Holy Ghost, let me come with my heart full of praises to worship God and remember the Lord in His death, and the radiancy of this joy spreads to the others. I do not need to advertise it, the Holy Spirit is there to make it good and make it real, "according to the effectual working in the measure of every part." My right condition is necessary to the perfection of the whole ; and in this necessity lies our individual responsibility.

INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY

In 1 Corinthians iii. we also find this subject of responsibility with regard to the growth of the assembly. We ought to realise what responsibility rests upon the members of the body of Christ in this matter. It applies to those that are taught in the assembly, and to those that teach, as well as to those that help or minister in any way. There is a great deal of instruction on this point in this chapter, but I can only briefly refer to it. You can study the chapter at your leisure.

At the beginning of it the apostle speaks in a somewhat strange way to the saints at Corinth. He says that he cannot write to them as he would like to do. Their spiritual state hindered him. It was three or four years since he had left them, and they had now fallen into a state of sad disorder. And instead of feeding them with meat as adults, he has to feed them with milk as babes. Now there was a reason for this low and stunted state. He writes, "I could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, as unto babes in Christ."

THE FLESH HINDERS SPIRITUAL GROWTH

What was the matter, what was wrong at Corinth? Why were they so stunted in growth? They had forgotten that being now members of the body of Christ, they belonged to a new class of persons entirely. Their relationships to one another were new. In the assembly, they were not to be governed by their former worldly responsibility and worldly ways. There was a new standard, for they now belonged to Christ; and yet they had been acting just as men of the world. They were influenced by carnal motives, and there was strife among them, and divisions.

Their differences arose about something which in some respects appeared to be commendable. They did not agree among themselves with regard to their leaders and teachers. They had various prominent persons before them in their assembly. They well knew the apostle

Paul, of course, who had been among them some eighteen months teaching the word of God. There was also Apollos, and there was Cephas too. The saints had attached themselves to these leaders in a spirit of appreciation and devotion, which developed into rivalry. One said, "I am of Paul", another "I am of Apollos", and another said, "I do not belong to any of you, I belong to Christ", and a party was set up even in that way.

Thus while there was no open division, there were cliques in the assembly. And this party-spirit was just what they had been accustomed to in their unconverted days. Consequently, the assembly in Corinth had its circles of doctrine; one man was whole-hearted for his teacher, and another was whole-hearted for his teacher, and they had brought these varying views and feelings into the assembly. They were looking at influential men; they were not looking at Christ as the Head of the whole body. When a man said, "I am of Christ", that is, "I have got Christ in a way that you have not", he made Christ the head of a party instead of the Head of the church. His zeal was not according to divine knowledge.

The truth was that they had allowed worldliness and self to usurp the place that Christ should have in their hearts. They were fleshly, and therefore had to be fed with milk. They could not receive the truth of God which the apostle would have loved to minister to them. And if a person cannot receive the truth of God, he does not grow up into Christ "in all things, which is the Head, even Christ." He makes no progress in spiritual things, and so there is a failure in his personal responsibility.

Individually and collectively, spiritual growth depends upon obedience to the word of God. We have an example in the early church, of whose progress we read thus: "So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace, being edified, walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, was multiplied" (Acts ix. 31, R.V.). The church was multiplied, and this increase followed a faithful walk.

This connection between spiritual growth and walk is

important to note. As members of the body of Christ, are you walking in separation from the world? You know very well that the world and Christ cannot go on hand in hand. You know that if you indulge in worldly parties, clubs, and associations, you at once acquire a distaste for the word of Christ, and soon you have no relish for Christ Himself. You are asked, "What is the matter with you?" You say, "I do not know." But you do know; it is the result of your association; you have been allowing the love of worldly pursuits to creep into your heart; and this is destroying your communion with the Lord. You do not like Bible readings; you do not like to read the word of God yourself, nor to read it with other people. You do not grow in grace and truth. Why is it? Because you have fallen into worldly ways and carnal habits. This is what the apostle upbraided them for at Corinth, and the passage provides a word of caution for those who are taught, lest they should by their own failure and shame interfere with the church growing and multiplying.

Now, in the latter part of the chapter, Paul speaks about teaching and service in the church. He speaks of laying the foundation (1 Cor. iii. 10). He himself laid the foundation in Corinth, and the foundation was Jesus Christ.

WORKS WHICH STAND THE FIRE

Other persons came afterwards, and taught various doctrines. They built upon the apostolic foundation. But some of the workmen, some of God's workers in the assembly at Corinth, had not been building wisely. They had not been serving the saints faithfully. They did not have the Lord before them to direct their work, and they had not used the right material, the truth of God, in their work; and the apostle here warns them against this improper and unfaithful service.

If we are helping in the assembly to build up the saints in any way, let us take heed what we build, because Christ means to have a pure, holy, and spotless church, which He will present to Himself. And if we are putting

anything into the structure, He will test our work to prove whether it is good. He tests it by fire. The apostle deals with the subject in figurative language. Some build on the foundation gold, silver, precious stones; others wood, hay and stubble. In the day of Christ, He will try every man's work to show publicly what sort it is. Fire will try every man's work, and some of it will disappear, being only wood, hay, stubble. Gold, silver, precious stones will stand the fire. And only what is of God's word will stand the fire of His judgment, His final test.

The Bible is the imperishable word of God, and if I put into the heart of my fellow-Christians what is the truth of God contained in this word, the work will stand. But if I minister my own thoughts and opinions, the work will be destroyed in the judgment day. Let every one take heed what he is doing in the church of God. It is a terrible thing to put a stumbling block in the way of one of Christ's little ones, and to cause him to fall. Some are placed in difficult circumstances wherein they have to walk every day, and any moment they are liable to slip and fall. What am I doing? Am I holding out a helping hand to them, or am I giving them a push? If I give them any helpful advice, I must give them what is written by God. If I do not, it may do them more harm than good; and this service of mine will be burnt.

But there are also the good workmen of whom the apostle speaks. Their work will stand inspection when the Master comes, and He will say, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant." Oh, let us covet to be good workmen in the sight of the Lord, faithful workmen in the service of our Lord Jesus Christ. If you are seeking to help a person in spiritual distress, what is the good of reading to him something out of Shakespeare or Milton? Such literature may be useful in some matters so far as this world is concerned. But the use of God's holy word is to keep you loyal to Christ of Whom that word speaks. Help him then with what is sterling and good, and you shall have your reward. A man who wishes to work well chooses the best material for his work.

In addition to the second class of workmen, whose works are burned, but they themselves saved, there is a third class. These are wicked and terrible persons, who defile the holy temple of God, bringing evil, poisonous teaching into the assembly of God. Nothing is said of their works, but the apostle says solemnly of such an one, "Him shall God destroy."

CONCLUSION

We have only had before us a very imperfect outline of this subject of the growth of the church. But let us remember that there is a divine work proceeding in connection with the building of the church. This work is infallible and cannot be overturned. It will go on in spite of our failure.

But there is also the individual work, in which we each have a responsibility. So surely as we are in this church of God, so surely we have a responsibility to our brothers and sisters to help them, to do them good, to get them a little further advanced in the things of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Lord looks to each of us for this. Let us by His grace do what we can for His name's sake.

VII

THE CHURCH IN DECAY AND DISORDER

(Read Matthew xiii. 24-43 ; Acts xx. 28-32 ;
2 Timothy ii. 19-22.)

THE above scriptures all have a bearing upon the subject proposed for this evening, which is the decay and disorder in the church of God. There is decay so far as doctrine is concerned and disorder so far as moral and spiritual practices are concerned.

We have on a previous occasion considered briefly the founding of the church of God at the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and we then saw a beautiful and striking picture of the new thing in Jerusalem that had been constituted in the Name of the Lord. We also saw that the small nucleus consisting of disciples of the Lord, baptized into one body by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, very quickly, even upon the first day, began to add to their numbers. The power of the Holy Ghost Who had come down was such that it wrought mightily through them for the blessing of others in the city, and men who had been betrayers and murderers of the Lord Jesus were born again through the word. They confessed faith in His Name, and they were added to those who were already together in Jerusalem.

SPREADING OUT FROM JERUSALEM

And the word of God grew and multiplied still further, not only in Jerusalem, but throughout Judea, Samaria and Galilee, and subsequently to the very ends of the known world at that time. In the first few years of the

church's history, the spread of the gospel was undoubtedly phenomenal, but although the companies of believers multiplied so rapidly, although the numbers of individual saints increased so quickly, yet still they were all together; there was an unity between them; they were one in the things of the Lord. They walked together in the truth, and acted together in faith and love; and throughout large districts though there were many assemblies there was but one church.

And, in view of this marvellous development, we might ask ourselves, why did not this glorious work continue to spread and spread? If the church spread so rapidly in the first thirty or forty years of its existence, and it is now more than eighteen centuries later, how is it that by this time the whole world is not confessing the name of the Lord Jesus Christ? If the church was one in those early days and growing apace in those early days, why is it that things are so different now? Instead of seeing those who name the Name of the Lord Jesus all walking together in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, we see that they are sadly divided and scattered, and that things are permitted among the saints of God and encouraged in the name of the Lord which we know to be of Satan and not of God. Many popular doctrines and practices are absolutely foreign to the character of our Lord and Master, and yet they are all ostensibly authorised under His Name.

If we close our Bibles, we shall be baffled by this great mystery, because apart from the word of God, the declension cannot be explained. There is no hypothesis to account for the contrast between the present days and the early days of the church, except what we find when we turn to the scriptures. There we find that the whole discreditable history was foreknown of God.

Moreover, we learn that the reason why this failure in the church has arisen is the same reason that accounts for the failure we read of in Old Testament times. In those times, the people of Israel, when they were brought out of Egypt to Canaan, and were called to witness to the unity of the Godhead against the prevailing idolatry,

forthwith began to worship idols like other nations. They were held responsible before God for this sin against the light, and were punished in consequence. The church like the nation of Israel failed in their responsibility, as man always does fail and dishonour God in the things which are committed to him. Do you regard this breach of trust as a strange thing? If you do, you may not perhaps have rightly considered your own history; because I am bold to say that there is no one here to-night who is absolutely faultless in his own private life. Is there one here who would stand up and unblushingly declare in the presence of God that he has been absolutely true and faithful in all that has ever been committed to him, and that when he is called to give to the Lord an account of his stewardship he will have no excuses to make, no acknowledgments of failure, nothing to deplore?

From the beginning, everything that was committed to the hands of man became manifestly a failure, and often grossly abused. And on this account we read right through the scriptures intimations of God's purpose to bring in the Second Man, the Lord from heaven, His own beloved Son. The last Adam will never fail in what is committed to Him. What our Lord Jesus Christ does abides for ever, it never deteriorates, it never decays, it is never subject to disorder, it never in any way brings dishonour upon God the Father. The work of the Lord Jesus is absolutely perfect and glorious to God, and this truth is an immense comfort to every one of us here to-night. Man has failed, and miserably failed, and wickedly failed, and he is responsible to God for his unfaithfulness; but we can look confidently upon our Lord Jesus Christ and glory in Him Who never failed God as the perfect Servant in the work that was committed to Him to do. He did it well, and to the glory of God.

THE LORD'S WORK PERFECT

Therefore, while we look upon ourselves with distrust and dissatisfaction, we look upon our Lord Jesus Christ

with satisfaction and delight. We glory in His cross, and in His perfection and His fullness. We rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh. Now in connection with this subject of the church, the scripture makes it perfectly plain that whatever our Lord Jesus Christ does in connection with His church is perfect and always will be perfect. When the church is spoken of as Christ's work, there is no failure nor imperfection attaching to it at all. The Lord Jesus Christ said at the beginning, "Upon this rock, I will build My church." He is going on with this building, and every living stone He adds to that spiritual edifice is perfect. The building is growing, stone by stone is being assembled, and the whole structure is rising up into a habitation for God, which will be flawless, and will be seen to be absolutely perfect.

Christ loved the church ; here is the real motive ; the whole church is before His mind and heart. The Lord knows the individuals that are His, and they form part of His church. But He also loved the church in its unity and completeness, and gave Himself up for it ; He lives for His church ; He serves it on high ; He cleanses it by the washing of water by the word. Then by and by, when it is all complete, He will present to Himself His church, without spot, or wrinkle or any such thing. The day is coming when the last member of the body of Christ will be added, and the church will be completed. Then Christ will take that church to be for ever with Himself.

Later still, when the Lord comes in glory to this world, the church in glory will accompany Him, by the grace and faithfulness of her Saviour. The world will wonder at those whom God will bring with Him. They will say, "These are sinners saved by grace, and there they are now right in the glory of God, absolutely perfect, without any failure." Where will you find anything approaching that in this world ? The world cannot discern perfection and glory in the church to-day. You can search all round the world, but you will never find a church on earth which is comparable with that perfect, ideal church

set out in the scriptures, the church which is His body, the fullness of Him which filleth all in all.

THE BLOTTED RECORD OF THE CHURCH

No ! I have been saying that we cannot look around the world and find that ideal—a perfect blameless church. And when we turn to the scriptures, we find a record of failure even in those early days. Who were the writers of the Epistles we have in the New Testament ? Were they not the apostles and prophets, the foundation of the church ? And they wrote Epistles to the various churches. They wrote to Rome, to Ephesus and to other places. What do you find in every Epistle ? You find that the apostles had to set to work to correct disorders that even then existed in the church of God. Paul wrote to the saints at Rome, a place he had never visited ; he expounded the gospel to them very fully, but he had to correct their behaviour. The spirit of oneness in the truth, the spirit of the unity of the body in Christ, the spirit of caring in love one for another because they were Christ's had departed from them. Those who rightly thought themselves delivered from the prescriptions of the law scorned those who were not able to rise to the same degree of liberty in Christ Jesus.

Again, when you read the Epistles to the Corinthians, you find a flood of errors in this church. There, those who called upon the name of the Lord Jesus, were suffering all kinds of evil things in the midst of the holy assembly ; immorality was condoned in the midst of the church of God ; the operation of the Holy Spirit of the Lord in their midst was made an occasion for men to display their pride of heart and their self-satisfaction, the rich setting themselves against the poor at the Lord's supper ; some denied the resurrection of the body. The apostle had to correct all these things and more in the church at Corinth ; and it was only about three or four years after he had founded that assembly that Satan effected an entrance there and these things of the flesh and the world were introduced into it.

SIMILITUDES OF THE KINGDOM

If you go through the whole of the Epistles, you will find that the work of the apostles was not only to found the church, to set it upon a stable basis as to doctrines and practices, but also to correct what was evil and wrong which even then had sprung up in their midst. Evil had come into God's assembly while the apostles were still alive.

What was it to our Lord Jesus Christ to see this beautiful house of God so quickly defiled? But the Lord Jesus Christ knew this beforehand, and I read those parables to you from the thirteenth of Matthew, wherein He speaks very clearly of this disorder. You may say you do not get the church there; that the church is not mentioned in Matthew xiii; and that the Lord Jesus speaks of the kingdom of the heavens.

It is true that the church is mentioned for the first time in Matthew xvi. And before the Lord says anything about the church, He discourses about the kingdom of the heavens. The Lord Jesus came from God to set up that kingdom, which should be like the kingdom of David His father, only better and more stable than that of the son of Jesse, but the people would not receive Him. He was in the midst of the Jews, a greater than Solomon, and He would have given them a dominion greater than Solomon's, wisdom greater than Solomon's, power and riches greater than Solomon's, but they would not receive Him. Have you ever heard of a kingdom in existence without a king? If a king is not acknowledged by his subjects, where is his kingdom?

In earthly government you associate the kingdom with a person who is ruling. The truth was that the people of Israel would not have "that Man" to reign over them. "We have no king but Cæsar", they said to Pilate, "as for this Jesus of Nazareth, crucify Him, crucify Him. We will not have this Man to reign over us." The Lord knew beforehand that this refusal would take place, and taught His disciples accordingly. He said in effect that the kingdom of the heavens would, in consequence of this

rejection, assume a specially strange and peculiar form indeed. He said, as it were, I am going to heaven, and in My absence, the kingdom of the heavens will be formed of those who render allegiance to Me throughout the world. I shall not be present to reign over them ; I shall not be seen by them. Those who call on Me, those who acknowledge My name, will constitute this kingdom. But it will not be like the future kingdom of Israel, when I shall sit on the throne of My father David and reign over Jerusalem. As a kingdom it will be unique in the world's history. So the Lord gave these similitudes which are in Matthew xiii., and which all relate to the kingdom of the heavens, the first being introductory. They depict its new and peculiar features as compared with Old Testament teaching.

THE TARES AMONG THE WHEAT

In the parable of the wheatfield, a man sowed good seed in his field, but an enemy came and sowed tares in the same field. And when the blade sprang up and brought forth fruit, then the tares appeared also. The servant said to the householder, "What shall we do? Shall we root up the tares?" "No", said the owner, "let them grow until the time of the harvest." Here, therefore, you see the kingdom of the heavens depicted in this composite form. There is good and there is also evil side by side ; there is a stalk of wheat, there is a blade of the tare ; both are growing side by side. They are similar in appearance ; they resemble one another outwardly ; but you will never get any good fruit from a tare. The good wheat will produce that which is the staff of life, but not the tare, though apart from fruit-bearing there is a resemblance between them.

Now, the Lord explained that the tares are the sons of the wicked one, and the good seed are the sons of the kingdom. The Lord Jesus Christ came to destroy the works of the devil, and therefore Satan is the great enemy of Christ ; and in order to work harm to those that bear His name, he places his own sons in the assemblies

of God's people. Though so dissimilar, they are allowed to congregate together. During the period when they are growing in company, the Lord Jesus Christ does not cast out of His kingdom all things that oppose, as He will when the harvest, the end of the age, comes. Now the Lord Jesus is not on the throne of David. He is on the throne of glory, but not on His own throne, hence He does not interfere outwardly with the constitution of His kingdom. Those who name the name of the Lord in truth are found side by side with those who are under the rule of the evil one. And this mixed condition will persist until the time of discriminating judgment arrives, when the tares are gathered out and burnt, and the wheat is gathered into the garner.

In the Acts of the Apostles and in the Epistles, you find that what was portrayed in the parables had become a fact, and evil persons had crept into the church of God. They were there side by side with true believers. They sat together in the assemblies ; they listened together to the teaching of the Holy Spirit ; but they wrought evilly to the detriment of what was holy and true, because the sons of the wicked one can only exercise an influence which is evil.

Let me endeavour to make this distinction quite clear. This parable was not spoken as a picture of church condition and relationship. It is a similitude of the kingdom of the heavens, which consists of those who nominally own our Lord Jesus Christ. Some are included who do not mean from the heart what they really say and confess, but these unreal ones are mixed up with the children of God as they gather together. And this springing up of tares among the wheat is recorded in the early church history as given in the Acts and the Epistles. Wolves entered in among the flock of sheep (Acts xx. 29).

BIRDS OF THE AIR IN THE BIG TREE

But there is another similitude of the kingdom of the heavens to consider. The second one is that of the grain of mustard seed, which, indeed, is the least of all seeds,

but when it is grown it is the greatest among herbs, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in the branches thereof. The mustard seed, the least of all seeds, we saw when we were looking at the second chapter of the Acts. There were about one hundred and twenty disciples of the Lord together in Jerusalem, fishermen, simple folk ; what could such a small company accomplish in the world ? But although in men's eyes they were " the least of all seeds," they immediately began to grow in strength and increase in numbers, and they continued to multiply until by and by they became a great tree.

The apostle, writing to the Colossians, speaks of the gospel having come to the whole world by that time ; such rapid progress was a great and unexpected phenomenon, and a good thing for those who received the gospel. Consequently, this astonishing growth of Christianity was soon considered something worth taking notice of and worth taking advantage of by the world. You will remember that in the first of our Lord's parables, the seed that fell on the wayside was stolen by the birds of the air. They also could easily carry away the mustard seed, the least of all seeds, but when the seed became a tree, they could not carry it away, but they could roost in its branches. So people of the world, when the company of believers grew too numerous and strong to be ignored and despised, sought to use the new faith as much as possible for their own advantage and convenience. We know that in the history of the church, this was the case. In the early part of the fourth century, the Emperor of Rome found that a great many of his soldiers were Christians, and that there were Christians in all parts of his dominions. As a matter of worldly policy, he said, I will become a Christian, so that I can have their support. Then it was that the world and the church intermarried. The world left its persecution, and took a prominent part in managing the outward interests of the church of Christ. The birds of the air found a lodgment amongst those who confessed the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

This amalgamation formed an epoch in ecclesiastical

history, and we know that right on to the present time the world has kept its footing in the church. The world not only holds the sceptre in its hand, but its influence penetrates everywhere in Christendom. It takes up the things of Christ to use them for its own ends. Worldly men will not scruple to use the name of Christ in an advertisement or displays in a theatre, or of a picture play, or of anything of that kind. They argue that some will be attracted because the name of Christ is associated with their entertainment. This is but a single instance of the world making use of the name of the Lord Jesus Christ to popularize its pleasure. The Lord warned against this artifice of Satan in those very early days before the assembly was formed.

THE LEAVENED MEAL

Now the next parable is very brief, but full of meaning. First, a man sowed seed in the field, then, a man sowed mustard seed, but now we read of a woman who took leaven and hid it in the meal. The Lord's word suggests secret dealing on the woman's part; the small piece of leaven was concealed in the three measures of meal. And you know the effect of leaven is to spread itself throughout the whole mass in which it is present. The three measures of meal became permeated by the leaven. There was no further effort by the woman; the leavening process went on of itself. The woman only had to put the leaven in, and the result was sure; the whole measured quantity of meal became leavened.

Leaven is a type of evil. "Beware", said the Lord afterwards to His disciples, "of the leaven of the Pharisees." Their teaching was corrupt and corrupting. Nothing spreads so rapidly amongst the children of God as leaven. If it is introduced into a company, it spreads throughout that company: "a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump", the apostle said to the Corinthians (1 Cor. v. 6). He did not only mean that it will go on to leaven it, if not cast out. But the sentence also implies that the effect of the presence of leaven is to contaminate

the whole lump, and that result is owing to the corrupting nature of the leaven itself. Evil has an insidious, permeating effect, destructive of what is good.

Ought we not even from experience to know that sin has this character? Have we never had the sad, humiliating consciousness of the poisonous effect of an evil thought or idea? Though, at first, but a germ, it is apt to grow and multiply within us. We may not desire its presence, but being there it works, it poisons the springs of action, it spreads throughout the whole life.

As this is true in the case of an individual, it is also true in the case of a company of God's people. No assembly is absolutely immune from the presence and corrupting influence of evil, which may arise either in teaching or doing. In the Galatian assemblies, it was a question of evil teaching (Gal. v. 9), for they were adding law to grace, and those who were carried away by it had fallen from grace. Christ had become of no effect to them. At Corinth, the leaven of corrupt practice was at work; gross immorality was permitted; and its presence had its defiling effect on the whole assembly.

Ought we not to allow these word-pictures of our Lord to warn us of what the contaminating power of evil is effecting among the saints of God? We should watch day by day against the danger of defilement. Unless we take account of it, there is the possibility of being ensnared by it and carried away by it. You know how easily disease is spread from one to another; infection is easily and quickly developed and carried throughout communities. Men are taken unawares by the epidemic; and it is so also in the matter of evil among the saints.

From the beginning the church has been subject to defiling influences from within and without, and we must not close our eyes to the facts. We find them here in the scriptures. Without dwelling further on these parables, let us refer to the address of the apostle Paul to the elders of Ephesus (Acts xx.). Paul was the great instrument that Christ used for spreading among the saints the knowledge of the church, which was communicated from heaven to him particularly. The risen and glorified Lord

revealed the mystery concerning Himself and the church to Paul, the last-called of the apostles. The other apostles knew the truth, but it was particularly intrusted by the Lord to Paul, from whom they received it.

Here he is bidding farewell to these elders ; he is going up to Jerusalem, and he has it particularly on his spirit to speak to these rulers of the assembly in Ephesus. He had put his whole soul into his work when he laboured there ; night and day with tears he wrought amongst them. He was not a man who was in the habit of talking about his own things, but when he did speak in this way, it was for a special purpose, and we ought to follow carefully what he said.

Paul felt in his spirit he would never see their faces again, and it was before him that in his absence terrible disorder and declension would come into the church. What the Lord had predicted in His parables would take place ; evil would enter and spoil the beauty and purity of the church of God. Accordingly, he warns the elders, those who were appointed especially to watch over and care for the saints at Ephesus. Seeing what was hanging over their heads, he speaks out of his love for them and for the assembly. He said, " Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which He hath purchased with His own blood."

WOLVES RAVAGING THE FLOCK

What were the overseers to do in view of this impending calamity ? They were to feed the church of God. What is the great preventative against the spread of evil ? Feeding upon the word of God. If our hearts and minds are fortified by the word of God, we become protected against the evil that is around and that seeks an entrance. If we know the truth, we also know that what is not of the truth is a lie. If we have the truth, we do not need anything else. We do not need to study the peculiarities of the five hundred different sects in Christendom to find out what is real and true. If we

have the truth, if we know the voice of the Good Shepherd, we are safe.

Feed the church of God ! This was his reason, " I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock." What did the Lord in the parable say would come into the great tree ? He said that the birds of the air would come in and lodge in the branches of the tree. His apostle said that grievous wolves would come in not sparing the flock. Why do wolves come among the flock ? They come to kill, and to scatter, and to destroy,—to damage the flock as much as possible.

It is thus clearly foretold by the apostle that agents of Satan would come into the church of God. They are there now. The protection against this danger is to give the sheep good food ; feed them well, so that they are made strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Let them know the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth ; and they will be preserved from those terrible foes which enter the church from the domain of Satan. Of course, wolves may appear in sheep's clothing, but they will come in where they can. This is the danger, and the only safeguard is to exercise shepherdly care and feed the church of God.

THE RISE OF PARTY SPIRIT

But this is not the whole of the peril Paul foresaw. It was not only necessary to watch the doors and see that grievous wolves did not enter, but he also says " of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them." There would be trouble from an internal source. Some among the saints of God themselves would stand up and declare things not according to the truth of God, their object being to draw people after them and form a party. A man who can talk fluently can say pleasant things, and he knows it, and often does so in the hope that his hearers will gather around him, and make a company of followers for himself. At Corinth there was a little party of those who

said, " I am of Paul " ; others said, " No, I am of Peter. Peter is the man for me." A third company said, " I am of Apollos." They made these little circles in the assembly, and called themselves by the name of their favourite leader.

The saints who were led away were wrong, as well as those who led them astray. But Paul is speaking of those who instead of standing for Christ their Master, stood for themselves. They did not say, " Look at Christ " ; they said, " Look at me, and follow my teaching instead of following Christ." When we hear a person saying that to-day, we had better not follow him, because he is of those who are spoiling the church of God.

I know that these things about the corruption and failure of the church are not pleasant to hear, but I have not brought before you a tithe of what is found in scripture on this subject. I hope enough has been said to compel you to look further and further into scripture for guidance upon this important question. While the ideal church of Christ remains pure and holy as consisting of believers made so by His precious blood, not one of whom will be lost, but all will form part of His church in glory ; while this is true, it is also true that in the professing church of Christ upon earth there is a state of general ruin and departure from primitive truth. Christendom includes all that which outwardly owns the name of the Lord Jesus, and there we find doctrines and procedure which are contrary to the holy Name of Christ and which are utterly condemned by His holy word. In view of this confusing condition of things every one who loves the Lord Jesus Christ will be inclined to despair and say, What am I to do ? What is my responsibility ? If there are evil doctrines and evil practices on the right hand and on the left, what is my responsibility to my Master ?

GUIDANCE FOR THE PERPLEXED

But there is no need to despair. We may be sure that our Lord Jesus Christ Who before the day of Pentecost spoke those parables depicting this state of degeneration,

has also provided some guidance for those who want to do His will and serve Him. Surely I am not speaking to anyone who is without a real desire to please our Lord Jesus Christ? We may have had the melancholy experience of trying to please a number of people; we find we cannot do it; and so some relapse into a selfish mood, and say, In the future I will only please myself. That is a very poor frame of mind to be in. We are here only to please our Lord Jesus Christ, and in pleasing Him we shall please our neighbour "for his good to edification." He is true to us; now then are you going to be true to Him in assembly matters?

You say, what shall I do to please Him? Shall I just carry on with things as I find them? Shall I accept them as they are, because I cannot help them? I am not responsible for the present failure. I will do the best I can where I am. No, we are responsible to the Lord Jesus Christ to act upon His word, which we have. We know that He loves His church. We know that through grace we are members of His body, and that we belong to Him, the living Head. Therefore, surely we must be anxious to know His mind for us in this day.

I think we have ample guidance in this Second Epistle to Timothy with regard to these matters. This is the Epistle which deals especially with the last days, the final condition of the church in which it is found up to the time when the Lord comes. Is it not good for us that decay and disorder in the church began to take place in apostolic times? Because we have the light of God upon the confusion. We have the written word to shine in the day of increasing gloom and darkness. And we have this guidance here, in the passage I read.

THE SOLID FOUNDATION

The first thing we notice is that in verse nineteen there is a word of great encouragement. "Nevertheless", says the apostle, "the foundation of God standeth sure." He had been speaking about some of the terrible things taking place in the last days. Evil words and teaching

abounded then, and would increase. But Paul is rejoiced to remind himself and Timothy and ourselves that although what is committed to man fails, the foundation of God stands sure. What is of God abides unimpaired, and nothing can touch it.

And while this character of permanence is true with regard to church things, I think it is a very sound principle to have always in mind also as an individual believer. What the Spirit of God reveals to you of the truth never changes. Make sure that what you have is of God. Let it be thoroughly grasped in your own soul as before God, that what you believe and what you are associated with is of Him. Do not have your spiritual convictions from other people ; do not have them even from your father and mother ; but have them from God, and have scripture for them, and then you can go to your daily rest with a good conscience and peaceful mind. The foundation of God stands sure ; and what was sure fifty years ago is sure now ; what was sure in apostolic days is firm now.

The foundations of the faith are being undermined and destroyed in these days. There are men who are devoting their whole lives and giving all their powers to the destruction of this holy word ; and they in the name of the Lord seek to destroy the confidence of the children of God in the Bible. They teach that only little bits of the Book are true. But what is the good of the Book to simple souls, if it is only reliable in parts ?

The apostle says, " The foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are His." The Lord knows, and we can rest confidently on His knowledge. His eyes, those eyes of flame, search the heart and conscience. He seeks for real relationship with Himself. He alone knows those that are His in this congregation. I do not—you do not. But our great assurance in this day of shallow profession is our personal connection with the Lord Who knows us, and will own us as His.

But there is another inscription upon the foundation, " Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart

from iniquity." Apart from our own will and desire, we may become physically infected with some contaminating, destructive disease if we come in contact with it. It fastens itself upon us, and we are laid upon a sick bed. Similarly, we are in danger from the evil around us. We are to beware of its pernicious effect. "Let every one that nameth the name of the Lord depart from iniquity."

THE HOUSE OF DISORDER

Then the apostle takes up the figure of the great house. If we had time, we could look at the First Epistle to Timothy where Paul writes to the same man and tells him how to behave himself in the house of God, the church of the living God (1 Tim. iii. 15). There he speaks of the true thing, but here it is something else, not the house of God. He calls it the "great house", because he cannot associate the name of God with a composite thing where evil is permitted to be side by side with good.

When the Lord Jesus Christ went into the temple in Jerusalem, He heard the lowing of cattle, the bleating of sheep, the cooing of doves, the rattle of coins on the money changers' table. He drove them all out and said, "They have made My Father's house a house of merchandise, a den of thieves", for they were cheating one another in the very courts of God's house. It was evil in the sight of the Lord, and here, we find, the church, the house of God had become the "great house", having lost its character of holiness.

In the great house, there are vessels of gold, and silver, wood and earth. Those of gold and silver are the vessels proper to the service of the house of God. Nebuchadnezzar took them away from the temple at Jerusalem and carried them to Babylon, and Belshazzar brought them out at his great banquet, and he and his lords praised their gods out of God's most holy vessels, which were consecrated for the use of the tabernacle and temple. That night God judged his profanity. Belshazzar was slain, and Babylon was taken. Here there are not only vessels of gold and silver for the exclusive use of the

Master, but vessels of wood and earth which ought not to be there.

You may take a golden vessel and use it to dishonour. When Belshazzar used the sacred vessels at his idolatrous feast, they were put to a dishonourable use. Similarly in the great house, where the vessels represent persons, you may have a real believer in the Lord Jesus Christ doing something, perhaps happily though mistakenly, which dishonours the Lord Jesus Christ. But the Lord cannot approve of this service because it is associated with evil. The golden vessel contains a libation to the gods. The good servant engaged in an unholy service is a vessel to dishonour, not to honour.

PURGING ONESELF TO BE SERVICEABLE

The apostle says there are vessels of gold and of silver, but also of wood and of earth ; and some to honour, and some to dishonour. If a man therefore purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honour, sanctified, and meet for the Master's use, and prepared unto every good work. Need I dwell upon this verse ; does it not speak for itself to each of us ? My Master is good, and kind, and gracious and loving, and He died for me ; and now I want to serve Him ; but if I would serve Him I must be a vessel sanctified and serviceable. How can I be prepared for every good work ? If I purge myself from those vessels which are to dishonour, then I shall be a vessel unto honour, sanctified, and meet for the Master's use.

I cannot come to Him in His service as if nothing mattered as to my personal conduct. I cannot go to Him, associated with something or somebody which I know to be wrong in His eyes. We often use this text as if it only applied to ourselves personally and individually ; exhorting us to purge our service from everything selfish and impure. That is needful, but the passage goes much further than that. It is not only putting away what is defiling in myself, but what comes from mixing with others too. "If a man therefore purge himself from

these, he shall be a vessel unto honour, sanctified, and meet for the Master's use."

In the twenty-second verse you get the moral features that are proper to the service of the Lord. "Flee also youthful lusts : but follow righteousness, faith, charity, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart." Here the association with pure hearts is enjoined. You remember the text in the tenth of Romans, "The same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon Him", and so He is. Whether we have pure hearts or not, He is rich unto us. If we call upon Him in the day of trouble, He hears. Have you not sometimes felt when you are delivered out of some trouble, that you had forgotten Him, but when you called upon Him you got His answer very quickly? How good of Him! But when it is a question of service, of association, of rendering a testimony for His name in a great house, you must look for those who call upon the Lord out of a pure heart, who have sanctified themselves, and follow righteousness, faith, love and peace with them.

By so doing you will purge yourself from those vessels which are to dishonour; you will leave them behind and have no more to do with them. There have been times in the history of the church when this has been done to a considerable extent. For instance, when people came out from the Roman Catholic Church in the Middle Ages, leaving the carnal and idolatrous worship behind and standing for the word of God and for justification by faith, that was a purging from vessels to dishonour on a grand scale. But to-day the Lord is calling us to hear His word, to abide by His truth, and to keep ourselves clean, and to keep our association pure. And His call is the more urgent for this special reason that the Lord is very quickly coming. Ecclesiastical profession has become so evil now; the children of God and the children of the world are so mixed up that surely the Lord will not endure it much longer. Surely He Himself will come, and take away His church out of this mass of corruption—take it to Himself. How long the Lord has waited for His church! Christ loved the church and gave Himself for it; all

through these many centuries He has been patiently gathering out souls, one by one, for His assembly. He wants to complete that church and present it to Himself.

If the Lord should come to-night and find you in association with something contrary to His holy name, though the word of God has shown you that it is contrary to His truth, what excuse could you render? Renounce such links with evil for His sake, because He calls for this sacrifice. Depend upon it, the Lord will approve and reward your faithfulness. Sometimes people refrain from such a step, because, they say, "I have so much greater influence and power over others as I am and where I am; and I think I should lose my power for good if I give up my present connection." This specious plea will not excuse your disobedience to the Lord's word. Your service must take the second place. Then the Lord will use you in the way He thinks best. To bring this about you must seek to be a vessel to His honour, "meet for the Master's use."

Remember, no person ever yet gave up anything for the Lord Jesus Christ and regretted the sacrifice. The Lord, as has often been said, is no man's debtor. When a surrender is made in obedience to His word, He makes ample compensation. And how pleasing such acts are to Him! You remember that the Lord was in the court of the temple on that day when the poor woman put her two mites into the treasury chest. Oh, how He loved to see that act of self-renunciation, and to look upon the woman as she gave all that she had! It was a refreshing draught to our Lord Jesus Christ to behold this work of grace in her soul. He was soon to go to the cross, selling all that He had to purchase the costly pearl, His church. She, too, gave all that she had, though only two mites.

Beloved friends, the Lord is looking upon us, seeking that we should exercise some self-denial for His name's sake. In the midst of all the decay and disorder in the church, may we be desirous to respond to His love; and if there is anything contrary to His word and displeasing to Him in our personal ways or in our association, let us give it all up for His name's sake!

VIII

THE CHURCH AND THE LORD'S SUPPER

(Read 1 Corinthians x. 14-22 ; xi. 20-34.)

THese scriptures are no doubt familiar to us all, and we can hardly hope to consider them all in detail this evening, but you may have observed that the verses that I have read may be roughly divided into three parts : first, x. 14-22 speaks of the Lord's supper as it concerns the church collectively looked at as the one body. I may refer particularly to verse 16, "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ ? For we being many are one bread and one body : for we are all partakers of that one bread." In this passage, the church is viewed in its unity, and the celebration of the Lord's supper is regarded as an act by the church in its collective capacity.

Secondly, in xi. 20-26, the apostle is referring to the manner of eating the Lord's supper, bringing out those tender and affecting features of the remembrance of the Lord which are so closely connected with a proper observance of the Lord's supper. This is a passage of the greatest importance to us, seeing that it sets out the meaning, the spiritual import of this central institution of the church of God.

Thirdly, the concluding verses of the eleventh chapter (27-34) are a personal exhortation with regard to the personal conduct of those who attend the observance of the Lord's supper.

ONE LOAF, ONE BODY

In the tenth chapter then, the apostle presents the Lord's supper with regard to this great fact that in it all the saints of God (because they are members of the one body of Christ) are represented when they gather together on such occasions. They meet as units of that great congregation on earth which forms the church of God and the body of Christ. There is one loaf ; and the one loaf while it speaks most truly of the Lord's own body given for us, it also speaks of that mystical body, the spiritual body, which He Himself has formed by the Holy Spirit, because of His death. We being many are one loaf : there is one loaf, there is one body. Symbolically, the saints are all together there—a most important consideration, particularly at this present juncture in the history of the church of God, when the saints, outwardly speaking, are divided into so many conflicting parties, all carrying on under different names. Nevertheless, week by week, as the saints of God gather together for the remembrance of the Lord Jesus Christ in His death, the one loaf upon the table has this voice to all that are present, namely, that there is but one body. The Lord Jesus Christ died that He might gather together in one the children of God that were scattered abroad, and the unity of the church is expressed in a figurative way in the one loaf.

There was no doubt a special reason why in the tenth chapter the apostle presents the Lord's supper in this way, and the reason was found in those whom he addressed. The saints of God at Corinth, and possibly at other places too, had forgotten the peculiar and unique nature of the Lord's supper. They forgot that it was something which linked them with the Lord Jesus Christ Himself ; it was His own appointment ; and an appointment made by Him after He had completed the observance of the paschal supper, of which He Himself was the Antitype. Then it was that, speaking to the eleven apostles, He desired of them that they should do this for a remembrance of Him. The Lord's supper was thus

instituted to be the memorial of Himself—the absent Lord and Master. The One Who had died would be remembered in the world by the continual observance of His wishes in respect of this supper.

The Lord's supper therefore stood out as an institution in complete contrast with the Jewish feasts which were instituted in Old Testament times ; it superseded them ; it differed in character from them altogether. Think of the occasion when it was founded. The Lord Jesus Christ was sitting at the table and the eleven were around Him. It was a simple ceremony, appealing to the heart's affections. The Lord spoke tenderly, graciously as a man speaks to his friends, and it was on the eve of the solemn moment when He would be betrayed into the hands of sinners for crucifixion. He said in effect, I am going away and you will see My face no more. Remember Me, not only in your hearts, not only with the sense that though absent I am with you alway, but do this for a public memorial of Me. Eat the bread and drink the wine for the specific purpose that here in the world there may be maintained an abiding remembrance that the Christ, the Son of the living God, laid down His life at Calvary's cross.

Because of this special character the observance of the Lord's supper in spite of its simplicity outshone in glory and significance everything in the Old Testament procedure. The Old Testament feasts and ceremonies pointed forward to what was to be done. The Lord's supper speaks of what had been done, and particularly of the One Who has done it at such infinite cost to Himself, and Who has presented to all the participants in that feast, the spoils of His victory over sin and death. The Lord did not hedge about His words in the upper room with thunders and lightnings as when the terrible Voice came from Mount Sinai. The men who listened to Him did not tremble as they sat before Him. There was no fright within their hearts as He spoke ; He appealed to their love. He set before them Himself as the One Who loved them and gave Himself up for them, and said, Do this for a remembrance of Me.

ASSOCIATION WITH IDOLS

Now, this simple ceremony, while it had the special character of obedience to the word of the absent and beloved Lord, was exposed to the danger of being degraded to the level of other observances. The children of God might be inclined to connect with this simple ceremony some other ceremony, either some of the Jewish ceremonies, or of the idolatrous ceremonies to which they were accustomed in their unconverted days. We find that this danger existed at Corinth, and there were those in the assembly who had fallen into the snare. Consequently, the apostle brings before them truth to correct this error. He shows the Lord's table is exclusive in the fullest sense of the word. The Lord's supper is for the saints of God only ; and it must have nothing unholy associated with it, nothing that appertained to idolatry. Fellowship with idols was destructive of the real character of this simple feast.

For in this chapter the apostle shows that those who partook of idol feasts, or of sacrifices offered in the worship of idols, and who also took their part at the Lord's table were seeking to associate in a public manner what was of Christ with what was of Satan, because behind every idol was the emissary of Satan ; behind the idols were the demons who wrought upon the evil passions of those who worshipped them.

The constant object of Satan is to steal, to kill, to destroy, to do all possible damage and hurt to men. And he was doing this in Corinth, and throughout the Gentile world of that day, by leading men into the worship of idols. These unthinking Christians linked up the Lord's table with the table of demons ; they attended both ; and the apostle speaks to them in words of serious warning. He bids them to flee from idolatry (ver. 14). He reminds them of the Israelites, who started out from Egypt, the house of their bondage, where idolatry was rife, who were all under the cloud, and who all passed through the sea. All were baptized unto Moses, and they all partook of the manna which came down from heaven,

and they all drank of that Rock which followed them, and that Rock was Christ. But God was not well pleased with many of them, and they were overthrown in the wilderness because they linked themselves up with idols. They worshipped the great enemy of God and Christ in the person of the demons, who were behind the images to which they bowed down.

God is a jealous God. He will not have Himself associated with idolatry. "What communion hath light with darkness?" God is a holy God. He said, "Be ye holy; for I am holy"; and if every individual who is a follower of God and of Christ must be a holy person, how much more so the church of God! particularly in view of its unique character, being welded together by the Holy Spirit to form one body on the earth. It must be maintained in holiness, separate to God from all evil.

THE CUP MENTIONED FIRST

The apostle, as you will notice, in speaking here of the Lord's supper, reverses the historical order of the observance. He mentions first the cup and then the loaf, while we know from the Gospels themselves that our Lord broke the bread first, and passed the wine to the disciples subsequently. But here Paul speaks first of the cup; he refers to the cup of blessing which they bless. Why is this prominence given to the cup? Because he said, "Is it not the communion of the blood of Christ?" and the blood of Christ speaks of the death of Christ.

The death of Christ had a significance which would correct their error. The Lord Jesus Christ inhabited the body of His flesh from the first. In the body prepared for Him He walked and served from the day of His birth to the day of His death, but the wine in the cup symbolized His death, not His life. When blood is in the body it is the life, as we are told in the Old Testament (Lev. xvii. 11), but when apart from the body, it is the evidence of death. And in the Lord's supper the cup of blessing told of the death of Christ; and what did the death of

Christ mean ? It meant that there was a great gulf fixed between the world and Christ. In connection with His death the world in combination rose against the Lord Jesus Christ, and Jew and Gentile in an unrighteous alliance put to death the Lord of glory. It was the triumph outwardly of unholiness and wickedness, but the Lord Jesus, Who was crucified in weakness, was raised in glory.

The cup of blessing sets forth the blood of Christ which not only made atonement for sin, but is evidence of the guilt of the religious and idolatrous world in crucifying the Lord. How it cuts us off from the world ! And it is not for me, nor you, any more than it was for the Corinthians to seek to undo what Christ has accomplished by His death. There must be purity and holiness in those that share that cup of blessing, and particularly in the way of their collective association. Oh, let us lay hold of this fact that in the tenth of Corinthians, the saints of God are not looked at individually ; here they are looked at as a whole, as an organization bound together in spiritual unity by the power of the Spirit of God ; and as such they are to maintain pure and holy associations only.

THE ONE LOAF BROKEN

“ The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ ? ” Now he is speaking of the body of Christ in which our sins were borne on the cross, but in the seventeenth verse, he passes to the new scriptural signification of the term “ body ”, that is, the body of which the Lord Jesus Christ is the Head—“ We being many are one bread, and one body : for we are all partakers of that one bread.” Each believer has his personal interest in that loaf. When the loaf is undivided, it is the symbol of Christ’s body for which He died—that new corporation formed in consequence of His death.

Adam fell into a deep sleep, and God built from a rib out of his side a woman, whom He presented to Adam as a helpmeet for him. And in like manner the helpmeet for Christ was formed after His death ; the church did

not spring out of the living body. There was no union with Christ in incarnation, but through His death this new body was formed. And we all are partakers of that one loaf, we each have our share there. We all taken together form one body, while each one is a part of the whole.

THE DANGER OF DEGRADING THE SUPPER

In the next chapter the apostle brings before the saints of God the true character of the Lord's supper. It may help us if we remember what the error was into which the Corinthians had fallen in connection with the Lord's supper. It is corrected in these verses, and it is an error into which every one of us during the observance is liable to fall. At Corinth, they had degraded the Lord's supper to the level of a common meal. They regarded it very much in the same light as they did the taking of food together as a company. The solemn significance of what they were doing passed from their minds. They *mechanically ate the bread, they mechanically drank the wine*, as in their ordinary fashion.

No wonder the apostle declared, "This is not to eat the Lord's supper." Why? Because they had left the Lord out of their thoughts; they had not before their minds the adorable Person of the One Who died. They looked upon the memorials as common bread and common wine, as articles of food. And in a sense it was but common bread and common wine. There was no material change in the bread or the wine, yet there was a real presence in their company, the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ. And the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ made those elements, the bread and the wine, significant of the most tremendous event in the world's history—the death of the Lord Jesus Christ, God's own Son.

RECEIVED FROM THE LORD IN GLORY

But the saints in Corinth had forgotten all this, as we too are in danger of doing. Accordingly the apostle

recounts simply the facts concerning the institution of the Lord's supper, recalling its solemn significance.

And we gather from what the apostle says in this connection the immense importance to the church of this Supper and its observance. This may be learned from the fact that the apostle Paul who was not present did not receive the account of its institution from the other apostles, but direct from the Lord Himself in glory. He was the latest of the apostles, as it were, born out of due time; he did not see Christ after the flesh, but he saw the Lord from above (1 Cor. xv. 8). And the Lord Himself gave him the details of his special apostleship; the mystery of the church was communicated to him by revelation.

Here we have the fact that the things that the other apostles witnessed in the upper room in Jerusalem, the apostle Paul received from the lips of the Lord in glory, showing us that the Lord in glory and the Lord in the upper room are the same Lord. He is the One Who died, and He is risen again, and what He said to those who were present with Him that night, "This do in remembrance of Me", He said again from the glory of God to this apostle. Now Paul was the apostle of the Gentiles, and it was perhaps for that very reason that the Lord spoke especially to him. Otherwise some might have said, That supper was given to eleven Jews and it is for Jews and does not apply to us. But the apostle of the Gentiles was instructed by the Lord Himself about the institution of this supper, so that we, Gentiles, as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, cannot escape from our responsibility in connection with the Lord's supper.

If we are His, His word comes to us to be obeyed. If we have any interest in His death, we must have an interest in the commemoration of that death in this world in the appointed way. And I do beseech my readers to consider what is your relationship to Him in this matter. It is not a question of merely participating in some ceremonial observance when it suits you. The great fact which ought to appeal to you is this, that the Lord personally is interested in receiving this tribute of

the hearts' affections of those that are His upon the earth; and it is His will that they should as often as possible be entwined about Himself afresh, as it were, in connection with the bread and wine partaken of as a memorial of Himself in His death.

The Lord's supper is not something surrounded by forbidding restrictions, in which we may only take part very rarely, as if it were an observance so solemn, so awe-inspiring, that we must not make it too common by becoming too familiar with it. There is nothing in the scriptures which supports such a view at all. The homely manner in which it was instituted shows us that the Lord graciously comes down to where we are in our everyday circumstances, and He says to us as He said to them of old, "This do in remembrance of Me."

But a man may seek to excuse his non-attendance by saying, "I can stay at home and I can remember the Lord there; I can read my Bible, this chapter and others, and I can remember Him just as well privately as in the assembly." But the Lord said to His disciples collectively, not individually, "This do in remembrance of Me." Therefore, the Lord's will is only done when believers come together as members of the body of Christ; it must be done not in private but in communion with one another. It is a holy communion most certainly, for the Lord is present and the Holy Spirit is present when the saints of God are gathered together in assembly. No single person in His chamber, or walking along the streets, or in the fields and woods can remember the Lord in the sense our Lord desired it, and ordained it.

EATING WITHOUT UNDERSTANDING

"I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, That the Lord Jesus the same night in which He was betrayed took bread." The occasion was most solemn. It was the hour of man and the power of darkness. Do we not remember that Judas on that night of betrayal took the sop from the Lord? Then the

Lord said to him, "That thou doest, do quickly", and the man rose up and went out; and it was night—the night of betrayal. Judas was going out to betray the Lord Who knew all that was in his heart, though he did not realise that the Lord knew all about it. He betrayed the Lord, because he did not realise Whom he was betraying. He did not realise that it was the Son of God Who handed him that sop. Then Satan entered into him, and he went out on his errand. He was not present at the Lord's supper, but the fact of the betrayal is mentioned here, bringing before us the affecting circumstance that a man, who had companied with the Lord and had seen so much of his doings, could have the heart to sell his Master for thirty pieces of silver, the price of a slave.

But the fact is true, and the historical incident of the betrayal is named by the apostle in connection with his rebuke of the levity of the Corinthians. It showed that there was a man in the upper room that night, who took a morsel during the passover supper from our blessed Lord in fulfilment of scripture, yet did not understand the nature of what he was doing nor the evil of the heart within him. It is a solemn reminder that there is something within me and you, when we are at the Lord's supper, which is capable of betraying our Lord. Do you believe it? I do. It is there. The Lord knows it is there. If we know that it is there, if we recognise it, if, at the same time, we recognise that the One Who is present to receive the remembrance of our heart, knew it when He invited us there, and, moreover, that He died for us condemning sin in the flesh because it was so evil and nothing could improve it—then all is well, for the truth is in us. But if we deceive ourselves as to the real character of the "old man" and fail to perceive the beauty and glory of the Lord Jesus Christ, Who is present, the Lord's supper is of no value to us. To partake heedlessly is something rather to our condemnation than to our blessing.

SIMPLE BUT SOLEMN

There is no more blessed occupation on the face of the earth for the children of God than the remembrance of our Lord Jesus Christ in His death ; the oftener we do it, the sweeter it becomes to those who understand its significance, while if we forget, we do so at our peril spiritually. None can with impunity trifle with the remembrance of the Lord in His death. When we really think Who He is, and that He should suffer, and should die, and that we are remembering that great event, what a spirit of solemnity becomes us ! How is it that we are sometimes so trivial during the few moments that we are together and think so little of the solemn act that we are remembering ?

The apostle states the circumstances of the institution of the supper very concisely, and very definitely : " The Lord Jesus the same night in which He was betrayed took bread : and when He had given thanks, He brake it, and said, Take, eat : this is My body, which is broken for you : this do in remembrance of Me." The Lord first took the bread ; this was to be for a symbol : He was holding the bread in His hand. He said, " This is My body." What the Lord held was not really His own body ; it was not something to be worshipped and adored, then or afterwards ; but it was chosen to be the emblem of His body, the thing for our sight and our lips. But if our hearts are not right at the supper, there will be no fulfilment of the Lord's word in looking upon the bread, nor in partaking of it.

The Lord said to them there, " This is My body, which is broken [or given] for you : this do in remembrance of Me. After the same manner also He took the cup, when He had supped, saying, This cup is the new testament in My blood : this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of ME." Observe the repetition of the injunction, " This do in remembrance of Me ", in connection with the cup as well as the loaf. The Lord Himself is speaking, consequently He seeks the remembrance of Himself—" of Me." It is of the utmost

importance to remember that the Lord Jesus Christ is the central figure of this institution. He is there ! It is He that makes the supper a reality ; it is He that gives value and worth to it.

THE MEMORIAL OF HIMSELF

The Lord Jesus Christ is not now an object of sight. His presence is to us a matter of faith, but we are apt to forget this at times. And when we come together for the remembrance of the Lord Jesus we are liable to allow objects of sight and hearing to come between us and the fact that we are remembering the Lord Jesus Himself, and that it is HE Whose known presence is for every heart. This danger has to be watched against. We have to be careful lest our thoughts wander from Him. We know how treacherous our hearts are. Some persons, I suppose, may have more difficult minds to manage than others ; some people's minds move very rapidly and are easily influenced by outward events—by what happens inside the door or even outside. All these things Satan can use to rob us of some, if not of all, the few moments we are together for the remembrance of the Lord Jesus. The object of Satan is to interpose something between our hearts and the Lord Jesus Christ which will cause us to forget Him. If he can make me forget Him for twenty per cent. of the time, he has gained the victory so far, and I have been so far defeated.

Every remembrance of our Lord Jesus brings responsibility of this nature. The object of Satan is to take from our Lord, for as great a period as possible, the engagement of my heart and my affections with Himself. He may accomplish this purpose in this way. He may introduce obstacles which I fail in my lethargy to surmount so that I am ten minutes, a quarter of an hour, or twenty minutes late ; instead of being present before or at the appointed time, I arrive ten minutes late. The Lord has lost ten minutes of my heart's service, and I have lost what I can never regain. Should we be late if the king of this country had promised to be here at a

definite hour? Who would slight him by being absent when he came? And the Lord Jesus Christ is faithful to what He promised, "Where two or three are gathered together in My Name, there am I in the midst." Let us always be present when the hour comes.

THE REAL PRESENCE

Beloved friends, do not let Satan get any victory over us in this matter. The Lord is there at His supper, and the object of this ceremony is His remembrance. We remember the Lord Jesus as the One Who died; He is present with us as the living Lord of glory, and this is the real presence in connection with the supper of the Lord about which we hear a great deal sometimes. The phrase is often misunderstood and misconstrued. The real presence is the living presence of Christ in this way, as He promised to be in the midst of His own company. He is there as the One Who is glorified at God's right hand; and He is there to lead our hearts back to remember Him when He was betrayed and crucified.

And what better guide than Himself could we have? Who knows the sorrows of Gethsemane like that One Who sweat as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground? We dare not think about such solemn scenes unless the Lord lead our hearts and direct our thoughts. But He will do this if we are depending upon Him; He will lead us into a true and worthy remembrance of Him, when they put a crown of thorns upon His head, when they spit upon His blessed face, when they mocked Him and bowed the knee before Him, when He bore our sins in His own body. Who can awaken within us holy and true thoughts concerning Him like the Lord Himself? There is no one else. But it is a real feature of this Supper that the Lord is alive, and that it is He Who shows us His hands and His side, silent witnesses of His death, so that we bow before Him and say, "My Lord and my God." He wrings the worship out of our hearts by His compelling presence and His

power, and the well of water in us bubbles up unto everlasting life.

UNTIL HIS COMING

Paul says, "As often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till He come"; and so the Lord's supper is made a great link between two outstanding events in the chain of divine history. The central event in God's history of the world is the death of Christ upon the cross. The Old Testament looked forward to it. He Who should come as its Saviour would die. The next great event is the Lord's second coming. And the observance of the Lord's supper connects the two things, standing between the past event and the future event. Therefore we are to shew or announce the Lord's death until He comes. This passage is an answer to those persons who seek to minimise the importance of the act, and say, Of course, the Lord's supper was a right and proper thing for Christians to observe in the early days, because so many of them actually saw the Lord. There were many in Jerusalem and throughout Judea and Galilee who had heard His words and had witnessed His miracles. The Lord and His work were fresh in their memories and, therefore, it was natural for them to keep this feast in the first century, but now the Lord's death was long ago; it is an event long past; we do not need to keep the Lord's supper now; we have got beyond the range of these ceremonies. But the answer in a few words is in this sentence; we are to proclaim "the Lord's death till He come." The Lord has not yet come, so those who neglect the supper are without excuse.

NEGLECTING THE SUPPER

I hope no believer present is searching for a legitimate excuse not to remember the Lord in His death at all, or only to remember Him once a quarter, or once a year. The Lord does not lay upon us any rigid commandment, enforcing obedience under the penalty of losing our

eternal life. He does not even tell us that we are to do it every week. We are shown in the word that the early disciples broke bread at Troas every week, while earlier still, in Jerusalem after Pentecost they did so every day, while they were specially together there. What are we to gather from the absence of any prescribed interval, and from the record of actual practice? That we are to show the Lord's death as often as we can. If we stay away when we might be present, there is One Whom we ought to satisfy that there is a real, a reasonable excuse.

The Lord knows when any are prevented from being present. And He knows those who deny themselves comforts and conveniences in order to attend the breaking of bread. Why are they so anxious to go? Because of what the Lord said on the night of His betrayal; because obedience is good to their souls; because they want to bless the Lord in the cup of blessing; because they cannot forget His precious word, "This do in remembrance of Me." They so love the Lord that they say, As long as we can crawl we'll go. Everything else must be given up, so that we may be faithful to Him in showing forth His death. And this is how the Lord's supper ought to appeal to us all.

When the Lord comes, and receives us to Himself, we shall not need bread and wine as memorials of Him. We shall see Him in His glory. His majesty will overpower us perhaps, as it did John in Patmos. We shall have glorified bodies that the sight may not overpower us altogether, but I think we may be dazzled when we first look upon our Lord. He will be so wonderful in our eyes. We shall remember He is the same One as He Who died. When we see the glories thick upon the Lamb, we shall remember He is the Lamb Who was slain. The experience will not be by faith, as it is now; it will be by sight. Then we shall not need the aid of a commemoration supper.

But even then it will be a season of fellowship, for in that place of glory our adorable Lord will Himself come forth and serve us, and give us to taste of the cup of His

own joys. The cup of blessing that we shall share in that bright place above will be our share in the glory of Christ, which He will grant us in the day of His coming kingdom. But now, while our Lord is rejected, and while the world says, *We do not care for Jesus the crucified*, He is nothing to us; we hate Him; we despise Him; there are a few on earth who say, *We love Him; we adore Him*, and we eat the bread and we drink the wine in continual remembrance of His death. And by eating the Lord's supper, the church proclaims to the world that the Lord Jesus died.

The doors should not be shut "for fear of the Jews", but open so that the world can come in and observe what takes place. If they ask what it means, the answer is that these men and these women are celebrating the death of the Lord of glory. The world crucified Him, but God has exalted Him, and the supper of the Lord is a witness to this fact in this present evil age.

IMPROPER BEHAVIOUR

In the latter verses of our chapter, we have the apostle correcting the absence of that simplicity and reality which should characterise the Lord's supper. Some at Corinth appear to have been partaking of the bread and the cup of the Lord unworthily.

He had already said that they were not to treat it as their own supper (xi. 21). If a man were sitting at his own table, he might sit how he pleases. He might sit in his shirt-sleeves if he wished. In the privacy of his own family his behaviour might not matter. But if he had a number of people there, or if he were summoned to a royal banquet, he would be very careful of his appearance and manners. The difference would arise because of the character of the meal of which he partook and the persons who were present. Now at Corinth the saints had treated the Lord's supper with levity, behaving as if it were their own supper. They had confounded it with the love-feast of the day, that is, in our modern tongue, the tea meeting or conference meal, when the saints of

God come together out of common interest in the things of Christ. The latter occasion is right and proper, but to mix it up with the Lord's supper is altogether an error and destructive of the purpose of gathering together.

The consequence at Corinth of forgetting the Lord's presence was that they went to the Lord's supper with their hearts and their consciences unjudged. By that I mean that the light of God was not allowed to shine upon what their hearts were naturally. They were looking at things from their own point of view, and social distinctions were allowed to prevail. Fleshly appetites were indulged, and they degraded the Lord's supper to the level of a common meal. The apostle writes, "When ye come together, therefore, into one place, this is not to eat the Lord's supper. For in eating every one taketh before other his own supper."

We see therefore in the tenth chapter the contrast between the supper of the Lord and an idol supper, and in the eleventh chapter between the Lord's supper and a man's own supper. We are certainly all in danger of falling into this latter error of making it our own supper. If we make it our own supper, we consider first our own inclinations, and study our own convenience. There are, alas, too many persons who seem to think that they can come to the Lord's supper just how and when they like. They rise very late on the Lord's day, and after a hurried breakfast arrive five minutes or more late. Possibly there may be a legitimate excuse on some special occasion, but if lateness is a habit, what does the practice show? It shows that that person regards the Lord's supper from an human standpoint altogether, and sets aside its claims in favour of his own ease and self-indulgence. It shows a deadened conscience too, for he would not allow himself the same liberty in the matter of his secular employment. He forgets that the Lord is there; he ignores the sanctity of His presence; he does not judge himself. The consequence of such laxity is that those who, forgetting the Lord's presence, eat the bread and drink the cup of the Lord, do so unworthily.

EATING UNWORTHILY

Be pleased to mark this word of the apostle very carefully, "Wherefore whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord *unworthily*, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord." He condemns the way in which the supper was observed. Some persons have misunderstood this text, and stayed away from the Lord's supper for years on that account. They say, I am not worthy to go; it says in the Bible I ought not to go. But they have not read the passage very carefully, because the verse does not speak about unworthy persons eating, but about the unworthy way in which they ate.

Where is the man or woman who is worthy to be at the Lord's table? None have a right to be there; we have no suitable qualifications in ourselves to be there; and we go only because the Lord has bidden us to go. He knows what we are, far better than ourselves; and yet He has invited us to do this in remembrance of Him. The Lord says that we can go, but we must do so with propriety; we must remember in Whose presence we are; we must remember how to behave ourselves in the church of the living God. Because what are we doing when we do this? We are ostensibly remembering that the body of Christ was given for us, that the blood of Christ was shed for us; and can we think lightly about such holy matters as these? The body of Christ which was riven with the cruel spear, the blood of Christ which flowed from His side, can we treat these with levity? The apostle declares that the person who eats unworthily is guilty in respect of the body and blood of the Lord.

The verse is very solemn. Will you therefore say, I am afraid to go; I cannot trust myself to go lest I eat unworthily? Sometimes it is such a long time before anybody speaks or says anything, and my thoughts wander. I think of many things—of what happened last week, what is likely to happen to-morrow, about somebody who is there and somebody who is not there, and about all

sorts of things. It is only when somebody gives out a hymn or speaks that my thoughts are recalled.

Well, why is it your attention is so divided? It is because your eyes of faith are not looking upon the Lord; you are not thinking of Him. If you were thinking of Him you would not be thinking of somebody or something else. If you find yourselves guilty of it, say to the Lord there and then, Pardon me for doing this; fill my heart; draw my wandering thoughts to Thee. Never mind about somebody else taking an audible part; you must not depend upon somebody else; you are there to remember the Lord. You are with others; this is blessedly true, but your individuality is not lost. Let your own thoughts be upon Him. Let some scripture, perhaps, come to your mind, and think about that. Feel that the Lord is speaking to you in His own living, written words, and this will fill your heart with a wonderful sweetness. Do you not think that you can keep your mind occupied with Him for sixty minutes or so? Are there those that sleep at the Lord's table like those that slept in the garden of Gethsemane? Oh, shame that it should be so. You are guilty of the body and blood of the Lord, and you have no excuse. Think of Him. "Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation."

PROVING ONESELF

The apostle shows how to avoid this sin. He says, "Let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup." It does not mean that when I am sitting at the Lord's table I am to look into my own heart. That would be a poor, wretched occupation. I can do that at home. A person ought to examine or prove himself. It means judging himself as to what he has done and what he is capable of doing. We may be so self-satisfied as to forget what we are liable to, apart from grace. Then we may come to the Lord's supper forgetting that it is possible during that short while to dishonour the Lord, to rob ourselves, to be guilty with regard to the body and blood of the Lord. But if, in the

privacy of our own chamber, we reflect that without the Lord's grace and power and the exercise of His priestly ministry on our behalf in the sanctuary, we shall not be able to worship Him as we ought, that is to examine or prove ourselves as the apostle enjoins. We remind ourselves that in us, that is, in our flesh, dwells no good thing.

“ Let a man examine himself ”, and not stay away, but come and eat of this bread and drink of this cup. There is no excuse permissible according to scripture for a person absenting himself from the Lord's table. Though in himself he is unworthy, he is, unless under assembly discipline, invited to come. If he comes confessing his dependence upon the Lord even that he may remember Him properly in His death, if he is honest enough with himself to get down upon his knees and say, “ Oh, Lord, Thou knowest how foolish and ignorant a person I am, and although I have known Thy love so many years and although I have learned much in those years about Thy sufferings and death, I am apt to fail when eating Thy supper : I dare not trust my own heart, lest when I am present with all Thy saints, I may by my frailty or folly hinder the working of Thy Spirit. Lord, concentrate my heart upon Thee, shut out everything that is unworthy, enable me to remember Thee as Thou would'st have it ” —do you think the Lord will not take care of one who takes this lowly place ?

TRUSTING THE LORD, DISTRUSTING SELF

Do not rush into the presence of the Lord at His table as if you were hurrying to catch a train ; you are going into the most holy place. Go there circumspectly, having judged yourself before the Lord, having filled your heart with the sense of His great sacrifice, of His dying love for you, of the love that desires the remembrance of such a foolish heart as you may have. Go in such a spirit, and you will find what a difference it makes to your enjoyment of the meeting. Do not be occupied with the fact that so-and-so is not there, and that somebody else is there

whom you wish was not present. All such thoughts are of Satan. The great enemy is the spoiler of the meeting for the remembrance of the Lord Jesus. You must not forget that Satan is a foe and never a friend, and that you cannot trust him. He may even come and sit by your side as an angel of light sometimes, and talk heavenly language to you. But you ought not to be ignorant of his devices, and you may be sure it is the deceiver if he shuts out the Lord from your spirit. Have nothing to do with Satan, but have everything to do with the Lord Jesus Christ.

May God give us to have yet sweeter and more precious communion with the Lord and with His saints at His table. There is no place on earth like it, not only because the Lord Jesus Christ is there, but the saints are there in the character of the assembly of God and the church of Christ. There may be only a few in number, but the Lord has guaranteed His presence to two or three gathered to His name, and He works amongst these two or three in a way which is unique. There is nothing comparable to it on the earth. It is just a little foretaste of that great assembly of which we have a picture in Revelation v., when every heart in unison with the mighty throng will swell with praise and adoration to Him in the midst, Who redeemed them with His precious blood. We shall all be there, every one of us ; we shall not be latecomers ; we shall be fully prepared for that holy service ; we shall not take part in that worship-meeting unworthily ; but all and each will be to the glory and praise of the Lord.

Now the Lord's supper provides us with oases in the desert ; it gives us, even when we are passing through the wilderness, foretastes of that grand and glorious time. And it is incumbent upon all of us to see to it that we do not miss any of the joys that may be ours in the breaking of bread.

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