

Ephesians 1:22-23 (Captain Leslie) 122389

The Assembly: An Outline of Two Aspects as Presented in the Scriptures, Assembly, The (1:22-23)

Part 1: The Assembly as the Fruit of Counsel

When we think of the assembly as "The Fruit of Counsel" (God's counsel), we are thinking of the body of which Christ, risen from the dead and glorified, is the Head. (Eph. 1:22, 23.) The body consists of all believers. They are united to one another and to Christ, the glorified Man in heaven.

What is the means by which this union is effected? It is by the Spirit on earth dwelling in each individual believer, uniting him to his fellow believers on earth, and to Christ as Man on high. (1 Cor. 6:17; 2 Cor. 1:22; Eph. 4:3.) Belonging to the same denominational faith does not unite.

This body is formed of both Jew and Gentile. (Eph. 2:16, 3:6.)

Four things were necessary before this union could be:

1. Redemption accomplished.
2. The middle wall of partition, by which God had shut the Jew in from the Gentile, removed. (Eph. 2:14.)
3. A glorified Man present in heaven.
4. The Holy Spirit, who is the bond of union, present on the earth, indwelling the believers. (1 Cor. 12:13; John 14:17.)

In the Lord's earthly work of the cross (John 1:29), the first and second of these were completed. (Heb. 9:12; Eph. 2:14-16.) The Lord's ascension (Acts 1) fulfilled the third and began His heavenly work. (John 1:33.) The Holy Spirit sent down (Acts 2) fulfills the fourth requirement.

The effect of this is that the union is accomplished (1 Cor. 12:13), the body of Christ is formed (having the characteristic of vital union between all the members and the Head), and Eph. 2:16 and 3:6 are fulfilled. "And that He might reconcile both [Jew and Gentile] unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby.... That the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, and of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ by the gospel." We can see the Gentiles formally brought into the body in Acts 10.

The symbol of this unity is the one unbroken loaf at the Lord's Table. (1 Cor. 10:16, 17.) At the Lord's Table, the members in that location partake of the one loaf, because they are members together of the one body.

The present position of the body is that the Head is in heaven and the members, although having by faith and in God's sight a heavenly place (Eph. 2:5, 6), are in actual fact maintained here upon the earth by the Holy Spirit. By His presence and power, He maintains the body of Christ. The body of Christ, therefore, will remain on earth until completed and called to be with the Head in heaven; the Holy Spirit will then go too. (John 14:17.)

When the body is called the church or the Assembly of God, it refers to all the saints between the day of Pentecost and the coming of the Lord for His saints (the rapture). When the body is called the body on the earth, it refers to all the saints alive on the earth at any given moment, between the day of Pentecost and the rapture of the saints.

The center of gathering of the members of the one body is "He that is holy, He that is true." Rev. 3:7; see also Matt. 18:20. The power of gathering is the Spirit of holiness, the Spirit of truth. The principle of gathering is holiness and truth, separation from evil and according to the revelation of God's will and what suits Him. The ground (basis) of gathering is the one body.

The responsibility of the saint is to endeavor "to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." Eph. 4:3. The endeavoring means to use diligence to keep practically the one body in the uniting bond of peace. It must be remembered that the unity of the body only exists by the presence and operation of the Spirit of God. Diligence should also be given to exhibit the moral qualities which are consistent with holiness and truth. Diligence is needed to manifest the unity of the body on the earth.

The spirit in which this responsibility is to be fulfilled is found in Eph. 4:2, 3. The characteristics found in these verses are suitable for unity and they are also the means of keeping the unity in practice. Wherever saints break bread, they should do so as being members of the one body.

Association with the Lord's Table severs from association with all others. The principle is stated in 1 Cor. 10:16-22 that there cannot be association with that which is of God and that which is not of Him.

What are the required characteristics of any table to have a valid claim to be the Lord's Table? It must be spread as owning, in practice, the truth of the one body. It must also be spread according to the principles of holiness and truth. Its basis and surroundings must be founded on and in accordance with the truth revealed and the character of Him whose table it claims to be.

Requirements for being at the Lord's Table simply are (1) confession of Christ and membership in the body, (2) a desire to be part of that which represents Him, and, (3) holiness of walk and conversation. The effect of the addition of any other conditions is to make the group who requires such conditions into a sect. Thus their table becomes a sectarian table.

Another or the second way in which the assembly is viewed is as "The Fruit of Work": a building, which has the distinctive characteristic of being a dwelling place. Viewed from this perspective, the thoughts of head, body and union are not present. There are two ways in which the assembly as a building is presented.

First, according to the operation of God and in its full result, it is called a holy temple in the Lord. This building, at the present moment in the process of construction, is still not yet completed. (Eph. 2:21.) Those who make up the building when completed in glory are all the saints from the day of Pentecost to the rapture of the saints. The Builder of this temple is Christ. (Matt. 16:17, 18.) The foundation on which it is built is the Person of Christ as Son of the living God. He is in the power of life manifested in resurrection and the resurrection displayed Him to be such. (Rom. 1:4.) The consequence of the above is that nothing but true material (living stones) can go into its construction. It is completely immune from judgment. (Matt. 16:18; 1 Peter 2:4, 5.)

Second, according to the result produced on earth and under the responsibility of man, it is called a habitation on earth in which God by His Spirit dwells, the building of which He committed to man's responsibility. Those in it when looked at in this way are all persons on earth who profess to own the name of the Lord at any given time from the day of Pentecost to the rapture. The builder of this house is man. The consequence of the above is that no guarantee can be made against the entrance of material that is other than that introduced by the Lord into the temple or by the Spirit into the body. There is no immunity from judgment, but rather the contrary. (1 Peter 4:17.)

The reason for the present confusion in Christendom is the confounding of the house as built by man with either the temple which Christ builds or with the body which the Holy Spirit forms and maintains.

There are different characters of builders and different qualities of materials introduced into the house when thinking of the building as man's responsibility to build. (1 Cor. 3.)

1. A Christian properly uses gold, silver and precious stones in building. The work is tested and abides. He is rewarded.
2. A Christian uses wood, hay and stubble (worthless ideas) in building. The testing of the work results in its being burned up. The man himself is saved because he is a believer.
3. A person who is not a Christian defiles the building, introducing only bad doctrine which is subversive to the fundamental truth. In such a case both the work and the workman are destroyed.

At the day of Pentecost, the body, the temple and the house were co-extensive (that is, they all consisted of the same people, all true believers). The building was committed to man's responsibility in Acts 3-8. In Acts 8:13, there was the entrance of some who professed but were not real, and thus the house was disproportionately enlarged beyond the real size of the temple or body. The result since then has been the continued disproportionate enlargement which is now called Christendom.

Declension was already apparent in the apostles' day. (Phil. 2:21, 3:15-19; 2 Tim. 2:19-24.) What did the apostle say would be in the last days? See 2 Tim. 3:1-5. The apostasy (that is, the entire throwing off of the profession of Christ) is spoken of in 2 Thess. 2:2-8.

What is the path and the responsibility of the saint in connection with the house of God? It is to remain consistent with the character of Him (the holy God) who dwells in the house. The principle on which this responsibility is carried out is separation from evil. The practical way in which this separation from evil is maintained is by purging out leaven. (1 Cor. 5:7.) Leaven in Scripture speaks of evil. The effect of the entrance of evil into the assembly is not confined to the one personally guilty of it, but the whole assembly is involved. See Josh. 7:11 for an illustration of this. Achan was the guilty person, but God says, "Israel [that is, the whole congregation] hath sinned."

What the assembly was to do in 1 Cor. 5:7, 13 was to "purge out therefore the old leaven.... put away from among yourselves that wicked person." The character of the action of putting away is one of duty (that is, obedience) and not of power.

When should the assembly resort to "putting away"? When all individual care and discipline have been used without effect. Putting away is the last resort and takes place when, if it were not used, the glory of the Lord's name would be compromised.

The exercise of ecclesiastical discipline (putting away by the assembly) is not the act of an individual, or even of a certain number of individuals: it is the act of the whole assembly as such. "The conscience of the assembly is to be exercised as feeling the sin in humiliation, self-judgment and confession, owning it as that of the whole. Where this is not so, saints exercising it merely form themselves into a court of justice, giving a verdict and passing judgment on a guilty person. There is no real clearing of themselves." The assembly is not clear, once evil is known, until discipline has been exercised. (2 Cor. 7:9-11.)

The object of discipline, with regard to the Lord, is the maintenance of that holiness which is consistent with the character and presence of God. (Psa. 93:5.) The object of discipline, with regard to the assembly, is the clearance of itself and the maintenance of practical consistency with the absolute character it has before God ("a new lump," "unleavened," 1 Cor. 5:7). The object of discipline, with regard to the individual upon whom it has been exercised, is to awaken his conscience and break down that which necessitated discipline, thus producing self-judgment so that in the end restoration may take place. The motive is love; the end (object) is holiness.

The consequence to an assembly of refusing to judge and put away evil or refraining from doing so is the same as affirming the possibility of agreement between God and evil. By doing this, the assembly forfeits all claim to be on the ground of God's assembly or to represent it. This might be so, even though each individual in that assembly is still a saint of God.

The behavior of the individual when an assembly has made a judgment concerning a matter is to accept its judgment. If it is thought that a mistake has been made, remonstrance is open so that there may be a review of the case in question. In no case is private judgment to be set up in opposition to the judgment of an assembly. No individual has the promise of the Lord's presence as has the assembly which is gathered unto His name.

How is the saint to be separate from evil? When corruption is general and the mass is unfaithful and, moreover, it is not possible to purge out the leaven, then he, in individual faithfulness, is to depart from iniquity by purging himself from the vessels of dishonor in the house. (2 Tim. 2:19-21.) Even though a saint may not hold a certain evil, he is never clear of evil as long as he continues in fellowship with one who teaches the evil or with those among whom the evil is accepted. (2 John 9-11.)

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