

Matthew 16:16-18 (F. Prod'hom Berthet) 167388

The Christian Shepherd: 1998, On the Assembly

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The Gospel of Matthew presents, as we know, the Lord Jesus Christ as the Messiah, the Sent One, to Israel. However, He is rejected by the nation, and thus in this same gospel, after His rejection, He begins to speak of that which was to be established His assembly. In Matthew 16:16-18 the Lord speaks of what He is about to build and that "upon this rock [which is the Christ, the Son of the living God] I will build My church."

He is speaking here of His universal assembly ("ekklesia," which in the KJV is always rendered "church") during the entire period between Pentecost (Acts 2) and His return to this earth.

It is remarkable that in this same gospel, the Lord also gives us His thoughts concerning a "local" assembly, though it may be composed of only two or three persons (Matt. 18:15-20). The time would come when He would make known to His brethren, as their present portion, the Father whom He came to reveal, when also these same redeemed ones would be gathered together in His name upon the earth. These words of the Lord reveal the character and duty of the local assembly, upon which He confers His authority to act on His behalf and in His name, so that the acts of the assembly are ratified in heaven. The epistles of Paul contain the development and application of Matthew 18:20.

The Lord's words in Matthew 18 refer to a Christian assembly rather than a Jewish synagogue. He is speaking of a "local assembly," not the "church universal." This "local assembly" would be comprised (and should be so today) of all saints living in a locality.

An assembly decision is very serious: "Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven." The assembly derives its authority from the Lord, is governed by His authority and administers according to the authority which He has conferred on it. What it binds or looses on earth is bound or loosed in heaven. The assembly binds and looses nothing in heaven its actions on earth are held in heaven as so done and are consequently to be considered so done by those who acknowledge the Lord's presence in the midst.

In apostolic times, there were two authorities that of the assembly and that of the apostles. (See 1 Corinthians 5 as an example.) Today, only the authority of the "two or three" gathered in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ still exists as it will until He comes.

An assembly of God is shown to be so by the Lord's table spread in its midst. Christians gathered together without the Lord's table would not constitute an assembly because the Lord's authority for administration is found in connection with the ordinance which calls Him to mind.

The truth of the unity of the body of Christ on earth is expressed in the Lord's table, for we read, "We being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread" (1 Cor. 10:17). The oneness of the body is given practical, public expression by those who partake of the broken loaf in remembrance of Himself.

The Lord's table is not the saint's table. Because He alone has authority at His table, it is the solemn responsibility of each local assembly to watch and see that the Lord's rights over His own table are maintained.

There can no more be many kinds of assemblies of God than there could exist two bodies of Christ upon the earth. For this reason, it is impossible that there should be many tables of the Lord, meeting and acting independently of each other. By breaking bread together, members of His body express the unity of that body. There is no other Scriptural way of breaking bread. A table spread without recognizing this principle is not "the Lord's table."

Believers do not sufficiently realize the gravity of an independent table. Such a table denies the unity of the body. The children of God are members of the body of Christ and cannot partake of the Lord's supper at their pleasure. It is important that the collective action in taking this supper express the unity of the body otherwise such could not rightly be called the Lord's table. Thus, actions taken in a local assembly of God must be so recognized in all the assemblies of God. Assemblies which so recognize local actions are not merely a confederacy, but rather give collective, public expression to the body of Christ.

In summary, let us consider this example: Suppose that all the assemblies of God upon the earth number 5,000 and that according to God's thought all of His children in the world are found in these 5,000 assemblies. The Lord has given His authority (connected with His table) to each of these 5,000 assemblies. The Lord is Lord over them all (Eph. 4:5) and the Spirit acts and directs in each local assembly. While spiritual capacity and responsibility are in each assembly, there is universal, joint responsibility in which the actions of one assembly are accepted by all the others.

Suppose, however, that one of the 5,000 assemblies refuses to accept the action of another of the assemblies. By this sad circumstance, that assembly immediately becomes schismatic and sectarian, forfeiting its character as an assembly of God. By its actions, it has put itself out of communion with the rest of the assemblies, breaking fellowship with them.

If a person, free of all moral evil and perfectly upright in his personal Christian walk, comes from this schismatic assembly and visits one of those assemblies still gathered in fellowship, should he be received? We must answer, "No," for unless he can prove to the contrary, he has endorsed and is in fellowship with the independent and schismatic position of the assembly from which he comes.

To receive such a person would be to receive the position of the assembly with whom he is in fellowship, which in turn would cause the receiving assembly to also be in fellowship with division.

The only way in which such an individual could be received would be for him to publicly disavow the independent action of the assembly from which he comes and remove himself personally from its fellowship.

We recognize that because of the sad ruin of professing Christianity, all of the children of God are not today found in assemblies. But the principle remains true and is applicable to all assemblies of those who gather to the name of the Lord Jesus, owning the truth of the one body of Christ and their individual responsibility as connected with this precious testimony.

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