

THE ASSEMBLY MESSENGER

Proclaiming the Timeless Truths of the Church to a New Generation of Believers

Volume 97-5

Dear Reader

In the previous issues of the Assembly Messenger we have mainly studied *facts* about the Assembly -- the different names or titles used to describe it, its beginning, its future, its unfolding in Ephesians. Now we want to get into the *response* side of things. *We* are expected to respond to every truth found in Scripture by God-honoring conduct in relation to that truth.

God essentially says, "Here are the facts about the Church; now you conduct yourselves in accordance with those facts, according to My directions." First, we are to *assemble together* (Heb.10:25). The local assembly -- the local representation of the whole Church in each community or portion of a community -- is seen throughout the New Testament from Acts to Revelation. The wording of the last chapter of Romans where Paul greets the brothers and sisters at Rome may indicate a number of local assemblies like the one that met in the home of Priscilla and Aquila (v.5). The early Church in Jerusalem "continued *steadfastly* in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in prayers" (Acts 2:42). All who believed were *together* (v.44). Although we unfortunately may be careless in consistently or steadfastly assembling together, the fact that we *should* do so is not in contention among most Christians.

But *how* should we gather together? On what *ground* or *basis* should we meet? What meetings are authorized in Scripture? Who should lead those meetings or gatherings? With whom should we gather? What about order and discipline? These (and many other practical aspects of the Church) *are* in serious contention! Therefore, these matters will be taken up in this and future newsletters, as the Lord leads.

Why are these things in contention? Are the Scriptures that unclear or are there other reasons? God's Word, unfolded by the Holy Spirit, is *not* unclear. The Lord said, "If anyone *wills* to do His (God's) will, *he shall know concerning the doctrine ...*" (John 7:17). So it's *our* fault when we fall prey to all the conflicting doctrines concerning the Church or any other teaching of God's Word.

We aren't claiming that any true Christian is *deliberately* being dishonest, but many come in their "church" positions with a huge amount of spiritual baggage -- prejudice, bias, tradition and religious up-bringing that is hard to overcome. We are influenced by people around us and by prevailing principles of society such as democratic *tolerance* of different positions and practices. Some things, by their antiquity, are just accepted as being scriptural. One 19th century writer said, "Theological ideas, imbibed from infancy, form a veil on many minds and hearts, and prevent the acceptance of what the Holy Spirit would give directly from the Word of God." Yet

we are responsible to both *learn* and then to *live* the truth as found in Scripture, not the teachings or practices of man.

Another problem is our *focus*. The above writer said, "By making the sinner's or even the believer's blessing the object of service, you begin and end on a low level, and there is loss to the saint and to the Savior. But when God's thoughts and what will suit His heart are the motives which constrain us in service, the highest and fullest blessings will be obtained." When the focus is on man the object often is to obtain and keep large crowds whether at some special gathering or at a "church." Therefore, what pleases people is stressed. Man's terrible fallen condition is watered down. The need for repentance -- taking sides with God against ourselves -- is weakened. This may well lead to profession-only (Mt.7:21-23) or to spiritually-weak, immature Christians. But when the focus is on God, then there is the desire to please Him regardless of how the masses of people feel about it. The end never will justify the means if the "means" compromises what is revealed in the Word. We are then quite content to leave the results up to the Lord.

So we will be challenging you in this and subsequent issues of the Assembly Messenger. But we want you to be like the Bereans when the apostle Paul came to preach to them. Surely they could and should believe God's great apostle. Surely it would be an insult to check him out! But check him out they did! *And they were commended for it!* "These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica in that they received the Word with all readiness *and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so*" (Acts 17:11). Paul told the Thessalonians the same thing, "Test all things; hold fast what is good" (1 Thes.5:21). Please do likewise!

The featured article in this newsletter is by Leslie M. Grant of Kent, Washington, a brother who has faithfully traveled among the Lord's people for half a century and has written numerous books. The article is slightly edited with his permission from a tract of perhaps 30 years ago. It is entitled *God's True Ground* and very clearly sets out what should be our ground or basis of ecclesiastical (local assembly) gathering and briefly contrasts it with what is commonly practiced in the professed Christian community. This hard-hitting article gives us all much to think about and it is a good place to begin the practical aspects of the Assembly. It is also a good time to prayerfully turn off those biases built up over the years and simply turn to the Word for guidance.

In future newsletters we will look in more detail at the various forms of gathering that brother Leslie Grant tells us about in his paper. Without further ado, let's read his ministry to us.

GOD'S TRUE GROUND

Verses such as Ephesians 1:22; 4:15 and Colossians 1:18 clearly show us that Christ is Head over all things and Head of the Church, His body, which is comprised of all believers of the present dispensation of grace. He also is the Head of every man (1 Cor.11:3). Can we therefore have the least doubt that He has not only provided for our salvation, but has given us clear

directions for our entire Christian pathway and fellowship? Since He is Head, we depend on Him to provide wisdom, direction and nourishment for His body. Let us therefore have fullest confidence that His Word gives us the answer to the questions of what our Church fellowship should be and with whom. We therefore should be willing to bow totally to His sovereign will in these and all such matters.

The simple chart at the right is presented with the desire to appeal to the spirit of faith in the child of God. Let us justify God, not ourselves, by acknowledging that just as Christ remains the unchangeable Head of His body, the Church, so His stipulated ground of Church-gathering for His people remains absolutely the same from the beginning of the Church at the day of Pentecost (Acts 2) until that Church is taken to Glory at the coming of the Lord Jesus (the Rapture) as seen in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.

The circle in the chart represents God's ground of Church gathering. The solid surrounding line indicates that this ground remains inviolate through all Church history. It is the ground upon which the early Church in the book of Acts was established and the only basis upon which the unity of the Holy Spirit in the Church can exist or be kept. This is clearly seen in Ephesians 4:3-4, "Endeavoring to keep the *unity of the Spirit* in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in the hope of your calling."

Preserving the "unity of the Spirit" is based upon the unchangeable, established truth that "there is one body and one Spirit." However, this unity is something that takes effort on our part to preserve, to maintain. The *unity of the body of Christ*, the Church, cannot be broken or maintained by us, because it is totally God's workmanship. This unity of the body includes every true believer living on earth at any particular time. God cannot recognize any ground of gathering smaller than this, nor can He enlarge the ground to include even one unsaved person.

Although a believer can never lose his place in the one body of Christ, it is possible for him to gather with others on "grounds" that are not the ground of the one body. This, sad to say, is the general condition of *Christendom* (professed-Christianity) today. Thus, while every believer is part of the unity of the *body* of Christ, yet if one leaves the *ground* of the one body, he or she cannot be preserving the "unity of the Spirit" *because such an one has left the ground of the Holy Spirit's operation in the Church*. The Holy Spirit will never act contrary to God's Word. Yet, no matter how many abandon this ground, "nevertheless, the firm foundation of God stands" (2 Tim.2:19). God cannot change His foundation or ground to accommodate the wills of men.

A Helpful Example

The following simple illustration may be helpful. A school teacher has told the pupils to play a game together on the school playground. Yet most of the pupils soon leave to play the game elsewhere. No matter how well they play together, *they are not on the stipulated ground. They are disobedient!* Likewise, soon after the beginning of the Church, *with almost one consent*, the people of God deserted the ground of the one body of Christ to adopt clerisy, ritualism, denominationalism and other wrong grounds noted on the chart. Indeed today, some denominations are so bold as to claim that they are the direct line of the original Church! Yet

denominationalism itself is a gross denial of God's very ground for His Church, for we are to gather to Christ's name alone (Mt.18:20), *the common and only authorized gathering-name for all believers!* Further, we must not trust any claim that boasts of being of "the original line." God has always been right and we have been wrong in ever leaving His ground, no matter how right our conduct is otherwise.

Whatever other ground we may have taken, or however close to the true ground it may seem, or however well we have cooperated with others there, it is still not *God's* ground. It is still a practical denial of the truth concerning God's Church. The child of God should face this honestly with a broken and contrite spirit before God. Then he should seek, not merely to be more right than others, *but rather to return in heart and practice to the ground that God has established.* Even when on that ground we cannot boast that "we are right," for after all, the teacher told *all* the pupils to play together on the school playground. As long as any of God's saints remain off divine ground, the least thought of self-satisfaction is improper. Rather than justifying ourselves, we should have real concern for others and thus by our actions justify God.

Other Grounds

There are many other fields or grounds outside of God's ground, for the professing Church has split up into numberless groups with varying forms of human organization. However, our chart in principle covers them all by simply describing the unscriptural *principles* adopted by these different systems of men. *These are not merely inconsistent practices, but rather standards or principles adopted and defended as though they were Scriptural -- in other words, a ground taken in actual opposition to God's true ground.* Therefore, if a believer would honor God, he or she must completely leave these other grounds and return to God's true ground.

Let us consider, for instance, the doctrine of *clerisy* -- that a certain class called "the clergy" is entitled to an authoritative position over "the laity," the *common Christian* (as they would be thought of and would think of themselves) in their congregation. The roots of this doctrine were already beginning to develop in the early Church. *Diotrephes* loved to have the preeminence (3 Jn.3:9) and the "deeds of the Nicolaitans" troubled the local assembly at Ephesus (Rev.2:6). The meaning of *Nicolaitans* is simply "rulers of the laity." The Ephesian church hated these deeds *which the Lord also hated.* However, in the assembly at Pergamos, this evil had so developed as to be justified by some: "Thus you also have those who hold the *doctrine* of the Nicolaitans" (Rev.2:15). One whose deeds are inconsistent with his principles may be weak and thus may be borne with to a certain point even though a godly person would hate the evil of his deeds. But when a teaching or doctrine is formed to defend and justify deeds such as a clergy-laity relationship, *this is a defiant opposition to God's ground of the one body, for it usurps the authority of the Holy Spirit in the Church and His liberty to use whomsoever He will.* The same must be said of fundamentally false doctrine, unholy associations, independency, evil practice, legality, denominationalism, ritualism, etc., when any group of people attempt to justify these things by misuse of Scripture.

As another example, we all may act independently at times, as much as to say, "Am I my brother's keeper"? We should unsparingly judge ourselves for such carelessness. However, the

independency referred to on the chart is the avowed doctrine that each local church or assembly is independent or autonomous in its constitution and government, having no *vital* connection with or responsibility to other local churches. *This is a complete denial of the very ground, the very basis of the one body of Christ, for the one body is comprised of all true believers the world over.* By being part of that body, they are vitally linked together, *interdependent* and responsible for the welfare of one another. That is God's view, regardless of how men fail to put it into practice on earth.

The Need to Return to God's Ground

Note that in the chart these various unscriptural grounds are separated from each other only by broken lines. The reason is that these things may easily mingle together. In fact, the easy-going religious tolerance of our day encourages such mixtures. However, the ground of the one body will not tolerate mixture, for it is the ground of truth. Error has no place there, as indicated by the strong, unbroken line that encloses the circle. God does not approve of any humanly-devised additions to His ground of gathering.

This ground of the one body thus is the only ground upon which the Holy Spirit is free to work to produce true unity according to God, while fully allowing for the diversity of gift in every member of the body of Christ. If one desires to return to this ground, he may find many who will oppose such a move. They likely will claim that he is breaking unity with them in order to do so, but he may correctly answer that *if unity is not based on God's ground, it is not the "unity of the Spirit" and therefore of little spiritual value.*

In our example, if only one pupil was sufficiently concerned to return to the school ground because of the word of the teacher, that pupil could not rightly be charged with being divisive, but the opposite. "In a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay, some for honor and some for dishonor. Therefore, if anyone *cleanses himself from the latter*, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified and *useful for the Master*, prepared for every good work" (2 Tim.2:20-21).

We may be certain that Satan will continually attack this ground and do all in his power to keep believers from it, or entice them off it. He knows he cannot destroy the ground itself, but by means of all the evils surrounding the circle on the chart, he *ceaselessly assaults* what he cannot overthrow. He uses insinuations, denunciations and deceit in an effort to nullify or gloss over the pure truth of God so that a believer will not seek the one true ground of Church fellowship. Only real faith in the living God will discern and act upon this wonderful truth of gathering which is so clearly revealed in His Word.

The truly interested reader will perhaps not require any more comment on the various other fields in the chart and their harmful influences. Such a reader, with the help of the Scripture references shown, will be able to search out for himself or herself the thoughts of our Lord in all these things and then find pure joy and encouragement in giving Him in practice His place as Head of His body, the Church. May our gracious God and Father stir His people to desire to be in the place He has for them, subject to their blessed Head, in the brief time we may have before

the coming of the Lord Jesus for us. LMG

Suggested Reading

You might be interested in brother Leslie's books and pamphlets that relate to some of the things we have been studying. *Exploring the Revelation* is a small, hard cover, easy to read commentary on the New Testament book of Revelation -- a vital prophetic book for understanding the Church, specially its future. *God's Order: Is it Possible Today?* and *The Great Mystery* (the Church) are both small pamphlets that present a profitable message that will help you understand the Church and its practical order according to Scripture. He has many other books also. Another very helpful booklet on our subject is *The Step I Have Taken* by Edward Dennett (edited -- Christian Update Series, Volume 3). It details the struggles of a preacher in leaving his denominational position simply to meet on God's true ground. For this material please write or call Believers Bookshelf USA, POB 261, Sunbury PA 17801, (717) 672-2134 or Canada, 5205 Regional Rd #81, Unit #3, Beamsville Ontario L0R 1B3 (905) 563-4929. Fax numbers, respectively, are 717-672-7220 and 905-563-5811.

Are You Being Helped? Then Please Help Us.

If you are finding the Assembly Messenger a spiritual help and are being challenged by its message, then please share it with others and determine whether they would like their own copy free of charge. Please send names to Roger P. Daniel, 22240 Morley, Dearborn MI 48124-2127. Thank you in our Lord's precious name.