

# THE ASSEMBLY MESSENGER

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

Volume 97-6

Dear Reader

In light of the thought-provoking, soul-searching ministry we had in the last issue from our brother Leslie Grant, we will in this issue begin to look in detail at some of the grounds of gathering he listed, other than God's true ground -- that of the one body, *to* the precious name of the Lord Jesus Christ. We have chosen to begin with the ground or position of *independency* since it is rooted in thinking of so many lovely Christians who are seeking the Lord's directions for their lives. But sincere people can be sincerely wrong.

Many, in writing about various forms of church gathering, have expressed their conviction that the Scriptural one is the *independence* or *autonomy* of the local church (assembly). Generally no scriptures are given for this supposed correct way of gathering, but the despised alternate is *interdependence* of local assemblies.

When the term *independency* or *autonomy* is used, the meaning is that the local gathering is only responsible to Christ and is independent of all else, although, if desired, there may be a loosely-knit working together of certain local assemblies. But what goes on in any other local church (assembly) is no real concern to them, nor do they have to answer to any other local assembly for what they do. Thus, to use an extreme example, one may be put out of the fellowship of a local assembly for some very serious sin and be received in the next, often with no questions asked. The discipline only applies to the local church where the sin took place. This is the position of many of our dear fellow believers in many "independent" Christian groups. In actual practice, different local churches under this form of gathering vary widely in how much care is exercised when people come into their midst to break bread or speak.

When the term *interdependency* is used, the idea is that the local assemblies who believe in this form of gathering are responsible to each other as well as to Christ, their Head. So what goes on in one assembly affects all. A person received to the breaking of bread in one assembly is received in all assemblies since Christian fellowship is universal. A person disciplined in one assembly is disciplined in all. They *intercommune* around the world by means of letters of commendation (Rom.16:1-2; 2 Cor.3:1-2). Such a letter introduces the person or persons to a distant local assembly as being in happy fellowship and gathered on Scriptural ground. Other information also may be included, such as a gift to teach, and the distant assembly may be asked to care for the traveling one(s).

The independent and interdependent forms of local church gathering are graphically represented at the right. Almost all would admit a strong vertical responsibility to Christ: the Roman Catholic would claim responsibility to the Pope, whom they very wrongly take as the vicar (agent) of Christ on earth. But comparatively few local churches admit to a strong horizontal responsibility to other local churches, and that the fellowship should be one. Yet we believe that is *exactly* what the Bible

teaches, as we will see. (Actually, in our “interdependence” sketch, every circle should be connected to every other, but that would be messy to draw.)

Another form of local church operation should be mentioned at this point because it factors into the discussion. It is *central oversight* -- a governing board of respected men that oversees many local churches and makes official policy. A large portion of professed Christian denominational “churches” operate in this mode, whether the board is called a College of Cardinals, the Presbytery, a Synod, or by any other name. A human central oversight *in any form* hasn’t *Scripturally* existed since the apostles of the first century who had unique authority from God to act for God in any local assembly, *but never to promote their own ideas*. Even with the apostles, we don’t see hands-on oversight often practiced as such in Scripture, although the *threat* was there (1 Cor.4:21; 2 Cor.13:2, 10).

But Scripturally-functioning assemblies *do* have central oversight, *and that oversight is Christ*. Colossians 1:18 says that Christ is the *Head* of the Church. He is the *only* continuing central oversight found in the New Testament. He is seen in Revelation 1:11-13, 20; 2:1, 5 (and implied in all the letters to the seven local assemblies of Revelation 2 and 3), walking in the midst of His assemblies, discerning what is going on and commending or condemning their actions, even threatening to remove their lampstands of testimony if they don’t repent (Rev.2:5). Read all of Revelation 1 through 3 to see that the above statements are true.

### **Autonomy or Independency**

Now let’s look at the scriptures that support these various positions. For the *autonomy* or *independency* (the words mean the same thing) of the local assembly, I know of none! The only verses I have seen used to support the independency (autonomy) of the local church is John’s letters to the seven local churches of Revelation 2 and 3. The argument goes that the Lord addressed each *individual* assembly, not all of them together. Yes, He did address each individual assembly, showing His personal care, interest and concern for its conduct, *but He ended each address with the admonition to hear what the Holy Spirit says to the churches* (plural). *All* were to be equally interested and concerned, for they were part of the *one body* of Christ. Also note what we said in the previous paragraph: John saw the Lord walking in the midst of His assemblies (plural). So using this portion of Scripture is a very weak argument to support autonomy! In fact, it supports the opposite!

It is amazing that so many believers are taking their ecclesiastical stand on a ground as unstable and shifting as independency! We spoke in a previous newsletter of all the baggage many of us bring to our decision as to where and how to gather -- our upbringing, our friends, people and situations we are comfortable with. We are seldom taught to question what respected Christians write or preach. Yet that is exactly what God encourages us to do (Acts 17:11). The principle of 2 Corinthians 6:17 is to come out from sin and be separate and *be received by Christ!*. The principle of 2 Timothy 2:19 is to “depart from iniquity” to be a vessel unto honor, *fit for the Master’s use!* The Greek word translated *iniquity* (Greek *adikia*) might be better translated *unrighteousness* -- everything that is not right before God. The principle of Hebrews 13:13 is that we should go forth *unto Christ* outside the camp of men’s false opinions (which are sin), even though there will be a reproach in doing so. Moses had to pitch the tent where he met with God “outside the camp” of Israel when there was sin in the camp, and those who wanted to be on God’s side went out there to Moses. Note that the power for proper gathering is *the love to and honor of Christ*, and to maintain His rights involves leaving that which is wrong.

### **Interdependency**

Let’s now look at *interdependency*. 1 Corinthians is a remarkable book on practical Church-truth and all the following quotes are from this book. In 1:2 Paul writes “to the church of God which is at Corinth ... *with all who in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours.*” So all the instructions of 1 Corinthians -- and some of that instruction was very personal to the Corinthian assembly

(1 Cor.5) -- *were equally for all the local assemblies existing at that time, and for us also.* All, for example, were to treat the sinful, excommunicated man seen in chapter 5 just like the Corinthians were to treat him: he *everywhere* was to be excluded from all the fellowship of the assembly, including breaking bread. *That's interdependency!* And all conduct everywhere was to be in obedience to the true central oversight, Christ Himself!

In 1:10, there were to be no divisions anywhere, for they were to be of one mind -- not only the Corinthians but all the assemblies. Paul taught the same things everywhere in all the assemblies (4:17; 7:17; 11:16). Discipline and proper church order were to be the same (chapters 5 and 14). Headship and the order of the sexes, as well as order in the breaking of bread were to be the same (chapter 11). The understanding and practice concerning gifts and manifestations of the Holy Spirit were to be the same (chapter 12). Balanced Christian love (first to God and then to our fellow believers) was to be exhibited everywhere (chapter 13). All the churches of the saints were to be at peace (14:33). Doctrines such as the resurrection were to be jealously guarded by all (chapter 15). Even the truth about the collection for the Lord's work was to be practiced the same in all local assemblies (16:1). There was to be the same doctrine and practice everywhere. Of course, this common practice was in *spiritual* things, not things like the type of building where the local assembly meets, the color of the rug or the exact time of meetings, etc. This uniform teaching of the apostle Paul certainly sounds like *interdependence*, not autonomy, as directed by a central head (Christ). Remember, the things that Paul taught were "the commandments of the *Lord* (14:37). All direction and control is to come from the Head.

Then the very truth that the Church is called "*one body*" (12:12; Eph.1:22-23) should put the last nail in the coffin of independency. Chapter 12 shows that an ear is not independent from an eye, etc. (vv.14-26). While the fact that every member is needed is true locally, it is particularly true for all everywhere. In 12:12, the definite article *the* is used in the Greek before "Christ" -- "*the* Christ." When used this way it always speaks of Christ *and* His Church. Although there are many members, there is only *one* body (12:20). The Corinthians were "*body of Christ* (no definite article) and members individually" (v.27). They alone weren't the body of Christ but were *of* it, just as a soldier in World War II could say he was "Fourth Army." He wasn't *the* fourth army all by himself, but was as much of it as any other soldier in the fourth army.

When the Lord stresses unity and oneness, it is amazing that many who profess to be gathered as the Lord intended New Testament local assemblies to gather, should stress the exact opposite -- independency! But we must conclude that *independency* is a fundamentally wrong principle, striking to the heart of the truth as to the true Church of Christ. People may build a very biblical local church order on the ground or foundation of *independency* and may live irreproachable, godly personal lives, but if the foundation is the shifting sand of man's false opinion, how long can it stand under the discerning flame of the Lord's perfect discernment at the Judgment Seat of Christ? If it is a fundamentally flawed way of gathering, our only recourse (if in it) is to get out of it, or (if not in it) to have no association, no involvement with it.

### **Edited Comments from J.N. Darby**

John Nelson Darby is the man credited around the world as being unusually divinely gifted and used by God to rediscover and unfold the truths of the Church beginning in the early 1800's. He had firsthand experience with independency, for he was forced to separate from it in the mid 1800's at great personal cost. The following is the edited essence of the last four pages of his article on "Ecclesiastical Independency" from Collected Writings, Volume 14. Be prepared for some strong, thought-provoking language!

Independency is an unscriptural denial of the whole structure of the Church of God. It is a system I knew forty years ago and would never join. Independency merely means that each church judges for itself independently of another. I have no quarrel with those who, liking to judge for themselves, prefer this system; *only I am perfectly satisfied that in every respect it is wholly unscriptural.* The Church is not a voluntary system. It is not formed of a number of independent bodies, each acting for itself. It was never

dreamed that Antioch could let in Gentiles, and Jerusalem not, and all go on according to the order of the Church of God. There is not a trace of independency and disorder in the Word. There is every evidence of, and doctrinal insistence on there being *one body* on earth, whose unity was the foundation of blessing, and its maintenance the duty of every Christian.

The disciplinary action directed by the apostle at Corinth (1 Cor.5) was operative in respect to the whole Church of God: *all* are contemplated in the opening of the epistle. Does anyone mean to pretend, if one were put out at Corinth judicially, that each church was to judge for itself whether he was to be received; that *that* judicial act passed for nothing; that Corinth and Ephesus could do as they liked afterwards? For what then was the solemn act and direction of the apostle?

Suppose an assembly of God in a place. If there be one such, and another is set up by man's will, independent of it, the first only is morally, in God's sight, the assembly of God; and the other is not so at all *because it is set up in independency of the unity of the body*. I reject in the most entire and unhesitating manner the whole independent system as unscriptural and *a positive, unmitigated evil*. Now that the unity of the body has been brought out and the Scriptural truth is known, *it is simply a work of Satan*. Ignorance of the truth is one thing -- our common lot in many ways -- but opposition to it is another.

I know it is alleged that the Church is now so in ruins that scriptural order according to the unity of the body cannot be maintained. Then let the objectors avow that they seek *unscriptural* order, or rather disorder. To meet on the ground of independency is to meet in defiance of God's Word, for scripture says we are all one body; for we are all partakers of that one loaf. We profess to be one body whenever we break bread; Scripture knows nothing else. Man's reasoning cannot break it.

### **Central Oversight**

Some who would have us believe human central oversight is scriptural point us to the Jerusalem council in Acts 15. A problem arose with people teaching that Gentiles must be circumcised after the manner of Moses or they couldn't be saved, and they should keep the law of Moses (Acts 15:1, 5). What was the truth? Now, it is true that most of the apostles were at Jerusalem and since the truths of the New Testament were revealed to them (1 Cor.2:10, 12-13 -- the *us* and *we* of these verses refer to the apostles), the brethren would naturally seek them out. *We don't have apostles today!* Jerusalem probably also had the largest assemblies, all well taught. Those who came from Antioch, including Paul and Barnabas, were welcomed by the church and apostles and elders at Jerusalem. The apostles and elders considered the matter -- certainly an elite group, but were they acting as a governing board? Finally the apostle James made a proposal (vv.19-20). Was this proposal rammed through? No! The whole church at Jerusalem concurred (v.22), *making it an assembly decision* (v.23). All worked together. It was not a central oversight, but a special conference called to consider one matter before the Lord.

As said above, we don't have apostles today, so we don't have their authority. But we have the Word of God. Nothing says brothers can't get together to seek the Lord's mind on thorny problems and issues, *but no set of brothers, no matter how gifted and respected, have any authority to bind their conclusions on anyone!* Their *moral* authority (the respect and confidence people have in them because of long years of faithful service and sound teaching) may be used of the Lord to help persuade assemblies as to the scriptural truth of the situation and help point out the scriptural principles involved, but that is as far as it goes. There is nothing in Acts 15 to indicate that any group of people, whether highly respected or not, can act as a governing, ruling board for even one assembly, much less a group of assemblies.

### **Summary**

It should be plain from our study that *independency* or *autonomy* is far from the scriptural way of gathering and is a terrible sin against the Head of His Church, for it denies *in practice* the very doctrine that the Church is the one body of Christ. Also, there is no such thing as human central oversight: Christ exercises divine central oversight for all His local assemblies. The truth of Scriptural gathering on the

ground of the one body, to the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, is that every local assembly is responsible to, and linked to its Head, Christ, and is linked to every other local assembly so there is one doctrine and spiritual practice everywhere. Although the vast majority of professed Christians have given up this practice for a variety of reasons, that is no excuse for any believer not to attempt to maintain the same pathway the Holy Spirit would maintain even in a day of outward ruin of Church testimony. The Holy Spirit has never changed nor compromised.

RPD

## **NOTES**