

THE ASSEMBLY MESSENGER

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

Volume 98-14

Dear Reader

We want to continue our study of the local church or assembly as to its proper daily functioning to the glory of God. Remember when you first got your learners' permit to drive, and you thought you would either get a ticket or get into an accident at almost every intersection. Everything seemed so new and confusing, and there were so many rules! But as time went on you became comfortable with those rules and now you hardly think about them. Tickets or accidents generally occur only when those rules of the road are carelessly carried out ... or ignored! The same is true in the operation or functioning of the local assembly. God is very specific as to its operation. It may seem that the "rules" we will study in 1998 are difficult and confusing, and even wearisome at times. But to be pleasing to Him who is Head of His Church, we must know His rules and then carefully practice them. Eventually they become second nature and we will no longer think of them as confusing or as a burden, or wearisome. Instead, we will think of them as simply ways that are pleasing to our Lord (2 Cor.5:9) in our collective gathering together.

In Judges 17:6 and 21:25 we are told that Israel failed to carry out the Lord's will as given in the Law, but rather every person did what was right in his (and her) own eyes. We suggest that has happened in the Church. The collective gatherings of the Christian community generally do not function according to Scriptural principles, but to a myriad of conflicting man-made ideas. We have already looked at many of these religious but human ideas. How sad it is! Have we resolved to reject man-made practices and follow only the Word of God?

Suppose a local assembly or a number of local assemblies desire to carry out together the desires of the Lord as to assembly gathering. What *authority* do they have to receive persons into their midst and, as necessary, to carry out Scriptural discipline to maintain divine order? We will look at reception and discipline, the Lord willing, in future Newsletters. This matter of *assembly authority* will occupy us in this Newsletter because it is the basis for continued Scriptural order in a functioning assembly. The quoted material is from a 1952 short paper summarizing a conference held in Chicago on this same subject. This paper is out of print, but was recently printed in two parts in *Truth and Testimony* magazine -- a United Kingdom magazine available in North America for a subscription fee by phoning John Pickering at 815-933-0096.

Scriptural Authority

God alone is the ultimate and intrinsic authority. All other true authority is derived from Him (Rom.13:1). In the home circle He has given parental authority (Eph.6:1; Col.3:20 and a number of verses in Proverbs). Wives are to be subject to their husbands since that is the divine order of headship (1 Cor.11:3; Eph.5:22-24; Col.3:18). In the world He has given governmental authority, and the government "is God's minister to you for good" and the government "does not bear the sword in vain, for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil" (Rom.13:4; see from verses 1-7).

More to the point of this Newsletter, in the Church God at one time *did* give authority to a handful of specially chosen men of the first century. They were entitled apostles (sent-ones). They could carry out acts of discipline to maintain holiness in the local assemblies by their own derived authority (Jn.20:23; Acts 5:1-11; 13:8-11; 1 Cor.4:19-21; 2 Cor.1:23; 10:8-11; 13:1-2, 10; 1 Tim.1:20). But there was no apostolic succession. We now have a completed Bible that has everything needed so that "the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim.3:16). We no longer need apostles. We have their inspired teachings! Authority to maintain God's rights in His Church is elsewhere. It is not found today in any man or group of people, *short of the gathered local assembly*. Only the gathered local assembly has any authority today!* Elders (which we will study in the next Newsletter) have often taken

on themselves to have authority which God has not given them, and have caused great harm to the proper functioning of the local assembly. The clergy, although itself unscriptural, also has usurped authority, which has led to the allowance of every evil in the professing Church. Let us seek divine authority, not man-made authority!

* There is a *moral authority* that comes from the impact of the Word of God on the hearts and consciences of the brothers and sisters in the local assembly. That Word is “living and powerful ... and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart” (Heb.4:12). Hebrews 13:17 tells us to “*obey* your leaders and be submissive, for they watch over your souls ...” (JND). The Greek word for *obey* is *peitho* which has the thought of “to persuade, to win over” (Vine). So when those who preach the Word to us *convince* us that they have presented to us God’s directions on a subject, then we “obey” them, because to do so is obeying God. But such have no personal authority: the authority is in the Word.

Matthew 18:18 and 1 Corinthians 5:3-5,13

Now we come more to our subject, after laying the above background. We want to dwell on two verses. We will quote from the J.N. Darby translation because of its exceptional fidelity to the Greek.

“Whatsoever ye [plural] shall bind on the earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatsoever ye shall loose on the earth shall be loosed in heaven ... for where two or three *are gathered together* unto My name, there am I in the midst of them” (Mt.18:18-20).

“For I, as absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged as present, to deliver in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ (ye and my spirit *being gathered together, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ*), him that has so wrought this: to deliver him, I say, being such, to Satan for destruction of the flesh ... Remove the wicked person from amongst yourselves” (1 Cor.5:3-5, 13).

These verses are perhaps made clearer in the generally excellent NASB. It says, “For I, on my part, though absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged him who has committed this, as though I were present. In the name of our Lord Jesus, *when you are assembled*, and I with you in spirit, *with the power of our Lord Jesus*, I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan ...”

The context of both these passages make it clear that they are speaking of the local church gathered together *as a local church*. It is not a gathering of clergy or a board of elders. Yes, an apostle was guiding the Corinthians because they had no written instructions as to how to act, but that does not detract from the principles of action he laid down for us today in 1 Corinthians. *The only derived authority today resides in the local assembly gathered together!* It does not have authority to enforce some man-made regulation or to “receive” to its fellowship anyone it desires, apart from the Scriptural qualifications, or to discipline one for non-Scriptural reasons. *The assembly in exercising authority is gathered in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and acts with His power!* If the Lord is not in it, there is no *divine* power to act, although an assembly may still act in *fleshly* energy. Such an action then is *not* bound in heaven. But if the assembly action is Scriptural, then the action *is* bound in heaven and sanctioned by Christ, and woe to anyone who refuses that action or is careless as to it!

What Are Assembly Actions?

An assembly action is a spiritual judgment of the assembly that has to do with the spiritual welfare of the assembly and affects one or more persons. The most common assembly action is the “reception” of one to take part in the fellowship of the local assembly, including the breaking of bread. Most commonly a visitor comes from out-of-town with a letter of commendation (Rom.16:1; 2 Cor.3:1) from a like-minded assembly and the *assembly* receives the visitor as one of its own. Others may be received for the first time, after the assembly has enquired in view of the person meeting the Scriptural qualifications (to be studied in a future Newsletter, the Lord willing) for assembly fellowship together. These are pleasant decisions; so

pleasant that one may not realize that an assembly action has taken place which has been ratified in heaven by the Head of His Assembly.

The case of the immoral man in 1 Corinthians 5 is an example of an unpleasant but sometimes needful use of assembly authority in the form of an assembly decision. Generally (as we will see in future Newsletters), there are assembly decisions involving lesser forms of discipline for both moral and doctrinal sin, but if the sin proves to be a *course of action*, the person is put outside the functioning of the local assembly (1 Cor.5:12); he is “removed ... from among yourselves” (1 Cor.5:13). Note that the removal was not only from among the Corinthian brethren, but from *all* who call on the name of the Lord Jesus (1 Cor.1:1-2). That is the practical truth of the one body.

The example in 1 Corinthians 5 is of an individual, but the *principle* carries to *assemblies*. From Old Testament example, leprosy is a picture of serious sin requiring the person to be put out of the camp of Israel as an unclean person (Lev.13-14). The New Testament counterpart is seen in the case of the immoral man of 1 Corinthians 5 who was put away from among the saints everywhere. But there could be leprosy (sin) *in a house* (Lev.14:33-57). If the sin proves to be willfully unstoppable, the house was torn down (v.45). Note however the care taken before that final action (vv.35-44). So there might have to be an assembly action against a sinning assembly after the sinning assembly was proven to be in a *course* of sin. Such an action would result in the disowning or “withdrawing from” the sinning assembly by all assemblies willing to gather on God’s true ground (2 Tim.2:19, JND).

The Responsibility of Others in Relation to Assembly Decisions

In previous Newsletters we have stressed the truth of the one body. That great truth has great ramifications when it comes to assembly decisions. A person received in one assembly is received in all, assuming there was nothing seriously unscriptural in the original reception. A person disciplined in one assembly is disciplined in all, again assuming the discipline was scriptural: *it was an assembly action taken with the derived authority of our Lord Jesus Christ*. The same is true as to an action taken against another assembly. This is no place to take sides because “my friend” is involved. If the action was correct I *must* bow to it because God gave authority to the assembly to act in His name and for Him. And if it is a Scriptural decision, it is ratified in heaven and my rejection of it or indifference to it finds me fighting against or being indifferent to God. “Whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God *and those who resist will bring judgment upon themselves*” (Rom.13:2). See also Acts 4:19 and 5:29.

The before-mentioned 1952 paper says, “Obedience out of conscience to God is obligatory even where there is not infallibility. If it were not so there could be no order in this world at all ... Only when obedience to His own higher authority demands it, can one reject the demand of the subordinate authority ... To pretend to decide for oneself whether to obey or not, whenever one thinks the authority over one has failed, would be the end of all authority in the world and in the Church. It would make self-will the rule of action ... *he who sets his own will against the authority, pretending to the right to disregard it when he pleases, is acting in high-handed rebellion against God’s divine order.*” Rejection of the assembly action is rejection of the assembly that made the decision and amounts to making a division. Scripture says to “note those who cause divisions and offenses *contrary* to the doctrine which you have learned, and avoid them” (Rom.16:17). There may have to be divisions but they had better be because one is before God standing up for the truth, not contrary to the truth!

A Mistake is Made

No person (other than the Lord) is infallible; neither is any assembly. An assembly may act wrongly in reception or discipline due to carelessness, misunderstanding Scripture or self-will. The wrong action may involve a person or another assembly. Such an action is *not* bound in heaven since it was not really done in the power of the Lord or truly in His name: He would not be involved in a wrong action. In that case the assembly would have no divine authority to act. There would be no energy of the Holy Spirit working in the consciences of the saints. Even then, only rarely would the decision be immediately refused.

Suppose there is clear evidence that a mistake has been made. And the evidence must be clear: an opinion or feeling won't do. Support of my friend because he is a friend or because I like his theology better than that of the suspect assembly are no reasons to ignore the decision. But if the evidence seems clear, then there is every reason to seek the resolution of the mistake for the Lord's honor and the spiritual good of all involved. The process should be begun as quickly as practical. What is the process?

The Process to Seek to Remedy a Faulty Decision

We believe the *principle* for solving *all* problems between Christians is given in Matthew 18:15-17. Too often we get caught up in the *example* and forget the *principle* behind it. The *example* in Matthew is a problem between two individuals, but the *principles* involved hold true for any number of people — for assemblies too.

Let's paraphrase these three verses. "If an assembly sins, go and tell it its fault between you and it alone. If it hears you, you have gained an assembly" (v.15). If I as an individual, or an assembly with which I express fellowship, is convinced of a wrong (unscriptural) assembly decision, then meet with that suspect assembly. The alleged problem isn't spread around the world, but is kept contained. Let them present the evidence to you. Remember, there must be a clear *Scriptural* reason for you to go: it must clearly be an *unscriptural* action that you are opposing. The suspect assembly may be able to show you that your understanding was faulty, or you may be able to show the suspect assembly that its action was wrong. In either case, if the wrong is corrected, the assembly is gained. But if the suspect assembly refuses to meet an *honest* inquiry or refuses to change, then further action is required.

Back to our paraphrase. "But if it will not hear, take with you one or two more, that by the mouth of two or three witnesses, every word may be established" (v.16). Now other assemblies are involved. From the example given in Deuteronomy 21:2-3, *nearby* assemblies should be involved, and it should total at least two or three so there will be competent witness. As in the above there needs to be diligent, careful inquiry, for the enquiring assemblies are acting for the Lord. See the Old Testament example of Deuteronomy 17:4-11. The hoped-for outcome is that the sin is stopped, the sinful assembly action reversed, and the Lord's honor thus maintained.

Completing our paraphrase. "And if the suspect assembly refuses to hear the two or three assemblies, tell it to all the local assemblies. If the suspect assembly refuses to hear the other assemblies, let it be to you like a heathen assembly and a tax collector" (v.18). Again, the hoped-for outcome is repentance, but if not, after a reasonable length of time has passed, the sinning assembly is withdrawn from (2 Tim.2:19-22) by all the other assemblies. There is no longer any fellowship with that assembly or with other assemblies that might support it. Only thus is the honor and holiness of the Lord, the Head of His Church, maintained in the practical functioning together of local assemblies.

Conclusion, Suggested Reading and Miscellaneous

These directions of the Lord for the functioning of Scripturally-constituted local assemblies may seem as difficult as first driving in New York or Chicago at rush hour, but once they are learned, they are not difficult, although they may involve both happy and sad cases that will bring one to his or her knees before the Lord. But the Lord wants us to be spiritually exercised before Him for every assembly decision and to prayerfully seek His Word for answers. The authority of the local assembly is a great truth to be used to maintain the Lord's honor.

Suggested reading is *The Law of the Leper* by G.C. Willis, Believers Bookshelf

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CORRECTION: In 97-7, the first reference in paragraph 4, pg.1, should be 1 Corinthians 1:11-13.

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