

THE ASSEMBLY MESSENGER

Proclaiming the Timeless Truth of the Church to a New Generation of Believers
Volume 00-41

Dear Reader

In previous newsletters we have systematically studied the truth of the Assembly in both Ephesians and Timothy. We have also made considerable reference to 1 Corinthians, but have never approached the book systematically to seek to discern the truths of the Assembly found therein. In the next few Newsletters we will seek to do that, for 1 Corinthians is a vital book in the understanding of “assembly truth.” There is much more in the book than simply assembly truth, and it is particularly Bob Costen’s exercise that we at least briefly bring in the whole context of the book. But we will seek to generally emphasize the general topic of the Assembly Messengers — assembly truth.

INTRODUCTION

Bob Costen gives us the following introductory outline and points out that the Corinthian local assembly had a number of difficulties, such as:

- contentions and divisions (1:11-13)
- envying, strife, divisions (3:3-4)
- reigning as kings and being puffed up (4:4, 18)
- defilement and lack of discipline (5:1-5, 11)
- going to law against other believers (6:1-8)
- no sense of their unique position (6:9-20)
- marriage problems (chapter 7)
- eating in idol’s temples (chapter 8)
- carelessness before and at the Lord’s supper (11:20-22, 27-32)
- misuse of gifts and gender roles (chapter 14)
- denial of the resurrection (15:12-19)

But in spite of their carnal (fleshly) state, the apostle by the Holy Spirit reminds them of their *holy dignity* and *spiritual wealth* (1:2-9), that they were:

- the assembly of God at Corinth (v.2)
- sanctified (v.2) — *set apart* by and for God — and in Christ Jesus, saints by calling
- linked with all believers in every place who call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord (v.2)
- favored by grace and peace from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ (v.3), which should eliminate discord and disorder
- enriched by Him in everything (v.5)
- the testimony of Christ (v.6)
- gifted saints, while waiting for the coming (appearing) of our Lord Jesus Christ (v.7)
- called unto the fellowship of His Son Jesus Christ our Lord (v.9), by God’s faithfulness.

Who are those called into this fellowship?

- Both Jews and Greeks (Gentiles) (v.24)
- Not *many* wise, mighty or noble naturally (v.26). Note it does not say “not *any*.” Greek wisdom reached its climax at Athens with “an altar to the unknown God” (Acts 17:23). Man’s natural wisdom and intellect are foolishness in divine things, bringing in different schools of opinion and making *man* prominent instead of Christ (1:10-12). *Christ*, wisdom personified, is the great lesson-book of divine wisdom.
- God chose the foolish things of this world to shame the wise of this world, and the weak things of this world to shame mighty things; despised things to bring to nothing things that are (vv.27-28)
- Why? That no flesh should glory in His presence.

But now we are in Christ Jesus and called to find every blessing in this glorified Man, who became for us:

- wisdom
- righteousness
- sanctification
- redemption

As a result, our hearts are full of joy, peace and praise, that we glory in the Lord (v.31). We are transferred from Adam to Christ.

ASSEMBLY TRUTH IN 1 CORINTHIANS 1-4

1 Corinthians and 2 Timothy were written to correct situations dealing with the Assembly or Church. 1 Corinthians deals with a *local assembly* which was functioning with many internal problems as we saw above. 2 Timothy deals with the situation of the Church as a whole in widespread dissension or division, and instructions are given of how every *individual* is then to act in relation to assembly fellowship.

Chapter 1

v.2. When Paul wrote, the local assembly of God at Corinth consisted of every believer in that city, but Paul's instructions went beyond Corinth to *every believer in every place* who called on the name of the Lord, for there is *one* body. Inspired instruction to one assembly applied equally to every other assembly. This fact leaves no room for *independency* in the functioning of each local assembly. Every assembly was to have the same order, conduct and teaching.

v.7. God saw to it that the spiritual gifts needed for the Corinthian assembly to function were present. Also, they had the proper final goal: they awaited the revelation of the Lord. They desired to be with *Him*.

v.10. The brethren at Corinth (and all other assemblies too) were to speak the same thing and have the same mind and judgment — in everything! How was that possible, considering the diversity of people with so many backgrounds? How is that possible today in the local assembly where we express fellowship? And for all assemblies calling on the Lord? The answer is found in chapter 2. We [as did the apostles] have the Holy Spirit, that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God (2:12). We will see this further when we get to chapter 2.

The apostles wrote what the Holy Spirit wanted written — “in words which the Holy Spirit teaches” (2:13). They were, as JND puts it, “communicating spiritual things by spiritual means” (2:13). And these spiritual things are only “spiritually discerned” (v.14). It's *impossible* for the “natural man” (unsaved man without the Holy Spirit) to understand such things, but *we* believers have the mind — the intellectual faculty, the thinking-faculty — of Christ (2:16), for we have the Holy Spirit as an indwelling-possession (Jn.14:16-17; Rom.8:11; 1 Cor.6:19; 1 Jn.2:27). So by the Holy Spirit the believer has the capacity to understand the wisdom of God. Thus, if we put aside our natural humanistic reasonings (which we find so hard to do), it is absolutely possible for us *all* to be of one mind, of one judgment, without divisions among us. But it is essential that we be free to study and discuss these things together. The brethren of the early 1800's grew so fast in the Word because they, as R.K.Campbell put it, “hammered out the truth in Bible studies,” of course done in a friendly manner, each adding his knowledge and understanding, till all were satisfied they had the mind of Christ.

vv.12-31. The Corinthians were rallying around local teachers, and Paul is gracious enough in 4:6-7 to “figuratively transfer” this to himself and Apollos, not naming or blaming them. But chapter 1:17-31 is the complete setting aside of the first man and human wisdom in divine things, as *Christ* is the power of God and the wisdom of God. Yet some even claimed exclusive right to Christ. Out of this human thinking, allowing human emotions to control instead of the Holy Spirit, eventually came *denominationalism* in its hundreds of forms today, so sadly *outwardly* dividing the true Church, the *one* body. At that time the thought of *denominationalism* was only in seed form, but it was *not* the mind of Christ. Philippians 2:5 shows that we have to *allow* the mind of Christ to have control in our lives.

Chapter 2

Chapter 1 brought before us the cross which closes the believers' history as a child of Adam and displaces completely the first man (1:18-25). Then we are in a new position (v.30) *in Christ Jesus*. Chapter 2 then tells us how to make spiritual progress by the Spirit of God. Paul told the Corinthians how he came to them: his ...

- style of speech and preaching (vv.1-4)
- subject — Jesus Christ and Him crucified, meaning the first man is set aside at the cross (v.2)
- spirit and attitude (v.3)
- end in view, that their faith should not be in man's wisdom but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power (v.5)

In verses 6-8 Paul reminds them that the wisdom of this world and the rulers of this world come to nothing, whether the intellectual "princes" as the Greeks, or the governmental and military rulers as the Romans, or the religious rulers as the Hebrews. If they had known the true wisdom from God, they would not have crucified the Lord of Glory.

Verses 7-14 tell us how the hidden wisdom of God is communicated to us by the Spirit of God.

- It is *ordained* or *predetermined* (JND) before the ages *for our glory* (v.7)
- It is prepared by God for those who love Him (v.9)
- These things are revealed to us through His Spirit, that is, the Holy Spirit (v.10)
- The Spirit of God searches the deep things of God for us (v.10)
- These things are known and received by the Spirit (v.11)
- They are communicated in words which the Holy Spirit teaches (v.13)
- They are spiritually discerned, for the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God (v.14)

The spiritual believer discerns all things, the Holy Spirit being free to teach him. By the Holy Spirit the believer has the mind of Christ and thus has the capacity to apprehend the wisdom of God (vv.15-16).

Chapter 3

vv.1-4. In chapter 1 Paul reminded the Corinthians of their holy dignity and spiritual wealth. But here he tells them of their true state. They were *carnal* (fleshly — a believer walking according to the flesh) and babes in Christ, rallying around men and not God. These verses show that God may consider a whole assembly to be "carnal" instead of "spiritual." The Corinthian assembly was walking in a way that emphasized the old nature, the "flesh." They needed solid food, the deep things of God, but because of their envies and strife and internal divisions — all fleshly things — Paul had to feed them baby-food. How many assemblies today are spiritual babes, with internal fleshly strife, unable or unwilling to receive the very truths that would mature them so they would have a greater appreciation of divine things and divine Persons, and would know what to do when difficulties arise and wrong doctrines and practices are promoted?

vv.5-9. Paul and Apollos were servants used by God at Corinth, but they took no credit. They were simply God's fellow workers. *God* was the Great Workman: He alone gave the increase. Being there 1.5 years, Paul *planted*. He laid the foundation — Jesus Christ. Apollos *watered*, or built upon it. Therefore at the end of verse 10 the application embraces "each one," that is, every person who puts his hand to work at Corinth. Paul and Apollos were not the only ones who labored for the Lord at Corinth.

"Assembly truth" begins with the expression that the Corinthian believers (and all believers: the Church) are "God's building" — the house of God (1 Tim.3:15), the temple of God, as seen in verses 16-17. Here, as opposed to 1 Corinthians 6:19, the believers *collectively* are the temple, and the Holy Spirit indwells the Church *collectively*, just as He does the believers *individually*. The Church is holy (v.17), and God takes great offense at any attempt to defile His Church. Christians need to take that seriously to heart as they contemplate their church-position! And as we saw in the last issue of the Messenger, God holds the brothers and sisters responsible to maintain proper order.

vv.10-11. The Church's *foundation* is given here. Verse 11 speaks of the bedrock *divine* foundation, the Lord Himself. "On this Rock [Christ] I [Christ] will build *My Church*" (Mt.16:18). By Christ's own power and work He is building His Church *upon Himself*. Paul laid that foundation in verse 10, as we saw above, and He taught them the truths of the Assembly which he was divinely commissioned to proclaim to the saints (Eph.3:2-12). Now that these "Assembly truths" are given, as found particularly in Paul's writings, each of us individually is responsible for how we "build" on the foundation. The "how" of verse 10 is not "how much" his successors build, but *with what* they built. We will see that the materials are all-important.

vv.13-15. Although the truth given here of our *works* in relation to the Judgment Seat of Christ (Rom.14:10; 2 Cor.5:10) is probably general, it has *special application* in 1 Corinthians to our *assembly* lives — as we build on the foundation. These things were written *to an assembly*. *Gold* (divine righteousness: what is right before Him), *silver* (redemption: the gospel) and *precious stones* (the saints of God: how they are cared for) are items not damaged by the “fire” of God’s righteous discernment. *Wood* (good but natural things — Heb.12:1-2), *hay* (somewhat useful but highly combustible) and *stubble* (worthless things) are destroyed by fire. Our works — everything we do — are going to be manifested at the Judgment Seat of Christ, and those works will be perfectly tested by the *Lord* according to *His* criteria! Those works which *abide*, which God counts as for Him (Rev.19:8), will earn us *rewards* to be used for Christ, not in eternity, but during His millennial reign (Mt.25:14-30; Lk.19:11-27). We will “suffer loss” for those works burned up: only what’s done for Christ will last. I dare say we waste opportunities every day! Don’t we want a “full reward” (2 Jn.8)?

vv.16-20. The true Corinthian assembly collectively was the temple of God, a tremendous truth. The Holy Spirit not only dwells within us as individuals (1 Cor.6:19), but in the Assembly collectively. But that is only true of true believers, whether individually or collectively. Evidently Paul doubted whether all who worked at Corinth were truly converted, so he gave the warning of verse 17. Some were doing destructive work (vv.18-20).

vv.21-23. Let us not glory in men, even the best of men! All things are ours because we are *Christ’s* and Christ is God’s. Notice the vastness in verse 22. Having such blessing would woo us from the wisdom of this world to Christ.

Chapter 4

vv.1-2. Paul and Apollos were both servants and stewards. Paul reminds the Corinthians and ourselves that the essential thing for a *steward* — one who cares for another’s affairs — is to be found *faithful* or *dependable* (v.2). So may *we* be faithful in view of the Judgment Seat of Christ, remembering that we are all saved to serve according to God’s mind!

vv.3-5. Who were these carnal Christians at Corinth to judge Paul? Their judgment would be of little value. Paul didn’t even judge himself, but left it with the Lord. When the Lord comes (or shortly thereafter) the *hidden things*, the *motives* and counsels of the heart will be made manifest. So we are not to judge *motives* (vv.3-5), but as chapter 5 shows us, we — the local assembly — are to judge *actions* in the assembly. Verse 5 has been widely proclaimed as allowing almost anything, any practice, any teaching, to go on in the midst of the local assembly or in assemblies in general, without assembly action against it being possible, but as Peter gives the principle (2 Pet.1:20), one cannot use any one verse out of context to make a doctrine of Scripture. Someone has said that a *text* out of *context* is a *pretext*. When a study is made of *judging*, we see that an assembly cannot judge *motives*, but it clearly *is* to judge *action* — what a person says, writes or does. Note that the last phrase in verse 5 does not mean that every person is going to be praised, but that each one who is praised will have his praise from God and not from men.

vv.6-16. Paul is so gracious in not mentioning the names of those who would judge him, and even applies these things to himself and Apollos so the Corinthians might learn not to think of men above that which is written, thus leaving no room for boasting or being puffed up against another believer. Glorifying in “man” is the spirit of the world, so the questions of verse 7. The Corinthians were reigning as kings, as it were, not realizing their true condition. But now is not the time to reign. In the future they ... and the apostles ... will reign together (v.8). Then when we read the account in verses 9-13 of what the apostles went through, it really touches our consciences and shuts our mouths. The Corinthians were converted

through Paul's ministry, and so have we been, indirectly, so he is our instructor through his inspired writings.

vv.17-21. Paul sent Timothy to remind the Corinthians of his ways in Christ which he taught *everywhere* (v.17), for the body is one. Each local assembly is to have the same practice, same teaching, same discipline. We too need to be reminded of Paul's ways and teachings as the great apostle to the Gentiles. The apostles had authority from God to *enforce* that sameness (vv.18-20), but *today*, the only earthly authority in these matters is the gathered assembly, acting in the Lord's name and power, according to His Word. We will see this in action in chapter 5 in the next Messenger, the Lord willing. Finally Paul reminds them and us of what the kingdom of God is. Knowing this would deflate any who were puffed up.

BC and RPD