

THE ASSEMBLY MESSENGER

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

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Dear Reader

Another doctrine that has been under attack lately is the doctrine that the outward manifestation of the Church is in ruins. Brother Leslie M. Grant, no stranger to the pages of the Assembly Messenger, has written the following article on this subject, which we believe will be helpful to all. He begins with a scriptural background of how man has ruined every work that God has placed in his hands to maintain for Him. And, as we noted in issue #40, God *has* placed the government of the Church, locally, into man's hands to carry out for Him, but man has and continues to fail miserably in carrying it out. But none of us *must* fail in these things. We have the great resources of the Word of God and the indwelling Holy Spirit to teach us the truth and give us the power to carry it out. Let's see what brother Leslie has for us.

THE OUTWARD RUIN OF THE CHURCH IN TESTIMONY

Man's Work Ends Only in Ruin

In every dispensation God in His dealings with mankind has proven the sad truth that what God has committed into the hands of men, ends in total failure. When man was tried under *conscience* (the dispensation from Adam to Noah), "The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Gen.6:5). The moral ruin was so complete that God sent a flood to destroy the civilization that rejected Him.

Human Government Failing

Noah was then given principles by which he was to govern the world (Gen.9:1-17). Thus, men were tried by having a human *government* under God, but this only resulted in men setting God aside, to govern as they desired. This was the very reason for the construction of the tower of Babel, and God judged this by mixing up their languages (Gen.11:5-9). Thus, human government was brought to complete ruin [although *God's* principles remain].

Man Failing Under Law

God then chose Abraham (Gen.12:1-3) to be the father of a nation, Israel, who were given the law of God with its tabernacle-service, priesthood and many attendant blessings (Exodus 19 to 40), and for many years Israel was tested by these divinely-given laws. But the result was total failure as described in Isaiah 1:6, "From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it, but wounds and bruises and putrefying sores."

Of course there were those in Israel who objected that the condition was not as serious as God said it was. These are spoken of in Isaiah 9:9-10, "Ephraim and the inhabitants of Samaria — who say in pride and arrogance of heart, 'The bricks have fallen down, but we will rebuild with hewn stones; the sycamores are cut down, but we will replace them with cedars.'" They had no sense of God's righteousness or of their own sinfulness, and thought they could remedy what God had already condemned.

On the other hand, God says in Hosea 13:9, "O Israel, you are destroyed, but your help is from Me." Though Israel was destroyed and could not help themselves, God was not defeated. He would and will accomplish blessing for Israel that is far beyond Israel's anticipation, but He will do this without human help. Meanwhile, Israel's pride in thinking they are able to establish their own righteousness, has left them for centuries in a state of confusion and desolation, and it will not be until they bow in faith to the Lord Jesus when He returns to the Mount of Olives in power and great glory (Zech.12:10; 14) that their ruin will be reversed.

The Church As Committed to Man Is a Ruin Too

Though the Lord Jesus said in Matthew 16:18, “On this Rock I will build My Church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it,” and this is absolute truth as describing His own sovereign work of grace, yet when we consider the *actual experience* of the *condition* of the Church publicly, and also the scriptures that speak of the rapid degradation of the *testimony* of the Church, does this not bow our hearts in broken self-judgment in realizing that we have been no better than Israel in maintaining what God has committed to us?

Revelation 2 and 3 furnishes a prophetic history of the testimony of the Church from its beginning to its end on earth, and this history shows a general downward progression that was only slightly interrupted in *Smyrna* when the Church suffered severe persecution and was more bright in its testimony because of this. But *Pergamos* followed *Smyrna* (Rev.2:12-17), and here we read of the Church *dwelling* “where Satan’s throne is” (v.13), that is, *dwelling* in the world, though her proper dwelling is in heaven. *Dwelling* here comes from the Greek *katoikeo* and has the moral thought of “settling down, dwelling fixedly” (Vine) — it was her preference! This refers to the time of the Emperor Constantine who adopted Christianity as the State religion, thus the Church, outwardly, being reduced to the level of the world in a compromising condition. At that time “the doctrine of Balaam” (the corruption of teachings and morals) and “the doctrine of the Nicolaitans” (the clergy system introduced) (vv.14-15) began their damaging work. This resulted in the dreadful corruption of *Thyatira* (vv.18-29) — Roman Catholic domination at its worst, bringing in the so-called Dark Ages.

In *Philadelphia* God again intervened in mercy to His people (Rev.3:7-13) in reference to a small number who were true to Him, but this did not change the condition of the Church generally, and the history ends with *Laodicea* (Rev.3:14:22), which means “the people’s rights.” We can understand the *world* claiming their own rights, but those claiming to be Christians should not think at all of their own rights, but the *Lord’s* rights. The Lord says about *Laodicea*, which is sadly true of the professing Church generally, “So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth” (Rev.3:16). This is because of their total outward corruption, total confusion, in giving up much of the truth.

Yet some think, as some in Israel did, that the condition is not so serious as total ruin. Let them consider the striking picture of the shipwreck of the testimony of the Church in Acts 27 where the ship was totally wrecked, but the passengers all saved. Should the passengers have told the captain that their plight was not so serious as he told them, and therefore that they should spend their time repairing the ship?

This is what many today are occupied with — *the repair of a condition that is already under the judgment of God*. The so-called *ecumenical movement* of today is a widespread attempt to build up what scripture judges as opposed to the truth. As we have seen in Isaiah 9:9, this is the attitude of human pride and arrogance, which God will utterly judge. It is the same principle as in the case of one trying to obtain salvation by human reformation, as though the flesh (the fallen nature) has some good in it (Rom.7:18)! The ecumenical movement will be successful, but only after the Rapture, when practically all “religious” but unsaved people will unite in a great world-church clothed in Roman Catholicism (Rev.17:1-7,18; 18), which will be overthrown by the political world-dictator (the beast out of the sea) before the end of the Tribulation, unknowingly fulfilling God’s will (Rev.17:8-17).

What Is the Resource?

Since we can never correct this condition of evil that exists in the overall professing Church, it is futile to spend our time in trying. We are defeated! But let us remember, *God is not defeated*, and He has the answer to such needs as we face. 2 Timothy 2:20 tells us, “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.” The Church had been called “the house of God” in 1 Timothy 3:15, but in a very short time it had deteriorated so badly in outward testimony as to be called “a great house” which involved both believers and unbelievers. Is this a serious condition or not? Yes, it is! So serious that an individual is told by God to *purge himself* — a strong word in the Greek — from that mixture in order to become “a vessel for honor, sanctified and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work” (v.21).

Would this separation then leave such an individual without fellowship? No. For he is then told to “pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace, *with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart*” (v.22). Are such Christian people as this told to leave the great house? No, they can’t, but they *are* to be separate from the mixture that is found there. To leave that great house would be to abandon all Christianity, but though in that house, they may at least clear one room, even if in the

corner of the housetop, and admit into that room nothing of the principles of evil that so characterize the great house. But that fellowship of believers, weak as it is, may still seek grace from God *to act on the true principles of the house of God, maintaining an order that is scriptural and true*. Even though they do this, they cannot claim to be “*the Church*” or to have corrected the condition of ruin in the Church, for they are only a very small part of God’s Church. But if doing this in lowly grace and submission to God’s Word, they will find true blessing from God.

Separation from evil is not a popular subject for unbelievers, and sad to say, for some believers too. But even in the Old Testament this was a matter of intense importance. The Lord told Jeremiah, “If you take out the precious from the vile, you shall be as My mouth. Let them return to you, but you must not return to them” (Jer.15:19). Jeremiah was not to be identified with those living in sin. If his leaving them resulted in even one person returning to Jeremiah, this was good, but Jeremiah was not to return to what he had left.

Some appear to have no conscience about identifying themselves with a denominational “church” or other religious group that allows a mixture of believers and unbelievers, or that tolerates serious sin in the actions of its members, or that harbors false doctrine and practices. This kind of thing is a part of the outward ruin of the Church, certainly not the evidence of *God’s* work, and believers should avoid such associations, and rather be glad to identify themselves with what is clearly the work of God.

John 17:11,21 is often used to advocate ecumenical unity today. But these verses speak of a vital unity *established* by the Father and the Son, which is far above men’s claims of practical unity. God’s Church *is* one, and in a future day it will be one in practice too, but that is after the Judgment Seat of Christ (2 Cor.5:10; Eph.5:27). Man’s claims of practicing that unity now are empty vanity. Paul besought the Corinthians to be of one mind (1 Cor.1:10), but they weren’t, and soon, “All those in Asia had turned away” from Paul (2 Tim.1:15) and we then have the resulting confusion and disorder seen throughout 2 Timothy. As we’ve already seen from Revelation 2 and 3, for most, that disorder will only get worse till the Rapture.

God's Work in Contrast to Man's

However, God’s view of the Church and the sovereign action of the Lord Jesus in building His Church, is absolute perfection in contrast to man’s action. Such perfection has never been manifested in the history of the Church, but will certainly be beautifully displayed when the marriage of the Lamb takes place, concerning which we are told “that He (Christ) might present her to Himself a glorious Church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish” (Eph.5:27).

Such marvelous truth as this is intended to have vital effect on every individual believer now, to encourage him to more wholeheartedly follow the Lord in separation from all that dishonors Him, and genuine devotedness to One whose love and faithfulness has been so marvelously shown in His once giving Himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling odor.

In all of this, does the Lord not seek to deal with us individually? While it is true that He desires pure unity among His beloved saints, yet the outward unity of the Church as a whole is utterly broken by innumerable divisions, and now we have to learn that just *being together* (as advocated by the ecumenical and other “unity” movements which minimize the importance of doctrine and practice) is not true scriptural unity. The Holy Spirit would *never* maintain a unity that was not according to the mind of the Spirit (Eph.4:3) — according to the whole Word of God. Only as we are enjoying the Lord personally by individual faith, and doing so according to Scripture, will we be rightly expressing the unity that is of God. Therefore, we should not be content with having “numbers” following with us, but should be concerned that every individual believer is enjoying personal close communion with the Lord Jesus, and for this reason desiring to also enjoy communion with His saints according to His Word. When Israel had been reduced to a state of shameful degradation, it is refreshing to read, “Then those who feared the Lord spoke to one another, and the Lord listened and heard them; so a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who fear the Lord and who meditate on His name” (Mal. 3:16).

L.M.Grant

The question of “occasional fellowship” continues to come up. Perhaps the following remarks will prove helpful. We seriously ask that you prayerfully consider whether this “doctrine” comes from Scripture, tradition, or man’s reasonings. Are we simply relying on what was said 100-175 years ago, or do we have the solid foundation of “Thus says the Lord”?

THOUGHTS ON “OCCASIONAL FELLOWSHIP”

What makes the concept of *occasional fellowship* so difficult for many of us is that there is not one hint in Scripture as to it — no thought of breaking bread on the ground of one “altar” one week and on another position or “altar,” the next. A brother had it right when he wrote, “We must never imply that reception is other than ‘full fellowship’ and ‘permanent fellowship.’ When one is received he is permanently received. We have no ‘guests’ This means that every person received comes under the discipline of the local assembly In irregular reception [what we call occasional fellowship] ... it should be such that if the person were to be received in the normal way, there would be no question of his/her reception.”

Nothing in Scripture hints other than this! Would we “normally” receive one who intended to leave us and go to a denominational or “open” position the next week? No! But isn’t that the case with the vast majority of “occasional fellowships” as practiced in some assemblies? Is it OK because we don’t *ask* the question as to what he believes and where he is going? Is it only a problem when one *tells* us what he or she is going to do next week? As R.K. Campbell said, “Doctrine ... and fellowship therein, *preceded* the breaking of bread.” That’s the teaching of Acts 2:42! Are those occasionally received in agreement with us in the apostles’ doctrine? No! If they were they generally would be with us ... permanently.

Occasional fellowship also ignores the principle of *associations*. 1 Corinthians 10:16-18 shows us that breaking of bread is a very strong “association” and that I’m responsible for the position I take and with whom I break bread. Then if I carelessly associate myself in the breaking of bread with one who rejects the position I believe to be scriptural, then I am associating myself with something I believe to be wrong. He too is associating himself with a position he believes to be wrong (although he may not understand that fact). It’s utter confusion!

RKC again writes, “In 2 Timothy we have the final instructions from the apostle Paul as to the pathway of fellowship in the days of confusion and departure from divine principles.” Where in these instructions is a *hint* of receiving on an occasion the very ones Timothy was told to depart or withdraw from — those who had turned from or refused to follow the Pauline pathway? It’s not there! And yet, almost all those “occasionally received” are walking on other ground than given by Paul, as were those defectors of 2 Timothy. They may not be intentional defectors; nevertheless they are on the defectors’ ground.

RKC goes on to say, in regard to 2 Timothy 2, “Personal purity in association requires separation from iniquity [Gk: *adikia*: *unrighteousness*], from what is unrighteous and dishonors the Lord. *Iniquity is anything not subject to the entire will of God.*” Is denominationalism (which denies Christ as our only gathering-Center, substitutes the rule and thoughts of men, and gathers on sectarian ground), along with its intimate connection with the clergy-laity system (which denies the priesthood of all believers, the freedom to use gift as the Spirit directs, and the presidency of the Holy Spirit in the assembly — 1 Cor.12) being subject to the will of God? I think not! How can we ignore such plain truth?

Most denominations know, but refuse the position we believe to be right, and thus are causing division *contrary* to the doctrines we have learned? God says to “turn away from them” (Rom.16:16-17 JND)? Isn’t a denominational “church-member” responsible for not leaving both a wrong position and a man who usurps the place of the Holy Spirit? Does not God say He *hates* such a system (Rev.2:6,15)? If one does not obey (for whatever reason) the Pauline doctrines of the Assembly (which are the commandments of the Lord — 1 Cor.14:37), isn’t the *principle* of Romans 16:16-17, 2 Thessalonians 3:14 and 2 Timothy 2:19-22 that I am not to allow such an one into the privileges and responsibilities of the assembly, thus associating myself (and all others) with such, on an “occasion,” for the person’s convenience? Am I to condone him breaking bread with “us” — a deep association indeed?

The *principle* of coming out and being separate (2 Cor.6:14-18) is far more than saved-unsaved, but righteousness vs. unrighteousness. Paul also told Timothy to “depart from *adikia* — unrighteousness. Isn’t denominationalism at least *unrighteous*? So the above is what I would bring forward to object to the made-up doctrine of *occasional fellowship*.

What do I believe as to strangers who come among us without a letter from an assembly with which we are in practical fellowship? First, no one is *invited* to break bread. Next, only the *assembly* has authority to receive, not one or two or

three brethren, no matter how esteemed. Then no one is received without sufficient time to properly evaluate the case. Any person who presents himself to break bread on an “occasion” is to be examined according to *all* the criteria laid down in Scripture — life in Christ; perseverance in the apostles’ doctrine; freedom from a course of moral or doctrinal sin; freedom from wrong associations; departure from unrighteousness; those who will pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace, calling on the Lord out of a pure (undivided heart). One who meets those criteria — who if “received in the normal way, there would be no question of his/her reception” — would be received, even on an occasion. Others would not. Admittedly, those so received in this day of widespread departure would be very few in number. That does not negate the principle that each case is evaluated on its own merit, and that being “of us” is *not* a principle of reception found in Scripture.

RPD