

NOTES ON THE BOOK OF DEUTERONOMY

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“YE are the children of the Lord your God; ye shall not cut yourselves, nor make any baldness between your eyes for the dead; for thou art a holy people unto the Lord thy God, and the Lord hath chosen thee to be a peculiar people unto Himself, above all the nations that are upon the earth” (Ver. 1, 2).

The opening clause of this chapter sets before us the basis of all the privileges and responsibilities of the Israel of God. It is a familiar thought amongst us that we must be in a relationship before we can know the affections or discharge the duties which belong to it. This is a plain and undeniable truth. If a man were not a father, no amount of argument or explanation could make him understand the feelings or affections of a father's heart; but the very moment he enters upon the relationship, he knows all about them.

Thus it is as to every relationship and position, and thus it is in the things of God. We cannot understand the affections or the duties of a child of God until we are on the ground. We must be Christians before we can perform Christian duties. Even when we are Christians, it is only by the gracious aid of the Holy Ghost that we can walk as such; but clearly, if we are not on Christian ground, we can know nothing of Christian affections or Christian duties. This is so obvious that argument is needless. Now, most evidently, it is God's prerogative to declare how His children ought to conduct themselves, and it is their high privilege and holy responsibility to seek, in all things, to meet His gracious approval. **“Ye are the children of the Lord your God: ye shall not cut yourselves.”**

They were not their own; they belonged to Him, and therefore they had no right to cut themselves or disfigure their faces for the dead. Nature, in its pride and self-will, might say, Why may we not do like other people? What harm can there be in cutting ourselves, or making a baldness between our eyes? It is only an expression of grief, an affectionate tribute to our loved departed ones. Surely there can be nothing morally wrong in such a suited expression of sorrow.

To all this there was one simple but conclusive answer – **“Ye are the children of the Lord your God.”** This fact altered everything. The poor ignorant and uncircumcised Gentiles around them might cut and disfigure themselves, inasmuch as they knew not God, and were not in relationship to Him; but as for Israel, they were on the high and holy ground of nearness to God, and this one fact was to give tone and character to all their habits. They were not called upon to adopt or refrain from any particular habit or custom in order to be the children of God. This would be, as we say, beginning at the wrong end; but being His children, they were to act as such.

“Thou art a holy people unto the Lord thy God.” He does not say, Ye ought to be a holy people. How could they ever make themselves a holy people, or a peculiar people, unto the Lord? Utterly impossible. If they were not His people, no efforts of theirs could ever make them such. But God, in His sovereign grace, in pursuance of His covenant with their fathers, had made them His children, made them a peculiar people above all the nations that were upon the earth.

Here was the solid foundation of Israel’s moral edifice. All their habits and customs, all their doings and ways, their food and their clothing, what they did and what they did not do – all was to flow out of the one grand fact, with which they had no more to do than with their natural birth, namely, that they actually were the children of God, the people of His choice, the people of His own special possession.

Now, we cannot but acknowledge it to be a privilege of the very highest order to have the Lord so near to us, and so interested in all our habits and ways. To mere nature, no doubt – to one who does not know the Lord – is not in relationship to Him, the very idea of His holy presence, or of nearness. to Him, would be simply intolerable: but to every true believer – everyone who really loves God, it is a most delightful thought to have Him near us, and to know that He interests Himself in all the most minute details of our personal history and most private life; that He takes cognizance of what we eat and what we wear; that He looks after us by day and by night, sleeping and waking, at home and abroad; in short, that His. interest in and care for us go far beyond those of the most tender, loving mother for her babe.

All this. is perfectly wonderful; and surely, if we only realized it more fully, we should live a very different sort of life, and have a very different tale to tell. What a holy privilege – what a precious. reality, to know that our loving Lord is about our path by day, and about our bed by night; that His eye rests upon us when we are dressing in the morning, when we sit down to our meals, when we go about our business, and in all our intercourse from morning till night!

May the sense of this be a living and abiding power in the heart of every child of God on the face of the earth.

From verse 3 to 20, we have the law as to clean and unclean beasts, fishes, and fowls.

The leading principles as to all these have already come under our notice in the eleventh chapter of Leviticus;* but there is a very important difference between the two Scriptures.

*** As we have given in our “Notes on the Book of Leviticus,” chapter 11, what we believe to be the scriptural import of verses 4-20 of our chapter, we must refer the reader to what is there advanced.**

The instructions in Leviticus are given primarily to Moses and Aaron; in Deuteronomy, they are given directly to the people.

This is perfectly characteristic of the two books.

Leviticus may be specially termed, The priest's guide-book. In Deuteronomy, the priests are almost entirely in the back-ground, and the people are prominent. This is strikingly apparent all through the book, so that there is not the slightest foundation for the idea that Deuteronomy merely repeats Leviticus. Nothing can be further from the truth. Each book has its own peculiar province, its own design, its own work. The devout student sees and owns this with deep delight. Infidels are willfully blind, and can see nothing.

In verse 21 of our chapter, the marked distinction between the Israel of God and the stranger is strikingly presented – **“Ye shall not eat of any thing that dieth of itself; thou shalt give it unto the stranger that is in thy gates, that he may eat it; or thou mayest sell it unto an alien; for thou art a holy people unto the Lord thy God.”**

The grand fact of Israel's relationship to the Lord marked them off from all the nations under the sun. It was not that they were, in themselves, a whit better or holier than others; but the Lord was holy, and they were His people. **“Be ye holy, for I am holy.”**

Worldly people often think that Christians are very pharisaic in separating themselves from other people, and refusing to take part in the pleasures and amusements of the world; but they do not really understand the question. The fact is, for a Christian to participate in the vanities and follies of a sinful world would be, to use a typical phrase, like an Israelite eating that which had died of itself. The Christian, thank God, has gotten something better to feed upon than the poor dead things of this world. He has the Living Bread that came down from Heaven – the true Manna; and not only so, but he eats of **“the old corn of the land of Canaan,”** type of the risen and glorified Man in the heavens. Of these most precious things the poor unconverted worldling knows absolutely nothing, and hence he must feed upon what the world has to offer him. It is not a question of the right or the wrong of things looked at in themselves. No one could possibly have known aught about the wrong of eating of anything that had died of itself if God's word had not settled it.

This is the all-important point for us. We cannot expect the world to see or feel with us as to matters of right and wrong. It is our business to look at things from a divine stand-point. Many things may be quite consistent for a worldly man to do which a Christian could not touch at all, simply because he is a Christian. The question which the true believer has to ask as to every thing which comes before him is simply, Can I do this to the glory of God? can I connect the name of Christ with it? If not, he must not touch it. In a word, the Christian's standard and test for everything is Christ.

This makes it all so simple. Instead of asking, Is such a thing consistent with our profession, our principles, our character, or our reputation? we have to ask, Is it consistent with Christ? This makes all the difference. Whatever is unworthy of Christ is unworthy of a Christian. If this be thoroughly understood and laid hold of, it will furnish a great practical rule which may be applied to a thousand details.

If the heart be true to Christ, – if we walk according to the instincts of the divine nature, as strengthened by the ministry of the HOLY GHOST, and guided by the authority of Holy Scripture, we shall not be much troubled with questions of right or wrong in our daily life.

Before proceeding to quote for the reader the lovely paragraph which closes our chapter, we would very briefly call his attention to the last clause of verse 21 – **“Thou shalt not see the a kid in his mother’s milk.”**

The fact that this commandment is given three times, in various connections, is sufficient to mark it as one of special interest and practical importance.

The question is, What does it mean? what are we to learn from it? We believe it teaches very plainly that the Lord’s people must carefully avoid every thing contrary to nature. Now, it was manifestly contrary to nature that what was intended for a creature’s nourishment should be used to seethe it.

We find, all through the Word of God, great prominence given to what is according to nature – what is comely.

“Does not even nature itself teach you?” says the inspired apostle to the assembly at Corinth. There are certain feelings and instincts implanted in nature by the Creator which must never be outraged. We may set it down as a fixed principle, an axiom in Christian ethics, that no action can possibly be of God that offers violence to the sensibilities proper to nature. The Spirit of God may, and often does, lead us beyond and above nature, but never against it.

The tithe

We shall now turn to the closing verses of our chapter, in which we shall find some uncommonly fine practical instruction.

“Thou shalt truly tithe all the increase of thy seed, that the field bringeth forth year by year. And thou shalt eat before the Lord thy God, in the place which He shall choose to place His name there, the tithe of thy corn, of thy wine, and of thine oil, and the firstlings of thy herds and of thy flocks; that thou mayest learn to fear the Lord thy God always. And if the way be too long for thee, so that thou art not able to carry it; or if the place be too far from thee, which the Lord thy God shall choose to set His name there, when the Lord thy God hath blessed thee; then shalt thou turn it into money, and bind up the money in thine hand, and shalt go unto the place which the Lord thy God shall choose; and thou shalt bestow that money for whatsoever thy soul lusteth after, for oxen, or for sheep, or for wine, or for strong drink, or for whatsoever thy soul desireth; and thou shalt eat there before the Lord thy God, and thou shalt rejoice, thou, and thine household, and the Levite that is within thy gates; thou shalt not forsake him, for he hath no part nor inheritance with thee.

“At the end of three years thou shalt bring forth all the tithe of thine increase the same year, and shalt lay it up within thy gates. And the Levite (because he hath no part nor inheritance with thee), and the stranger, and the fatherless, and the widow, which are within thy gates, shall come, and shall eat and be satisfied, that the Lord thy God may bless thee in all the work of thine hand which thou doest” (Ver. 22-29).

This is a deeply interesting and most important passage, setting before us, with special simplicity, the basis, the center, and practical features of Israel's national and domestic religion. The grand foundation of Israel's worship was laid in the fact that both they themselves and their land belonged to the Lord.

The land was His, and they held as tenants under Him. To this precious truth they were called, periodically, to bear testimony by faithfully tithing their land – **“Thou shalt truly tithe all the increase of thy seed that thy field bringeth forth year by year.”**

They were to own, in this practical way, the proprietorship of the Lord, and never lose sight of it: they were to own no other landlord but the Lord their God. All they were and all they had belonged to Him. This was the solid ground-work of their national worship – their national religion.

And then as to the center, it is set forth with equal clearness. They were to gather to the place where the Lord recorded His name. Precious privilege for all who truly loved that glorious name! We see in this passage, as also in many other portions of the Word of God, what importance He attached to the periodical gatherings of His people around Himself. Blessed be His name, He delighted to see His beloved people assembled in His presence, happy in Him and in one another; rejoicing together in their common portion, and feeding in sweet and loving fellowship on the fruit of the Lord's land. **“Thou shalt eat before the Lord thy God, in the place which He shall choose, to place His name there, the tithe of thy corn . . . that thou mayest learn to fear the Lord thy God always.”**

There was, there could be, no other place like that, in the judgment of every faithful Israelite, every true lover of the Lord. All such would delight to flock to the hallowed spot where that beloved and revered name was recorded. It might seem strange and unaccountable to those who knew not the God of Israel, and cared nothing about Him, to see the people traveling – many of them – a long distance from their homes, and carrying their tithes to one particular spot. They might feel disposed to call in question the needs-be for such a custom. Why not eat at home? they might say. But the simple fact is, such persons knew nothing whatever about the matter, and were wholly incapable of entering into the preciousness of it. To the Israel of God, there was the one grand moral reason for journeying to the appointed place, and that reason was found in the glorious motto, the *Jehovah Shammah* – **“The Lord is there.”**

If an Israelite had willfully determined to stay at home, or to go to some place of his own choosing, he would neither have met the Lord there nor his brethren, and hence he would have eaten alone. Such a course would have incurred the judgment of God; it would have been an abomination. There was but one center, and that was not of man's choosing, but of God's.

The godless Jeroboam, for his own selfish, political ends, presumed to interfere with the divine order, and set up his calves at Bethel and Dan; but the worship offered there was offered to demons and not to God. It was a daring act of wickedness, which brought down upon him and upon his house the righteous judgment of God; and we see, in Israel's after history, that **“Jeroboam the son of Nebat”** is used as the terrible model of iniquity for all the wicked kings. But all the faithful in Israel were sure to be found at the one divine center, and nowhere else.

You would not find such making all sorts of excuses for staying at home; neither would you find them running hither and thither to places of their own or other people's choosing; no, you would find them gathered to Jehovah Shammah, and there alone. Was this narrowness and bigotry? Nay; it was the fear and love of God. If the Lord had appointed a place where He would meet His people, assuredly His people should meet Him there. And not only had He appointed a place, but, in His abounding goodness, He devised a means of making that place as convenient as possible for His worshiping people.

Thus we read, **“And if the way be too long for thee, so that thou art not able to carry it; or if the place be too far from thee which the Lord thy God shall choose to set His name there, when the Lord thy God hath blessed thee; then thou shalt turn it into money, and bind up the money in thine hand, and shalt go unto the place which the Lord thy God shall choose: . . . and thou shalt eat there before the Lord thy God, and thou shalt rejoice, thou and thy household.”**

This is perfectly beautiful. The Lord, in His tender care and considerate love, took account of everything. He would not leave a single difficulty in the way of His beloved people, in the matter of their assembling around Himself. He had His own special joy in seeing His redeemed people happy in His presence, and all who loved His name would delight to meet the loving desire of His heart by being found at the divinely appointed center.

If any Israelite were found neglecting the blessed occasion of assembling with his brethren at the divinely chosen place and time, it would have simply proved that he had no heart for God or for His people, or, what was worse, that he was willfully absent. He might reason as he pleased about his being happy at home, happy elsewhere; it was a false happiness, inasmuch as it was happiness found in the path of disobedience, the path of willful neglect of the divine appointment. All this is full of most valuable instruction for the Church of God now. It is the will of God now, no less than of old, that His people should assemble in His presence, on divinely appointed ground, and to a divinely appointed center. This, we presume, will hardly be called in question by anyone having a spark of divine light in his soul.

The instincts of the divine nature, the leadings of the Holy Ghost, and the teachings of Holy Scripture do all most unquestionably lead the Lord's people to assemble themselves together for worship, communion, and edification. However dispensations may differ, there are certain great principles and leading characteristics which always hold good, and the assembling of ourselves together is most assuredly one of these. Whether under the old economy or under the new, the assembling of the Lord's people is a divine institution.

Now, this being so, it is not a question of our happiness, one way or the other; though we may be perfectly sure that all true Christians will be happy in being found in their divinely appointed place. There is ever deep joy and blessing in the assembly of God's people. It is impossible for us to find ourselves together in the Lord's presence and not be truly happy. It is simply Heaven upon earth for the Lord's dear people – those who love His name, love His person, love one another, to be together around His table, around Himself.

What can exceed the blessedness of being allowed to break bread together in remembrance of our beloved and adorable Lord, to show forth His death until He come; to raise, in holy concert, our anthems of praise to God and the Lamb; to edify, exhort, and comfort one another, according to the gift and grace bestowed upon us by the risen and glorified Head of the Church; to pour out our hearts, in sweet fellowship, in prayer, supplication, intercession, and giving of thanks for all men, for kings and all in authority, for the whole household of faith – the Church of God – the body of Christ, for the Lord’s work and workmen all over the earth?

Where, we would ask with all possible confidence, is there a true Christian, in a right state of soul, who would not delight in all this, and say, from the very depths of his heart, that there is nothing this side the glory to be compared with it?

But, we repeat, our happiness is not the question; it is less than secondary.

We are to be ruled, in this as in all beside, by the will of God as revealed in His Holy Word. The question for us is simply this: Is it according to the mind of God that His people should assemble themselves together for worship and mutual edification? If this be so, woe be to all who willfully refuse, or indolently neglect to do so, on any ground whatsoever; they not only suffer serious loss in their own souls, but they are offering dishonor to God, grieving His Spirit, and doing injury to the assembly of His people.

These are very weighty consequences, and they demand the serious attention of all the Lord’s people. It must be obvious to the reader that it is according to the revealed will of God that His people should assemble themselves together, in His presence.

The inspired apostle exhorts us, in the tenth chapter of his Epistle to the Hebrews, not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together. There is special value, interest, and importance attaching to the assembly. The truth as to this begins to dawn upon us in the opening pages of the New Testament.

Thus, in Matthew 18:20, we read the words of our blessed Lord – **“Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them.”**

Here we have the divine center. **“My name.”** This answers to **“The place which the Lord thy God shall choose to place His name there,”** so constantly named and so strongly insisted upon in the book of Deuteronomy. It was absolutely essential that Israel should gather at that one place. It was not a matter as to which people might choose for themselves, Human choice was absolutely and rigidly excluded. It was **“The place which the Lord thy God shall choose,”** and no other. This we have seen distinctly. It is so plain that we have only to say, **“How readest thou?”**

Nor is it otherwise with the Church of God. It is not human choice, or human judgment, or human opinion, or human reason, or human anything. It is absolutely and entirely divine. The ground of our gathering is divine, for it is accomplished redemption; the center around which we are gathered is divine, for it is the Name of Jesus; the power by which we are gathered is divine, for it is the Holy Ghost; and the authority for our gathering is divine, for it is the Word of God.

All this is as clear as it is precious, and all we need is the simplicity of faith to take it in and act upon it.

If we begin to reason about it, we shall be sure to get into darkness; and if we listen to human opinions, we shall be plunged in hopeless perplexity between the conflicting claims of Christendom's sects and parties. Our only refuge, our only resource, our only strength, our only comfort, our only authority, is the precious Word of God. Take away that, and we have absolutely nothing; give us that, and we want no more.

This is what makes it all so real and so solid for our souls. Yes, reader; and so consolatory and tranquilizing too.

The truth as to our assembly is as clear and as simple and as unquestionable as the truth in reference to our salvation. It is the privilege of all Christians to be as sure that they are gathered on God's ground, around God's center, by God's power, and on God's authority, as that they are within the blessed circle of God's salvation.

And then, if we be asked, How can we be certain of being around God's center? we reply, Simply by the Word of God. How could Israel of old be sure as to God's chosen place for their assembly? By His express commandment. Were they at any loss for guidance? Surely not. His word was as clear and as distinct as to their place of worship as it was in reference to every thing else. It left not the slightest ground for uncertainty. It was so plainly set before them that for anyone to raise a question could only be regarded as willful ignorance or positive disobedience.

Now, the question is, Are Christians worse off than Israel in reference to the great subject of their place of worship, the center and ground of their assembly?

- Are they left in doubt and uncertainty?
- Is it an open question?
- Is it a matter as to which every man is left to do what is right in his own eyes?
- Has God given us no positive, definite instruction on a question so intensely interesting and so vitally important?

Could we imagine for a moment that the One who graciously condescended to instruct His people of old in matters which we, in our fancied wisdom, would deem unworthy of notice, would leave His Church now without any definite guidance as to the ground, center, and characteristic features of our worship? Utterly impossible! Every spiritual mind must reject, with decision and energy, any such idea.

No, beloved Christian reader; you know it would not be like our gracious God to deal thus with His heavenly people.

True, there is no such thing now as a particular place to which all Christians are to betake themselves periodically for worship. There was such a place for God's earthly people, and there will be such a place for restored Israel and for all nations by and by.

“It shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it. And many people shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; and He will teach us of His ways, and we will walk in His paths; for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem” (Isaiah 2). And again, “It shall come to pass, that everyone that is left of all the nations which came against Jerusalem shall even go up from year to year to worship the King, the Lord of Hosts, and to keep the feast of tabernacles. And it shall be that whoso will not come up of all the families of the earth unto Jerusalem to worship the King, the Lord of Hosts, even upon them shall be no rain” (Zechariah 14:16,17).

Here are two passages culled, one from the first, and the other from the last but one of the divinely inspired prophets, both pointing forward to the glorious time when Jerusalem shall be God’s center for Israel and for all nations. And we may assert, with all possible confidence, that the reader will find all the prophets, with one consent, in full harmony with Isaiah and Zechariah on this profoundly interesting subject. To apply such passages to the Church, or to Heaven, is to do violence to the clearest and grandest utterances that ever fell on human ears; it is to confound things heavenly and earthly, and to give a flat contradiction to the divinely harmonious voices of prophets and apostles.

It is needless to multiply quotations. All Scripture goes to prove that Jerusalem was, and will yet be, God’s earthly center for His people, and for all nations; but just now – that is to say, from the day of Pentecost, when God the HOLY GHOST came down to empower the Church of God, the body of Christ, until the moment when our Lord JESUS Christ shall come to take His people away out of this world – there is no place, no city, no sacred locality, no earthly center, for the Lord’s people.

To talk to Christians about holy places, or consecrated ground, is as thoroughly foreign to them (at least, it ought to be) as it would have been to talk to a Jew about having his place of worship in Heaven. The idea is wholly out of place, wholly out of character.

If the reader will turn for a moment to the fourth chapter of John, he will find, in our Lord’s marvelous discourse with the woman of Sychar, the most blessed teaching on this subject.

“The woman saith unto Him, ‘Sir, I perceive that Thou art a prophet. Our fathers worshiped in this mountain, and ye say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship.’ Jesus saith unto her, ‘Woman, believe Me; the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain nor yet at Jerusalem worship the Father. Ye worship ye know not what; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for the Father seeketh such to worship Him. God is a spirit, and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth”’ (Ver. 19-24).

This passage entirely sets aside the thought of any special place of worship now. There really is no such thing.

“The Most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands, as saith the prophet, ‘Heaven is My throne, and earth is My footstool: what house will ye build Me?’ saith the Lord, ‘or what is the place of My rest? Hath not My hand made all these things?’” (Acts 7:48-50). And again, **“God that made the world, and all things therein, seeing that He is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands, neither is worshiped with men’s hands, as though He needed any thing, seeing He giveth to all life and breath and all things”** (Acts 17:24, 25).

The teaching of the New Testament, from beginning to end, is clear and decided as to the subject of worship; and the Christian reader is solemnly bound to give heed to that teaching, and to seek to understand, and submit his whole moral being to its authority.

There has ever been, from the very earliest ages of the Church’s history, a strong and fatal tendency to return to Judaism, not only on the subject of righteousness, but also on that of worship. Christians have not only been put under the law for life and righteousness, but also under the Levitical ritual for the order and character of their worship.

We have dealt with the former of these in chapters 4 and 5 of these *“Notes,”* but the latter is hardly less serious in its effect upon the whole tone and character of Christian life and conduct.

We have to bear in mind that Satan’s great object is, to cast the Church of God down from her excellency, in reference to her standing, her walk, and her worship. No sooner was the Church set up on the day of Pentecost than he commenced his corrupting and undermining process, and for eighteen long centuries he has carried it on with diabolical persistency. In the face of these plain passages quoted above, in reference to the character of worship which the Father is now seeking, and as to the fact that God does not dwell in temples made with hands, we have seen, in all ages, the strong tendency to return to the condition of things under the Mosaic economy. Hence the desire for great buildings, imposing rituals, sacerdotal orders, choral services, all of which are in direct opposition to the mind of Christ and to the plainest teachings of the New Testament.

The professing church has entirely departed from the spirit and authority of the Lord in all these things; and yet, strange and sad to say, these very things are continually appealed to as proofs of the wonderful progress of Christianity.

We are told by some of our public teachers and guides that the blessed apostle Paul had little idea of the grandeur to which the Church was to attain; but if he could only see one of our venerable cathedrals, with its lofty aisles and painted windows, and listen to the peals of the organ and the voices of the choristers, he would see what an advance had been made upon the upper room at Jerusalem!

Ah! Reader, be assured, it is all a most thorough delusion. It is true indeed, the Church has made progress, but it is in the wrong direction; it is not upward, but downward. It is away from Christ, away from the Father, away from the Spirit, away from the Word.

We should like to ask the reader this one question: If the apostle Paul were to come to London for next Lord's day, where could he find what he found in Troas eighteen hundred years ago, as recorded in Acts 20:7? Where could he find a company of disciples gathered simply by the Holy Ghost, to the Name of Jesus, to break bread in remembrance of Him, and to show forth His death till He come? Such was the divine order then, and such must be the divine order now. We cannot for a moment believe that the apostle would accept anything else. He would look for the divine thing; he would have that or nothing. Now, where could he find it? Where could he go and find the table of his Lord, as appointed by Himself the same night in which He was betrayed?

Mark, reader, we are bound to believe that the apostle Paul would insist upon having the table and the supper of his Lord as he had received them direct from Himself in the glory, and given them by the Spirit in the tenth and eleventh chapters of his Epistle to the Corinthians – an Epistle addressed to **“all that in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both theirs and ours.”**

We cannot believe that he would teach God's order in the first century and accept man's disorder in the nineteenth. Man has no right to tamper with a divine institution. He has no more authority to alter a single jot or tittle connected with the Lord's supper than Israel had to interfere with the order of the passover.

Now, we repeat the question, and earnestly entreat the reader to ponder and answer it in the divine presence and in the light of Scripture, where could the apostle find this in London, or anywhere else in Christendom, on next Lord's day? Where could he go and take his seat at the table of his Lord, in the midst of a company of disciples gathered simply on the ground of the one body, to the one center – the Name of JESUS, by the power of the HOLY GHOST, and on the authority of the Word of God? Where could he find a sphere in which he could exercise his gifts without human authority, appointment, or ordination?

We ask these questions in order to exercise the heart and conscience of the reader.

We are fully convinced that there are places here and there where Paul could find these things carried out, though in weakness and failure, and we believe the Christian reader is solemnly responsible to find them out. Alas! alas! they are few and far between, compared with the mass of Christians meeting otherwise.

We may perhaps be told that if people knew that it was the apostle Paul, they would willingly allow him to minister. But then he would neither seek nor accept their permission, inasmuch as he tells us plainly, in the first chapter of Galatians, that his ministry was **“not of men, neither by man, but by Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead.”**

And not only so, but we may rest assured that the blessed apostle would insist upon having the Lord's table spread upon the divine ground of the one body, and he could only consent to eat the Lord's supper according to its divine order as laid down in the New Testament. He could not accept for a moment any thing but the divine reality. He would say, Either that or nothing. He could not admit any human interference with a divine institution; neither could he accept any new ground of gathering, or any new principle of organization.

He would repeat his own inspired statements – **“There is one body and one Spirit,”** and, **“We being many, are one bread – one body, for we are all partakers of that one bread.”** These words apply to **“all that in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord,”** and they hold good in all ages of the Church’s existence on earth.

The reader must be very clear and distinct as to this.

God’s principle of gathering and unity must on no account be surrendered. The moment men begin to organize – to form societies, churches, or associations, they act in direct opposition to the Word of God, the mind of Christ, and the present action of the Holy Ghost. Man might as well set about to form a world as to form a church. It is entirely a divine work. The Holy Ghost came down on the day of Pentecost to form the Church of God – the body of Christ, and this is the only Church – the only body that Scripture recognizes; all else is contrary to God, even though it may be sanctioned and defended by thousands of true Christians.

Let not the reader misunderstand us. We are not speaking of salvation, of eternal life, or of divine righteousness, but of the true ground of gathering, the divine principle on which the Lord’s Table should be spread and the Lord’s Supper celebrated.

Thousands of the Lord’s beloved people have lived and died in the communion of the church of Rome; but the church of Rome is not the Church of God, but a horrible apostasy; and the sacrifice of the mass is not the Lord’s supper, but a marred, mutilated, and miserable invention of the devil.

If the question in the mind of the reader be merely what amount of error he can sanction without forfeiting his soul’s salvation, it is useless to proceed with the grand and important subject before us. But where is the heart that loves Christ that could be content to take such miserably low ground as this? What would have been thought of an Israelite of old who could content himself with being a child of Abraham, and could enjoy his vine and his fig tree, his flocks and his herds, but never think of going to worship at the place where the Lord had recorded His name? Where was the faithful Jew who did not love that sacred spot?

“Lord, I have loved the habitation of Thine house, and the place where Thine honor dwelleth.”

And when, by reason of Israel’s sin, the national polity was broken up, and the people were in captivity, we hear the true-hearted exiles amongst them pouring forth their lament in the following touching and eloquent strain, **“By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down; yea, we wept when we remembered Zion. We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof. For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song, and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion.’ How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land? If I forget thee, O Jerusalem [God’s center for His earthly people], let my right hand forget her cunning. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy”** (Psalm 137).

And again, in the sixth chapter of Daniel, we find that beloved exile opening his window three times a day, and praying toward Jerusalem, although he knew that the lions' den was the penalty.

But why insist upon praying toward Jerusalem? Was it a piece of Jewish superstition? Nay, it was a magnificent display of divine principle; it was an unfurling of the divine standard amid the depressing and humiliating consequences of Israel's folly and sin. True, Jerusalem was in ruins; but God's thoughts respecting Jerusalem were not in ruins. It was His center for His earthly people.

“Jerusalem is builded as a city that is compact together, whither the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord, unto the testimony of Israel, to give thanks unto the name of the Lord. For there are set thrones of judgment, the thrones of the house of David. Pray for the peace of Jerusalem; they shall prosper that love thee. Peace be within thy walls, and prosperity within thy palaces. For my brethren and companions' sakes, I will now say, Peace be within thee. Because of the house of the Lord our God I will seek thy good” (Psalm 122).

Jerusalem was the center for Israel's twelve tribes in days gone by, and it will be so in the future. To apply the above and similar passages to the Church of God here or hereafter – on earth or in Heaven, is simply turning things upside down, confounding things essentially different, and thus doing an incalculable amount of damage both to Scripture and the souls of men. We must not allow ourselves to take such unwarrantable liberties with the Word of God.

Jerusalem was and will be God's earthly center; but now, the Church of God should own no center but the glorious and infinitely precious Name of Jesus. **“Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them.”**

Precious center! To this alone the New Testament points, to this alone the Holy Ghost gathers, It matters not where we are gathered – in Jerusalem or Rome, London, Paris, or Canton. It is not where, but how.

But be it remembered, it must be a divinely real thing, it is of no possible use to profess to be gathered in, or to, the blessed Name of JESUS, if we are not really so.

The apostle's word as to faith may apply with equal force to the question of our center of gathering – **“What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say”** he is gathered to the Name of Jesus? God deals in moral realities; and while it is perfectly clear that a man who desires to be true to Christ cannot possibly consent to own any other center or any other ground of gathering but His Name, yet it is quite possible – alas! alas! how very possible – for people to profess to be on that blessed and holy ground, while their spirit and conduct, their habits and ways, their whole course and character, go to prove that they are not in the power of their profession.

The apostle said to the Corinthians that he would **“know, not the speech, but the power.”** A weighty word, most surely, and much needed at all times, but specially needed in reference to the important subject now before us.

We would lovingly, yet most solemnly, press upon the conscience of the Christian reader his responsibility to consider this matter in the holy retirement of the Lord's presence; and in the light of the New Testament. Let him not set it aside on the plea of its not being essential.

It is in the very highest degree essential, inasmuch as it concerns the Lord's glory and the maintenance of His truth.

This is the only standard by which to decide what is essential and what is not.

- Was it essential for Israel to gather at the divinely appointed center?
- Was it left an open question?
- Might every man choose a center for himself?

Let the answer be weighed in the light of Deuteronomy 15. It was absolutely essential that the Israel of God should assemble around the center of the God of Israel.

This is unquestionable. Woe be to the man who presumed to turn his back on the place where the Lord had set His Name. He would very speedily have been taught his mistake. And if this was true for God's earthly people, is it not equally true for the Church and the individual Christian? Assuredly it is.

We are bound, by the very highest and most sacred obligations, to refuse every ground of gathering but the one body, every center of gathering but the Name of JESUS, every power of gathering but the Holy Ghost, every authority of gathering but the Word of God.

May all the Lord's beloved people everywhere be led to consider these things, in the fear and love of His holy name.

We shall now close this section by quoting the last paragraph of our chapter, in which we shall find some valuable practical teaching.

“At the end of three years, thou shalt bring forth all the tithe of thine increase the same year, and shalt lay it up within thy gates; and the Levite, (because he hath no part nor inheritance with thee,) and the stranger, and the fatherless, and the widow, which are within thy gates, shall come, and shall eat and be satisfied; that the Lord thy God may bless thee in all the work of thine hand which thou doest.”

Here we have a lovely home-scene, a most touching display of the divine character, a beautiful outshining of the grace and kindness of the God of Israel. It does the heart good to breathe the fragrant air of such a passage as this. It stands in vivid and striking contrast with the cold selfishness of the scene around us. God would teach His people to think of and care for all who were in need.

The tithe belonged to Him, but He would give them the rare and exquisite privilege of devoting it to the blessed object of making hearts glad.

There is peculiar sweetness in the words, “**shall come**” – “**shall eat**” – “**and be satisfied.**” So like our own ever-gracious God! He delights to meet the need of all. He opens His hand, and satisfies the desire of every living thing. And not only so, but it is His joy to make His people the channel through which the grace, the kindness, and the sympathy of His heart may flow forth to all.

How precious is this! What a privilege to be God’s almoners – the dispensers of His bounty – the exponents of His goodness! Would that we entered more fully into the deep blessedness of all this! May we breathe more the atmosphere of the divine presence, and then we shall more faithfully reflect the divine character.

As the deeply interesting and practical subject presented in verses 28 and 29 will come before us in another connection in our study of chapter 26, we shall not dwell further upon it here.

~ end of chapter 14 ~

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