

## **Sailing With Paul**

### **Simple Papers for Young Christians**

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## **Chapter 11**

### **The Assembly In Its Local Aspect**

Side by side with the truth of the Assembly as the body of CHRIST, is the truth of the local assembly, the company of believers in any given locality, acting on the ground of the one body.

Both the Acts and the Epistles give us many illustrative incidents and historical notices which enable us clearly to see the divine method of ordering these companies of believers gathered in the peerless name of the Lord JESUS CHRIST. For His own words: "**Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst**" (Matthew 18:20), clearly apply to all scriptural assemblings of His people. He will ever be the Centre and recognized HEAD, who will lead the praises and worship of His saints, as it is also written, "**in the midst of the church** (called-out assembly) **will I sing praise unto thee**" (Hebrews 2:12).

In the beginning the local assembly at Jerusalem and the Assembly of the body of CHRIST were one. Every member of that body was, for a brief season, at least, a part of the local assembly in that city. Then as these believers were scattered abroad, as Pentecostal visitors returned to their homes, or others were driven from Jerusalem by persecution - as the Gospel also was carried to Samaria, and then to the Gentiles - wherever a company of members of CHRIST's body was found there was another local assembly. This was the only way in which separate gatherings were formed. "Two or three" in any given locality were drawn together by the SPIRIT in the name of the Lord JESUS, and thus a local assembly sprang into existence. To this little company others were added, as grace revealed CHRIST to their souls, and they in turn became partakers of the blessings of the SPIRIT's baptism, owning the rejected JESUS as Lord.

Thus all was simple. There was no human organization, no cumbrous ecclesiastical machinery, no sectional membership. He who was recognized as a member of CHRIST's body in Jerusalem, traveling or going elsewhere, upon making himself known there as one subject to CHRIST the HEAD, was at once accounted as one of them. He had found his own company. From an early period letters of commendation were given to such brethren, that they might be, at once, accredited in places where they were personally unknown: "**I commend unto you Phebe our sister, which is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea: That ye receive her in the Lord, as becometh saints, and that ye assist her in whatsoever business she hath need of you: for she hath been a succourer of many, and of myself also**" (Romans 16:1, 2) and "**Do we begin again to commend ourselves? or need we, as some others, epistles of commendation to you, or letters of commendation from you?**" (II Corinthians 3:1) and "**And when he was disposed to pass into Achaia, the brethren wrote, exhorting the disciples to receive him: who, when he was come, helped them much which had believed through grace**" (Acts 18:27). But this was all. There was no dismissing a "member" from the church in Ephesus that might "join" the church in Philippi. If a known member of CHRIST's body in Ephesus, he was gladly acknowledged as such in Philippi when his claim was properly attested.

As one goes over all this, how the conviction is forced upon the soul that Christendom has got far indeed from the simplicity of early days! And that very fact leads us to inquire: Is it possible now to act just as they did then? - when love was warm, and ere evil and pernicious doctrines had honeycombed what should have ever been in an outward way "**the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth**" (I Timothy 3:15). The answer is that all this declension and failure was foreseen by the HOLY SPIRIT, and directions clearly given how to proceed when such unhappy ruin should have come in. In Acts 20, where Paul delivered his farewell address to the elder brethren of the Ephesian assembly, he warned them of the very things we have been considering; but at the close he simply says, "**I commend you to God, and to the word of his grace.**" GOD's Word therefore is all-sufficient, whatever the cold-heartedness and backsliding that may be prevalent.

What course, then, are we directed to take when such evil days have come? Go back to "**that which was from the beginning.**" Find out how things were at the first, and act on what the Word of GOD makes known.

But shall we not then be literally swamped by unholy errorists of every description? This does not necessarily follow; for the same Word clearly tells us who are to be accepted to communion, and who refused Christian fellowship. We are called to receive all whose doctrine and way give evidence that they are members of CHRIST, and subject to Him as Lord and HEAD. If a man is not sound in his teaching, he may be a member of CHRIST but he is not subject to Him, and is not to be received till the evil is judged. And the same applies to moral questions. One who has fallen into unholy ways, may, after all, be a believer whose failure is but temporary; still, we dare not receive him in that state. We must wait till we see the evidences of his subjection to CHRIST in the judgment of his sin.

This is largely ignored in Christendom generally, which has become like a great house in which valuable and common vessels are all mixed up together. If a man would be a "**vessel unto honor, sanctified, and meet for the Master's use,**" he is called to purge himself out from this mixture, by separating himself from it. He is then to find fellowship among similar separated ones, and to

**"follow righteousness, faith, charity, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart"** (II Timothy 2:19-22); and so walking together the ground of the one body is maintained. If companies in different places are similarly gathered, they occupy the same position, and thus, in principle, go back to **"that which was from the beginning."**

To do so involves no pretension. It is not "rebuilding the church." It is owning the ruin of the Church, and, in simplicity, **"endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace"** (Ephesians 4:3). Difficulties may and will arise. Troubles will come up. Sorrows will have to be faced. But if there be a cleaving to CHRIST and His truth, the Word of GOD will be found all-sufficient to meet every case that appears.

Owing to the broken and defiled conditions in Christendom, more care will need to be exercised as to whom fellowship is to be extended. But the heart should ever be open to all whose ways and doctrine give good evidence that they are of the one body and subject to the one Lord. Special discernment will be needed, lest by association with the unholy, such become partakers of other men's sins; for to go on with one who is in an evil course, even to the extent of greeting him in a brotherly way, is to make oneself **"partaker of his evil deeds"**: **"Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son. If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed: For he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds"** (II John 9-11).

But if the Scriptures are allowed to be judge, every difficulty will vanish. In the beginning what applied to one assembly applied to all, as all were one; and if the same principle is recognized by believers gathering in the simple way indicated above, it will solve many perplexities and keep from isolation and independency, which are the twin enemies of practical fellowship between local companies of believers.

~ end of chapter 11 ~

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