

LOCAL RESPONSIBILITY  
IN  
CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP

JAMES McMULLAN

*'returning to the divine thought'*

## LOCAL RESPONSIBILITY IN CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP

1 Cor. 1: 1, 2; 3: 16; 12: 27.

The divinely ordered system set up under the law given by Moses was confined to a single nation, divided into twelve tribes, having an earthly metropolis — Jerusalem — which was the focus of all collective service Godward. In contrast with this, the assembly by the baptism of one Spirit forms but one body in which both Jew and Gentile have been merged; and it is in Scripture regarded as one whole existing on earth at any given time from Pentecost till the rapture. It has no earthly centre because it belongs to heaven and its Head is there.

In the practical ordering of the assembly during its sojourn on earth, however, it is evident that it found concrete expression in localities. This begins to appear with distinctness in Acts 11, as some of those who were scattered by the persecution that followed Stephen's martyrdom entered into Antioch and preached not only to Jews but to Greeks also. The Lord's hand was with them in this, and "a great number believed and turned to the Lord". The assembly which was in Jerusalem heard of these conversions and sent out Barnabas, "who having arrived and seeing the grace of God, rejoiced, and exhorted all with purpose of heart to abide with the Lord."

It is important to notice that the converts in Antioch were not required to go up to Jerusalem or elsewhere to be received into fellowship by those already gathered. There is no suggestion in Scrip-

ture that persons resident in one city should be received in another as a preliminary to breaking bread where they live. The messenger from Jerusalem simply acknowledged the sovereign work of God in Antioch; and, instead of fetching one or more of the twelve apostles to give official recognition (so to speak) to the work, he went away to Tarsus and brought Saul to the place, where they both took up residence. "And so it was with them that for a whole year they were gathered together *in the assembly* and taught . . ." Thus at the very outset of the church's history the wisdom of God can be seen forestalling the tendency of the human heart to metropolitanism. The formal reference in Acts 13: 1 to "the assembly which was there," shows that the assembly in Antioch was by the Spirit accorded the same status as that in Jerusalem.

From Acts 13 onward the work extends far beyond the bounds of Israel's territory, and we read of the formation of assemblies in *cities*. Paul says to Barnabas in Acts 15: 36, "Let us return now and visit the brethren *in every city* where we have announced the word of the Lord, and see how they are getting on." In Acts 20 Paul tells the elders from the assembly in Ephesus, "bound in my spirit I go to Jerusalem, not knowing what things shall happen to me in it; only that the Holy Spirit testifies to me *in every city*, saying that bonds and tribulations await me." This testimony would be, of course, rendered through the saints in the cities he passed through. Then we learn that elders were established *in each city* (Titus 1: 5); thus showing incidentally

the extent and limitation of their sphere of rule or responsibility.

Much light is thrown on the matter in Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians. It is addressed to "*the* assembly of God which is in Corinth." There was only one, although the Lord had much people in that city. From this it follows that if, because of large numbers, there had to be more than one gathering for the breaking of bread (as appears to have been not infrequently the case—see Acts 2: 46, Rom. 16: 5, 1 Cor. 16: 19, Col. 4: 15) yet there was in any one city or place only one assembly; and the whole of it coming together on occasions is contemplated in ch. 14: 23. At the same time, the apostle associates the assembly in Corinth "with all that in *every* place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ," for the things he wrote to Corinth were equally binding everywhere; and he insists in ch. 12: 12 and 13 that *the* one body embraces the saints universally.

Nevertheless, the Corinthian assembly was, in that city, characteristically "temple of God" (ch. 3: 16) and "body of Christ" (ch. 12: 27); they were to be, as it were, a miniature of the whole church. The inhabitants of Corinth could not observe what was going on in the assemblies in Philippi, Thessalonica or elsewhere, but they could take account of the saints in Corinth, and were to see in the assembly there what was proper to the whole.

Thus we see that the *administration* of the assembly is not by means of a central body or authority like Rome or Canterbury governing the

whole, but by the saints in each locality acting under the Lord in accordance with His commandments as given through the apostle; regardful of the fact that, in what they may do in the place where they are set, they act for the whole assembly universally.

Another important truth, implicit in Paul's letters to the several assemblies, but very clearly brought out in Rev. 1—3, is that the assembly in each city is accountable to the Lord *directly*. While Heb. 9: 2 refers to *one* candlestick, which had seven branches, Rev. 1: 12 speaks of seven separate candlesticks; because each of the seven assemblies had its own responsibility as a light-bearer, for which it was answerable directly to the Lord. The separate address to each assembly clearly shows this. In Rev. 2: 5 the Lord warns Ephesus that if it did not repent, "I am coming to *thee*, and I will remove *thy* candlestick" (or lampstand: it is the same word as in Heb. 9: 2) "out of its place." It is true that the seven assemblies prophetically represent phases in the history of the church as a whole, but this must not be allowed to obscure the fact that they were actual companies of saints addressed by the Lord at that time.

A concomitant truth is that the responsibilities of separate localities cannot be consolidated or combined. Bethany was *near* Jerusalem (John 11. 18) but not part of it; it is a distinct place, taken account of by itself: "*there . . . they made him a supper*" (John 12: 2.) Colosse and Laodicea were close enough together to share letters from Paul, but the local responsibility of each is recognised by the fact that each received a separate letter (see Col. 4: 16).

Bethsaida was only  $1\frac{1}{2}$  miles from Capernaum, but Matt. 11: 21—23 plainly shows that they are separately responsible, and each should answer for itself for its disregard of Christ.

The question arises, Does the humbling fact that the church publicly is now in fragments abrogate or modify its constitution? Scripture gives no warrant for affirming this. To do so would be an admission that hades' gates had prevailed. When worldliness and doctrinal evil abound in that which professes the name of Christ, those who seek to be faithful to Him in the midst of it are with chastened spirits to *let that which has been heard from the beginning* abide in them. This would embrace what the Lord gave through Paul, the minister of the assembly, by whose service the saints were freed from the mixed practices that marked the period of transition from Judaism. But it would be done according to John, with more regard to what is vital than to terms and outward pretension.

The internal power of unity at the commencement was the Holy Spirit; and the exhortation to use diligence to keep the unity of the spirit in the uniting bond of peace is still valid, because the Holy Spirit is still here. The symbol and external centre of unity was the Lord's Supper, and 1 Cor. 11: 26 contemplates its continuance until the Lord comes. This must involve that there will be some moving together as governed by the light proper to the assembly, though soberly aware that they are only a tiny remnant of it, until the end of the dispensation; for it must never be overlooked that the Lord's Supper

is connected with the *assembly*. "The bread which *we* break, is it not the communion of the body of the Christ? Because *we*, being many, are one loaf, one body; for we all partake of that one loaf" (1 Cor. 10: 16, 17). It is clear, therefore, that the Supper is not an individual or even a family privilege. It is, as has been said, the rallying point for the Christian company. The expression "come together" occurs five times in 1 Cor. 11 : 17—34.

If then a few Christians in any place find themselves together, as having each departed from iniquity to pursue what is right in fidelity to Christ, what are they to do? Abstain from the Supper until those they have left repent, so that they may rejoin them? The word for such a case is, "Let them return unto thee; but return not thou unto them" (Jer. 15 : 19) : What then? Delay until it is certain that there are those in other places with whom inter-communion may be freely enjoyed? If Scripture so directs, it must be obeyed; but where does it suggest such a thing? Does not the principle of local responsibility, to which attention is here drawn, require as a duty as well as a privilege that the Lord's request should be honoured? Surely it would have been a solemn matter if Pergamos had hesitated to act until Ephesus or Sardis also did so! As regards fellowship with others elsewhere, the Lord will give wisdom and discernment as the necessity arises.

To act in this way does not involve setting up anything new; it is simply returning to the divine thought; for there is no hint in Scripture that the break-down relieves the two or three exercised and available saints from the obligation to answer in

their own locality to what is the Lord's mind for the whole assembly. Should they find others in the same path, either locally or elsewhere, they will of course gladly recognise and walk with them, in the light of the one body.

Failure to take up, where it is possible to do so, the local responsibility attaching to saints is really to disregard the Lord's rights and the needs of the testimony. "For as often as ye shall eat this bread, and drink the cup, *ye announce the death of the Lord, until he come.*"

Here is what J. N. Darby wrote in his "Remarks on the State of the Church" (C. W. vol. 1, p. 419): "Act in simplicity with what you have; if you have the Lord Himself, you have all you need. "Whosoever hath, unto him shall more be given." Remember also, that when the disciples came together, it was to break bread (Acts 20: 7)." Upon the first day of the week", it is written, "when the disciples came together to break bread," etc. 1 Corinthians II shows us the same thing: "When ye come together therefore into one place, this is not to eat the Lord's supper. For in eating every one taketh before other his own supper: and one is hungry, and another is drunken." There was an abuse of the Supper, and the apostle was correcting this abuse. But we can see that the *object* of their coming together into one place was to eat the Lord's Supper."

"Prove me now herewith, saith Jehovah of hosts, if I open not to you the windows of the heavens, and pour you out a blessing, till there be no place for it." (Mal. 3: 10).

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