

ACTING IN FELLOWSHIP IN MATTERS OF DISCIPLINE.

WHEN a local assembly acts, it will do so, if it acts rightly, as in the presence of God, by the authority of the Lord, and being guided by the Holy Ghost. If it does so act we may justly assume two things: first, that there has been subjection to the Word of God for the formation of the decision upon which the character of the action is taken; secondly, that the consciences of the individuals forming the assembly have been in direct contact with and have been governed by the Word of God as to the matter in question. The act of the assembly thus wrought will be that of one mind, and will be done in fellowship.

In an assembly gathered to the name of the Lord, which is being frequently enlarged by the accession of fresh units, it is obviously all-important that the Word of God should be referred to when a given action is necessary; or, at all events, that the consciences of the

fresh comers should be drawn out in exercise by the Word of God, lest they, ignorant of the Scriptures concerning the question which is before the assembly, should take part in and be bound by an action which, though right in itself, does not command their consciences as that which God has bidden should be done. If this care be not constantly exercised, the result will be—supposing years to roll on—that in some units of the assembly a spirit of following a leader or a majority will ensue, and thus that in a certain number of the individuals composing the assembly practical subjection of conscience, as relating to assembly action, will be imperilled. And when such a state of things occurs in a given assembly, on a wide scale, the rule of leaders, and not acting in fellowship, will surely result; and the very ground of the assembly, as gathered to the name of the Lord Jesus, will be endangered. It will not be practically gathering to the name of the Lord, and seeking the guidance of the Spirit, in relation to the point before the assembly, and, in consequence, saints acting as one, but it will be practically the authority of A or B, and the guidance of this or that brother. In a word, it will be man, not God.

The judgment of the leader or of the majority may be right, but more is requisite than that the right thing should be done. It is of moral importance that the conscience of each individual of the assembly should have the sense of responsibility to God, and that all should act together as in the sight of God. When, either from ignorance or inertness, the units of an assembly take to following a leader or to falling in with the majority, there is a very great weakening, if not a giving up, in their souls of the principle of the individual responsibility of each saint towards God, and also of the reality of the presence of the Holy Ghost in an assembly. They are merely accepting a state of things which pertains to their assembly, and are not acting as led by the Spirit. Also, though the action be passed, as we may say, by the whole assembly, and thus outwardly all be smooth, and though the action be right in itself, still there is spiritual decay as to fellowship and subjection to God.

When consciences are not in exercise, and the Word of God is not enquired into, seeds are surely growing up which will develope into ministerialism and surrender of judgment and conscience to ministers. The Holy Ghost, in

His work in an assembly, is thus practically set aside; and when this state is complete, only the name of an assembly of God will remain. Godly individuals may indeed be united together professedly on the ground of the assembly, but the vitality of their gathering together will no longer subsist, for it will be man, not God, who holds things together.

The true idea of acting in fellowship is lost in souls who follow a leader or a majority, or, if we will, a minority, for it is not with them the Holy Spirit guiding the assembly's judgment into obedience of the Word of God, but the judgment of A or B, or the influential part of the assembly. This is exceedingly sad work, and utterly unworthy of the grace of God, Who has opened our eyes to the fact that it is our privilege and duty to endeavour to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. The dictum of a man is not the unity of the Spirit, and following it is retrogression, even to the state of things all around us, where, from Rome downwards, men hand over their consciences to their leaders as to matters of discipline. And we have only to consider the present divided state of Christendom in order to have a just view of the result of the prin-

ciple of following a leader or going with a majority or a minority ; yes, and to be warned of our certain end if we do as Christendom at large does.

Those whom God has set in an assembly as leaders or guides are especially responsible to Him, to direct the minds of His people towards Himself in these matters. It is of deep importance that faith be in exercise as to the fact of the presence of the Holy Ghost in an assembly, and that He can, and does, lead God's people to oneness of judgment. We say faith should be in exercise as to this, for if the doctrine merely be accepted, and the practical results of the truth of God the Holy Ghost being with us be ignored, we are simply laying ourselves open to Satan, by holding a truth intellectually, and yet practically denying it. If there be faith in the presence of the Holy Spirit guiding our minds, there will necessarily be also dependence on God and patience. Also in proportion to our degree of actual faith in God will our own fleshly ways and energies be utterly rejected. Efforts to obtain a majority, or to force the will of a minority, or to carry the special views of a leader, are sure marks of independence of the Holy Spirit.

If the responsibility of the leaders in an assembly is great as to directing minds to the reality of the presence of God the Holy Ghost, so also is their responsibility great as to the state of their own spirits when a matter of discipline is before an assembly. "Ye which are spiritual" (Gal. vi. 1) are recognised by God, and alas for the assembly, which regards as spiritual, such as act contrary to the "spirit of meekness," or to resort to means, which accord not with the holiness and truth of Him who is the Holy Spirit and the Spirit of Truth. Acts done professedly in the Spirit, but which deny the character of the Spirit of God, are a wrong upon Him and the Lord.

As a matter of fact, acts of discipline, or, shall we say, attempts at discipline, ever test a body of Christians. Even at this moment more than one large religious body is trembling over the probable results which attempts at discipline threaten to bring upon it. And we ourselves know, that if a case of discipline be present in one of our own assemblies, the state of such an assembly will be revealed by its presence. At such a time voices will be heard which are seldom, if ever, heard in the prayer or the reading meeting, and individuals will be

active whose public spiritual activity does not usually go beyond attending the meeting for worship on the Sunday morning. These active persons, too, will, generally speaking, occasion difficulty by their activity.

Discipline is the most difficult thing with which an assembly has to do, and even though the man's judgment who takes a prominent part in it be absolutely right, yet if his soul is not in communion with God he will not carry moral weight, which inspires confidence. His words will lack power and he will be a hindrance; for it must ever be borne in mind that the affairs of the assembly are the concern of Christ, and that His eyes are as a flame of fire penetrating the thoughts and intents of all hearts, and that real discipline cannot be carried out in our own strength.

However weak we may be, if we put ourselves in the Lord's hand and honestly seek the guidance of the Spirit, there will be, if not to say judgment, at least instinct to detect who is in communion with God and who is right, and also a very strong sense of the difference between right and might. We need, in a very special way, to be near to God when acting for the glory of the Lord in matters of discipline,

to feel the evil as if it were our own, otherwise dealing with evil has the effect of unhinging the spirit, and injuriously affecting the moral sense.

Satan is active where evil is present, and discipline relates to evil ; hence it is a conflict, and victory can only be gained by obedience to the Word of God and in subjection to the Holy Ghost. And, more, there is always a defiling tendency when we take up evil, even though it be to judge it and put it away ; hence the absolute need of self-judgment at such times. As a matter of fact, when we are judging evil in others we are apt to be drawn aside by the enemy into a state of pride ourselves.

And, because of this, it is not unfrequently the case that there is a crisis in an assembly, occasioned by a double working of wrong in it. On the one hand, the specific evil to which the assembly has addressed its thoughts, with the object of dealing with it ; on the other hand, the evil of those who would act for God in the matter, acting in their own strength and by human means and not in the Spirit, seeking to put things in order for God with unhallowed hands. And hence God, who never denies Himself, has a controversy with the assembly,

not only on account of the evil it would judge, but also on account of the way men are trying to judge it.

Discipline ever lays bare the condition of those who form an assembly, and at such times men's motives, as well as their judgments, become manifest. Suppose a man, ostensibly righteously indignant with evil, but angry on personal grounds with the one who has done the wrong; do we think that God, who tries the hearts and reins and weighs actions, will pass by such sin as this? There is but one way in which any safety is possible when dealing with or seeking to deal with evil, and that is, acting in the light. If we regard iniquity in our hearts the Lord will not hear us, and to use the Lord's name as a cloak to cover our own feelings is iniquity. Holiness becomes His house for ever.

Another thing which is apparent when discipline is before an assembly is this, that the detection of one evil very frequently leads to that of another. It is oftentimes that in the first instance it is like having attention drawn to the sprouting of a tiny leaf out of the ground, but whether there is one small fibre, or many large roots, spreading under the surface

we know not. God allows things to come to light, and opens the eyes of His people to what they were previously blind, and His way would seem to be to bring the hidden things of darkness to light by degrees. Hence there is all the more need that there should be earnest waiting upon Him who knows all things. How many a long story of sorrow in an assembly might never have been written, if the first indications of evil had been met by prayer and fasting!

If evil be present in an assembly, the first consideration should be the Lord's honour. This must be cleared at all costs, but the most intense desire should fill each heart that it is the Lord's honour pure and true, which is called the Lord's honour. It is an awful delusion when Christians start with calling the Lord's honour that which is their own. There have been many conflicts in various ages in the Church in Christian bodies waged ostensibly for the Lord's honour, but really for wrong motives, and what has been, not only will be, but is. But the Lord's honour being dear to the assembly above all else, it must be considered that each unit of the assembly is a living part of the whole, and that, therefore, in each unit there must be a clearing itself accord-

ing to Scripture, and a conscience exercised before God as to the evil. This will assuredly create a humbled and self-judged state in the whole assembly.

The next consideration should be the recovery of the transgressor or transgressors. If we are in the light we shall certainly have real desire, that he who has done the wrong may be led by God to see the wrong and to repent. When this is the case the transgressor will not find it hard to acknowledge to the assembly the sin he has confessed to God. He who has confessed his sin to God and whom God has forgiven and cleansed from all unrighteousness would be the first to vindicate God against himself. A restored soul—one who has been in the light and has been forgiven—would not require pressure to be put upon him in order that he may own his wrong doing. And where there is true repentance—sorrow for the sin, and turning from it—the way is clear for the assembly to set its seal upon the work which the Holy Spirit has wrought in the soul of the individual. Where God has restored His assembly can receive.

God is just, and there is no unrighteousness in Him. The assembly is simply acting for

Christ. It is clearing itself from evil in the Lord's name; hence, when there is not absolute holiness, there will be certain trouble following; for with what measure we mete it will be measured to us again. We must also remember that a calm, judicial spirit is rare in an assembly which is troubled with a question of discipline. For it is a crucial hour for men's souls, and unless at rest in God's presence, and thus in spirit above the evil which is at work, and which has to be judged, holy calmness will be lacking. Also, unless truly in the light, such is man, that there will not be freedom from partiality, and without this the holy unbiassed spirit which should mark our actions in the Lord's name cannot exist.

It is usually the case, that if an assembly is at the first lax to judge evil, when it does begin to deal with it, it will be over hard with the transgressor. It will sway from one extreme to the other. But God requires that His Word be obeyed, and we have patiently to follow in His Word. Neither laxity nor unrighteousness are of Him, and neither would exist in souls if we were in communion with Him. There cannot be too great abhorrence of evil in our souls, but there

may be a reprehensible severity against the transgressor. Men still "away from the Table" might have been restored if the very hand which smote—and necessarily smote—had been guided by an eye of sorrow. If a parent have to smite his child with the rod of correction, more than half the value of that act will be lost to his child if the parent loses his temper. The child will get its punishment, but the parent will forfeit his influence. The Lord would not have His people do a work of discipline for Him in His assembly, save as directed by Him. Neither would a right thing be done in a wrong way if there were subjection to His Spirit. And when there is severity, not of act, for discipline must be severe, but of heart, we shall usually find that it arises either from those whose souls are not free from the very kind of evil with which they are so angry in the person of the transgressor, or from those who have not judged themselves before God. And it is only necessary to observe the history of those whose undignified severity against the transgressor savours of vindictiveness, to learn, as time goes on, that the very men whose hard spirits—hard, not towards the evil, but the transgressor—so afflicted their brethren, have

had in their hearts the seeds of the very same kind of error which they denounced in others. The reaping times come round, and as men sow they will surely reap.

This is one of the remarkable symptoms of the perversity and deceitfulness of the human heart. And it is an injustice with which the Lord will surely deal. We need, when dealing with evil, to remember the Lord's words about the beam in our own eye, otherwise how can we obtain His light to judge righteous judgment? Indeed, view this subject from whatever point we may, we are forced constantly to return to the state of soul of those who judge, and to the sense of the utter inability of an assembly to act in fellowship unless there is the guidance of God the Holy Ghost.

Practical fellowship, one-mindedness, gained in the presence of God, as to discipline, resulting in the action of local assemblies, is not so common as it should be. And we would not shrink from putting this assertion in the form of responsibility, for we should be more together in prayer and in reading the Scriptures, as to the principles of discipline arising in the given local assembly of which we may form part. It is easier to conquer a country than to govern it.

It is not sufficient, that a given number of men have been separated from the religious systems to which they once adhered, and that they are vanquished by the truth into taking the ground of the expression of the unity of the Spirit; it is also necessary that each and all of them should live under the rule and guidance of the Word and the Lord. In former days, these truths relating to the Church of God had to be won; now men come into a state of things where these truths are accepted; but where this and that is taken for granted as known, it is seldom really learned, for the conscience is not then in exercise. The great question for our souls when any matter arises in a local assembly is, "What saith the Scriptures?" and we are in a low state of conscience as to God, if to get the answer we are content to enquire, "What does A or B say?"

There will be a seemliness in the younger men as to taking part in deliberation on questions of discipline, but the consciences of all should be in exercise. And it is a sorrowful day for an assembly when its leaders, instead of waiting on the consciences of their brethren, take the law into their own hands, and without consultation thrust their sentence upon the assembly. This is ministerialism and neglect

of the consciences of others, and under whatever name it may pass muster, it is certainly not acting in fellowship as guided by the Spirit.

That which may be termed the collective conscience of an assembly ought first to be considered ; and as there should be a common judgment, so there should be in every given assembly, such oneness of conscience that it is not visionary to speak of it in its God-fearing character as having a common conscience ; and if one assembly be thus before God and in the light, so may two be, or any number. Unless an assembly, as such, is in the presence of God and subject to His Word, what may be termed its consciences is in an unsatisfactory state.

We cannot hurry a man's conscience, and there may be in godly men a want of knowledge of the Scriptures, which accounts for their indecision. We not unfrequently find an assembly utterly perplexed by a question of discipline, through some composing it having conscientious difficulties as to a line of action desired by others. What is to unite the consciences of all in such a case ? That which alone can bind them—the authority of God's Word.

If a man have a conscience about a day or meats we are to respect his conscience (Rom. xiv.), though he may be weak in the faith. Surely, too, we should respect the conscience of an assembly, if it be weak in the faith, and should seek patience to walk in grace and unity with it. However, it is not the belief of an assembly that it has been guided by the Holy Ghost, but its obedience to the Word of God, which is real power, and which must eventually bind the consciences of other assemblies. An assembly may transgress, as an individual may, in announcing that it has been guided by God the Holy Ghost, but it is a far more serious evil for an assembly to do this than a private individual.

If an assembly be weak, and a case too hard for it be before it, or if the assembly be divided in its judgment, then counsel is frequently sought from a "brother," or "brothers," of another assembly. And it is most simple that a brother having wisdom, or being disinterested, should impart what God has given him to others; but a very careful distinction must be jealously maintained between counsel being graciously given and consciences being overridden. A "brother" not of the local

assembly where the question perplexes, is under the advantage of coming to the subject dispassionately; he is also under the disadvantage of hearing one side of the subject from those with whom he may be at first immediately in contact. But woe to the brother who seeks to settle things in his own wisdom, however wise he may be, or in his own might, however strong he may be, for if the collective conscience of the local assembly be not considered God is ignored.

Where a brother goes to a local assembly with self-invested power and imagined inward ability to set things right, his mission will end in sorrow. He defies men's consciences on the one hand and the Spirit's action on the other. Even the apostle first acted upon the consciences of the saints at Corinth—though using his apostolic power to set things right amongst them—while in our days of no apostolic power and of professed weakness, the principle of endeavouring to thrust a line of action, which perhaps may be wrong, and not apostolic in wisdom, upon an assembly, is simply contradictory to what we accept to be the principle of the Scriptures. No wonder, then, that where such things are done or

attempted the results are so miserable. And such must be also the state of any assembly which, when evil is before it, is content idly to let conscience sleep and ministerialism manage its affairs. Ministerialism ends in division.

Let the evil be faced in the presence of God, and if there be not oneness of judgment let prayer be made, and if all are honest, God will give oneness of judgment. There is but one Spirit, and where all are simple-hearted the one Spirit will give oneness of mind. And then will ensue acting in fellowship. The great consideration must ever be to set the conscience of a sluggish assembly in action. If an assembly will not deal with evil it loses its character as an assembly of God; but usually there will be found a large proportion of honest men in each assembly, though some may be sleepy and others ignorant; hence patience is needed.

When one local assembly tries to take up the affairs of another local assembly the result is confusion, for God does not own such interference. It is much the same as an individual brother coming to set things to rights in an assembly, on a larger scale. Matters are made worse, for the vital principle—that the assembly itself must act before God—is ignored. It

surely is right to appeal to a hesitating assembly to act, thus stirring up to enter God's presence, but for another assembly, or for an individual to lay down the law, is simply ignoring the state that the assembly should be in before God, and is taking the question out of God's hands.

Patience, also, is necessary, for, as a rule, the judgment of an assembly upon any kind of evil is but an expression of the moral state of that assembly. There are, for example, bodies of Christians who look very lightly upon doctrines which are really subversive of the very honour of Christ. Why is this? Because their members, generally, are indifferent to the evil of the doctrines. Every few years we hear of secessions from organized Christian bodies because some Christian man or other cannot tolerate an evil thing to which the body of which he is a member is indifferent; but the mass goes on as before, and we find also a gradual leavening process goes on in the mass, and thus Christians generally becoming painfully more and more indifferent as to the most grievous of doctrines being taught by members of their denominations. So when an evil doctrine of a covered kind expresses itself in a local assembly, we

seldom find that every one, at the first, perceives its gravity, and this shews what the low state of the local assembly is, and indicates that each unit is not alive to the importance of the evil which is manifested.

Doctrine is in some respects easier to deal with than practice. And here again the state of the soul and character of conscience of the assembly is tested by evil practice occurring in one composing part of it. The learned and gifted Corinthians were blind and indifferent to their divided state, and also boastful of the presence of a horrible crime in their assembly, and thus we see what was their actual moral condition. We may be sure that the way in which we view sin is really the way in which we practically are in, or are not in the light. If there be honesty before God, there will be simplicity as to right and wrong. If thine eye be single thy whole body shall be full of light. No underhand procedure will commend itself to honesty, nor will party feeling in order to shield the transgressor approve itself to him who is in the presence of God. And what is earnestly to be desired is, that the whole of each assembly should be so in the light that there may not be any will, save that which

would do the will of God. But it must be insisted on, that to this end it is all important that each individual should be before God with a clear and honest conscience.

We know that there must be heresies amongst us so that the approved may be made manifest, and whether we look at Ephesus (Rev. ii.) or Corinth, or read the later Epistles, we find, alas, that even in apostolic times, and from the earliest days, God's saints were exposed to this danger. Sifting and testing must be our portion. The way to glory is not lined with roses; happy are they who overcome.

Neither in these days can we send up our difficulties to "Jerusalem" by the hand of one or two "unto the apostles and elders about this question" (Acts xv.). There is no divinely appointed council for God's saints to refer to. Apostles are not, and where are the elders? We do not say that they, as the apostles, are not; for surely they exist, but where are they? There is now no apostle to commission with divinely given authority and wisdom, a Titus, to "set in order the things that are wanting and ordain elders in every city" (Tit. i. 5). Neither is there an united assembly composed of all the believers in any city over which to appoint

the elders. While as to the elders themselves, in reference to our assemblies, there is many a city and village where our local assemblies exist, in which the elders are not gathered with us to the name of the Lord Jesus, but are still in churches or chapels ! We are living in the days when Christendom is in a state of disorder and confusion, and when Christendom's organization is human ; hence we, who as a little remnant, as a poor, weak few, are gathered to our Lord's name, must be humble and find our strength in our very weakness. Elders or no elders, all will be well if we depend upon the Lord and obey His word, and even if we had lived in apostolic days and had had elders in every city, we should not have got on at all had we depended on elders. We must not rely on man, but on God.

And of what value is a man in office unless he himself is a reality ? There may be in a local assembly both elders and rulers, but perhaps in it there are none. As there are with us teachers, pastors and evangelists, so are there elders and rulers, but we cannot say that such are in each assembly, and an elder or ruler can no more be made by man than a teacher, pastor, or evangelist. Hence we, with

no organization in the eyes of men, are in the position, as an ecclesiastical body, of being real and honest before God in the day of confusion and weakness. What can be better than this in our day? Provided we are honest and real, and in the place of weakness and dependence upon God.

If the state of weakness arising out of the disordered condition of Christendom be allowed, and the attitude of honest weakness be remained in before God, He will guide by His Spirit as to every anxious question. Let the brethren of the local assembly deliberate over God's Word on the questions in the midst of them and seek His guidance. What saith the Scriptures? is the all important question, and which answered binds the conscience. When an assembly, however weak, is faithfully before the Lord, and waiting on Him, He will stand by it, and it will be eventually guided by the Holy Spirit according to the Word of God. Then the action of the assembly will be in fellowship, even fellowship effected by the Spirit of God, and what they bind on earth in government will be ratified in heaven. H. F. W.

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