

THE CHURCH OF GOD

“God is faithful, by Whom ye were called unto
the fellowship of His Son Jesus Christ our Lord.”
(1 Cor. 1. 9).

BY
WILLIAM ANGLIN

Printed for the Author by
PICKERING & INGLIS, 229 BOTHWELL ST., GLASGOW, C.2
14 PATERNOSTER ROW, LONDON, E.C.4

Foreword

THIS pamphlet was written originally in the Portuguese language for the help of a large number of Christian congregations in various parts of Brazil. When reading these pages it must be kept in mind that out there, for the most part, each congregation of believers is the whole Church in that locality in the Scriptural sense of the word. They gather all in one place on primitive church lines, without being part of some human organisation, and are not dependent upon any society or missionary. The conditions in this respect approximate more to those of which we read in the New Testament than do many assemblies in England, where so seldom a congregation could be styled "the Church which is in X."

It has been thought worth while to put the booklet into English for the guidance of English reading workers abroad, as the difficulties and conditions existing in various countries where the Gospel has but recently penetrated, are often similar. Also because some of the questions herein discussed are often overlooked or not well understood in many English assemblies, especially the distinction between the principles which govern church rule and functions, and those that obtain in individual or collective service. The measure of its usefulness in this country must be left to the reader to judge.

The Church of God.

God is faithful, by whom ye were called unto the fellowship of His Son Jesus Christ our Lord (1 Cor. 1. 9).

THE subject under consideration in this booklet is the Church of God, its constitution, fellowship, and functions. The great interest of God in this world is not its politics, the development of civilisation, education, or human inventions, but it is His Church.

The word "church" means a people called for a special purpose; an assembly or convocation. The thought of God is clearly expressed in the words of the above text God is calling by the Gospel His elect, and when the number is complete, He will call them to His presence. From the teaching of the Scriptures we see that the whole world will not be saved by the preaching of the Gospel, nor the Millennium introduced thereby, although some Christians have that idea. God is drawing out from the world by the Gospel a people for Himself. A preacher well-known, discussing with another the aim of the Gospel preaching, said that it appeared to him as though the world was like a ship in distress, which by the efforts of the crew would eventually reach the port in spite of the storm, and save all the passengers, but that his friend viewed the world as a shipwreck, and the Gospel as the life-boat to save as many passengers as possible from going down with the ship. The second illustration is, no doubt, more in accord with the truth of the Scriptures.

Its Constitution

The Church is viewed in three different ways in the New Testament:

1. Including all believers from Pentecost to the Lord's Coming for His Church;
2. Including all believers on the earth at any moment of the Church's history;
3. The local Church, which includes all the believers in any locality.

The first aspect presents the Church complete and perfect.

The Scriptures that speak of this phase are Eph. 1. 22, 23; 5. 27.

The second aspect is found in Eph. 4 and 1 Cor. 12 (except verse 27, which refers to the local Church), and other passages that speak of the Church in its responsibility. In 1 Cor. 12 the Church is compared to the human body, and in Ephesians it is presented as the Body of Christ. It is clear that the thought of some members suffering, and others participating in that suffering, can only be realised in the Church on earth, because the saints of past centuries, or those in the future cannot be affected. Also the growth and development in the 4th chapter of Ephesians can only apply to living believers or the Body down here. This aspect we speak of as the living, universal, or catholic Church.

This booklet treats more of the local Church, which is a miniature of the second aspect referred to.

The Church in any locality is the sum of all the believers therein. God does not recognise an entity that is less, except the individual believer. Should the Church of God in any place be divided into various groups or congregations, each company is not a Church, because the local Church is a complete entity recognised by God. We should meet on a ground open to all sincere believers in the Lord Jesus Christ (even though they belong to some denomination), and recognise them as equally belonging to the Church of Christ. We should not recognise the denomination as such, but the believers which belong thereto.

The Scriptures that deal most with the subject of the Church are the Epistles to the Corinthians, Ephesians, and Timothy. Corinthians treats more of the Church when assembled, Ephesians of its constitution, and Timothy speaks more of its behaviour.

When the universal Church is viewed as the Body of Christ here in the world, the Lord as the Head is seen in Heaven where He ascended on high.

When the Church is gathered in its local character, the Lord is presented as being "in the midst." It was as Man, risen, and glorified in Heaven that God made Him Head of the Church, and He will only leave there

when He comes to call the Church to His presence. As God, however, He can be in the midst of the local gatherings in many places at the same moment, and His desire is that we might realise His presence more intimately. This, however, can only be enjoyed when there exist the essential conditions, amongst those that meet, which are holiness, harmony, and faith. When there are these conditions, even two or three believers who meet in His Name, may enjoy the presence of the Lord. It is hardly necessary to say here that those meeting in this way, do not gain thereby some ecclesiastical status. The promise of His presence is to all believers fulfilling the conditions, and ceases when the meeting is over. God does not recognise a people entitled "those gathered to the Lord's Name" when they are not actually meeting. Believers who take to themselves this title are forming a sect or denomination.

Fellowship

We are called to the fellowship of the Son of God. When we speak of "our fellowship" we ought always to include all the saints, for otherwise "our fellowship" will not correspond with the fellowship of the Son of God, but will be a sect or party. God has not divided His Church into fellowships, sects, or parties, nor has He changed His plans to accommodate the failure in the Church. He does not recognise any sect, or a believer as being a member of a party. These divisions are of men, and contrary to the desire of God, and we should still seek to regulate our fellowship in a practical way by the Word of God, and not by what we see around.

Functions

The principle functions of the Church are enumerated in Acts 2. 42. We do well to follow the example of the primitive Church. Let us examine the fourfold functions:

1. "Continued in the Apostles' Doctrine" meant in those early days, the verbal teaching of the apostles, which was received by Divine inspiration, but to-day is found written in the New Testament. We do not need more, and should not be satisfied with less. Some appear to find the Bible instructions inadequate, and believe that

there has arisen a state of things in the Church to-day that the Bible does not quite provide for.

2. Continuing "in fellowship" means a practical fellowship. The word means association with each other, implies love, fraternity, seeking the company of the believers, visiting and helping the needy ones, and working for the welfare of the Church.

3. "The Breaking of Bread" is the expression of Christian fellowship, communion with the Lord, and with each other. This rite was inaugurated by the Lord in commemoration of His death, and was afterwards confirmed by the Apostle Paul. It was observed frequently in the beginning, and evidently later on, the Church met on the first day of the week for this purpose (Acts 20. 7).

4. "In prayer." We read that the House of God was to be called the House of Prayer, and prayer is one of the special functions of the Church. The Lord, as High Priest intercedes on High, and the Church has the privilege of intercession on earth.

We might observe here that the preaching of the Gospel is not mentioned in this list. The reason appears to be that this service is more of an individual character. The command is "Go, and preach," and not "Come to the Church." Acts 8. 4 shows that the believers dispersed abroad, preached Christ.

Fellowship and Service

Here let us note carefully the difference between the principles which regulate our Christian service and those that should be observed in the Church.

The Church is a living organism, animated by the Holy Spirit, and not a human organisation. Our companions are chosen for us by God, and we have no say in the matter. The Church is an elected company and not a selected one. The Church has to judge each professor by his fruits. When one shows the signs of true faith, the confession of Jesus as Lord, accompanied by a holy, upright life, the people of God must recognise such as a brother and receive him, not as we receive a stranger into our house, but as a brother that has the same place as we have.

In Service, however, we choose our own companions or

fellow-workers. When certain service needs the co-operation of a number of servants, organisation is necessary. When we are working with others, we must consider their desires, and likings. A Sunday School is an example of collective service. The teachers are co-operators. They arrange the service together, and no one ought to be invited to take part in the work, nor should any practice be adopted without the consent of all the workers in that school. There should be unanimity in all things. Although a Sunday School or any kind of Gospel mission for young or old, is necessarily a human organisation, the organisation ought never to prevent the operation of the Holy Spirit, and the workers should watch that it does not do so. There may be an organisation at home to help a band of missionaries abroad. Such may be necessary to facilitate the passage abroad or return of workers, for sending supplies, or financial aid, but should not usurp the functions of the Holy Spirit, such as sending out or recalling labourers. Where there is a Sunday School functioning, say in a meeting hall, no believer or elder that is not a teacher, has the slightest authority in the school. The elders might prohibit any undesirable practice in the hall, but when the school is in another place, they cannot interfere. There should always be the happiest fellowship between an assembly and the Sunday School, and everything should be done to facilitate such a good work, and so important to the welfare and growth of the Church. In case of dispute, however, the relationship between the assembly and Sunday School is that of landlord to tenants.

How much service has been discouraged and destroyed by the lack of observance of the principles that govern service, both due to interference from outside, and through lack of consideration between fellow-workers, especially on the part of leaders. The first contention and division in service of which we read, was because Barnabas insisted on taking another servant (John Mark) against the wish of the Apostle Paul who was his fellow-servant.

We should not bring the principles connected with the Church when assembled (1 Cor. 14) into evangelical service. When the preaching of the Gospel is usually

held in the meeting-hall of an assembly, it has the appearance of a Church meeting, but should not be considered as such. Any brother may feel himself to be free of any responsibility for this service (which would not be the case if it were a meeting of the Church), and may consider that he has some other service at that hour. The servant responsible for the preaching on Sundays ought to have the confidence of the Church, for outsiders do not draw distinctions between meetings in the same hall. It is better if he has the gift of an evangelist. The elders are teachers by preference (1 Tim. 3. 2; 5. 17), and thus not always so apt in evangelization. The servant who is thus responsible ought not to choose preachers whom the believers who help by their prayers and presence, do not approve, because in a sense they are his fellow-workers. A Gospel meeting should not be treated as an open meeting, whether indoors or out-of-doors, that is to say where any person may get up and speak. It is better when the preacher is prepared beforehand, and when in a hall, that the hearers should know who is going to preach. In Christian service there is much liberty. The Apostle Paul made himself all things to all men to gain some, and preached in all manner of places and ways. What is preached is of the most importance, but how and where should be left to the individual servant. We are responsible to the Lord, and must not interfere with the service of others, nor judge another servant, except when he transgresses the Word of God.

Whilst speaking of individual service, it might be well to say a word as to baptism, which at times tends to cause contention in the Church. To-day, this rite is often performed in fellowship with the whole local Church, and done publicly. There is no reason why this should not be done, and it has served as a good opportunity to explain the teaching and meaning of baptism. This should not, however, be treated as essential, and where there is likely to be divided feeling it is better not to cause a breach. Actually, the Scriptures treat it as an individual service, and there is no record of the rite being treated as an ecclesiastical ceremony in the New Testament. The Church was not consulted or even notified of the cases mentioned

in the Acts. The act is not necessarily public, but the *fact* should be, because it is a profession of Christ (Gal. 3. 27). It is not important as to who it is that baptizes, he may be an evangelist, or any other servant of the Lord.

The Gifts

In the Body of Christ we find unity and diversity. In the primitive Church there were evidently more gifts than exist to-day. There were then apostles with special power and authority. There were prophets who received their message by inspiration from God. We have to-day in place of these gifts, the apostolic writings that the primitive Church did not possess. Other gifts have apparently, or in part disappeared, such as miracles, gifts of curing, tongues, and interpretations. There do exist to-day teachers, pastors, and evangelists. The prophets of 1 Cor. 14. 32 were most probably brethren with the gift of teaching the Word of God (O.T.), and applying the truth in a special way to the hearers. To-day, in this sense, a teacher speaking in the Holy Spirit, might have the character of a prophet.

The teacher usually exercises his gift in the Church when assembled. The service of the pastor is more individual, and consists in visiting believers in their houses, and generally caring for the flock. The evangelist exercises his gift, not in the Church, but in the world. He goes after the lost sheep, whilst his brother, the pastor attends to the saved sheep, with special care for the weak and sickly ones. In the Scriptures we see the evangelists, and other believers going out to preach the Gospel or to evangelise individually (for an evangelist is not necessarily a public speaker) to the lost world. There is no record of meetings in buildings where the brethren met for their church meetings. There is no reason why a meeting-hall should not be utilised for Gospel preaching, if the unconverted will come and listen to it, but should they not attend, the responsibility of the servants is to go out with the message. It is generally better to deliver the message, where the sinner feels more at home, than in a place of the servant's choosing.

Every Church should contain all of these gifts.

The Apostle Paul explains in 1 Cor. 14 how the Church when assembled should proceed. There was no "minister," nor president to lead, and although there had been disorders, the Church was not instructed to nominate such leaders to direct the meetings. Even the elders, as such, were not to guide in the assemblies for ministry. If an elder happened to be one of the teachers or prophets (and many were so) he might exercise his gift, but not his office. The meeting had to be under the direction of the Holy Spirit, which did not mean that men could inflict unsuitable ministry on the assembly. One so doing would be asked to desist, even whilst speaking. The judges were evidently the prophets. This character of meeting requires spirituality, otherwise it may become unprofitable through carnal activity.

These instructions for the Church in Assembly do not preclude the believers meeting for ministry, with pre-arranged speakers.

Government

The Scriptures teach that in the House of God there is order and government. When Moses was about to build the Tabernacle, he was commanded to make all things according to the pattern showed in the mount. The pattern of the House of God to-day we find in the New Testament. The overseers are called bishops or elders. We learn from Acts 20. 18-28 and Titus 1. 5-7, that the bishops (or overseers) and the presbyters (or elders) are the same persons. To-day certain "churches" ordain men called bishops to take charge of a number of congregations, but the Word of God indicates that the local Church should be governed from inside, and not by some one outside the locality. We find, too, that in the time of the apostles there were more than one bishop or elder in each Church (Acts 20 and Phil. 1. 1). The bishops in some churches were chosen by the Apostle Paul, but there were evidently others where he had not chosen them, such as the elders in the Church at Jerusalem. The apostle knew well the personnel of the Churches he had founded by his preaching, and being a man full of the Holy Spirit, he was guided in his choice. At the close of his life he left with the Church

for future guidance, the portrait of what a bishop should be (in the Epistles to Timothy and Titus). The description was given, no doubt, for the guidance of these two servants so that they might recognise the character of persons fitted for the office, and also it was written for our learning. They were constituted bishops by the Holy Spirit (Acts 20. 28) Who still dwells in the House of God. It is not the Church that constitutes them, but should recognise those the Holy Spirit has ordained. Necessarily the recognition means more than an uncertain spiritual discernment, for the oversight could not function without a definite recognition by the Church, for their authority depends upon their united rule, and the willing submission of all to their oversight. Although we speak of it as an office, care should be taken to avoid "officialism," which is not a loving care for the people of God.

Recognition of Elders. A Church does not rightly choose its governors, for that is not the Scriptural method. The "ordination" should be of the Holy Spirit, but the approval of the Church is necessary. The manner of arriving at the knowledge and recognition of elders presents at times a difficulty. Where there is an old established assembly with elders enjoying the confidence of all, that is to say, the right men doing the right work in the right way, the question as to how they arrived in that position is of little importance, but these pages are written more to help newly founded churches in their difficulties. Let us suppose there is a Church fairly numerous, having in the midst various spiritual men that appear suitable to act as overseers (the word "bishop" is not so preferable, as it is apt to give the idea of high sounding title, due to misuse of the term). How should the Church proceed? It needs Divine guidance, and that can always be obtained by an assembly, by examining the portrait, and by united prayer. The Church should meet and wait upon the Lord that He would reveal to them which are the men that the Holy Spirit has ordained. When all are of one mind, and realise they have the Lord's mind, then the Church should recognise them, and they should unitedly take over the responsibility. The manner of initiation

into office is of little consequence—generally speaking, the less ceremony the better. Often the elders glide into their duties automatically, and it is better so, unless any have not the approval of the Church, or the qualifications. Self-elected elders are often not suitable, and difficult to remove—hence the need of prayer and care.

When, however, it is evident that there do not exist in a Church men with all the Scriptural qualifications, how, should such a Church proceed? The business has to be conducted, but by whom? The Scriptures do not teach definitely, and it is probably due to a lack of spirituality that has not produced men fitted fully for the work. It is better to approximate to the "model" or "pattern" as much as possible. The older, more apt, and worthy should direct, but should not claim to be "elders" or "overseers" in an official way when they are without all the qualifications. They should do all in conjunction with the Church. They naturally will not have the same respect, and the Church will probably lack in stability, but officialism and organisation will not do instead of, nor produce spirituality. Simplicity is a virtue, and government by elders is more simple in a large congregation but it would be absurd if a small company with only two or three brothers established an oversight, which would be formality rather than simplicity.

There are other forms of government that are common but unscriptural. One is the autocratic form, where one man governs. He may have the title bishop, minister, pastor, or be without a title. The danger of this system lies in partiality, or even a tyranny. We read of one such in the third Epistle of John, whose name was Diotrephes, and the apostle wrote strongly against him, and his rule and misrule.

The opposite to this form is a democratic system. In the government of the world, this is the most popular form of rule, such as a republic, though in these days many countries have turned to an autocratic form, or dictatorship. In the Church, democracy (or the voice of the people) at times takes the form of a meeting of all the brothers, and in others the government includes both sexes, and the whole Church governs itself. The youngest

brother or sister has the same say in matters as the oldest, in some cases, and in others they are expected to say little of nothing. The carnal brother is, however, usually very much in evidence. None of these systems can compare with the "pattern." It is easy to understand how vastly superior is the Scriptural way. It avoids the possibility of the unspiritual dominating the counsels of the assembly. The level of spirituality, prudence, wisdom, knowledge of truth, grace, patience, and love will be superior in the case of elders with the qualifications given in the epistles, than the level of the whole local Church with many members. One hears questions raised as to the extent of the authority of an elder. Their power should depend upon their working in unity than individually, as they might give divergent counsel individually. When they are united, and have the confidence of a spiritual Church, there should be no necessity to consult with the whole Church, except in a question of the first importance and of interest to all alike.

The Responsibility of the elders. The duty of the elders is to govern, direct, counsel, rebuke, correct, and to take care of the business of the Church. The gift of teaching is very desirable for an elder, says the apostle, and thus we find that the elders of Ephesus were told by him "to feed the Church of God." They were responsible to guard the purity of the ministry.

In all things and at all times the elders have to act with Christian love, without partiality, and with justice. It needs the firmness of a father, and the gentleness of a mother.

The elders must not usurp the functions of the Church. For example, the discipline of excommunication can only be done by the whole Church, although enquiries about the details of a case may be better performed by the elders. When all is proved, it is only the Church as a whole that can put away from among themselves the wicked person.

The Servants of the Church. We read in the Epistle of Paul to Timothy of deacons, which word means servants. The deacons there referred to are the servants of the Church. We must distinguish between "servants of the Lord" and "servants of the Church." All believers should be servants of the Lord, including the deacons,

but these have also a special office recognised by the Church, to which they are responsible for their service. As in the case of the elders, there can be no uncertainty or indefiniteness as to who they are and what they have to do. They are chosen by the Church, for the Church may choose its servants. The treasurer, for example is a deacon. The assembly cannot be of a divided opinion as to who is responsible for the collections, and distributions of money, or leave it to any persons whom they may care to undertake the duty. The treasurer should give an account of his stewardship with regularity to the whole Church, and not occasionally to a few.

Relations between the Churches

The relationship of one Church to another has been a subject of controversy. The Scriptures teach nothing directly on the subject, but one may draw inferences, and unfortunately those drawn do not always coincide. The harm done is due to too much importance being attached to what the Word does not positively teach. There is no doubt as to the link existing between all believers comprising the universal Church, and these links should draw the local Churches into an intimate unity under normal conditions. Each Church is a Temple of the Holy Spirit of God, as are the bodies of the believers. The believers are members of the same Body, recognising the same Lord, faith, and baptism. We find, however, that the Churches of the New Testament had each a special local responsibility or independent administration. Each Church was responsible to the Lord for conduct, administration, and discipline. We do not read of one Church interfering with the business of another. The ideal is that each should be a complete entity, having its own gifts and government. This should in no wise prevent one Church receiving help from another, or preclude one from inviting brethren of another assembly to visit or help in any difficulty, for we find this was a common practice in the New Testament days. Withal, brethren should not interfere in the local questions of another assembly, without being specially invited to help. The elders have only authority in their own local Church, and not in a neighbouring one. Whilst a teacher's gift is for the universal

Church, he should not insist upon ministering in an assembly where he is neither wanted nor welcome.

An assembly may have some difficulty that cannot be settled, and its effects are spreading. It would do well to ask help of spiritual brethren from other places. Even when this is done, the responsibility to act according to, or contrary to the counsel given, must rest with the local assembly. There are two main classes of difficulties: the first when there arises a question which the Scriptures can determine. In such a case brethren within or from without with a knowledge of the Word, can help. The second class is due to contentions and quarrels. For this Matt. 18. 15-17 or 1 Cor. 6 teaches the way to proceed.

Discipline in the Church

All just discipline in a local Church should be respected, not only by local believers, but by those of all other assemblies. Questions of false doctrines, especially when taught by some one accustomed to travel about, although dealt with in the assembly where lives the supposed heretic, are cases best dealt with by inviting spiritual well-taught brethren from neighbouring assemblies, to help in prayer and counsel.

There are various degrees of discipline. We read of persons whose mouths must be stopped (Titus 1. 11), of those who walked disorderly, with whom we may not mix (2 Thess. 3. 14). The last degree of discipline is excommunication (1 Cor. 5. 13). This has for its object the purifying of the Church, to avoid contamination, and also for the restoration of the guilty one. Such persons are not only cut off from their Church privileges, but from all individual association with the believers (1 Cor. 5. 11).

Sectarianism

When a congregation adopts principles or rules that exclude believers sound in the faith, and Christian conduct, it thereby constitutes itself a sect, and if it takes a name or title, we speak of it as a denomination. A company of believers that has an open door to receive all saints, is not a sect, even though the majority of the believers in the neighbourhood prefer to attend sectarian congregations. The fact of the majority of Christians being outside of the practical fellowship of those meeting

on simple Christian lines, is not the fault of such brethren, if they are ready to receive all godly believers without raising questions that only tend to make divisions, or are not of a fundamental character. The member of a sect has a fellowship that includes only those who agree with him about certain doctrines which are not vital, or about some practice, such as baptism or church government. When in the end, these believers arrive in the presence of the Lord, they will not think about their sectarian fellowship, but fellowship with Christ, and the vast company of the redeemed will occupy them.

If our fellowship is of the Son of God, we shall exclude from our midst all that the Scriptures condemn, and shall include all who are in communion with Him.

The Church of God is "one flock" with "one Shepherd," but a sect is a fold. The Shepherd came to lead out the sheep from the fold of Israel (shut in by laws and rules and rites), to enjoy liberty with the other sheep of the Gentiles, in His "one flock." A sect is also shut in by human rules to guard the sheep, not from wolves, but from other sheep which are not of their fold. We ought not to seek a fold made by men, when the Lord has already brought His sheep out of the only fold that God Himself has recognised. We should seek to be found around the Good Shepherd.

Clericalism

This is in part a mixture of Judaism and Christianity, bringing into the latter a priestly class, distinct and separate from other people. The idea of clergy and laity has no foundation on the New Testament. We do not read there of a special class set apart to direct the worship, administer the sacraments, and take charge of the Church.

Ritualism

This applies to the custom of introducing into the Church assemblies, any ceremonies that the New Testament does not teach, or are foreign to the idea of Christianity. It does not refer to the two rites taught in the Word, baptism and the Lord's Supper. W. A.