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AN OUTLINE OF
BIBLE TEACHING

The Church



J.W. Mc MILLAN

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THE CHURCH

AN OUTLINE OF BIBLE TEACHING

BY

J. W. McMILLAN

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PREFACE

The object of this little book is to give an outline of Bible teaching on the subject of **THE CHURCH**.

The chapters appeared originally in serial form in **ASSEMBLY TESTIMONY**, a bi-monthly magazine for Christians published in the U. K., and part of the introduction is quoted from an article originally published in **HELP AND FOOD**, a monthly magazine for Christians published in the U. S. A. It is hoped that the reprinting of these articles, slightly revised and enlarged, will be a help to a wider circle of readers.

Any request to translate this little book into other languages will be sympathetically considered by the author.

Sankeshwar,
Belgaum Dist.,

INDIA

J. W. McMILLAN

SPECIAL NOTE

ASSEMBLY TESTIMONY, the magazine in which these chapters originally appeared, is a bi-monthly magazine for the ministry of the Word of God published in the U. K. It is sent free on request to

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'Church of the living God,
 Pillar and ground of truth,
 Keep the old paths the fathers trod
 In thy illumined youth.'
 (Hymns A. & M. No. 532)

INTRODUCTION

The Greek word '**ecclesia**', the word usually translated 'church', is found 113 times in the New Testament. Two of these occasions are in the Gospel of Matthew, and both times the word was from the lips of the Lord Jesus Himself. We shall look at these in detail in the first two chapters of this booklet. It is not found in the other three Gospels. In the rest of the New Testament we find the Greek word "**ecclesia**" 111 times: 3 times it refers to the gathering together of the citizens of Ephesus (Acts 19:32, 39, 41); once it refers to Israel in the wilderness (Acts 7:38); once it is used in a quotation from the Old Testament (Hebrews 2:12 is cited from Psalm 22:22); 106 times it is used of the Christian Church in either its local or universal aspects, and these references are worthy of careful study.

In *Acts* there are 19 such references. (In the R. V. the word is omitted in 2:47; the plural of 9:31 should possibly be singular.) Almost all obviously refer to local churches. Differences of opinion are held about some of the 22 references in *1 Corinthians*, but at least half of them obviously refer to a local church. The 9 references in *2 Corinthians* all refer to local churches: in fact, all but one are in the plural. Of the 3 references in *Galatians*, 2 are plural, showing that they refer to local churches. The 9 references in *Ephesians* all refer to the universal Church, the "church which is His body" but at least one of the 2 references in *Philippians* is to the local church at Philippi. Of the 4 references in *Colossians*, 2 are to the universal Church, 2 to local churches. There are 2 references each in *1 and 2 Thessalonians* and all are to local churches. The 3 references in *1 Timothy* are probably best understood as applying to the local church. The reference in *Philemon* 2 is to a local church, while that in *Hebrews* 12:23 (where the Church is contrasted with Israel) is to the church universal. In *James* 5:14 the elders of a local church are in mind. The 3 references in *3 John* all refer to a local church,

which could hear witness, receive letters, and be lorded over by a Diotrophes who refused to receive brethren, and cast them out of the church. The 20 references in the *Revelation* are all to local churches: the word is in the plural 13 times, and in the remaining 7 instances the locality of the church concerned is specifically mentioned.

These references will give some idea of the importance of the subject. It is impossible to deal with each reference in a booklet of this size, although many of these passages will be referred to in the pages that follow. It should be emphasised that the reader who studies this booklet with his or her Bible open beside it, checking and considering each passage as it is referred to (Acts 17:11), will gain the most benefit from it.

1. THE CHURCH AND ITS MEMBERS

In studying any subject in the Word of God it is wise to pay special attention to: (1) the *first mention* of the subject in the Bible, and (2) what the Lord Jesus Christ *Himself* said about it. In this instance the first mention of the subject was by the Lord Jesus Himself, and it is these words which we shall consider in this chapter. They should be studied in their context, and the reader is urged to open his Bible and read Matthew 16:13 to 17:21 to understand the importance of these words. In this short passage several key events are mentioned:

1. The Lord's question, and Peter's confession of His Christhood and Deity (16. 13-17).
2. The *first* mention of the CHURCH (16. 18-20).
3. The *first* clear announcement by the Lord to His disciples concerning His death (16. 21-23).
4. The cost and reward of discipleship, with the *first* clear mention of His Second Advent (16. 24-28)
5. The Transfiguration (17. 1-13).
6. The healing of the epileptic boy (17. 14-21).

All these events took place within a short time of each other, about six months before the Lord Jesus was crucified.

The Lord Jesus first asked His disciples what people thought of Him, and they quoted the popular opinions. Then He asked them what they themselves thought, and Peter, speaking for them all, said, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." The Lord Jesus had referred to Himself as the Son of Man, a title which emphasises His real *humanity*: Peter confessed Him as the *Christ*, i. e. God's Anointed Prophet, Priest and King, and emphasised His *deity*—"the Son of the living God." The Lord Jesus replied that Peter was blessed, in that these truths had been revealed to him by God Himself. Then He went on to say: "Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build My Church; and

the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.” In the first sentence there is a play on words, for the name Peter (in Greek *Petros*) means “a stone”, and is similar to the word *petra*, which means “a Rock.”

Much controversy has raged as to who or what was by the “rock.” The official view of the Roman Catholic Church is that Peter was the rock, and on this is based their teaching as to the importance of the Pope, whom they claim to be the spiritual successor of Peter. But the Scriptures are quite clear on the matter, for the apostle Peter himself was inspired to write in his first epistle about this very subject. We find his explanation in 1 Peter 2. 1-10. There he clearly describes our Lord as a “living stone,” rejected by men, but chosen by God to be “chief corner stone,” and believers as “living stones” built into a spiritual house. There is no suggestion that Peter thought that the Church was built on himself. In the epistles of Paul we have the same picture used, with Christ Himself described as the foundation and chief corner stone (1 Cor. 3. 11; Eph. 2. 20), and believers in Him being described as making up a holy habitation on this foundation.

Although the Church is here compared to a building, we should note that the word “Church” is never applied in the Scriptures to an actual building used as a Christian meeting place, but always to a company of believers in Christ.

This first mention of the Church teaches us a number of important facts:—

1. The foundation of the Church is the Rock, Christ Jesus Himself. No one who does not belong to Christ can really belong to His Church.

2. Those in the true Church are those who believe that Jesus, the Son of Man, is the Christ, the Son of the living God, and who have received life through His name.

Have you done this? Then you belong to Christ, and you are a living stone in His Church. But the Bible speaks also of churches (in the plural), local companies of believers, and of these we shall speak in the next chapter.

2. LOCAL CHURCHES

The Lord Jesus only twice used the word “church,” as far as is recorded in the Gospels. We considered the first occasion in our last chapter. Now we shall look at the second. We find the word in Matthew 18. 17, but we should read the whole passage, i.e. Chapter 18. 15-20. Like the previous passage, this one looks to the future: in Matthew 16 He had said, “I *will* (future tense) build my Church,” and here He gives His disciples instructions as to how they are to act when He is no longer with them.

If a Christian sees another believer sin, he is told first to seek him out privately and show his fault to him. If the erring brother refuses to listen, he should go again with witnesses; and finally, if this fails, to “tell it unto the church.” What did the Lord mean by the word “church” in this verse? Did He mean that we are to tell our brother’s fault to every believer in heaven and earth? Obviously not. He makes this clear in verse 20, where He says that, “where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them.” Here He uses the word “church” to describe a company of people who are gathered together *in obedience to Him*. They may be only “two or three”, but if they are truly gathered in His name, then He is in the midst. The book of the Revelation gives us a picture of this in the opening chapters. The apostle John, who was almost certainly present when the Lord gave this teaching, saw a vision of the crucified and risen Lord in the midst of seven golden lampstands, that pictured the seven churches in the Roman province of Asia, and was given the privilege of writing, at His dictation, messages to the responsible brethren in each of these companies concerning the things that He had seen happening in them (Rev. 2, 3).

In the New Testament we read often of such local companies of Christians, and they are described by a variety of names. They are called “churches of God” (1 Thess. 2. 14), for in them God has His dwelling place; “churches of Christ” (Romans 16. 16), for they are composed of people who

gather in His name; and "churches of the saints" (1 Cor. 14. 33), for they are composed of believers, those who have been sanctified or made holy by faith.

The two occasions when the Lord Jesus mentioned the church by name are therefore of the greatest importance. In the first He said, "I will build My Church," showing that it was a *future* event, and that this Church would be composed of those who had accepted Him as the Christ and Son of God. He Himself was the Rock foundation of the Church, for He could call it "*My Church*." On the second occasion He indicated that there were also to be churches, companies gathering in His name, who would, amongst other things, be able to hear and decide concerning disputes amongst their "brethren." In this way He was preparing His disciples for what lay ahead, after His death, burial and resurrection, and in our next chapter we shall see how things developed.

3. FROM PALM SUNDAY TO PENTECOST

In the Spring of the year A. D. 30* there occurred, in and around the city of Jerusalem, the most important series of events that this world has ever seen.

On Sunday, April 2nd, A. D. 30, the Lord Jesus rode in triumph into Jerusalem, seated on an ass, and was acclaimed by the throngs of pilgrims who had come for the Passover festival as the Messiah, the Son of David, the One coming in the name of the Lord. The following day, Monday, April 3rd, He cleansed the temple by driving out the money changers and other merchants. On Tuesday, April 4th, He preached in the morning in the temple, and in the evening He sat with His disciples on the Mount of Olives, and talked with them about the coming destruction of Jerusalem and His return in glory at the end of the age. Two days later, on Thursday, April 6th, the Lord Jesus partook of the Passover meal with His disciples, and immediately after instituted a new ordinance, the *Lord's Supper*, which He commanded His disciples to observe for a remembrance of Him. He then talked with His disciples for a long time about His return to take them to be with Himself, about the coming of the Holy Spirit and about fruit-bearing, love, and other topics. He prayed to His Father for Himself, for the immediate circle of His disciples and then for the wider circle of those who would believe in Him through their witness. Late that night He was betrayed by Judas Iscariot and arrested by the temple guard, acting on the orders of the High Priest, and brought before the Jewish court for judgement. On Friday, April 7th, very early in the morning, He was tried before Pilate, the Roman Governor, and, at the insistence of the people, urged on by the religious leaders, sentenced to death by crucifixion. About 9 a.m. He was nailed to the cross. From 12 noon until 3 p.m.

* The exact year in which the Lord Jesus died and rose again is not certain. Pilate was governor of Judea between A.D. 28 and 33. A. D. 30 is a date widely accepted by Evangelical scholars. We do know the *time* of the year with certainty, and if the Lord Jesus was crucified in A.D. 30 the events would have taken place on the dates given.

the whole land was covered with a supernatural darkness. Soon after 3 p. m. He gave up His spirit, and died. The fact of his death was shown by one of the soldiers, who pierced His side with a spear. Before sunset His body was buried in a new tomb by two secret disciples, and a great stone was rolled on the mouth of the grave. On Saturday, April 8th, while the disciples and others observed the weekly Sabbath rest, the body of the Lord Jesus rested in the tomb.

On Sunday, April 9th, He arose from the dead, and appeared to his disciples on several occasions during the following forty days. We are not told a great deal as to what was said on those occasions, but we know that several times He gave His disciples what we know as the Great Commission, each time in a slightly different form (Matthew 28. 16-20; Mark 16. 14-16; Luke 24. 44-49; John 20. 19-23). If we draw together all of these statements of His commission, we find that He gave them a five-fold commandment:—

1. *Go into all the world.*
2. *Preach the good news.*
3. *Make disciples.*
4. *Baptize those disciples. and*
5. *Teach them to observe all the Lord's commandments.*

Apart from this general commission, the Lord had a special word for Peter, the one who had denied Him (John 21. 15-23). He also told them that they were to wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit, Who would empower them for this task.

On Thursday, May 18th, He ascended into Heaven, and was seen no more by the disciples. But 10 days later, on Sunday, May 28th, A.D. 30, the Holy Spirit came to empower and indwell the disciples, and they preached the message of the crucified and risen Christ with such power that 3,000 people became believers. *The first church thus came into being.*

4. THE FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH

When Peter and the other apostles, filled with the Holy Spirit, preached the Gospel on the Day of Pentecost (Sunday, May 28th, A.D. 30) the result was that on that day 3,000 people were added to the number of believers. The Lord Jesus had begun to build His Church, and the first local church came into being. We can learn many important things from this first local company of believers in Jerusalem.

First of all, let us see what those people did *on that day* (Acts 2. 41):

1. They gladly *received* the Word. They responded wholehearted to the message of the Gospel, and believed Peter's word that Jesus of Nazareth, the Man Who had died on the cross less than two months before, was really both "Lord and Christ," the Son of God.

2. They were *baptized*. Faith was followed by open confession in baptism. The Lord Himself had told them to make disciples and to *baptize* them, and the apostles lost no time in seeing that those who believed obeyed in this way.

3. They were *added* to the company of believers. Faith, followed by baptism, followed by reception into a local church is the pattern which we find in the Word of God.

All three of these things happened in close succession. But they were only the beginning. We read that these new believers *continued steadfastly* in four important matters. These should be true of all believers all their lives (Acts 2. 42).

1. *The apostles' doctrine.* The apostles carried out the Lord's commandment to teach these new disciples all that He had commanded them. The Word of God is inexhaustible, and all our lives we should be learning more and more from it.

2. *Fellowship.* These believers did not keep aloof from each other, but co-operated together in obedience to Christ as Lord (1 Cor. 1. 9).

3. *The Breaking of Bread.* The apostles remembered that on the very night that He was betrayed the Lord Jesus had instituted this ordinance for them, and they taught the disciples to observe it. At first they did this "daily," but later we find the Lord's Supper associated with the first day of the week, the Lord's Day, the day that He arose victorious over death (Acts 20. 7).

4. *Prayers.* Believers should pray together, as well as individually and with their families, and these early believers did that. There were some remarkable answers to their prayers, especially those made for the release of Peter when he was in prison (Acts 12. 5).

These features show us what a local church should be like. It is composed of people who have accepted the once-crucified Jesus Christ as their Saviour and Lord, who have been baptized in obedience to His command, and who have then been received into the assembly or church. The church should be one where the apostles' doctrine (and no man-made system) is taught, where believers enjoy fellowship with each other, where they meet to partake of the Lord's Supper, and where they unitedly pray to the Lord.

5. OVERSIGHT IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

No organisation can exist for any length of time without some kind of officers to carry out special functions, and a church is no exception. In particular, there must be those to act as spiritual guides, those who can "take the oversight" or supervise the activities of the church.

In our opening chapters, we mentioned that the Lord Jesus used the word "church" on only two occasions: but on at least two other occasions He clearly referred to it under different names. The first of these is found in John 10. 16. The second we shall refer to in Chapter 8 of this booklet.

In John 10. 16 the Lord is comparing and contrasting Israel, which He describes as a *fold*, (one nation), and the Church, which He describes as a *flock*, drawn from many folds or nations, but with Himself as its one Shepherd. After His resurrection He recommissioned Peter, the disciple who had denied Him, and told him to tend, feed and care for His lambs and sheep. In other words, the chief Shepherd commissioned Peter and the other disciples to act as His undershepherds. Peter himself shows us this very clearly in 1 Peter 5. 1-4, and here describes himself as a "fellow-elder", addressing other "elders" in the churches to whom he was writing.

In the first local church at Jerusalem the twelve apostles (including Matthias) were the first overseers. They had accompanied with the Lord Himself and were obviously best fitted for the work.

But very soon we find James, the Lord's brother, prominent in the church, and when the matter of the circumcision of Gentile converts led to controversy, the apostles and elders met to discuss it, and it was James, who was not one of the twelve, who finally suggested the solution (Acts 15. 1-29). As churches multiplied through the preaching of the Word, the apostles sometimes appointed elders from among them to act as 'overseers' in them (see Acts 14 :23), but, before He died,

Paul was led to put into writing the qualifications for this vital service, so that those coming afterwards would know the kind of men to be recognised for this work (1 Timothy 3. 1-7, Titus 1. 5-9)

Two words are used to describe these guides: one is presbyter or "elder", a word which emphasises the fact that spiritual maturity is needed; the other is "bishop", which means an overseer, superintendent, or supervisor. They are the "undershepherds" of the flock of God. Their service and that of the deacon or servant, which we shall consider in the next chapter, are the only two mentioned in connection with the care of New Testament assemblies. The three-fold division into "bishops, presbyters and deacons", adopted by the Anglican Churches, is a second or third century innovation, while the Popes and Cardinals of the Church of Rome are of even later origin. These New Testament bishops did not do all the preaching in the churches: as the names used to describe them indicate, they were leaders on account of spiritual maturity and they were the "over-seers" who saw that everything was carried out in an orderly way. There was no suggestion in those days of a distinction between "clergy and laity." And while we read that the apostles were one of the "foundation gifts", needed only in the infancy of the church (see Ephesians 2. 20), there is no suggestion anywhere that overseers were only a temporary expedient. The Scriptures rather indicate that even to-day it is God's plan that His churches be guided by them. Notice too that the word is always used in the plural: in the local church at Philippi, for instance, there were "bishops and deacons" (Philippians 1. 1). The idea of one man being in charge of a church has no warrant in the Word of God.

6. DEACONS AND THEIR WORK.

Sooner or later disputes will arise in any church, and the first Christian church at Jerusalem was no exception. The trouble arose over finance. Some funds were available for the help of the poor widows in the church, and some complained that they were not being distributed equitably. The members of the church complained to the apostles, who suggested that this work should be entrusted to seven men chosen by the assembly and approved by the apostles. The reason that the apostles were unwilling to do the distribution themselves was that they wished to be free to devote their time to a spiritual ministry rather than be caring for financial and other material matters (Acts 6. 1-6). That this service of * "deacons" was not a merely temporary expedient is shown by the fact that Paul gives detailed qualifications for those undertaking this service in 1 Timothy 3. 8-13. Although the deacon is more concerned with the material side of church service, spiritual and moral qualifications are as needed for this office as for that of overseers, but there is not the same need for spiritual maturity. If the deacon is gifted as a preacher, there is no objection to his using the gift, as the example of Stephen shows (Acts 7).

Deacons then are normally responsible to act as the treasurers of the assembly, and, where the assembly owns property, would be responsible for it. (The best way for property to be owned varies in different places. In many cases a separate property-owning trust is the ideal.) The funds collected from members of the assembly can be utilised in various ways:—

1. The rent (if any) for the meeting room, its upkeep, and other immediate needs.
2. Worthy Christian widows without other means of support (1 Timothy 5. 3-10).

* The word 'deacon' is derived from the Greek word which means 'a ministering servant'. A different word, meaning 'slave', also occurs often in the New Testament.

3. The Lord's people in times of famine, flood, and such like calamities (2 Corinthians 8, 9).

4. The Lord's servants, who are seeking to serve Him in accordance with the pattern laid down in His Word (Philippians 4. 15-17).

While it is good and convenient if an assembly can have its own meeting room (James 2. 2) it is not essential, and meetings can be held in private homes (Acts 12. 12). The size of the company and the circumstances of the time and place must be taken into account in deciding about these matters.

In many small assemblies the same brethren do the work of both overseers and deacons, but, whenever possible, it is good that these offices be separate, so that those whose primary care is the shepherding of the flock can have the time which would be taken up with these material things available for preparing messages, preaching, pastoral visiting and counselling, and all the other tasks involved in "taking care of the church of God."

7. THE CHRISTIAN ORDINANCES

The Lord Jesus Christ gave two special commandments to His disciples. Early in His public ministry we read that He baptized many disciples (John 4. 1-2), and when giving the Great Commission (Matt. 28. 18-20) He commanded His disciples to baptize those who became disciples as a result of their preaching. The second special commandment concerned the Lord's Supper, which He instituted the night that He was betrayed, as we saw in Chapter 3. Both of these ordinances are to be observed until our Lord returns (Matthew 28. 20; 1 Cor. 11. 26). We shall consider them in turn.

1. BAPTISM.

(a) The *command* to baptize was given by the Lord Himself in Matthew 28. 19. Baptism should be done "in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

(b) "Baptise" is really a Greek word meaning to "dip" or "immerse." John the Baptist baptized at Aenon, "because there was much water there" (John 3. 23).

(c) The *meaning* of baptism is explained in Romans 5. 3-11. Baptism is a picture of our identification with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection. The person baptized proclaims to the world that he has died, been buried, and raised again with Christ, and that he henceforth desires to live to please Him. Baptism is observed only *once* in the life of the believer. "Infant baptism" is not mentioned in the New Testament.

2. THE LORD'S SUPPER.

(a) This ordinance was instituted by the Lord Jesus the night before He died on the cross. It, like baptism, is a picture of the Lord's death. The separation of the blood from the body means death. An account of its institution is given in Matthew 26. 26-29, Mark 14. 22-25, Luke 22. 19,

20. and another, with more detailed explanations, in 1 Cor. 11. 23-26. The preceding chapter (vv. 14-22) and the context of 11. 17-34 should be noted.

(b) There are *two* elements in the Lord's Supper ;

1. *bread*, which is a picture of the *body* of the Lord Jesus, given as a sacrifice for us on the cross (Matthew 26. 26).

2. *wine*, which is a picture of His *blood*, shed on the cross for the remission of sins (Matthew 26. 27, 28).

Our *eating* and *drinking*, signify that all of our life comes from His death for us.

(To live a man must *breathe, eat* and *drink*. Baptism for one moment stops our breathing: in the Lord's Supper we both eat and drink).

(c) The Lord's Supper is to be observed, not once, like baptism, but *often*. Acts 20. 7 shows us how the early Christians met on the first day of the week, the Lord's Day, to eat the Lord's Supper.

These are the only two ordinances which the Lord Jesus gave to His disciples. Marriage goes back to the creation of Man. Confirmation, "Holy Orders", Extreme Unction, and the other so called "sacraments" of the Church of Rome are all man-made.

A local church seeking to carry out all that our Lord commanded will be careful to give due place to these special ordinances which He Himself instituted.

8. THE HEAD AND THE BODY

The Church at Jerusalem had a bitter enemy, a young man called Saul of Tarsus, who actively persecuted it. He was present and assisted at the martyrdom of Stephen by guarding the garments of those who stoned him to death. But God laid His hand upon Saul as he was travelling to Damascus to further his plans against the believers. He heard a voice from heaven, saying, "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou ME?" (Acts 9. 4). Note the words carefully: it was not, "why are you persecuting My people or My followers?" but "why are you persecuting ME?" In that moment the Lord revealed to Saul the germ or first glimpse of the truth that he, as the Apostle Paul, was later to emphasise in his epistles; i.e. that the Church is a body, of which Christ Himself is the Head (1 Cor. 12. 12). As the Head controls the body, so does Christ the Church (Col. 2. 19).

This relationship is effected by the Holy Spirit, Who indwells the believer. And it is through the Holy Spirit that the Head of the Church gives differing gifts to its members (1 Cor. 12. 4). This word, "gift", is used in two distinct, though related senses:

1. A God-given ability to perform a particular service (1 Cor. 12. 27-30)
2. A person possessing such an ability (Eph. 4. 11).

Gift is distinct from office: evangelists (those gifted in preaching the Gospel), teachers (those gifted in teaching the Word of God), and pastors (those gifted in caring for the believers) are all gifts. Apostles and prophets were foundation gifts, given at the beginning of the Church Age and no longer in evidence since the full revelation of the faith (Eph. 2. 20). But overseers and deacons are NEVER referred to as gifts, as their function depends on human recognition. The gift of pastoral care is a very useful one in an overseer.

A local church is thus made up of people possessing various gifts, and the intention of the Head of the Church is

that each one should use his or her gifts in accordance with His divine will for the benefit of the whole Church. Service in the assembly should be neither "one-man ministry", with one man doing all, or practically all, the speaking, or "any-man ministry", with everybody doing as he likes, but "every-man ministry", with each member contributing his or her own particular share. But these gifts must be used in accordance with the pattern laid down in God's Word. It is vital that each member of an assembly seek to prayerfully discover the gifts that he or she has received, and to develop and use them in the best possible way.

9. LOCAL CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

Every Christian should be a member of a local assembly. Faith, Baptism, and Reception into the local church is God's order.

RECEPTION. Who should be received into the assembly?

1. A new believer who desires to be baptised and received into fellowship should be examined by the brethren exercising oversight with a view to discerning that he is truly believing and that he is free from moral error. If they are satisfied that this is so, his (or her) name should be intimated to the assembly, so that anyone knowing any valid reason why the person should *not* be received may have an opportunity to make this known, and if no valid objections are raised the person may be received.

2. A believer who has been in fellowship in another assembly of believers who are seeking to carry out the teachings of the Scriptures should bring with him a letter of commendation (Rom. 16. 1, 2; 2 Cor. 3. 1) from the assembly with which he has previously been associated.

3. A believer who has been associated with a group of Christians who do not gather in the way shown in the New Testament should be interviewed and if it is found that he is free from moral or doctrinal error he may be received. It is usually wise to discourage such people from taking an active part in public service in the assembly until they are freed from any unscriptural ideas that they may have formed in their previous associations.

FELLOWSHIP. Fellowship means a "sharing together" in the privileges and responsibilities of the assembly.

1. All the believers should seek to be present at as many meetings of the assembly as possible, and all the brethren should be exercised to take some part in the meetings of the assembly, in accordance with the gifts that they have received (1 Cor. 14. 26).

2. All the believers should seek to live their individual and family lives in a way that will bring honour to the Lord and will not bring the assembly into disrepute (Col. 1. 10).

3. All the believers should seek to co-operate with each other in spreading the message of the Gospel (1 Thess. 1. 8).

4. All the believers should contribute towards the expenses of the assembly in accordance with their means (1 Cor. 16. 2) In Old Testament times the people of God were expected to give at least 10% of their income: surely we should not give less.

5. All the believers should seek to maintain the unity of the assembly, and should avoid the formation of cliques and parties in the church (Phil. 1. 27).

6. All the believers should be zealous in maintaining the purity of the assembly. If they know definitely that another believer is guilty of open sin, they should proceed as directed in Matthew 18. 15-20.

EXCOMMUNICATION. If a believer is guilty of gross moral sin—unchastity, idolatry, covetousness, drunkenness, reviling, or extortion (see 1 Cor. 5. 1-13)—he must be put out of fellowship as a “wicked person”. If any person who has been received into fellowship begins to teach anything contrary to the fundamentals of the Christian faith, especially any error in regard to the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ, he must be excluded from the assembly (2 John 10), and should not be permitted to enter a believer’s house. Until such time as those excommunicated show evidence of real repentance they must be cut off from social intercourse with those in the assembly; but when they show definite evidence of having turned from their wicked ways, by seeking to put right, as far as possible, the effects of their evil doing, they may be welcomed back into the assembly.

10. LOCAL CHURCH MEETINGS

As we read the pages of the New Testament we find that the early Christians gathered together for seven different purposes. Sometimes one meeting may well have served two or more of these. Let us note them in turn :

1. **PRAYER** (Acts 4. 31). It is the responsibility of the men to lead in prayer in the assembly (1 Tim. 2. 1-8). This passage also contains many subjects which are suitable for public prayer. Brethren praying in public should remember

(a) to use the *plural* first personal pronoun, “we”, not “I”, as the one praying is acting as the representative of the assembly.

(b) to be *audible*. If the other believers cannot hear the prayer, how can they say “Amen” to it? (1 Cor. 14. 16).

(c) to be *brief*. Note the example of Acts 4. 24-30 and the precept of Eccles. 5. 2.

2. **TEACHING** (Acts 11. 26). The Apostles’ doctrine is still of first importance. Brethren with the gift of teaching the Word of God must carry out this ministry (Rom. 12. 7). They should be careful to seek to teach “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20. 27) and not to concentrate on only a few subjects.

3. **HEARING REPORTS OF THE LORD’S WORK** (Acts 14. 27). Those serving the Lord should be given opportunity to tell of the work that God is doing through them, so that the believers can more intelligently have fellowship with them (2 Thess. 3. 1; Phil. 4. 15).

4. **READING THE SCRIPTURES** (Acts 15. 31). The epistle referred to is part of the Word of God. The public reading of the Scriptures is also referred to in 1 Tim. 4. 13 and Rev. 1. 3. It is vitally important in a church where some of the members are illiterate.

5. **BREAKING OF BREAD** (Acts 20. 7). Each Lord's Day the Lord's people should meet to partake of the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11. 20), and should seek to be prepared in heart to worthily partake.

6. **OVERSIGHT** (Acts 15. 6). The overseers of the assembly should meet together as often as needed to discuss and pray about matters concerning the spiritual well-being of the assembly.

7. **DISCIPLINE** (1 Cor. 5. 4). When open sin occurs in the assembly, a solemn gathering to put the erring believer out of fellowship must be convened. At this meeting the nature of the sin must be stated, the believers exhorted to fully endorse the action taken, and prayer should be made for the speedy restoration of the sinning brother or sister to the assembly.

Scripture plainly indicates that it is the responsibility of the men in the Assembly to preach (1 Cor. 14. 26), and to pray (1 Tim. 2. 8), while the women are to be silent (1 Cor. 14. 34) and in subjection (1 Tim. 2. 11). This does not mean that there is no place for women in Christian service, but it does mean that it is not a place of prominence in church meetings.

It will be noted that no mention has been made of a Gospel Meeting. In the next chapter we will deal with this subject as we consider the witness of the local church to those around about it.

11. THE WITNESS OF THE LOCAL CHURCH

Each individual Christian is called upon to be a witness to the Lord Jesus Christ (Luke 24. 48 ; Acts 1. 8), and this can always be done by private conversation with those with whom we come in contact day by day (1 Peter 3. 15). Thus is called "personal evangelism" and all believers, brethren and sisters alike, can do this valued service. Hospital visitation, tract distribution, and such like avenues of service give good opportunities for this. After a Gospel meeting is held, believers should always be ready to speak to ones who have shown interest and to explain to them matters which they do not understand. For obvious reasons, it is usually best to do such work with others of one's own sex.

But the local church will also have opportunities to help in "mass evangelism", when one brother (who should possess the gift of an evangelist) preaches the Gospel to a number of people. Such gatherings can be held in many places.

(a) Often the assembly meeting room is suitable for a regular meeting or a special series of meetings (James 2. 2).

(b) Sometimes cottage meetings in the homes of believers give good opportunities to reach neighbours and friends. (Acts 18. 7).

(c) A secular building (a theatre, school, or the like) may be ideal in some cases (Acts 19. 9).

(d) A temporary structure (a tent or a pandal) erected on some open place may attract more people than any of these. Such are usually best used in fine weather.

Those evangelists whom the Lord has called to give up secular employment, for the sake of the Gospel, should be encouraged to go to centres where there are no believers, and seek to win souls in these places, and practical fellowship should be extended by the church to those who are doing this vital work. When they visit their home assembly or other

established assemblies, they should be given an opportunity to tell of the work that the Lord is doing with them (Acts 14. 27).

New assemblies normally come into being in one of two ways.

(a) An evangelist goes to a place, souls are saved, baptised, and formed into an assembly.

(b) An assembly "hives" off to form a new testimony. This is very useful in cities, as a number of suburban assemblies may be able to reach a bigger number of people than one large central gathering. Also, in a large assembly there is a very real danger that the majority of the work be left in the hands of a small minority of brethren; in a small assembly, there is usually more room for development and use of gift.

12. HOW TO ACT

It will be obvious to any reader of these chapters that not all companies of those known as Christians act in the way that we have described. In some cases, belief in the deity of Christ is not required in church members; in many cases, local churches are federated into denominations; in some cases, the children of Christians are regarded as fit for baptism, and the Lord's Supper is only rarely observed; oversight is vested in a "bishop" or "superintendent", with authority over a number of churches, rather than in a group of overseers in each church; "one-man ministry" is the rule in many congregations, little scope being given for the development of gift; some care little as to the lives that their members live, and even tolerate immorality and false doctrine. How is the believer to act in view of these things?

1. He must never forget that the basic principle of Christian living is that of practically recognising CHRIST AS LORD. The disobedience of others is no excuse for my disobedience. Whatever it costs, I must do as He commands. The words of Mary, the Lord's mother, to the servants at Cana of Galilee should be taken to heart by every Christian: "Whatsoever He saith unto you, do it" (John 2. 5).

2. In linking himself with any group of Christians, he should therefore ask the question: "Is membership in this church consistent with acknowledging Christ as Lord?" If the answer is "No," he should refuse to join it, or, if already a member, should come out of it.

3. He should then seek to actively associate with a group of believers who are sincerely seeking to carry out the pattern of church life found in the Scriptures. It may be a small company, perhaps only two or three, but if they are truly gathered "in His name", the Lord Jesus Himself has promised to be "in the midst", and we can rely on His word (Matthew 18. 20). If there is no such company of believers within reach, he should so seek to witness to his neighbours and friends that they may believe and be saved, and be formed

into an assembly of believers meeting in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

There are difficulties to be faced in this, as in all other aspects of the Christian life. The believer who is seeking to obey the Lord must beware lest he should become proud of his obedience. "Even so ye also, when ye shall have done *all* the things that are commanded you, say, 'We are unprofitable servants; we have done that which was our duty to do,'" is a word from the Lord Jesus Himself (Luke 17. 10). While we should seek to "admonish and teach every man" (Colossians 1. 28), we should remember that each Christian is responsible to His own Master (Romans 14. 10-12), and be very careful in judging motives. After all, our first duty is to follow the Lord ourselves (John 21. 22), and not to worry unnecessarily about our brethren.

May the Lord grant that our consideration of these topics may lead to greater practical obedience to our Lord Jesus Christ, so that our assemblies may more truly represent Him to others.

RECOMMENDED BOOKS FOR FURTHER STUDY

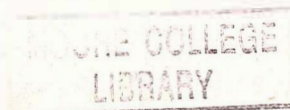
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THE CHRISTIAN ASSEMBLY by J. R. Littlepound. (Published and distributed by the Ralph E. Welch Foundation, 181 Monterey Road, Orange, California, U.S.A.) This most useful collection of Bible class Notes is available free on request from the publisher in the U.S.A.

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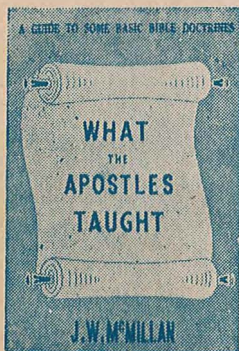
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