

The Oneness of the Body of Christ

—J. van Dijk

The Church — Christ's Body

All who believe in the Lord Jesus as their personal Saviour are members of the Church, the body of Christ (Eph. 1:23). In that body national boundaries are unknown. One is a member of that body neither by accepting a creed, nor by enlisting on a membership roll, nor by being a citizen of certain country. One is a member of the body of Christ by having received the Holy Spirit based simply on one's faith in the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:13; 1 Cor. 12:13). Today's denominations are all man made and their very existence is a denial of the oneness of the body of Christ.

There is one Body

That the Lord Jesus died to "gather together into one the children of God who were scattered abroad" (Jn. 11:52) shows the value that oneness has to Him. Some think that this is only a spiritual oneness. It has indeed a spiritual basis, but it also has a practical aspect. The words "who were scattered abroad" show that the practical side is the dominant one in this verse. Being scattered abroad is a very visible and practical matter, not just an abstract, spiritual one.

When attitudes in Corinth threatened this oneness, Paul told the Corinthians that they were carnal and walked as men (1 Cor. 3:3-4). Today some speak of the blessing of the denominations; Paul tells us that they are carnal.

Denominational divisions have serious results. The Lord asked: "That they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that Thou hast sent Me" (Jn. 17:21). Obviously He spoke of a oneness visible to the world. Today many turn to the New Age Movement because they fail to believe that the Lord Jesus was sent by God. They don't believe this because Christians failed to demonstrate their oneness.

A solution?

Around 1830 some recognized the evil of denominational divisions, and they began to meet in a way that gave expression to the oneness of the body. They received all to the breaking of bread who truly belonged to the Lord Jesus. The Lord greatly blessed these early brethren (as they called themselves). The gospel went out, many were saved, their assemblies grew.

Then division also came among them. Initially there was a matter of a wrong doctrine. This evil itself was thankfully recognized and dealt with, but secondary (I do not say, less important) issues caused peace to leave the brethren movement. The question arose, what to do with Christians who kept associating with the false teacher? Here the answers began to differ. Some assemblies thought they should be received as long as they personally did not hold wrong doctrine. Other assemblies were convinced that all who associated with the evil teacher were "partakers in his wicked works" (2 Jn. :11). The so-called "open assemblies" took the former position, and the so-called "exclusive assemblies" the latter.

Repentance

We believe it is appropriate that first we acknowledge this failure before God. No one can deny that we Christians are jointly responsible for the sad testimony to the oneness of the body of Christ. Yet, what Amos said of the Israelites could be said of many Christians today: "They anoint themselves with the chief ointments; but are not grieved for the breach of Joseph" (Amos 6:6). Oh, how guilty we are! How serious is our departure, how disastrous our denominational divisions. All true Christians share in this guilt, but especially those whose forebears set out afresh to show the oneness. The latter recognized the evil and tried to express the oneness of the body in the midst of the ruin. Yet, pride and quarrels among them have caused many to turn their backs on them (not primarily on the path) and, as a result, also on the expression of the oneness of the body.

Contradictions?

A new question, that of fellowship and association, confronted the brethren. Should a company that claims to be based on the oneness of the body of Christ refuse true Christians to take part of the Lord's Supper? Many assemblies who claim to be gathered on the basis of the oneness of the body often refuse others who do not regularly break bread with them. How can that be? Isn't that a denial of the oneness of the body? This valid question warrants a closer look.

Then and Now

Today we obviously live in a time of individualism and independence. A minister may begin an independent church and be considered a partner on equal footing among the ministers of other churches. Christians seek "the church of their own choice," instead of searching God's Word to see what His desire is for the Church. Today, to break bread elsewhere than within one's "own" fellowship is no great deal.

In the early days of brethren, it was no small matter to break bread in any other setting than one's own church; it was just not done. Therefore, one who came to break bread with the brethren was swimming against the stream. Today matters are obviously different, it is a much easier thing to seek to break bread in a place where one does not go regularly, and many consider it a strictly personal matter.

The principles

The question of fellowship entails more than a personal remembering of the Lord. Those who break bread with a company thereby express to be one with that company and all it stands for, its basis and its doctrines. This is one side. The other side is that those who receive one to the breaking of bread express to be one with that person and all he holds in doctrine and practice. Where such a mutual expression of oneness accompanies the breaking of bread, a true expression of the oneness of the body of Christ is seen. Conversely, breaking of bread without regard for these facts is a denial of the oneness of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 10:16-17).

Consequences

If the oneness of the body is to be expressed by the breaking of bread, one cannot break bread in an assembly associated with another assembly with which one refuses to walk. One who does so denies by this very act the oneness of the body. It should not be difficult to see that to receive a Christian who has refused to break bread in another assembly within the same fellowship is, therefore, a denial of the oneness of the body.

Some feel free to visit then this denomination and then that. They consider that it is up to them alone to decide where to go on a particular Sunday. Such persons fail to realize that the question of oneness of the body is directly involved in the act of remembering the Lord. The behaviour of such a person (by design or out of ignorance) disregards the display of oneness that is so valuable to the Lord. To receive such persons is not an expression of the oneness of the body but an acceptance of an independent walk.

In days of much error about the person of Christ, the value of His work, and the authority of God's Word (evolution, even among Christians), it is no longer possible to receive a person on his own cognisance. No one will ever consider him- or herself to hold a wrong doctrine. Care is needed to find out that the one desiring to break bread is free from such things. Since the act of breaking of bread is an expression of the oneness of the body, those with wrong doctrines cannot be received without denying that oneness or becoming partakers of their evil deeds.

Also, many who are burdened by an evil doctrine in "their church" will nevertheless not leave it. Occasionally such persons want to break bread. In love such persons should be taught, rather than received, for until they separate, they fall under the judgment of 2 John :11. To receive them to the breaking of bread before they break their link with those who bring evil teachings would be denying the oneness of the body expressed by that solemn act.

These four examples show situations in which receiving would express the opposite of the oneness of the body. For that very reason, care needs to be taken as to who breaks bread each Lord's day. At face value the refusal to let them break bread may seem to be a denial of the oneness of the body, yet at closer inspection, receiving them would deny this truth.

Others

Are there then no Christians who could be received? Must assemblies follow the motto: "If you don't belong to us, you have no place with us," as some say they should? This is the kind of denial of the oneness of the body that initially gave rise to the "brethren movement." Such remark shows that we have gone full circle, and are back to where we were in the early 1800's. It would unequivocally render the assemblies another denomination, another sect among the many.

The above negative examples may serve as a guide for evaluating each individual that presents him or herself. First, there is of course the need for assurance that the person is truly a child of God. Then, if there is no wilful independence, if there is no known association with evil, if there is no past refusal to associate with those gathered unto the name of the Lord Jesus, then an assembly might well decide to receive such an individual just as those who were received in the early days.

Practically this requires an opportunity to speak with the person before the breaking of bread. If time is lacking, the individual should refrain from breaking bread. If time allows, however, those speaking with the visitor need to be close to the Lord Jesus. It is a serious thing to accept when He would refuse, or to refuse when He would accept. The Holy Spirit's guidance in this matter is of prime importance. It would of course be easier to say either, "We never allow such a person to break bread," or, "If they say they are a Christian, we let them break bread without further questions." Though either path is easier, neither is of God. Life in the Assembly is a life of a living relationship with Him who knows His own and who died for them. He died for the oneness of the body. Let us, in dependence upon Him, seek to take care to show this oneness both in our receiving and refusing to receive.

The Prophecy of Amos (6)

—R. Been Sr.

In the previous chapters, Israel had been repeatedly warned of the impending judgments. These judgments are now all in the past. The position of Israel as God's testimony on this earth gave them a greater responsibility than the surrounding nations. Their condition, despite the repeated warnings by the prophets, had reached such a low state that God, who loved them dearly, could not delay His judgments any longer.

Chapter 5

The last warning

This chapter still begins with the warning: "Hear this word," but it is the third and last warning. The first one was directed to all Israel, the twelve tribes. Judgment stood at the door. The second was directed at Ephraim, the ten tribes. It spoke of their pursuit of wealth and the terrible link between the Lord's service and the idolatry introduced by Jeroboam.

Now comes the third warning. Three is the number of divine perfection, pointing to a perfect warning. God does all things in perfection, whether blessing, judgment, or warning. This third warning to hear the word is in the form of a dirge about the fall of the house of Israel, the ten tribes.

The prophet sees the Lord's judgment over Israel as already having been accomplished. Israel has fallen and will no more arise, it has been cast to the ground and there is no one to raise it up. Its entire military might has been destroyed, thousands have died. It has become defenseless, for the word of the Lord was: The city that once could send out a thousand would only retain a hundred, and the city that sent out a hundred only ten. That settled the fate of Israel.

The fall of Israel as a whole, of the ten tribes, was firmly decided, and it did come. Yet, for the individual soul who, in the midst of the ruin of the whole, sought the Lord, there remained the possibility of salvation. Such a person would live. For him it was not yet too late. But this meant that he was no longer to seek Bethel or to go to Gilgal, for that entire false religious system would be destroyed. Those who sought the Lord did not need religion; they needed God.

The execution of the determined judgment would still be delayed if Israel would as yet seek the Lord just in time. Then the Lord would not yet break forth as a fire in the house of Joseph. When that fire would come, no one at Bethel would be able to put it out, none of those who had changed justice into wormwood (bitterness), and had cast down righteousness to the earth. Isn't He the Almighty who made the Pleiades and the Orion, who drives away the darkness by the morning, but who also darkens the day as the night? Isn't He the One who called the waters of the sea to cover the surface of the earth? His name is Jehovah. He causes destruction to come over the stronghold and the fortress.

Greed

Israel, however, had not listened to God. They had displayed all their wicked characteristics. They hated him who stood for righteousness in the gate. They despised him who spoke led by his conscience and the truth. They oppressed the poor, obliging them to deliver grain. Because of this, they wouldn't dwell in the stone mansions they had built for themselves; though they had planted beautiful vineyards, they wouldn't enjoy them.

Their numerous transgressions and sins were committed out of a thirst for wealth and the pursuit of profit. All other, better, higher motives were set aside for these low instincts. They oppressed the righteous, accepted unrighteous bribes and pushed the poor ones who came to seek justice aside in the gate.

How great is the unrighteousness of oppressing the just ones! The world, even the religious world, invented the terrible axiom: Might is right. Did the world not apply this when confronted with the Righteous One, the Lord Jesus Christ?

Rejected with Christ

The few wise ones would be silent in those days of judgment (v. 13), for it would be an evil time. So it was to be then, and so it is still an important attitude today. It is not the task of a believer, a "wise one," who understands God's thoughts, to fight against the evil present in the world. At times he may perhaps raise his voice against an injustice, but generally, the current of evil and unrighteousness is too strong to break it or to curtail it. Only God intervening in judgment can do so. The wise one will, therefore, be silent. He always has the Lord as his refuge, and He is able to fight for him. Therefore, he does not protest, nor raises his voice, he is silent and relies on God's intervention. Often he will, in the midst of the evil, not know how to pray as is fitting. Then he can only resort to groaning that cannot be uttered. He waits for the moment that he can change his silence for a song of praise to the glory of Him who will soon curtail all this evil. He waits for the moment that evil, sin, will have been removed from this world as a power and a symptom. It speaks volumes that the Lord Jesus, in the midst of all the evil and unrighteousness done to Him, remained silent (Mt. 26:63).

God wishes all to be saved

Three times the Lord had said to Israel, "Hear this word." Three times the call of the Lord had sounded to seek good so that they might live (3:1; 4:1; 5:1,4,6,14). This is a clear demonstration of God's great desire and care for man to escape judgment and death. God does not make the way of escape a difficult one. Just a single upright desire in the sinner's heart for God and he will find life, find God. The knowledge of God, obtained through the holy Scriptures, causes One to seek, desire, and pursue good; the Scriptures enable one to do so.

When good is loved, and evil hated, when justice is executed in the gate, then, so says the prophet, the Lord, the God of Hosts, would perhaps be gracious to the remnant of Joseph. No longer is anything to be expected from the people; as a whole it will fall under the judgment.

Thus says the Lord

"Thus says the Lord." This is said three times in this chapter (vv. 3,4,11). In chapters 1 and 2 it occurs eight times, always while speaking of God's ways of recompense. Here, however, it occurs while speaking about God's people on earth. Everywhere there would be wailing and mourning. They would ask for wailing from those who had knowledge of lamenting. Women who knew the songs of lament would be in demand.

The Lord would go through the midst of Israel (v. 17). Now it is only an announcement of judgment, without an invitation to repentance. The same expression is used as when God judged Egypt by killing all first born (Ex. 11:4; 12:12). Then there was for Israel a passing over of God by the blood of the Passover Lamb. Now there would be no passing over for Israel. The Lord would go through their midst (7:8; 8:2).

Israel relied upon the fact that God was for them (v. 18). Were they not God's chosen people? Did they not have the service of the Lord? That the day of the Lord, the day of recompense over the Gentile nations would come they considered reasonable and they waited for that day. Israel longed for it, for during that day, or immediately after it, there would come a time of unknown prosperity. In reality, however, God was against them.

Woe

The "woe" in verse 18 should be understood in this sense. The day of the Lord would bring darkness and judgment over Israel, rather than light and blessing. Then Israel would be like someone who, after just having escaped the attack of a lion, meets a bear who crushed him with its front paws. Or it would be like one who flees into a house and, when leaning with his hand against the wall, is bitten by a serpent.

Removing the symbolism, this mean: During the judgment, Israel would not find safety anywhere so as to escape it. If they did not meet with one thing, it would be another, for the day of the Lord would be darkness for them and not light. The "woe to thee" had been pronounced over them.

Later the Lord Jesus announced a seven-fold "woe to thee" over the leaders of the people of Judah (Mt. 23:13-33). The "woe" in our chapter concerns all Israel, all twelve tribes. This is evident from verse 25, although it concerns the ten tribes first of all.

God despises empty religion

What value had their service for God? He hated and despised their feasts; He couldn't stand their days of fasting. He had no pleasure in their burnt- and peace-offerings; their thanks offerings He did not regard. It would be better if they removed the noise of their songs; the plucking of their harps He did not wish to hear. The prophet Isaiah says the same thing (Isa. 1:10-15). God hates the self-willed religion of man. He looks at the heart and conscience, not at the forms. So it is today. Many who pride themselves in proper Scriptural forms believe that God is on their side. They seem to forget that God judges all who have nothing but a form of religion, without life from God.

"Let judgment roll down as waters, and righteousness as an overflowing stream" (v. 24). This is what awaited Israel; it also awaits mankind. Man wanted peace and light, true enough, and they believed that they would get these without seeking good rather than evil. They expected to be kept from judgment without possessing life from God. Only through judgment will it afterwards be possible that justice and righteousness will reign on earth.

The question is asked of Israel (v. 25) whether they during the 40-year wilderness journey had brought sacrifices and oblations to God only. The answer had to be negative, for then they had also carried along the images they had made in Egypt of Sikkuth, their king, and Kiyun, the star of their gods (NASB). In the books of Moses we don't find a reference to this, although we find there the idolatry around the golden calf. It remains a question whether they, after having been punished for this, did no longer serve false gods. Later in their history, idolatry had reached its climax.

This and the accompanying sins became the cause of the judgment that would finally come over the ten tribes. They would be led into captivity far beyond Damascus. Thus spoke Jehovah, whose name is the God of Hosts. As far as the two tribes are concerned, after their return from Babel, their sin reached its climax in the rejection of the Messiah. Stephen, who refers to the verses 25-26 of Amos 5 in his discourse before the Sanhedrin, says that Judah would be carried away beyond Babylon (Acts 7:42-43). Judah is still under this judgment today.

Chapter 6

Woe

This chapter begins with the announcement of the second "woe," again over the twelve tribes, here called Zion and Samaria. Woe to the careless ones at Zion, and those who feel themselves safe on the mountain of Samaria. Judah and Israel should have been able to count on the governments of the nations around them to protect them. Israel expected safety from them, but instead they were anxious to increase their territory.

Jeroboam II had temporarily warded off this threat by conquering a few of the enemies' cities, among them Hamath, an important fortress in the North (2 Ki. 14:18). Now it was questionable whether Hamath could remain in the hands of Israel. It appears from Scripture that this city was later reconquered by the Assyrians (2 Ki. 18:34; 19:13), just as the cities of Calneh and Gath.

During the reign of Jeroboam II there was, as we mentioned before, an unprecedented prosperity in Israel. But with it came also a general weakening and demoralization. They put the evil day, the day of judgment, far away, and brought the seat of violence near. They simply didn't concern themselves about the future. Since the present was good, they committed violence and unrighteousness.

Selfishness

They thought of themselves alone, of their good life. They lay down, lazily resting on ivory beds and precious couches. They only thought of good food and drinks, enhanced with joyful music, as they chanted at the sound of lutes and harps. They had invented these instruments to increase their own pleasures. David, the poet-singer of Israel, had once invented musical instruments to accompany the songs of praise worthy of the Lord. The words "like David" only refers to the inventing of musical instruments. David had invented them, and so did they, but there was a great difference in their motives. David sought thereby to glorify the Lord, but they thought only of gratifying their own sensuality.

They were addicted to the wine they drank out of costly bowls. They anointed themselves with the best oils, but did not concern themselves about the "breach of Joseph," the ruin of the ten-tribe nation, which they caused. That day they put far off. Therefore they would be the first, heading the column of captives. The festivities of eating and drinking of those unrighteous, wealthy people would find a definite end.

Total devastation

God abhorred the pride of Jacob, and He hated his palaces, just as He had hated and despised Israel's hollow religion (ch. 5:21). Both are an abomination in His eyes. The city (here not further defined, it may be Jerusalem or Samaria, or perhaps both) would be given up to the enemy. If ten men were left in a house, they would die. A relative would come to burn the bodies, for there would be a shortage of tombs. When he would ask whether there are more, others would tell him: None. Then the relative would say, "Be silent" (just don't say anything), for they (the ones who had died) didn't want them to remember the name of the Lord.

The Lord would command and then both the great and the small house would fall under His judgment. This seems to signify Israel (the large house) and Judah (the small house), for the subject is the house of Jacob. Probably the prophet refers here to the result of the earthquake.

Verses 12-14 refer to the ten tribes. Israel prided itself on its victories and ascribed them to its own power. This, however, made just as much sense as when horses would run and oxen would plow on bare rock. It made just as little sense that they had made justice and righteousness into bitterness.

Lost gain

They rejoiced in the achievements of their own power, but failed to realize that this power did not amount to anything. All armies, fleets, and armament are in God's eyes but a speck of dust blown away by the wind. It is well to remember this in these days of nuclear power.

God would bring a nation, an oppressor, over the ten-tribe nation. This is the Assyrian. The Assyrians would first plunder Israel of what they thought to have obtained through their own power. Then Israel would be oppressed and forced to retreat from Hamath, that Israel had fortified against attacks from the North, to the Jordan, their natural boundary. All that Israel possessed east of the Jordan would fall into the hands of the Assyrian. All Israel's proud possessions would be taken from them. That is always the way things go in the history of the nations.

So far Amos had prophesied about events that were about to happen. In the chapters that follow he speaks also about the things that are still future even today.

Chapter 7

Three visions

In chapters 3-5 we read three times, "Hear this word." Three times too, we found the encouragement, "Seek Me." Then in verses 1-9 of chapter 7 the prophet speaks of three visions. These visions are regarding the three invasions of the Assyrian into Israel. The first one came under Pul, the next under Tiglath-Pileser, and the last under Shalmaneser. Three is the number of divine perfection.

Locusts

The first vision is that of locusts, a well-known type of the Assyrian. The prophet Joel also speaks of a locust plague. Amos saw in his vision how the Lord formed locusts when the latter grass growth started to sprout, after the king's mowings. The history recorded in 2 Kings tells us that King Menahem succeeded in having the Assyrian to withdraw by paying him a thousand talents of silver. To obtain this money, he had taxed every wealthy inhabitant 50 shekels each (2 Ki. 15:19-20). Amos words "the latter growth after the king's mowings" allude to this.

When the locusts were about to begin to devour the green herbs completely, the prophet intervened and pleaded with the Lord for forgiveness. How could Jacob (Israel) arise? He was only small. The prophet said the opposite of what the leaders of Israel proclaimed. They were proud about their might and greatness. This intercession of the prophet led to the curtailing of the locust plague.

Acknowledging one's own smallness before God, and confessing that one cannot stand in judgment, shows a disposition according to God's thoughts. It causes God to repent over the intended judgment. God, therefore, changed His actions toward the people. The judgment was immediately withdrawn.

Fire

The second vision was a fire that, after having consumed the great flood (symbolic of the sea of nations), also threatened to consume the land (a type of Israel). That fire symbolized the Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser (2 Ki. 15:27-29; 1 Chr. 5:6,26; 2 Chr. 28:20) Again the prophet Amos interceded with the same words and again the Lord answered that it would not take place.

The Plumb Line

With a plumb line in hand, the Lord then stood near a wall that had once been vertical. He was going to use this plumb line in the midst of His people Israel. From now on He would no longer pass it by, no longer spare it from judgment. The high places of Isaac would be laid desolate, the shrines of Israel destroyed, and God would lift up His sword against the house of Jeroboam.

The symbol of a plumb line is simple: it shows each deviation. It proves if a wall has begun to lean. If so, only one thing can be done. It needs to be taken down to be rebuilt. This would happen with Israel. In this third vision there is no mention of intervention. A definite judgment would come over Israel, the exile of the ten tribes by the Assyrian king Shalmaneser (2 Ki. 17:1-6). How significant are the words: "I will not again pass by them anymore." This was the second announcement. Before the Lord had already spoken that He would treat Israel as He had once treated Egypt (5:17). This announcement is now augmented. The Lord will no longer pass by them as He had passed by them in Egypt, and as Israel had been spared the judgments of the two previous visions. Now there would not be a lamb whose blood could protect Israel.

The end

God would make an end to Israel's existence as a nation. The sanctuaries of Israel would be destroyed, and the house of Jehu, of which Jeroboam II was the third descendent, would be destroyed by the sword. So it happened. Zechariah, the son of Jeroboam was slain after a reign of six months. Thereby the promise made to Jehu, that his sons would sit on Israel's throne until the fourth generation, was fulfilled (2 Ki. 15:8-12). After Zechariah, five kings reigned for some time over Israel, in total about 41 years. During the reign of Hosea, the last of these five and the last king of Israel, the judgment, that made an end of Israel's existence as a nation, came. After a siege of three years, Samaria was destroyed and the Israelites, as far as they had not fallen in battle, were taken captive to Assyria. This happened in the year 722 B.C. (2 Ki. 17:6).

The plumb line speaks loud and clear. When the Lord uses it in our days, in our midst, among our relatives, in our family, what would it show?

The prophet rejected

Verses 10-17 are a break in the visions of Amos, and gives an idea of the opposition against his prophesying. Amos had gone to Bethel to prophesy there. Amaziah, the priest of Bethel (not the priest of the Lord), opposed the prophet and sent a message to Jeroboam II, king of Israel. He claimed that Amos conspired against him by speaking among the people words that the land, the kingdom could not bear. For, so he claimed, Amos had said that King Jeroboam would die by the sword and that Israel would go into exile. The first part the prophet did certainly not say. The Lord had not told him that Jeroboam would die by the sword, but that the Lord would rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword.

Priests appointed by men have always opposed the Lord's servants who were driven by the Holy Spirit to speak the word of God. Amaziah did not tolerate the activities of Amos in the ten-tribe nation, the realm where he had arrogated spiritual rights to himself. In prophesying, Amos trod on Amaziah's territory. To rid himself of the prophet whose words disturbed him, he called upon the secular powers, that they might condemn the prophet. In anticipation of the decision of Jeroboam, he said to Amos, "Thou seer, go, flee away into the land of Judah, and eat bread there, and prophecy there. But prophesy not again any more at Bethel; for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is the house of the kingdom."

This way Amaziah thought to rid himself of Amos. He forgot though that God will not allow Himself to be restricted by men, and that only His authority is lawful and decisive. Amos announced the truth in Israel, but to the priest Amaziah it was highly important that Amos' message be curtailed. Amos' message destroyed the entire religious system devised by Jeroboam I, and with it he ruined the position of the spiritual leaders in Israel. This caused Amaziah to falsely accuse Amos, invoking government help to put pressure on Amos.

This is the experience of every preacher who announces truths that condemns man's religious institutions. Man loves to chase such preachers away, accusing them of political activity that the country cannot bear.

A prophet's faith

Hezekiah acted differently and better than the priest Azariah when Micah prophesied that Zion would be plowed like a field and Jerusalem would be laid in ruins (Jer. 26:17-19). Once, Uriah the son of Shemaiah had brought the wrath of King Jehoiakim upon himself by prophesying against Jerusalem. Uriah then had fled to Egypt, but his lack of faith became the cause of his death (Jer. 26:20-23). Jeremiah, who experienced similar things, trusted in the protection of his Sender, who had set him up as a brazen wall (Jer. 38:28; 15:20-21).

With similar trust Amos answered Amaziah. He was no prophet, not even a son of a prophet, but a herdsman and a gatherer of sycamore fruit. The Lord had taken him from behind the sheep and told him to prophesy among the Israelites. Amos did not pretend to be more than he was. He did not hold a special office in Judah and declared that he had neither received instruction from, nor been appointed by men. The Lord Himself had appointed him, instructed him, and sent him; that was sufficient. God alone has the right to appoint His ministers. Every human arrogation in this is an affront to God's sovereignty. A simple shepherd can become a prophet, a fisherman an apostle. This depends on the Lord alone.

Christ

Amos displayed the mind of Christ which Zechariah sketched in a few words (Zech. 13:5). Christ said, "I am no prophet." That does not mean to say that He had no right to be a prophet, but that He had, as it were, foregone this right, to become a man who tilled the land. Christ did not come as a prophet, therefore He said, "I am no prophet." Amos said, "I was no prophet... but I became one." Man had allowed himself to be recruited as a servant of sin. Christ allowed himself to be installed as Servant for the salvation of man, and to this end He entered suffering and trial. From his humble position Amos was exalted to that of prophet. He who was much more than a prophet descended from the highest place to the position of a serving slave.

Instead of being scared off by the words of Amaziah and the likely wrath of King Jeroboam, Amos announced the judgment over Amaziah. His wife would become a harlot, his sons and daughters would die by the sword, his fields would be divided among others. He himself would die in an unclean (Gentile) country. With Israel, he would go into exile.

To be cont'd

The path of the righteous is as the shining light, going on and brightening until the day be fully come. Proverbs 4:18

The Light is Sweet

Through cloudy storms and sunshine
The Lord has led the way;
Through dark and fearful shadows,
But toward the light of day.

Earth's darkness seems increasing,
Men's hearts fail them for fear;
But God's grace is unceasing,
And Christ will soon appear.

He will give grace and glory,
Grace to lead safely home
Through trial and need and sorrow:
Glory when He shall come!

If darkness seems alarming,
We who believe have light,
And look for Christ's appearing
In sunshine pure and bright.

L. M. Grant

Outline for Bible Study (60)

121. The Seven Parables of the Kingdom of Heaven — Matthew 13; Mark 4:1-20, 30-34; Luke 8:4-15; 13:20-21

Outline

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|-------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. Introduction | Mt.13:10-17,34-35,51-52 |
| 2. The sower | Mt. 13:1-9, 18-23 |
| 3. The tares among the wheat | Mt. 13:24-30, 36-43 |
| 4. The mustard seed | Mt. 13:31-32 |
| 5. The leaven | Mt. 13:33 |
| 6. The treasure hidden in the field | Mt. 13:44 |
| 7. The pearl of great price | Mt. 13:45-46 |
| 8. The net with the great fishes | Mt. 13:47-50 |

Explanation

1. The first parable shows the different responses to the Word of God. It is followed by two groups of three. In the first the Lord told the multitude how the carelessness of men would ruin the kingdom. In the next group, He told His disciples of how valuable the kingdom was to Himself despite its corruption, and how He would secure it for Himself. The Lord taught in parables so those who rejected Him would not understand (Mt. 13:13, Jn. 12:37-40), But He explained the parables to a remnant that believed in Him (Mt. 13:36).

2. The roadside speaks of the hardened heart (Pharaoh, the Pharisees). Satan takes away the Word, but man remains responsible. In soft but shallow soil, seed germinates quickly, but since the roots have no depth, it soon withers. This speaks of fickle hearts which at first receive the Word joyfully. The precious promises of forgiveness, peace, stir up mind and feelings, but the conscience remains untouched, the soul does not repent. These fall away when tribulation comes.

Though the third soil has depth, it is full of weeds, robbing the seed of air, light, and nourishment. It speaks of divided hearts. They recognize their sinful condition, and understand salvation in Christ, yet cares, riches, and lusts choke the seed (Felix, Acts 24:24-27; the rich young man, Mark 10:22-23; and Judas). The fourth soil (soft, deep, and clean) represents the true, receptive heart that receives and understands the Word (Paul, Lydia, the Philippian jailer, Cornelius).

3. This parable shows how the kingdom of heaven would become a mixture of good and evil. The Lord Jesus had begun to spread the seed over the whole world (the field). Satan used men's negligence (sleep) to sow tares (sons of the wicked one), which are very hard to distinguish from wheat (sons of the kingdom). This mixture is to be left in the field to grow up together till the harvest (the end of this dispensation). Then angels, after separating the evil from the good, will bundle the tares, leaving them on earth, to be destroyed when the Lord sets up His kingdom.

4. The Church is in the kingdom of heaven, but it is not the kingdom, which is professing Christendom. It began small, but, contrary to its nature, grew into a big tree (a world power) in which birds (evil spirits) feel at home. This parable shows the *external* form of the kingdom of heaven.

5. Leaven is always a symbol of corruption (Mt. 16:6,11-12; Lk. 12:1; 1 Cor. 5:6-8; Gal. 5:9). At the passover no leaven was to be found in Israel. The woman (Church hierarchy) hid leaven (moral and doctrinal evil) within the dough (the confessing company). The parable shows the *internal* condition of the kingdom of heaven.

6. The Lord Jesus buys the field (the world) for the treasure (the Church) it contains. The high price (His precious blood) tells how highly the Lord values the treasure (Acts 20:28).

7. The pearl of great price is similar, but symbolizes the marvelous beauty of the Church in the eye of the Lord Jesus. This parable portrays the kingdom of heaven in its last days.

8. Men separate the good fishes (true believers) from the bad (the wicked) and put them in vessels (local churches — not denominations). Later, angels will separate the wicked from the midst of the children of God for eternal judgment (v. 49). In these last days, the Lord Jesus uses His servants to separate His own from the world. They are occupied with the righteous, the angels with the wicked.

Lesson

During the reformation, the church attempted to do what the Lord forbade. In its effort to remove heretics from the field (the world), it burned wheat (e.g., John Hus in 1415).

122. The Feeding Of The Five Thousand. Jesus Walks Upon The Water —Matthew 14:13-36; Mark 6:30-56; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:5-21

Outline

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|-------------------------------|--------------|
| 1. Jesus' compassion | Mt. 14:13-14 |
| 2. The great miracle | Jn. 6:5-13 |
| 3. The effect upon the people | Jn. 6:14-15 |
| 4. The Lord in prayer | Mt. 14:22-23 |
| 5. The disciples in trouble | Mt. 14:24-27 |
| 6. Peter walking on the water | Mt. 14:28-33 |

Explanation

1. The execution of John caused the Lord to look for solitude across the lake. The multitude, however, followed Him on foot. Though deprived of the longed-for quietness, He, full of compassion, healed the sick (Mt. 14:14).

2. The people followed Jesus to hear Him, but true faith was seldom found. Even His own disciples did not recognize Him as Jehovah, but thought He needed to be reminded that it was time to dismiss the crowds. Though He had longed to be alone, He did not send them away empty. His remark tested the disciples (v. 16). Where could sufficient bread be bought?

Who had enough money (one denarius is a day's wages)? What good was the little they had? Looking for answers, Philip and Andrew saw only the practical circumstances (Jn. 6:5-9). They had little faith. Then the Lord Jesus gave thanks for the food, and the bread multiplied in the Lord's hands, the Creator of all things. Twelve baskets of the fragments were gathered up, for "God is a God of order" (1 Cor. 14:40) and thrift (Jn. 6:12).

3. Because Jesus could satisfy their physical needs, the people wanted to make Him king (Jn. 6:14-15). The Lord wanted to become their Saviour first.

4. After caring for the crowds, the Lord finally had opportunity to be alone. He sent the disciples away, dismissed the crowd, and went up into the mountain to pray. How necessary it is for us also to speak with God, the Father.

5. While the ship was in the middle of the sea, tossed by the waves, the Lord thought of the disciples. He came to them quickly, walking on the sea. Nothing can hinder Him from protecting His people. The disciples in the ship were troubled when they saw Jesus coming, mistaking Him for a ghost, but He encouraged them immediately and took away their fear. When we are afraid that our destruction is at hand, we may realize that the Lord is ever ready to save us.

6. Peter asked the Lord to allow him to come to Him on the water. The Lord said, "Come." Looking on the Lord, Peter could walk on the water. However, when he looked away from the Lord, he saw the waves and was afraid, and immediately began to sink. How important for us: looking on Him, we can do everything; looking on the circumstances, we will always fail. How good to know then that the Lord may let His own sink, but He will never let them drown! Today the Lord Jesus is praying in heaven, always interceding for us (Rom. 8:34). We are on life's stormy sea, but the Lord has power over waves and winds. He shall come and lead us safely Home.

Lesson

Faith looks up to God and puts Him above the circumstances. The Lord prayed before and after the daily tasks (Mk. 1:35). Without dependence upon God there is no guidance for us and no fruit. The Lord is also an example to us in His supplication and intercession.

To be cont'd