

A Circle of Fellowship in First Corinthians

—G. Quail

From the Church's inception on the day of Pentecost, gatherings of believers had the privilege of being linked together in a bond of fellowship, the source and centre of which was God's Son. This privilege brought with it certain responsibilities for them, many of which appear in 1 Corinthians.

In commenting on what the Word of God says as to Christian fellowship, the expression, "a circle of fellowship", as describing the idea of the privileges and responsibilities connected with scriptural fellowship, will be occasionally used. This, as with every human expression, falls short of conveying the truth. Human expressions and human creeds do not express the truth, the Word of God alone does: "Thy word is truth" (John 17:17).¹

Let us then examine some of the statements made in 1 Corinthians which have a bearing on the subject of fellowship.

1 Cor 1:1-3 *"...with all that in every place..."*

The letter was addressed not only to the assembly of God in Corinth but to "all that in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." Not being the property of an independent company of believers ensured its circulation. We still enjoy this circulation today with the added privilege of knowing it as part of the inerrant inspired Word of God

1 Cor. 1:9 *"...the fellowship of His Son..."*

There was only one fellowship recognised by God, that of which His Son was the source and centre (to which all who had believed were called). This verse does not speak of a fellowship as if there were many. Nor is it limited to the thought of fellowship with His Son (which we are also privileged to enjoy). It speaks of the (only) fellowship belonging to, and therefore proper to, and consistent with, the holiness of His Son. If our fellowship together involves any falsehood as to the person and work of Christ it is not the fellowship of God's Son.

1 Cor. 4:17 *"...as I teach everywhere in every assembly."*

Paul's teaching and his ways (or manner of life) were uniform in every assembly. The standard of doctrine and practice were the same in every assembly. It was not left to each to develop its own rules or traditions. There was only one standard.

1 Cor. 5:3-5 *"..ye and my spirit being gathered together..."*

Being gathered together does not require that saints occupy identical geographical coordinates. It is a spiritual matter. Paul was not in Corinth but in spirit he was gathered together with the Corinthians. They were responsible, as in a fellowship of spirit with all that in every place call on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, to deal with the evil person in their midst. Thus there was in every assembly the same fellowship, the same doctrine, the same practice, and the same discipline.

¹ *Two things have prompted this study. First, the reading of a booklet commenting on a division which took place among Christians in the last century. The author was convinced that the division was only "a question of adopting or rejecting a new and sectarian view of the assemblies" which he described by the term, "a circle of fellowship". Although I believe his reading of church history to be false, this is not what demands attention but rather the matter of what the Word of God says as to fellowship among gatherings of saints. Secondly, the hearing of statements claiming that a register of addresses is the only means by which it can be known with certainty which gatherings of Christians enjoy, and should enjoy, fellowship together. It is not intended here to discuss the usefulness of, or the pitfalls associated with, address books, but to see if it is by their means that scriptural fellowship is established or maintained.*

1 Cor. 7:1 *"...things of which ye have written to me..."*

This correspondence between the Corinthians and Paul was not on the line of apostolic authority (vv. 4,12) but as requesting advice from one mature in the faith and rich in experience with God. Both types of communication are, of course, necessary. The apostles were gifts given by the ascended Christ with a view to the edifying of His body. Gifts were given not for the building up of local gatherings merely but for the whole body (Eph. 4:10-12). Other functions which depended more on experience and moral qualification than on giftedness were exercised for the benefit of local gatherings (e.g. "...elders in each city..." — Tit. 1:5), although even these were not confined in their service as can be seen in the example of the principle of godly consultation in Acts 15. Paul and Barnabas, as representatives from Antioch, went up to Jerusalem, "to the apostles and elders" in order to consult together as to a critical matter of doctrine and practice. The Antioch assembly enjoyed the benefit of the gifts from the Head to the body by their willingness to consult with qualified saints from other localities. These are the blessings of a local gathering which demonstrates that it is not independent of other gatherings.

1 Cor. 7:17 *"...thus I ordain in all the assemblies."*

This emphasizes that there was one standard of conduct, particularly as to marriage, in every known gathering of believers. This was unchanged by culture, although considerable forbearance was exercised towards those who, in their unconverted days, lived in cultures where such things as polygamy were practised. Those who had, prior to conversion, entered into a polygamous relationship were not told to leave it. Because God's standard did not change, however, this forbearance precluded such persons taking a role of overseership in the assembly (1 Tim. 3:1-2) since it fell short of God's own pattern. For believers there was a single universal standard.

1 Cor. 10:16-17 *"...which we bless..."*

Here the apostle speaks not of the actual celebration of the Lord's Supper (in which the loaf is taken before the cup), but of principles associated with it. These principles are represented by the emblems used for the Lord's Supper. In principle it is the same cup wherever the Lord's Supper is celebrated. It is "the cup which we bless," which represents the fellowship which has as its basis the blood of Christ. Likewise, "the bread which we break..." here represents the oneness of the body of Christ. Further, partaking of the loaf is said in a certain sense to make us one: "For we all partake of that one loaf." This is not a "we all" associated with an isolated gathering, for Paul was not in Corinth. In principle there is one cup and one loaf worldwide. No matter where in the world the assembly is, there is the same expression of fellowship.

1 Cor. 11:16 *"...we have no such custom, nor the assemblies..."*

Neither the apostles ("we") nor the assemblies had a custom of being contentious. In context here this indicates that there was a uniformity as to men and women having uncovered and covered heads respectively when praying or prophesying.

1 Cor. 12:12-13 *"...we have all been baptised into one body..."*

We are members of nothing but the body of Christ. Scripture does not refer to us as members of a local gathering but members of the body of Christ. There is no other membership in Scripture. The appreciation of this will shape our local behaviour so as to preserve us from an independent attitude and to enable us to rightly value the gifts set in the body, the assembly, by God Himself.

1 Cor. 14:26-33 *"...as in all the assemblies..."*

The subject here is prophecy; not foretelling the future but speaking to men "in edification, and encouragement, and consolation" (v. 3). It has been called by tradition "open ministry" but we would do better to allow the Word of God to govern our expressions as well as our behaviour and our beliefs. The Spirit of God calls it prophecy. So should we. "Ye can all prophesy one by one..." indicates that prophecy is not only the result of a specific gift but the outflow of communion with God, speaking from God to the conscience of men (vv. 24-25). This type of gathering was current in all the assemblies when Paul wrote. The God of order, who could direct His people then, is still available to direct and order gatherings for prophetic ministry today.

1 Cor. 16:1-3 "*...as I directed the assemblies of Galatia...*"

Collections were not just for local needs. There was a need in Jerusalem, and Corinth and the Galatian assemblies contributed to a common fund in helping to meet it. They walked in fellowship together, recognising the needs of one another, dependent on one another.

Summary

1 Corinthians gives instructions to a local assembly in its normal proper setting—a circle of fellowship. We have seen that in common with gatherings of believers everywhere the saints at Corinth had the same:

*fellowship,
doctrine,
practice,
discipline,
recognition of giftedness and experience elsewhere,
teaching about marriage,
cup and loaf expressing their unity,
avoidance of contention,
appreciation of spiritual gift,
reliance on the Spirit for prophecy, and
the same uses of money accumulated in their collections.*

If it is our objective to return, in separation from evil, to the scriptural way of gathering, we must not neglect any of these things locally. Rather, we should practise them in a uniform way with believers in every place who in like manner seek to gather to the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is quite the opposite to regarding ourselves as, and acting as if we were, independent companies.

Further, the practising of these things will maintain in reality the fellowship which has been established by the death and resurrection of Christ and the descent of the Holy Spirit. In other words, only by practical obedience to the Word of God are we able to keep the unity of the Spirit (Eph. 4:3) and give expression to the truth that "there is one body" (Eph. 4:4). The fellowship which flows from this is practical and can only be maintained by practical obedience to the Word of God. It is neither official nor formal, and cannot be maintained merely by a register of addresses nor is there such a thing as "official" fellowship, for fellowship is just that:

FELLOWSHIP.

The Greatness of our Lord Jesus (3)

—H. Bouter Jr.

Christ's Greatness as Saviour

Our great God and Saviour, Christ Jesus (Titus 2:13)

In the Old Testament it was a well-known truth that God was the Saviour of His people Israel. He was the Source of salvation, of deliverance for His people, and they had to learn to put all their trust in the salvation of the Lord. In the exodus from Egypt we see how God brings about His salvation, His deliverance (Ex. 14:13). This caring and saving love of God, who time and again delivered Israel from the hands of their enemies, can be traced throughout the history of God's chosen people. Particularly in the book of Isaiah God is called the Saviour of His people. His salvation is not merely to be understood in the military sense of deliverance from hostile oppressors. God is also the Saviour who delivers from even greater hostile powers threatening man — sin, death, and Satan. He saves His people from all their uncleanness (Ezek. 36:29). He opens the springs of salvation for them, and clothes them with garments of salvation (Isa. 12:3; 61:10). It is obvious that in these Scriptures salvation has a deeper, a spiritual meaning, and does not stop at being only a temporary deliverance.

The New Testament fits in with this, as is obvious from Matthew's explanation of the meaning of the name Jesus: "You shall call His name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins" (Mt. 1:21). The name Jesus means "Jahweh is salvation" or, "Jahweh is deliverance." In this verse the evangelist clearly links the meaning of this name with the salvation of God's people from their sins. He is the promised Saviour, who was born in the city of David (Lk. 2:11). As the prophet Zechariah had said about His coming: "Behold, your King is coming to you; He is just and endowed with salvation" (Zech. 9:9). But He is more than that: He is not only Israel's Saviour, but the Saviour *of the world* — as the Samaritans acknowledged in John 4:42. Although salvation is from the Jews, it was not limited to the Jews after the Messiah had been rejected by His own people. It is for both Jews and Gentiles. There is no longer any difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. But there is also salvation for all through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, who is now the "mercy-seat" or "throne of grace" where men can find a refuge (Rom. 3:23-25 NT). Salvation and deliverance can be found only in Him, "for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12; cf. 5:31 and 13:23).

In Titus 2:13-14 the apostle, while speaking of the expectation of the *second coming* of Christ, remembers His coming in *humiliation*. We Christians look "for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour, Christ Jesus; who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds." Christ will return. But what is He to us? He is our Saviour who gave Himself for us — showing on the cross how far He was willing to go in this — to redeem us from our sins. In Him we have salvation, purification of sins, and deliverance from the power of sin. In Him God's grace has appeared, bringing salvation to all men (Tit. 2:11). We can rightly say that He is our Saviour, our Redeemer, if we, with the burden of our sins, found our refuge in Him.

But Christ is also *now* the Saviour of His own. This does not mean that His work of redemption is incomplete. The offering of Christ is perfectly sufficient and needs no repetition. When He died for us once for all, He obtained *eternal* redemption (Heb. 9:12; 10:10-18). We have a mighty Helper in heaven who will never forget His own, who always remembers us in order to intercede for us and to see us through until the end. Therefore Christ is also called the Saviour of the Body, (i.e., the Assembly — Eph. 5:23). He takes care of all who belong to Him, who have been made members of His body. The Assembly is the special object of His love, and He provides it with everything it needs. In a more general sense this care is also mentioned in 1 Timothy 4:10 (God is "the Saviour of all men, especially of believers").

However, Christ is also our Saviour with regard to the future. Although we have become new creatures in Him, we are still living in the old creation, which is subject to the consequences of Adam's fall. The whole creation groans under the curse of corruption, and God's children, too, groan within themselves, waiting eagerly for their adoption as sons, the redemption of *their body* (Rom. 8:23). For that purpose Christ will appear as the Redeemer, the Saviour: "For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a *Saviour*, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself" (Phil. 3:20-21). At the second coming of the Lord we shall experience the power of His resurrection physically as well (cf. 1 Cor. 15:51-55; 1 Thes. 4:15-18). So we owe to Him the complete salvation of our soul, spirit, and body. How great He is as our Saviour!

It is also worthwhile to observe that here (Ti. 2:13) Christ is called *our* Saviour. Without any doubt, it is very important for me to know Him as *my* Saviour, my personal Saviour and Redeemer. Yet this title is found but once in the New Testament, in the magnificat of Mary ("And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Saviour" — Lk. 1:47). Much more common are references to God or Christ as *our* Saviour, which would indicate that, as redeemed persons, we are not alone, but linked with all those who have become partakers of salvation.

Moreover, Christ is called our *great* God and Saviour here (Ti. 2:13). We have already seen a few aspects of His greatness as Saviour, but this verse tells us explicitly *that* He is great. This is confirmed by the subsequent words "God and Saviour." This verse in the Epistle to Titus is one of the many proofs of Scripture that Christ is indeed God. There is no need to doubt His greatness, for He is God Himself, blessed forever (Rom. 9:5). In 2 Peter 1:1 we find an almost identical expression — "Our God and Saviour, Jesus Christ"; in that Epistle He is twice called our "Lord and Saviour" (3:2,18). Christ is God the Son, the Creator of all things. He became flesh, He was revealed in the flesh, and as such all the fullness of Deity dwells in Him in bodily form (Jn. 1:14; 1 Tim. 3:16; Col. 1:19; 2:9). He is the true God and eternal life (1 Jn. 5:20). He is God and Man in one Person. Although He existed in the form of God and did not need to regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, He was made in our likeness (with the exception of sin) and partook of blood and flesh (Phil. 2:6-7; Heb. 2:14). How great is He, who is here called our God and Saviour. Indeed, He is God Himself, who became Man in order to be our Saviour!

The divinity of Christ is not only asserted in the New Testament, but also in the Old (e.g., Isa. 9:6 and Mic. 5:2). The Messiah is none else but Jahweh Himself. The words "God and Saviour" belong together, a striking combination that occurs even in the Old Testament (Ps. 106:21; Isa. 43:3; 45:15,21; Hos. 13:4). The Lord is a great God, and there is no

Saviour besides Him. In the New Testament we meet this Saviour God in the Person of our Lord Jesus Christ. He is called by exactly the same names: He is "our great God and Saviour, Christ Jesus" (Ti. 2:13). He is the humble Man Jesus, who is at the same time the Christ, the Anointed of God. God has made Him both Lord and Christ (Acts 2:36). He is the One in whom God carries out all His plans, the anointed King who accomplishes God's counsels.

In this respect it is noteworthy that the expression "God our Saviour" (or: "our Saviour God") is very characteristic of the Epistle to Titus and the First Epistle to Timothy (1 Tim. 1:1; 2:3; Ti. 1:3; 2:10; 3:4). This significant title shows us God's present special relationship with man. In the Old Testament He had already revealed Himself as Creator and Judge, and also as the Lawgiver of Israel. But the present dispensation has a totally different character. We are not under law but under grace (Rom. 6:14). Now is the day of grace, the day of salvation (2 Cor. 6:1-2). In Christ, God has revealed Himself as our *Saviour*, and as such He has stretched out His hands not only to Israel, but to all the nations. God our Saviour "desires *all men* to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4). "We have beheld and bear witness that the Father has sent the Son to be the Saviour *of the world*" (1 Jn. 4:14). Man has proved himself to be an inveterate sinner (both without law and under law). In this respect there is no difference between Jews and Gentiles. Yet, in Christ, God could make Himself known to us as our Saviour on the basis of Christ's work of redemption and His resurrection from the dead. By the cross and the resurrection, God has brought to light *His* salvation, and He offers this great salvation to all men as long as the day of grace lasts. It is not only the forgiveness of sins that was brought about, but also a complete inner renewal, a new birth for people with an evil nature, a quickening of dead sinners, deliverance from the power of sin and death, and a new relationship with God. Who would neglect so great a salvation (Heb. 2:3)?

Another remarkable thing is that in the Epistle to Titus, both God and Christ are alternately called our Saviour. It occurs in every chapter: "God our Saviour," "Christ Jesus our Saviour" (1:3-4); "God our Saviour," "our great God and Saviour, Christ Jesus" (2:10,13); "God our Saviour," "Jesus Christ our Saviour" (3:4,6). This proves again that Christ is one with the Father. In Him, God revealed Himself as Saviour, and came down to man. God greatly humbled Himself to redeem man. Our great God and Saviour, Christ Jesus, gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and have us for His own possession. When He appears He will give us the full enjoyment of God's salvation. That is why we look forward to His coming (Ti. 2:13-14).

To be cont'd
(References in this article are from the NASB)

Democracy in the light of Scripture (2)

—F. B. Hole

This rapid sketch of the course of government amongst men is enough to show that one feature marks it all through. The ultimate authority is always God — and God alone.

No man has any prescriptive right to exercise authority over his fellows except he has received it from God. Hence in such passages as Romans 14:1-6 and 1 Peter 2:13-15 obedience to the ruling authorities is enjoined upon the Christian. The Apostle Paul tells us "There is no authority except from God; and those that exist are set up by God."

Turning now from government as presented to us in Scripture to the practice of it by those to whom it has been entrusted on earth, we at once see that it has been terribly abused, as has all else that has been entrusted to fallen man. Self-seeking and tyranny have everywhere flourished, and history is a record of the long and painful struggles by means of which nations have turned from one form of government to another, or have introduced modifications into their various governmental systems; in the vain hope of evolving ideal conditions. Of all these changes democracy is the latest, and its advent is not surprising to anyone at all versed in the abuses which gave it birth.

Comparing it, however, not with its predecessors, but with the ideals of Scripture, which are to be fully realized in the millennial age, we at once see that it is more hopelessly condemned than any other form of government which has yet appeared; for the reason that it frankly and unblushingly deposes God as the foundation and source of authority and puts man — i.e., "the people" — in His place. The gulf between these two is as wide as that between heaven and hell.

To the thoroughgoing democrat only one question really matters, viz., What is the will of the people? To ask what may be *right* — *what*, in other words, may be the will of God — is quite irrelevant. What the people desire is to be regarded as the right thing, and the functions of a truly democratic government are to carry out the people's desires, to be the humble servants of the people's will — whether right or wrong.

In this matter, as in all others, the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ provides the Christian with a supreme test. At that solemn hour Pontius Pilate the governor was the representative of Caesar, and at his autocratic bar Christ was arraigned. Yet, in an unusual moment of weakness autocracy abdicated its functions. The record runs thus:

"Pilate, seeing that it availed nothing, but that rather a tumult was arising, having taken water, washed his hands before the crowd, saying, I am guiltless of the blood of this righteous one: see ye [to it]" (Mt. 27:24).

"They were urgent with loud voices, begging that He might be crucified. And their voices [and those of the chief priests] prevailed. And Pilate adjudged that what they begged should take place" (Lk. 23:23-24).

As Caesar's representative, Pilate washed his hands of the whole business, whilst, acting as executive officer of a democracy which held sway for just a brief hour, *he "adjudged that what they begged should take place."*

Viewed as a setting forth of democratic principles, this might be passed as all *right*. Viewed from every other standpoint, it was the most outrageous *wrong* of the world's history.

Reverting again to Nebuchadnezzar's dream as recorded in Daniel 2, we may now be better able to grasp the significance of the clay which entered into the image when the feet of it were reached.

Daniel's vision in chapter 7 sets forth the course of the four great Gentile empires in their dealings amongst men, and they are pictured as wild beasts in their powers of destruction. Nebuchadnezzar's dream, on the other hand, gives us the same four empires but as setting forth the character and quality of their governments, and hence what marks them is a steady deterioration in the metals that appear.

God started the "Times of the Gentiles" with an ideal form of government, though the man who wielded its power was far from ideal. That it *was an* ideal form is proven by the fact that God will revert to it for the millennial age. Then the ideal Man will appear, by whom He will "judge the world in righteousness," and all will soon be peace and blessing.

As the empires developed, men deviated from the golden ideal, and introduced human modifications, and the government became silver, brass, and iron, as more and more divine thoughts were forgotten and human policies came to the fore.

It is, however, in the last stage of the last empire — the Roman — that we find for the first time the introduction of clay — a non-metallic substance. This was an evident prediction that before the end there should be introduced into *the* prevailing governmental system, a principle which should be not so much a further modification of the old, as one radically and fundamentally different. Because of it "The kingdom shall be partly strong and partly fragile." Daniel's interpretation of the clay and iron mixed is "they shall mingle themselves with the seed of men; but they shall not cleave one to another, even as iron doth not mingle with clay."

The "they" of this passage appears to mean those in whose hands authority for the time being rests.

We have no hesitation in seeing here a prediction of the uprising and prevalence of a democracy in the last days. The authority which finds its source in God, and that which finds its source in man, are as different from one another as gold or iron, or any other metal, from clay. The two things may be mingled — they are in part inextricably mixed in our modern theory and practice of government, but only weakness and brittleness is induced, and soon will come the death-blow administered by the stone "cut out without hands."

If any have difficulty in reconciling what is said above with the prophecies concerning the coming Satan-inspired head for the revived Roman Empire, we would ask them to remember that in practice the transition from democratic to imperialistic forms is very easy. Let a man of transcendent genius appear, who seems to embody in himself the very spirit of "the people," and nothing is easier than for him to assume for himself the powers that theoretically belong to the people, and the people, fickle and easily led, will be glad to have it so. The career of Napoleon, springing out of the French Revolution is a case in point. The coming "beast" of Revelation 13 rises "out of the sea," i.e., the masses of the people in a state of agitation and unrest.

It is therefore more than likely that this coming "superman" will quite ardently uphold democratic institutions in theory whilst carrying on autocratic rule in practice — iron mixed with clay.

The reader who has patiently followed us up to this point may be inclined to ask what we hope to achieve in writing all this, if we have, as we say, no political ends before us. We therefore avow without hesitation that our aim is a far more thorough heart-separation from this present evil world for ourselves and all believers.

Full well we know that nothing but an abiding sense of the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus our Lord can effectually lift our souls above the level of the world and its thoughts, yet the exposure of world politics and schemes by the light of Scripture has its value, and this has been our present endeavour.

The lamp of prophetic Scripture is said in 2 Peter 1:19 to be shining in an obscure or squalid place. Let the lamp cast its rays on the much-vaunted principles of social democracy and how squalid they appear. The sticky clay may be gilded but it certainly is not gold! The enlightened Christian will not waste much enthusiasm upon it.

And what clear light it sheds upon the vexed question of whether a Christian should vote and interest himself in politics generally. We are asked to accept the position of being a little cog in that machine called "the people" which has usurped to itself that function in the sphere of government which belongs to God alone. Shall we do it? Yes! — if we believe in the modern humanistic "gospel" which humanizes Jesus and deifies man. But if we believe that salvation is not of the people but of the Lord, No!

The world system is doomed. Let there be no hesitancy in our witness to this fact. Out of the impending catastrophe souls are being rescued by the abounding grace of our Lord. It is ours to seek them, bearing witness to our Lord Jesus Christ. Let us then not waste time in vain attempts to shore up the tottering fabric, but let us busy ourselves in that which is the great work which our Lord has allotted to us. To be thoroughly for Him and His interests, is to be thoroughly outside the world system and its hopes.

We look, not for a perfected system of democracy, but for "the Lord Jesus Christ [as] Saviour, who shall transform our body of humiliation into conformity to His body of glory" (Phil. 3:20-21). As for this earth, we look for the setting up of the kingdom of Christ by the God of heaven. That kingdom shall never be destroyed but shall stand forever.

The End

Written in Heaven

*Written in heaven: O how can it be?
My name there inscribed for eternity
Not my record of works, by sin so defiled
But my name—a name of the Father's own child*

*Wonderful grace! For my record of years
Is purged from its sin, its sorrows and fears,
By the blood of Jesus, my Saviour and Lord
That one name so precious, exalted adored*

*Unspeakable joy! My past is forgiven,
My present is grace, my future is heaven.
Such joy be yours too, through believing His Word;
A happy New Year, with the joy of the Lord!*

L. M. Grant

Samuel, the Prophet (2)

—Hamilton Smith

The Failure of the Priest (2:11-36).

The song of Hannah assures us of the ultimate triumph of grace under the reign of Christ. In the light of this assurance we are prepared to face the complete breakdown of man in responsibility.

The evil condition of the professing people of God under the priesthood of Eli is manifested by three fearful evils. The priesthood was defiled (v. 12); the offering of the Lord was despised (v. 17); and the tabernacle was desecrated (v. 22). We have already learned from chapter 1:3 that the sons of Eli were priests of the Lord, now we are told that they "were sons of Belial," and that "they knew not Jehovah." The very men whose office was to represent the people before the Lord, were themselves ignorant of the Lord and used their position to enrich themselves at the expense of the people (vv. 12-16). The greatness of their sin before the Lord is seen in that their conduct led to the offering of the Lord being despised by the people. They became instruments for the corruption of the professing people of God (v. 17). Finally through their evil conduct the house of God, at Shiloh, became the scene of wickedness that shocks the natural conscience (v. 22).

Alas! is not this an exact picture of what is taking place in Christendom in our day? This condition has, indeed, been found in Christendom throughout the centuries though becoming more painfully evident in these last days. Today many, who publicly avow they are priests of the Lord, are strangers to the Lord. Like Hophni and Phinehas of old, such use religion to serve themselves and their own ends, at the expense of the people of God. Through such the atoning sacrifice of Christ is being despised. Wickedness and worldliness of such a gross character are being introduced into that which professes to be the house of God, that the natural mind is shocked and turns with righteous disgust from that which is a mere travesty of religion. Thus leaders of Christian profession, like the priests of old, become the main instruments of corruption and apostasy.

Such was the terrible condition of Israel; and yet, as we see the storm gathering, we are again reminded of God's own words, "When I bring clouds over the earth,... the bow shall be seen in the cloud." In the midst of the gathering gloom, the Spirit of God again and again sustains faith by giving us the vision of the bow. Thus we read, "the boy ministered to Jehovah" (v. 11). Then the sky darkens as we have the awful disclosures concerning the sin of the priests (vv. 12-17); but again we catch sight of the bow, for we read, "And Samuel ministered before Jehovah, a boy... and the boy Samuel grew before Jehovah" (vv. 18-21). Nevertheless, the darkness grows yet deeper as we read of the desecration of the house of God (vv. 22-25); but once again the bow is seen in its beauty, for we read, "The boy Samuel grew on, and was in favour both with Jehovah, and also with men" (v. 26). Does this not assure our hearts that, however dark the day, God will maintain a testimony for Himself, and sustain the faith of His true people? Moreover, the constant mention of "the boy" would indicate the way God takes to maintain His testimony in a day of ruin. He passes by the self-accredited religious officials and takes up "a child" to be a witness to Himself.²

Thus when the priests break down in Eli's day, the child comes into prominence, and always in association with the Lord, "The boy ministered to Jehovah"; "Samuel ministered before Jehovah, a boy"; "the boy Samuel grew before Jehovah"; "The boy Samuel...was in favour...with Jehovah"; "the boy ministered to Jehovah" (2:11,18,21,26; 3:1).

Moreover we see a further great and encouraging principle of the ways of God, that at the very moment when the people of God are entering upon evil times, through their own folly, God, in secret, is preparing a vessel for their ultimate deliverance. As one has said, "In all the seasons of man's destruction of himself, there has been another thing going on in the plans of the blessed God... While his brethren are filling up their sins and sorrows in Canaan, Joseph, unknown to them, is growing up in Egypt for their help. While Israel is in the heat of the furnace, Moses is preparing to be their deliverer in the distant solitudes of Midian... When the priesthood was defiled, and the glory gone into the enemy's land. Samuel, the child, is brought forth to raise the stone of help... When Saul and the kingdom are bringing ruin on

² It appears to be an unvarying principle of the ways of God, again and again illustrated in Scripture, that in a day of ruin God passes by those who assume to be His official representatives and uses, as witnesses for Himself, those who are little and of no account in the eyes of the world. Again, at a later day, amidst the desolations of Israel, Isaiah could say, "Behold, I and the children that Jehovah hath given me are for signs and for wonders in Israel from Jehovah of hosts" (Isa. 8:18). Seven centuries later, when the nation was "in darkness and in the shadow of death," and God visited His people to tell them of the coming King, it was through the child of the barren woman — a child that was called "the prophet of the highest" — that this witness came. Again, a little later, when at last the "Saviour, which is Christ the Lord" came into the midst of the guilty nation, it was in the lowliness of a child that He entered the world for, said the angel, "this shall be a sign unto you, Ye shall find the Babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger," and the godly could say, "Unto us a Child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon His shoulder: and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace" (Lk. 2:11-12; Isa. 9:6). Thus, too, in that yet darker day in Israel's history, when the Lord, a despised and rejected Man, stood in the midst of a corrupt nation fast hastening to apostasy, He could say, "I thank Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because Thou has hid these things from the wise and prudent and hast revealed them unto babes" (Mt. 11:25). Furthermore, in the day of Christ's exaltation, those who maintained a bright witness for the Lord in the presence of the religious officials of corrupt Judaism, were "unlearned and ignorant" fishermen — those whom the world would esteem as children of no account (Acts 4:13). Nor is it otherwise in the midst of corrupt Christendom, for, in the midst of the ruin of the church, those who are marked out for the Lord's special approval, like the little child, have but little strength" (Rev. 3:8).

themselves, David, 'the secret of God,' is under preparation to set the throne in honour, and the kingdom 'in order and strength.'"

A further truth comes before us in the closing verses of the chapter — that God will not allow the evil condition of His professing people to go unjudged though, as ever, He warns before He judges. Thus a man of God is sent with a solemn testimony, and warning, to the aged Eli. He is first reminded of the high privileges of his office. He was chosen, says the Lord, to be "My priest to offer upon Mine altar... before Me." His offence is then plainly stated. "Wherefore," says the Lord, "do ye trample upon My sacrifice and upon Mine oblation, which I have commanded in My habitation? And thou honourest thy sons above Me". Actually the sons were the guilty persons, but inasmuch as Eli took no action against them, he is charged with their offence. It is true, he had raised protest, but the evil was of such a character that to protest and yet continue with those against whom the protest was made was to sanction their evil. The secret motive that governed Eli is disclosed in the words, thou "honourest thy sons above Me." The relationships of nature, and the friendships of life, were set above the claims of the Lord. He was chosen to walk before the Lord, but having honoured his sons above the Lord, he has to hear the solemn word, "Them that honour Me I will honour, and they that despise Me shall be lightly esteemed."

Has not the solemn failure of this pious old man a warning voice for God's people in all ages? In very different circumstances, and in varying degrees we can easily slip into the snare of honouring our brethren, our friends, our kindred, above the Lord. Again and again has the truth of the Lord's words been proved, "Them that honour Me I will honour, and they that despise Me shall be lightly esteemed." If God in His grace has chosen us to walk before Him, we shall only be kept in safety as we act upon the word of the Psalmist, "I have set Jehovah continually before me" (1 Sam. 2:30; Ps. 16:8).

Having been reminded of his privileges, and charged with his offence, Eli has to hear of the judgment that is about to fall. Eli had sinned through his family, and upon his family the judgment would come. The increase of his house would die in the flower of their age; Hophni and Phinehas would meet their death in one day. Every one left of his house would be thrust out of the priest's office to beg their bread. The after history gives the solemn fulfilment of these predictions. Hophni and Phinehas are slain in the conflict with the Philistines (1 Sam. 4:11); sixty years later the increase of Eli's house was cut off by King Saul (1 Sam. 22:18); and one hundred years after the prediction the last of Eli's house was thrust out from being priest by King Solomon (1 Ki. 2:27).

Moreover, the failure of the priest becomes the occasion for indicating the great change about to take place in the ways of God. Because of the unfaithfulness of Eli, his house would be cut off, and a faithful priest would be raised up that would act according to the heart and mind of God. His house would be established; nevertheless, henceforward the priest would no longer occupy the first place before the Lord, but would walk before the Lord's anointed. The high priest is thus set aside, as the immediate link between the Lord and His people. He falls into a secondary place, there being another anointed greater than he. Thus through the failure of the priest the way is being prepared to fulfil God's purpose to establish Christ as King with a faithful priest walking before Him forever. We may note that in a day of official failure God uses a woman to declare His purpose; a child to bear testimony to Himself, and a nameless man of God to warn of coming judgment, and tell of final blessing.

To be cont'd

Outline for Bible Study (64)

131. The Man Born Blind. The Good Shepherd. — John 9 and 10

Outline

1. The healing of the man born blind Jn. 9:1-12
2. The hearing before the Jews Jn. 9:13-34
3. The glorious outcome Jn. 9:35-41
4. Jesus, the Door of the Sheep Jn. 10:1-10
5. Jesus, the Good Shepherd Jn. 10:11-18
6. Eternal salvation of the sheep Jn. 10:26-30

Explanation

1. The man's blindness served to reveal the Lord's power and grace, and to glorify God. As soon as the blind man had obeyed the Lord by washing himself, he saw. So souls that hear His Word remain blind until they confess to be sinners in need of forgiveness. As soon as they believe in the Son of God, light enters their souls. The once-blind beggar now is able to see God's creation! So is the joy of the sinner, when he has found salvation and peace in Jesus (Isa. 61:10).

2. The light he had received made him grateful to the Lord and caused him to faithfully testify of Christ to the unbelieving Jews. Abandoned by friends and parents, he was finally thrown out of the synagogue by the Jewish rulers.

3. As soon as he was cast out, the Lord, who had heard of it, revealed Himself to him as the Son of God. The man had been faithful in what he knew of Jesus, now he came to know Him more fully. Earlier he had been in physical and spiritual darkness and poverty, now he is a seeing and happy worshipper of the Son of God. How important it is to acknowledge that by nature we are blind. Then only there is help for us. As long as we say, "We see," our sin remains (Jn. 9:41).

4. The Lord as Door of the Sheep. In the East several shepherds used a common sheepfold guarded by a porter who allowed only known shepherds in. In the morning these came calling their sheep by name. Leading the sheep, the shepherd made the path accessible, guarding the sheep against wild animals.

The Jewish nation with its God-given laws formed the sheepfold. Many had come to take possession of the sheep, but only the Lord Jesus came through the door. He served God not only by being obedient to the law, but by doing God's will. God, the porter, gave Him access to the sheep, the pious Israelites who waited for the Messiah. As the door, the Lord gives them access to new and eternal blessings. He does not bring them again into a sheepfold or religious system (Jn. 10:16).

He brings them:

salvation, because they own Jesus, the Saviour;

freedom, because they need no law to protect them now that the Holy Spirit has separated them;

nourishment, because He Himself blesses them.

5. The Good Shepherd gave His life first of all for the Jewish remnant. After His resurrection and ascension, His relationship to them is like that between the Father and the Son. The death of the Good Shepherd, however, was not only for Israel, but also for the Gentiles (Jn. 10:16). They have become one flock, one Shepherd (Eph. 2:13-18). This reconciliation took place on the cross (Jn. 11:52) and has been effected by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13). The Son's obedience unto death did not only mean blessing for the sheep, but was also precious to God: "The Father loves Me, because I lay down My life" (Jn. 10:17).

6. Finally we learn that the sheep are safe for eternity, they shall never perish, no one shall seize them out of the hand of the Good Shepherd or of the Father who gave them to Him. The sheep of Jesus are kept safe and secure in every aspect.

Lesson

The blind man is a picture of man, who before conversion is poor and blind. The mud and spittle on the eyes of the blind man speak of the foolishness of preaching (1 Cor. 1:21).

132. Jesus Raises Lazarus. — John 11:1-54

Outline

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| 1. Lazarus' sickness and death | Jn. 11:1-16 |
| 2. Jesus' conversations with Martha and Mary | Jn. 11:17-37 |
| 3. The raising of Lazarus | Jn. 11:38-44 |
| 4. The counsel of the Sanhedrin | Jn. 11:45-54 |

Explanation

1. Full of confidence the sisters sent a message to the Lord. God wants us to cast our cares on Him (Phil. 4:6-7; 1 Pet 5:7). In vain the sisters waited for the Lord's help, but He let Lazarus die, for He knew that the Father would glorify the Son by revealing His power over death. For the Lord it was the "day" of activity. The sisters thought that by his death, their brother would no longer have part in the Messiah's kingdom. When the Lord finally came, Martha went to meet Him. She believed that the Lord could have healed Lazarus before he died. She also knew that He, as Messiah, would receive from God whatever He desired, but beyond that her faith did not reach.

2. Knowing that Lazarus would rise in the last day gave her no comfort in the face of death. Great comfort there is in the Lord's words: "I am the resurrection and the life." Through His death on the cross, the Son of God conquered death and removed its sting. Having triumphed over Satan, who had the power of death, He rose as the Victor. Whoever believes in Him "though he have died, shall live," (i.e., he shall rise to eternal life). "And everyone who lives" (i.e., is still on earth when the Lord returns) "and believes on Me shall never die." His body will be changed and he will be taken up into the Father's house (1 Cor. 15:51; Jn. 14:3). The believer has received divine life, life eternal, through faith in Jesus Christ (Jn. 3:15,36; 5:24; 6:40,47; 10:28; 1 Jn. 2:25; 5:11; Rom. 6:23). Though sinful man's body will die, his immortal soul will not, because God breathed into man at creation. Therefore, all men will be resurrected immortal (Jn. 5:28-29; Acts 24:15). The ungodly will go on to eternal condemnation (the second death — Rev. 20:11-15). Those who truly believe in the Lord Jesus Christ have eternal life and will not come into judgment but enter eternal glory. Martha did not answer the Lord directly, but gave a wonderful testimony of her faith in the Lord Jesus, the Son of God, the Messiah.

Mary waited at home for the Lord. At Martha's call she came quickly and fell at His feet. Earlier she had been sitting at the Lord's feet as a disciple (Lk. 10:39; cf. Dt. 33:3). Now she is at the feet of the Lord in her sorrow; later in worship (Jn. 12:3). Mary addressed the Lord in the same words as Martha.

3. Accompanied by all, Jesus went to the tomb. Martha expressed doubt: "Lord, he stinks already"; but the Lord responded, "If thou shouldst believe, thou shouldst see the glory of God." When the stone was taken away, the Lord thanked His Father and then cried loudly: "Lazarus, come forth!" Death had to release its prey. Lazarus came out, bound in grave-cloths. Jesus said: "Loose him and let him go." All were amazed at what had happened.

4. The Lord raised Lazarus so that the Son of God and God Himself might be glorified and the Jews believe. It was the Lord's last and most forceful appeal to the Jews. No longer could they ascribe His work to Satan (Mt. 9:34; 12:24), for they had heard the Lord praying to God, the Father, still they decided to kill Him. The more the Lord revealed His glory as the Son of God, the more man revealed his enmity (Jn. 10:30-31; 11:53). From then on, the Lord walked no longer openly among the Jews and in the temple, but He went into the desert and with the remnant into Bethany where there was rest and comfort for Him.

Lesson

In his death Lazarus was a picture of Israel and of every man. His resurrection is a type of the spiritual awakening.

The Lord was always full of compassion for the sorrow and grief of His own (cf. Isa. 63:9). He groaned about the results of sin and wept in compassion. This display of His emotion is more precious than His omnipotence. The Lord knew that He would raise Lazarus and change their sorrow into joy, but He shared the feelings of those who were weeping.

On the cross the Lord took our sorrows and grief upon Himself when He bore the punishment for our sins. His spirit was bent down under the burden of our misery and sorrows which sin and death had brought into the world (Isa. 53:4).

Just as the disciples could only loose Lazarus and let him go, so believers cannot give anybody eternal life, but they can minister to those who are born again. They can teach them that they are free in Christ and that the hands that were once bound can be raised up to heaven in thanksgiving and adoration to God the Father.

To be cont'd