

THE CHURCH — ITS NATURE, PRINCIPLES AND VOCATION

(with special reference to its local expression)

CHAPTER ONE

Next to the Person of Jesus Christ the church has been, and continues to be, the great battleground of history. So much so is this the case that an ever-increasing number of books, journals, periodicals, “Councils”, “Convocations”, discourses, etc., are occupied with this matter as a primary concern. But most of all this is controversial, thus justifying the phrase “the battleground”. This is all very significant, indicating that it *is* a primary matter, and that it is something which does hold a position in the forefront of accountability. Rightly it does, and perhaps much more so than all this writing and talking understands. It is a primary concern in the whole cosmic realm, the super-mundane sphere, if we are to take both the practical evidence and the definite New Testament statements seriously. For instance, the whole letter to the Ephesians, and particularly 3:10 and 6:12.

It may seem to be arrogant and ambitious for us, who, being of such little account in ourselves, and by the medium of such an insignificant a means as this little paper, to think that we can handle this immense matter to any advantage. Having had this as a primary concern for so many years, and having seen the church and the churches in so very many places from Far East to Far West, with much prayer exercise over it, perhaps we may be given something to say which throws some light into the shadows or darkness of the immense confusion which exists in relation to the church. We are especially concerned with the matter of local-assembly expressions of the church, for only there can the real meaning of the church be brought to immediacy.

We have to begin by asking the question which includes everything else, and which really expresses the problem in many minds:

Can we now accept the possibility of true local expressions of the New Testament church?

This question — and there is not a little, but very much, to give rise to it — has, because of its acuteness, received many answers, or has been attacked in many ways. Some of these are as follows:

1. A large section of Christians have answered definitely “NO”, and they base this upon what they term “the total ruin” position. They say that the church is in unredeemable ruins, and therefore a corporate expression is no longer possible. Of course, they especially relate this to the church universal, but they bring it very close by arguing that at the end-time everything will be individual. They base this on Revelation 2-3, where the Lord directs His address “to him that overcometh”.

2. Then there are those whose answer is that the only possibility now is an approximate expression of the church. That is, there can be no full and complete expression, but something comparative, provisional, and partial. There can be *some* features, and we must build upon *some* things which we perceive to be in the New Testament. In large instances the major denominations represent this position. Presbyterians base their whole position upon one interpretation of New Testament church order, as they conceive it. The same is true of Lutherans, Congregationalists, Baptists, Methodists, “Brethren”, etc. For each and all of these the term “church” is employed. But it is a concept which is a convenient solution to the problem, namely, a partial approximation.

3. Then there is the answer which is expressed by what is called “Sublimation”. That is, that the church is a sublime conception and idea. It is idealistic, and we must live in the abstract realm of a sublime conception and not try to bring that “down-to-earth”, or be too practical and demanding in reality. This answer and interpretation is expressed in the term “The church mystical”: but not practical.

4. There are those who have written off the whole idea of church, either as impossible or unnecessary. They are definitely Christian Institutions and organizations, but not a church or churches. To this category belong the Quakers, the Salvation Army, and a vast number of mission halls, and “Missions”.

5. Finally for our purpose, there are those whose answer is a very positive one! Yes, we must return to the New Testament pattern “and have New Testament churches”! They believe that the New Testament contains

a definite “blue-print” for local churches, and they are committed to “forming” such wherever possible. Unfortunately, they vary very much as to teachings, emphases, and practices, and some of them are characterized by excesses, abnormalities and exclusiveness.

What are we going to say to all this?

As we see it, all are *more or less* wrong or right (we underline “more or less”, but we would say that some are totally wrong), because the true nature of the church has been either lost or lost sight of.

The history of Israel

The history of Israel has a lot of light to throw upon this matter of the church. Historic Israel was constituted upon the same eternal principles as the Christian church. Indeed, they were called “the church in the wilderness” (Acts 7:38), and they were termed God’s elect. They were intended to represent in time on the earth an *eternal* and *heavenly* concept. In types and symbols to figuratively and temporally embody spiritual principles and divine thoughts. For our purpose here we have to narrow this all down to the main principles involved in their history. We divide that history into two phases. The one before, and leading to, the captivity in Babylon — the seventy years. The reason for that captivity was purely and definitely idolatry. The captivity dealt with that, and after that there was no more idolatry of the same kind in Israel. But then came — and still exists — the second, and both worse and longer, phase of judgment. This is revealed in the second aspect of the ministry of the Prophets. It is obvious that the Prophets prophesied in relation to the immediate future of the Babylonish and Assyrian captivity, and also in relation to a time further on. This second aspect is often taken up in the New Testament and applied — or shown to apply — to those times and events, with the extra feature that post-New Testament times (unto our day) were visualized. But why this second and longer and more terrible relegation to judgment? Why Israel’s confusion, weakness, and loss of the *immediate* presence and power of God, and only His sovereignty *behind* their history? The answer is in one phrase — “spiritual blindness”. “Blindness has happened to Israel” (Romans 11:25). There is a great deal about this in the Gospels, and both the teaching and miracles of Jesus were directed to and against this blindness. The giving sight to the blind was a testimony to Israel, as well as to the world. This blindness, however, was particularly related to

the Person, the significance, and the purpose of Christ. That intervention in history was a mission to redeem, recover, and re-establish that *eternal* concept in the heart of God, which was as “the mystery” in Israel. That is, the *spiritual* principles and meanings hidden in their temporal election and constitution, and to embody it all in a Person who was to be reproduced by the church, as the Corn of Wheat, through death, being reproduced in resurrection in a corporate body.

There we have touched the very heart of the true nature of the church. The touchstone of the church is a seeing by divine — supernatural — Holy Spirit revelation and illumination — the real significance and meaning of Jesus Christ and His mission. It is so evident that the great apostle of “the Mystery” — the church, came to his knowledge and understanding of the true church by way of the revelation of Christ to, and in, him (Galatians 1:16).

To truly see Christ is to see the church, and only so can there be a true church. It was when the Lord was able to say of Peter that “flesh and blood had not revealed the truth of His (Christ’s) Person” that Christ immediately made the first definite announcement about the church: “Upon this rock will I build my church.” This all means that, fundamentally, a true expression of the church, locally, is not more, nor less, nor other, than the spiritual apprehension of Christ by believers. The church, local or universal, is not traditional. That would make it second-hand and therefore artificial. The church cannot be seen through other people’s eyes, whether those others be of the past (apostles, etc.) or present (teachers).

We have known people to live in the presence of the teaching for years, and rejoice in it, repeat it, and think that they were in the good of it, and then eventually to prove that they had not really seen with their own spiritual eyes by contradicting and discarding it all too easily. They had seen it mentally through the eyes of someone else — the teacher or preacher. When Paul *saw*, it effected something in him that became himself, and no amount or form of suffering and outward disappointment could make him depart from the “heavenly vision”. We repeat, that all of his rich and full understanding of the church did not come, in the first place, from a revelation of some thing called “the church”, but from a seeing of Christ as in the eternal counsel of God. As the very foundation this answers the five points which we earlier mentioned, and answers them comprehensively. Can there be local expressions of the church? Yes,

given that such a seeing and apprehension of Christ is present, and we must dismiss the Holy Spirit and His work if we say that such a seeing is not possible now (Ephesians 1:17-18).

But having made the statement, it is necessary to say more as to the essential *principles* of a local church as a microcosm of the church universal.

The first (included in what we have said above) and the most difficult to explain, although not to experience, is in that misunderstood, disliked, and frowned-upon word — spirituality. It should not be difficult to understand, because any and every true born-again believer knows that there is something about him or her that is not just natural. A change in mentality, disposition, concept, gravitation has taken place in them. They are just different since the new birth took place. (We are talking nonsense about the church if this fundamental change has not been effected.) But we still have to define spirituality.

As a word and an idea, spirituality is not peculiar to the Bible and to Christians. The world uses it. For instance, in visiting a picture gallery, some pictures are looked at and the viewer passes on. But another picture holds the attention, for there is something more than canvas, paint, and an object depicted. That picture has an “atmosphere” about it; it touches the emotions; it stirs a sense of wonder; it is not just something in itself. There is something more about it than itself. The remark about that something is that there is something “spiritual” about it. The same thing can be said about a song; the execution of a piece of music; an ornate and beautiful building; a form of service; and so on. This is what the world calls the spiritual. But what they really mean is mysticism. This can be particularly found in literature, and there is a category of writers known as “the Mystics”. Religion is a special realm of mysticism. Let us say at once, and with emphasis, that mysticism and true spirituality, according to the Bible, are two entirely different things. They belong to two different realms. The one is temperamental, or a matter of temperament. It has its degrees. The simple response to beauty and emotion: or in more intense forms it can be psychic, fanatical. It can be induced by pathetic or tragic appeals. It can be worked up to excitability and paroxysms by repetitions — as of choruses and incantations. Thus, either mildly or extravagantly, an extra element can appear or give character. Religion lends itself peculiarly to the mystical in these various forms and degrees.

But the spirituality of the Bible of which we are speaking is differ-

ent. It is the result of a new birth by the Holy Spirit. It represents a change of nature and constitution, not the release and intensification of what is already there. Indeed, it is an “altogether other”, just as Christ was — in the deepest reality of His person — an altogether other. In that “other” He was not known, understood, and explicable. He was inscrutable. Not just mysterious, but of another order. There was another intelligence and consciousness. There was another capacity and ability. There was another relationship. This is all true of the individual believer by reason of being “born from above”. (See John 1:13, 3:6,7 margin). The church is the aggregate of such believers, in which what was true of Christ is true of it — deity apart.

He and it are the spiritual meaning of all symbols, and He definitely said that with His coming the old order of material, symbolical representations had entirely given place to that which they represented. It was no longer things to represent, but that which they represented without the things (see John 4:20-24) and note that John’s Gospel and the Letter to the Hebrews are two great documents of the great transition from the historic, the temporal, the tangible, to the spiritual. The apostles were moved by the Holy Spirit into that transition. It cost them travail to be so born again, but they got through by divine energy.

So spirituality, which is a heavenly other nature and endowment, is the first basic principle of the church. Let us repeat that the church is the vessel and embodiment of “the mystery” so often referred to in the New Testament, especially by Paul. The mystery was and is the hidden meaning of things, and of Israel, but which mystery is now revealed to and in the new order, the new Israel, the church. The “mystery of Christ” is the meaning of Christ, inscrutable to all but those who have “the spirit of wisdom and revelation in *the knowledge of him*” (italics ours).

When our Lord made the great pronouncement about His church: "... I will build my church; and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it", He intimated three things. One, that He would build a definite entity called His church. Two, that that church would encounter an opposing force in its full and final enmity. Three, that that power would be taken at its ultimate strength and be destroyed, that is, made incapable of prevailing against that church. In this full statement there is a very definite indication of the fundamental nature of His true church. We have been saying earlier that the church is essentially a spiritual thing, and that spirituality is its basic principle. But can we be still clearer as to what we mean by spirituality? We can, and that by using an alternative word, the word "supernatural".

The church is essentially supernatural

The church is the embodiment of true Christianity, and true Christianity is supernatural, or it is nothing! It is only when and where that is fully realized and accepted that the church really exists and can be the power that it is intended to be.

1) Supernatural in origin

First of all, Christianity and the church (in truth, identical terms) came down from heaven, and have still unceasingly to be received and entered from there. This is the very foundational truth of Christ Himself and of the church in every individual incorporated into it. The teaching of the New Testament everywhere is this. The origin and home of Christ was in heaven. John's Gospel and Paul's Letter to the Ephesians are a particular and emphatic argument for this one thing, and they comprehend the New Testament in this truth. In the former the repeated affirmation of Christ as to His heavenly origin is the basis of *everything* in the whole Gospel. It is a "verily, verily" — "most truly", and everything in the Gospel is intended to bear that out and be evidence of it.

But when that has been recognized, the Gospel, and the rest of the New Testament return from that to affirm equally that the church embodies that truth and fact of Christ. John 3 will employ the identical language — "verily, verily" — in connection with any single individual entering

the church. That individual, no matter if he be the best specimen and representative of the Old Testament Israel (such as Nicodemus) just cannot enter along the horizontal line of this creation; he cannot enter by the door of nature, of tradition, of “religion”; he “*must* be born from above”. By *this* birth he is constituted a *super*-natural being in the innermost reality of his being: what Paul calls “a *new* creation”.

Then correspondingly the church is born *from above*, on the day of Pentecost. The difference between the same persons before and after that event, and the corporate nature of the new entity, are patent to all who have eyes to see. It is supernatural.

2) *Supernatural in support*

What was — and is — true of the origin and home of Christ and His church is shown with overwhelming evidence to be true of their sustenance and survival. “Bread from heaven” only means the sustaining, supporting power of heavenly resources. This is seen in two connections. One, in the law of utter dependence upon God and heaven; the very principle of the Incarnation — “He emptied himself” (Philippians 2:7). Again, John’s Gospel is a constant emphatic assertion of this. The double “*verily, verily*” is employed to affirm this — (5:19): “*Verily, verily, I say unto you, the Son can do nothing of (out from) himself*”, etc., etc. For every work, for every word, for every time, He declared that He was dependent upon His Father, upon heaven. It explains His lowly birth, His lowly upbringing, His later homelessness. It explains His being “despised and rejected of men”. But was there ever a life and work so powerful as His?

The other connection is that of the church. When we consider the human material of the first nucleus, and mainly of its growth; when we take into account what it did not have of this world’s goods and support; and when we think of all that was against it in every conceivable way, bent upon its annihilation; and then remark its more than survival as an entity, there is only one word for it — supernatural! I confess that I have marvelled at the sustained and triumphant faith of a man like the apostle Paul when I see him suffering as he did, and when I read his own catalogues of sufferings. The natural mind would say: “This is not the support of heaven”, but we have the verdict of many centuries, and it is the evidence and verdict of the supernatural.

All this is contained in that further double “*verily*” of John 6, where — with an allusion to Israel’s life in the wilderness — Jesus declares

Himself to be the bread of God from heaven. Indeed, so strong, meaningful, and imperative is His mind on this matter that in that chapter He uses the double “verily” four times. The wilderness has always been the symbol or figure of a place outside of the world, and the succour and sustenance in conditions so inimical to life demand resources from another realm. The history of the spiritual life is the history of secret supernatural support. Silently, without demonstration; sustained, without failing; sufficient, without poverty, the manna fell, and the heavenly Lord of Life has maintained His church in the same way. Yes, while it has been silent and often almost imperceptible to the natural senses, yet, in fact, it has been a working of immense power. The New Testament will teach us that the very birth and sustenance of the church is the counterpart of Israel’s emancipation from Egypt. There and then the power of God extended and exhausted the whole might of Egypt and its gods, and then nullified death itself.

The part of the New Testament which most specifically brings the church into view uses such words as: “The *exceeding* greatness of his power which is to usward who believe.”

We have far from understood the terrific thing that was involved in the death and resurrection of Christ in order to secure the church unto God!

Surely we have said enough already to do one or two very supremely important things.

Firstly, to show what the true church is according to the New Testament revelation. If this is not a misapprehension of that revelation, it must be a very discriminating thing. That is, it must reveal a very great difference between the true church, on one side, and that immense umbrella which goes by the name on the other side; an umbrella under which have gathered so many institutions and conflicting conceptions.

It should be a corrective of two extremes. The extreme of a too great inclusiveness which overlooks the fundamental and essential nature of the supernatural, of which we have spoken: the supernatural in the new birth from heaven of every individual in the church. Also a corrective of the opposite extreme of an unscriptural exclusiveness, which makes Christ smaller than He really is in excluding from fellowship truly born-again believers on the ground of some particular technique of “protection”, or some specific interpretation of truth.

Further, if what we have said is a true definition of the church and its

nature, then, surely, it explains loss of power, of impact, of supernatural influence. It also explains the confusion, the poverty of spiritual food for hungry sheep, and the scatteredness which is Satan's special strategy to rob the church of its vocation to take the Kingdom and reign!

The explanation is that the great power of utter dependence upon God, which is the categorical demand of God for the showing of His own glory, has been surrendered to recourse to the world for means, methods, fashions, etc., to make God's work "successful". Satan is not one bit afraid of anything that will use his own kingdom for its glory! He will even sponsor anything that will give him a place. The curse resting upon him and this world will always spell frustration, confusion, and eventual vanity to all that is of his kingdom; hence so much of these very things in a church which is — in any respect — of this world. The church has so largely failed to discern why — in essential relation to His mission and ministry — the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness is given a place in three of the Gospels, and in that specific connection John's Gospel is so gathered up in chapter 17, where the emphasis of Jesus is upon His not being of this world, and the same of His church!

The church — universal and local — which is constituted on spiritual and heavenly principles will have food enough for its own needs, and to spare for all the world. The hungry will gravitate toward such. It will be a *spiritual* magnet which will draw the Lord's people together in a *spiritual* fellowship. It will therefore be an object of Satan's special attention to undo it. But, even if he succeeds in destroying its *temporal* aspects, by martyrdom, fire, dissensions, scatterings, places, etc., such a church will have held spiritual values which are indestructible and eternal — "for the things which are seen are temporal (transient, passing); but the things which are not seen are eternal".

The ultimate test is the eternal!

We said at the commencement that, while we are concerned with the nature of the true church universal, we have a special concern for the local expression. We shall therefore now concentrate our attention upon that expression.

If we take seriously the first three chapters of the book of the Revelation (and surely we must do so) we shall be impressed with the Lord's serious concern for such local expressions. A matchless presentation of Himself is given by way of judging the churches according to Himself. Every feature of that presentation is a factor in judgment. Then the

churches are given a twofold symbolic definition; one as of stars and the other as lampstands. Leaving many details until later, we, at the moment, note that the common feature is that of the power of testimony. It is the positive element of a challenge to world darkness. All through what follows in relation to the churches the feature and factor of positiveness of spiritual life and influence are dominant and paramount. All controversy by the Lord with the churches — on whatever specified account — is focused upon this ultimate issue: the positive effect of the church being where it is. Is there an impact within (lampstands) and without (stars)? Are they telling, accountable, effective, unmistakable? Have they an influential impact upon their surroundings? Is there spiritual power that has effects? Ultimately, the continuance of their place in the divine economy — being retained or “removed” — rests upon this issue. Many things are detailed as the cause of the loss of power, but it is that loss which makes for judgment.

Having noted the inclusive issue which determines everything in a local testimony, we proceed to ask and answer the question: What are

The essential features of a true local church?

We are seeking to keep close and true to the overall principle that the church — universal and local — is called to be an expression of Christ. It is impossible to read the New Testament without seeing that the presence of Christ anywhere was the presence of

1) Heavenly light and power

This we have just indicated as the basis of His judgment of churches. With Him it was not *only* the light of teaching or doctrine. It was teaching personified. There was the teaching incarnated in manhood. His teaching and His works were one. It was very practical light! It was light from another world. If the stars ruled the night they did so by the reflected light of the sun. If the churches are to have the power of truth it must be because they give a rebound of Christ upon human darkness. A local expression of Christ should mean that there is effective light, both for the Lord’s people (the candlesticks) and for the world (the stars). The people who have contact with such a local church should feel the power of the teaching, should be affected by it, and it should be fruitful in them. This is not only a test, but it is a testimony to what the Lord has provided for. Is it a people living in the good of the heavenly light received through that

vessel? Is sin rebuked and exposed? Are sinners convicted? Do the perplexed get understanding in that presenting of Christ?

2) *Heavenly life*

The Lord said that His very coming into this world was “that they might have life”. Therefore, His presence in a locality by means of the church there should mean that all who come and go register a *heavenly* livingness. Not just excitableness, noise, activity, etc., but a life which is not of this world. There are no dead forms and customs. There is nothing in a rut. Life is mediated by all that has a place and a part. There is a spiritual lift as of resurrection life, no depression!

3) *Heavenly food*

Yet again, as we have seen earlier, the presence of Christ meant bread for the hungry. The very “compassion” of Christ meant that He could not bear to have people come hungry and go away the same. A true local expression of Christ will mean that that company of His people will have, not only enough for themselves, but the margin, or overflow, to all the hungry — spiritually hungry. That will be a house of bread where none ever fails to be fed. The food will not be just localized, but will be ministered to many beyond.

4) *Heavenly fellowship*

An impressive feature of Christ when personally present among men was the way He transcended the things which divide men in this world. He made no attempt to make everyone and everything uniform by organization, institution, denomination, class, category, forms, systems, etc. Every type and temperament, if free from prejudice and hypocrisy, and of open heart and conscious of spiritual need, found a common ground of fellowship and oneness in Him. He just rose above the dividing things, and in response to Him people found that things which had separated them just vanished. Christ became their common ground.

Thus should it be in any local corporate expression of Christ. Questions of association, denomination, sect, tradition, etc., should not arise, but just vanish in the presence of the warmth of fellowship, and entire occupation with Christ. The only effective way of true unity, heavenly fellowship, is that of the higher than earthly ground — the love of heaven.

5) *Heavenly order*

All the four things which we have mentioned as characteristic of a true local expression of the church and of Christ will be helped or hindered by the presence or absence of a heavenly, spiritual order. All appointments, positions, “offices”, should be by the definite witness of the Holy Spirit; not by man’s choosing, whether by others or by the person’s ambition. As the result of much prayer by the church it should be manifest where anointing and gift rests, so that the function of those in any position of leadership should definitely mean that the church is inspired, strengthened and built up. Failing this heavenly order, there will exist an element of artificiality, a straining to *make* something and keep it going. The highest level of genius will fall far short of the smallest measure of divine inspiration. It is this divine inspiration that determines all divine service and functions. There is no effort or strain where the anointing rests, but spontaneity and liberty and unction. Oil has ever been a symbol of the Holy Spirit, and where He is things should move as in oil.

This is not at all an impossible standard, but the normal expression of the Lordship and Headship of Christ.

What God requires He makes possible.

THE CHURCH — THE ANOINTED VESSEL

In the Scriptures there are many ways in which the Holy Spirit's work is spoken of. There is the "receiving"; the "filling"; the "baptizing"; the "enduing"; the "gifting". It is not our purpose to consider the meaning of this variety of expressions, but to dwell upon one other, namely, the anointing. The anointing throughout both Old and New Testaments is shown to be both general and particular; comprehensive and specific.

The first thing about the general aspect of the anointing is that, because it is the Spirit of God who is the anointing Spirit, the anointing is God joining and uniting, and committing Himself to whatever or whoever is anointed. It means that whenever and wherever the anointing rests, there God has to be reckoned with. To touch that is to touch God. To obtain a real knowledge of this truth and fact we have only to read those parts of the book of Numbers which deal with the Levites, the tabernacle and the vessels thereof. Life and death were bound up with all these as anointed because thereby God was bound up with them. In the New Testament this comprehensive aspect is first related to Christ and then to the church.

The very word or name "Christ" means anointed. "Jesus of Nazareth, whom God anointed ..." (Acts 10:38). To Him God was committed. To touch Him was to touch God, as history has proved. In the end everyone is going to be judged and their destiny fixed according to their attitude and decision regarding Jesus Christ. What a tremendous amount of detail is comprehended by this inclusive truth!

When we pass to the church we find that, according to the New Testament

The church is the anointed vessel

On the Day of Pentecost a company of over five hundred men and

women were constituted the church of God by the anointing of the Holy Spirit. That company came under the anointed leadership of the exalted Lord Jesus, for *inclusive* anointing was always upon the head. From that time the church carried into the world the implication of God: and rulers, empires, and peoples had to reckon with God in the church. All that was true of Christ as the Anointed passed from Him as Head down to the church, His Body. It was not what the people were, or are, in themselves, but because of the anointing, although anointed people are such because they do not stand on their own ground, but on the ground of Christ.

It is taken for granted in the New Testament that truly born from above, baptized believers have the anointing, and surprise is expressed if the evidence is not present (see Acts 19:2,3 — R.V.). Place alongside of this reference 2 Corinthians 1:21, etc. The very place of believers as “in Christ” places them under His anointing, or in Him, as the anointed One.

But while the Holy Spirit is comprehensive and many-sided in meaning, the anointing is everywhere in the Bible the term which has the particular meaning of position and function, office and purpose. Satan (Lucifer) in his unfallen position is said to have been the “anointed cherub that covereth” (Ezekiel 28:14). It was evidently a particular position and function. So, prophets, priests and kings were anointed for their position and their vocation. In the same way the tabernacle and all its vessels and instruments were anointed to fulfil a particular purpose, and nothing could have a place or fulfil divine purpose without the anointing. Everything and everyone had to be anointed for a specific use and purpose, and no instrument could either choose its own function and position, or do the work of another. All this was God’s law of efficiency, effectiveness, harmony and blessing. Life and death were bound up with this principle.

The anointing has always been within the divine sovereignty, and *never* in the choice, power, or hands of men. It is a very serious thing to either get or be put into a position for which God has not acted by the anointing.

When we come into the New Testament this law of the anointing is very clearly recognizable as to both Christ and the church. First the sovereign act, then the many and various functions. Both in the major appointments, such as apostles and prophets, which mainly relate to the church universal, and in the particular functions in the local expression of the church, the New Testament is very clear. The Holy Spirit is seen to be the custodian of the gifts, functions, appointments, and enduements in the

churches. It is God's order; to overlook, to ignore, to violate, to exceed this law is to mean an affront to the Holy Spirit. This will result in confusion, limitation, and divisions. Where men have put their hand upon a work of God the subsequent history has invariably been twofold: divisions and the relegating of such men to a place where discredit rests upon them, and their place of full usefulness has been lost. On the other hand, there is a no more heartening and inspiring truth revealed in the Scriptures than that by the anointing every member of Christ has a particular function and value. The anointing is different from natural ability and qualification. The least gifted naturally is not thereby disqualified from divine usefulness, and the most gifted or qualified naturally has no advantage here. The anointing is unique. Just put together 2 Corinthians 1:21 and I Corinthians 1:26-30, and all of 1 Corinthians 2.

In the tabernacle of Israel there were great vessels under the anointing, and there were such humble instruments as the snuffers, but even the latter were anointed. Now, be careful! They were *anointed* snuffers. There are plenty of people who take on themselves the function of snuffing. They will snuff *anything*, and snuff *out* anything. The snuffers of the tabernacle were not for reducing or extinguishing the light of the testimony, but for keeping it fresh and from making an unpleasant atmosphere. It requires the anointing for such a ministry.

There is another thing that we must always remember, and it is that every vessel, function, and place derives its value from its relatedness to all the others. Indeed, no one vessel, however important, has either meaning or anointing apart from all the others. The anointing is *one*, although in a variety of operations. The lamps demand the snuffers, and the snuffers are absurd without the lamps.

All that we have here said is only an indication and pointer to a very large and important realm of divine truth; many volumes would be required to exhaust and expound it all. But surely, if this be God's truth, it is enough to — at least — indicate

- (1) the real nature of the church, churches, and their function;
- (2) why there is so much weakness and confusion, and loss of divine impact;

- (3) why the enemy is so concerned to counterfeit the Holy Spirit and thereby defeat the anointing of which he was once deprived. This latter will be a particular characteristic of the last times. That is why, in the Scriptures, the anointing had such a close and vital place with warfare.

Think about that!

THE LOCAL EXPRESSION OF THE CHURCH

Before leaving our consideration of the church I feel strongly that I should say a few things of vital importance as to a true local expression of the church. I know only too well how difficult it is to find or secure any such true expression, but that is no reason why we should abandon the whole matter. Rather is it a pointer to its value, for history and experience have shown that this is one thing that is of very great account where the adversary of Christ is concerned. To prevent or destroy such expressions has always been a major concern of the powers of evil. The true church, universal and local, is a very great menace to the kingdom of Satan. This we have emphasized in earlier chapters. But let us summarize:

1) The importance of the church in local expressions

We must first remind ourselves that a solid block of the New Testament was written specifically to local churches; which churches had been the first result of apostolic ministry. That ministry, and all the suffering involved, had been vindicated in local corporate bodies of believers. It was for those churches that the apostles travailed, laboured, prayed and fought. The bulk of the New Testament had its supreme concern for such assemblies which, themselves, had known great sufferings in their very birth, and were in “a great fight of affliction” for their continuance and survival.

Then we must remember that the Lord’s own personal concern for, and evaluation of local churches is made very evident by His direct messages to the seven churches in Asia with which the book of finalities (Revelation) commences. There is no mistaking the importance to the exalted Lord of local churches when we read those messages, the focal point of which is a clause in one of them: “These things saith the Son of God.” The Psalmist would say: “Selah” — “think of that!”

2) This importance is to be seen in the specific values of a local assembly, when rightly functioning

a) Here the principle that “No man liveth unto himself, and no man dieth unto himself” (Romans 14:7) is enunciated in relation to the local church in the messages to the churches in Asia. It is said of the church in Ephesus that through them “all they which be in Asia heard the word of the Lord” (Acts 19:10 — see 1 Thessalonians 1:8). It should be impossible for a local assembly of God’s people to exist without it being known over an area far greater than its own locality. A living company will, sooner or later, be known abroad for what it has of the Lord.

b) To enlarge on this, a local church should have, not only enough spiritual bread for itself, but basketfuls over to spare, and many beyond its borders should be receiving enrichment from its spiritual wealth. Is this not so very evident in history? Have not the Lord’s people been feeding down the ages unto this day upon the bread ministered to and through those New Testament churches? Is it not true that multitudes have been fed, and are still being fed by the food ministered in local churches in many places in the last century? So the Lord would have it. The church which only ministers to itself and does not do so to the church at large is committing a sin against the trust of life; it is a cul-de-sac, not a highway. Of course, it is particularly important that the ministry in a local church is truly anointed ministry. Not by man’s appointment, selection or decision from either side. Not by studied-up and made-up addresses, but by illumination and inspiration as through an open heaven. Not just keeping something going as *amust*, but by revelation of Jesus Christ. It must be evident to all that those leading and ministering are under a genuine burden from the Lord, and the evidence is life!

c) The local church should, and can be a refuge, a covering, a protection to its own members. One of Satan’s master-tactics is to isolate believers and then knock them out. This can be done by unwise and independent action, choices, movements, uncounselled decisions. The church by its prayers, and counsel, and fellowship is a divine provision against the tragedies which lie in the way of independence and isolation. Cooperation and coordination in the physical body are a provision and a law against many diseases. So it is in the spiritual body corporate.

d) The local church should provide personal ministries to the Lord's people, and to the unsaved, near and far, and it should provide an encompassing safeguard and support for the fulfilment of such ministries. Those who go forth in the church's ministry should know that they are being upheld and stood with by those from amongst whom they have gone. Indeed, they should go as sent forth by the church!

The lack and absence of these characteristics in local companies is the cause of much weakness in the church universal.

e) Finally, a local church rightly functioning is a wonderful provision for the training of its members for service. Training is so largely a matter of being able to work corporately. How to live and work with others, and to sink individualism into fellowship, is a real part of the discipline which makes a fruitful ministry!

There is a real danger in departmentalism: the separation into isolated groups, so that these groups do not come into the corporate life and function of the church. It is possible to have groups associated with a local church which really have no true church life. This means weakness and loss. Moreover, the local church should be its own bible school, for systematic instruction in the Word of God.

Careful reading of the Bible, especially the New Testament, will show that what we have said above is all there as exhortation, admonition, warning, instruction, and example.

Were I to add one more vital and all-inclusive thing, I would say that the absolute essential to such churches is a real work of the Cross in everyone concerned.

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