

Introduction to a Study of Church Truth

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Foreword

This booklet has been written for the purpose of enabling all true Christians to discover where they are in relation to the present confusion which obtains in Christendom. It is hoped that its reading will enable them to prayerfully, sincerely and intelligently decide what path they shall take in view of what the New Testament has to say regarding this neglected doctrine of the Church, or Assembly of God. These terms, "Church" and "Assembly", will be used interchangeably, for they both mean the same thing. The latter word is to be preferred as best expressing the real meaning of the word in the original.

The title will serve to indicate this is but an *introduction* to a study of the subject of the Church. The principal object of this paper is two-fold:

- To prepare the reader for further serious consideration of this most important theme
- To orient each Christian as to his position in and his responsibility to the revelation which God has given to the Church, particularly in view of Christendom today.

It will surely be agreed, by all true Christians, that there is but one authority on which to base a correct opinion concerning any of the fundamental doctrines of our most holy faith, and this is the Divinely inspired, and therefore absolutely inerrant word of God.

Mere human opinions and statements of belief, however hoary with antiquity, firmly established by tradition, sincerely conceived, learnedly composed and attractively stated, should have no weight whatever with the child of God unless they are based on what the Word of God clearly teaches throughout its pages. By this is meant, not some isolated text which may appear to back up a statement, but the *general teaching* of all that the Bible has to say on any particular subject. This is what 2 Pet. 1:20 affirms; "No prophecy of the Scripture is of any private interpretation." In other words, no Scripture passage should be interpreted without having in mind every other Scripture bearing on the same subject.

The supreme test of all doctrine, or teaching, has been laid down in the word of God itself, where we read: "To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them" (Isa. 8:10).

By the term, "Church truth", is meant all that the New Testament has to say regarding the Church of God, both in its universal and local aspects. By "universal" is meant the aggregate, or sum total of all regenerated believers from the inception of the Church at Pentecost to its consummation at the coming of Christ. By "local" is meant all the believers in a certain given area or town as, for instance, "the Churches of Galatia," or, "The Church of God which is at Corinth" (Gal. 1:2; 1 Cor. 1:2). These are the only two aspects of the Church contemplated in the New Testament, and the context will determine whether the universal or the local Church is in view. It is important to distinguish between these terms at the beginning of our discussion of the subject.

The Lord Jesus spoke only twice concerning the Church. First, in its *universal* aspect (Matt. 16:18-19), and then in its *local* aspect (Matt. 18:15-17).

We shall think of our subject under two main heads: the necessity for its study, and its value to every Christian.

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I. The Necessity for Such a Study of Church Truth

Although the subject of the Church of God, and the Churches of God, occupies a large part of the New Testament, it seems to be one of the least

known and appreciated of all the great doctrines of "the faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3). The reason for this tragic neglect stems from various causes. Let us consider them.

1. The utter confusion which obtains in Christendom

We must be careful to distinguish between "Christendom" and "Christianity". By "Christendom" is meant the sum total of all those organized systems of religion in the world that name the name of Christ, whether they are good, bad or indifferent. By "Christianity" is meant all that which was made possible by the incarnation, substitutionary sacrifice, victorious resurrection and present ministry of the eternal Son of God, and which finds its source, center and circumference in Him. In other words, "Christianity is Christ." Apart from Christ's person, authority, presence and power, Christianity could not exist for a moment.

Now let us note some of the evidences of this confusion.

(1) The multitude of various denominations.

We are faced today with the spectacle of scores of rival sects, or denominations, many of them very highly organized, and each claiming the support of Scripture for its constitution as a separate entity. Each, in turn, is divided from the others by man-made barriers in the shape of creeds, articles of belief, systems of Church government, councils and books of discipline.

One of these great systems of organized religion makes the pretentious claim to be "the one true Church", and designates all who do not belong to it as "heretics"! It actually has, as its head, a universal bishop called "the Pope", who assumes the title of "The vicar (or representative) of Christ on earth", and who is addressed as "the holy father"! Still another system has the crowned ruler of Great Britain as its head, who bears the title, "The defender of the faith." Other of these systems are under the control of central authorities such as synods, presbyteries and conferences, whose decrees must be obeyed by all members of the denomination under pain of excommunication.

We shall search the New Testament in vain to discover any mention, suggestion or support for such a condition of affairs. There is no mention whatever of either *denominationalism*, or *interdenominationalism*. Every believer, in the New Testament, is viewed as having been joined, by the Spirit of God, to the one Church, which is called "the body of Christ," of which Christ is the Head and every believer a member. See Eph. 1:22-23; 1 Cor. 12:13.

While the New Testament reveals the existence of many local companies of

believers, under the description of "the Churches of the saints," these assemblies were only separated from each other geographically. It was merely *distance* and not *difference* of belief that separated them. See 1 Cor. 14:33. Thus we read of "the Churches of Galatia," and "the Churches of Asia," etc. (Gal. 1:2, 1 Cor. 16:19; Rev. 1:11). By this term, of course, *all the believers* of that particular area were included.

In the first three chapters of Revelation, seven of these local Churches are described and addressed by the Lord Jesus. These churches were located in different cities and were autonomous (or self governing) in their constitution; yet all are described as being under the direct control of the Son of God who is pictured as walking "in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks," which symbolize these churches. The extraordinary thing about these churches is that though each actually existed at that time and in the place indicated, yet they combine to present a prophetic review of the entire history of the Church from the apostolic age to the end. For a full study of this fascinating subject, see "The Seven Churches of Asia" by F.C. Jennings, or "The Prophetic History of the Church" by F.W. Grant.

As the New Testament is read, it will become obvious that there is no reference whatever to a multitude of denominations existing in those days. While it is true that the spirit of sectarianism, in its recipient form, made its appearance in the Corinthian assembly, yet it is only mentioned to be vigorously denounced, in the most unsparing terms, by the Spirit of God through the apostle Paul. See 1 Cor. 1:11-15; 3:1-7. The fact is that denominationalism, as such, is a virtual denial of the unity of the body of Christ, that God has made, and which each Christian is urged to keep "in the bond of peace." (Eph. 4:4-6). Pride of denomination has no place in the Holy Scriptures.

In considering this matter of denominationalism, it is essential that we distinguish between a denomination and those who are members of it. Within these sects there are very many true believers in our Lord Jesus Christ. Their clear, unwavering testimonies to God's saving grace through faith in Christ, backed up by godly and consistent lives and a love for the word of God, bear witness that they have been truly regenerated by the Spirit of God. For all such we give God praise, and gladly hail them as our brothers and sisters in "the family of God," and fellow members of the one Church, which is the body of Christ. See Eph. 3:14-16.

But while we thank God for every believer in these denominations, we cannot honestly thank God for the denominations to which they belong, for they have separated Christians into various "*folds*", with artificial barriers to fellowship with other Christians. In reality, this constitutes a denial of Christ's revelation of His purpose, in redemption, to form "one flock and one

Shepherd." See John 10:16 R.V.

A convert to Christianity, in the early days of the Church, was not faced with the problem of deciding what denomination to join, for happily there were none in existence! He would be taught, from the Scriptures, that on his regeneration he had been "joined to the Lord," and was thus a member of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 16:17). It would also be pointed out to him that it was now his privilege, *as already a member of the body of Christ*, to associate himself, in happy fellowship, with a local company of believers who met together in the Lord's name for mutual edification. Thus he could now enjoy the company of his fellow members in the body of Christ. One cannot help but be impressed with the *simplicity* that existed in those days as compared with the *complexity* that obtains in these days!

The present day convert to Christ faces an entirely different situation. No sooner has he trusted Christ as his Savior and owned Him as Lord than he is faced by a host of denominations, each claiming to be guided by the Bible, and each anxious to secure his membership on the condition that he agrees to subscribe to its creed, submit to its ordinances, and obey its rules and regulations. The question may well be asked: "What is a Christian to do under these circumstances?" There is surely only one satisfactory answer. Let him read and re-read the New Testament for himself, and *then act on what he finds written therein*.

For instance, when a believer discovers that he is already a member of the Church of God, which is the body of Christ, he will not seek to join any other "church of man". When he sees that the early church disciples, at conversion, associated themselves with local companies of believers that met simply in the name of the Lord Jesus, and owned no name but what was common to and inclusive of all the people of God, he will seek to do the same. See Matt. 18:20; 1 Cor. 1:2.

Let such an one know that he will not be alone in his decision, for there are many such gatherings of Christians throughout the world who have also seen and acted on the pattern revealed in the Scriptures. Such companies of believers will gladly welcome him into their midst, and thus he will be enabled to enjoy the fellowship of saints, unhindered by humanly invented denominations.

Another cause for this confusion in Christendom is

(2) *The existence of a special caste known as the "clergy"*.

Practically all these denominations are staffed by a corps of especially selected, theologically trained and humanly ordained men who are called

"clergymen", or "ministers". In the majority of these cases these men alone possess the authority to preach and teach, "administer the ordinances", and conduct the worship of those who are members of such organizations.

A careful reading of the New Testament will disclose that there is no mention whatever of such a class of people existing in the early church. Every Christian, regardless of age and sex, is viewed in the New Testament as a "priest unto God." As such, he is enjoined to "draw near unto God," and to "offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." Let each reader read Rev. 1:5-6; 5:9-10; 20:6; 1 Peter 2:5-10; 4:10-11.

These scriptures clearly indicate the fact of the priesthood of *all believers*. Just as denominationalism is virtually a denial of the unity of the body of Christ, so clerisy seeks to nullify the equally important truth of the priesthood of all Christians, for it assumes the necessity for the existence of a priestly caste with privileges not common to all the people of God. We shall trace later how clerisy came into being.

Dr. Stanley, dean of Westminster, and himself a "clergyman", wrote in his "Christian Institutes," (page 19 New Edition): "In the beginning of Christianity there was no such institution as the clergy." Dr. A.T. Pierson, in "The Divine Enterprise of Missions," wrote: "These terms, 'clergy' and 'laity' were the invention of the Devil in the dark ages. The introduction of this distinction was not only an invention of the Devil, but a master stroke of Satan-craft."

The word, "clergy", is derived from the Greek, *kleeros*, which is translated "heritage" in 1 Peter 5:3. Thus the word has reference to all the people of God who together form God's heritage, or possession, and not to a small, exclusive and superior caste amongst Christians. The word, "laity", comes from the Greek word, *laos*, which means "the common people." Thus we hear today of "the clergy" and "the laity," or "clergymen" and "laymen", a distinction utterly unknown in the New Testament, where the sole revelation of the Church and its order is found.

To add to the confusion, it is evident also that

(3) *There are two classes of clergymen.*

Within many denominations there are two distinct classes of clergymen known as "fundamentalists" and "modernists". The fundamentalists, sometimes called "Evangelicals", or "Conservatives", believe and teach the foundation truths of Christianity such as:

- a. The divine inspiration, integrity and authority of the holy Scriptures, as the authoritative word of God.

- b. The essential and eternal Deity of Christ, the Son of God, His incarnation by the virgin birth and His true and sinless humanity.
- c. The necessity for and the eternal efficacy of the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ and His victorious resurrection as the alone basis for the sinner's acceptance with God.
- d. The ruined and lost state of man by nature, and the sinner's need of the new birth in order to see or enter the kingdom of God.
- e. That salvation is wholly of grace, entirely apart from human merit, and is conditioned by faith alone in the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ, and accompanied by a confession of Christ's Lordship in the life.
- f. The Deity and Personality of the Holy Spirit, who uses the word of God, which He has inspired, to illuminate, convict and regenerate each believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. He then indwells each Christian, thus sealing him unto the day of redemption and, from that time on, seeks to guide him, from the Word, into all truth so that he shall grow in grace and in the knowledge of his Lord and Savior.
- g. The eternal retribution of God upon all who reject the Son of God.

The Modernists, sometimes called "Liberals", not only deny these fundamental truths, but still remain within the membership and draw a salary from the denomination which outwardly professes to hold and teach these doctrines of the word of God! In very many cases these modernistic clergymen outnumber the fundamentalists in their particular denomination! One of these fundamental clergymen once sadly confided to me that of the ninety ministers of his denomination in a certain area, only six were sound in the faith! In many of the Theological seminaries of these sects, this God-dishonoring modernism is openly taught, and the fundamental position ridiculed.

Dr. Dowincott, of New York City, in a booklet entitled "The Deadly Parallel", describes an incident which occurred in an eastern city of the U.S.A. At a meeting of the Ministerial Association, a paper was read before a group of these modernistic clergymen. Their opinion was then asked as to whether this paper correctly represented their views on Christianity and the Bible. When they had all replied in the affirmative, the reader of the paper informed them, to their consternation, that what they had heard and approved was a chapter from Tom Paine's atheistic book "The Age of Reason"!

Thus, within the same ecclesiastical system, these two diametrical forces are at work: the fundamentalists, seeking to preach the clear gospel of the grace of God and teach the Bible as the word of God; and the modernists, endeavoring to deny, belittle and destroy "the faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3).

The fourth cause for this confusion can be traced to

(4) Laxity in "Church membership".

To further contribute to this confusion, if any was needed, is the fact that in many denominations there is little or no distinction made between the regenerate, or the saved, and the unregenerate, or the unsaved. Both are often received, on the same footing, into "Church membership". Some automatically become members in babyhood through the rite of christening. Later, these pass through a ceremony called "confirmation", concerning which the Bible is also silent. Others are admitted by merely expressing a desire for membership. Still others are admitted by submitting to some formal rite, or ceremony. Many a fundamental clergyman has confided to me that more than half of his so called "Church members" gave no evidence that they had ever been born again! These are solemn facts, which the reader may verify for himself by personal and careful investigation.

The fifth cause for this confusion stems from

(5) The avoidance of this subject by otherwise sound preachers and teachers.

We are convinced that the appalling ignorance of many Christians is directly due to this fact. There are many sound teachers of the Word, who speak with no uncertain voice when proclaiming the gospel. They clearly and fearlessly set forth the great truths of man's ruin, Christ's redemption, the Spirit's regeneration, the way of salvation, the assurance of salvation, the eternal security of the believer, the necessity for and the means whereby each Christian may live "godly in Christ Jesus," the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ and the eternal punishment of the Christ rejecter.

For all this we certainly give God praise. But when it comes to teaching a new convert the scriptural truth of the Church of God, or advising him regarding the matter of associating himself with a scripturally gathered company of believers, they are strangely silent. Often the young Christian is advised to "join the Church of his choice", or he is asked to indicate on the dotted line, his "church preference".

Thus the Bible, which was promptly and intelligently opened to chapter and verse to show the way of salvation, is shut when it comes to counseling a young believer as to the truth of the Church of God, or where to go and with whom to meet for assembly fellowship.

The illustration of this attitude of indifference to Church truth is seen in the following excerpt from a recent book by a well known evangelist: "I, for one,

do not deny the need for separate denominations amongst orthodox Christians. No one denomination could possibly minister to the needs of all men. Some people crave excitement, whereas others are innately calm. Some require an outward sign, while others are content to proceed entirely on faith. In this respect, denominations are within the will of God, for they minister to the spiritual needs of the world's variety of people. The current dream of a single church is absurd. Our physical make up, emotionally, mentally, socially forbids it."

Now compare this statement with what God has to say regarding divisions or sects, and see whether or not they lie "within the will of God". Read 1 Cor.. 1:10-16; 3:1-6; Eph. 4:1-7. Still another prominent teacher justified denominationalism by 1 Cor. 11:19: "For there must be also heresies among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you." What a misinterpretation of Scripture!

Still another contributory cause for this confusion is

(6) The silence of many Bible Schools regarding this subject.

This present century has witnessed the formation of scores of fundamentally sound Bible schools. These have taught and sent forth hundreds of young men and women to preach and teach the word of God. For this fact we give God praise. Yet, in practically all these schools, with a few happy exceptions, such as the Emmaus Bible School of Oak Park, Illinois, the great truth of the Church of God is sadly neglected. This is largely due to the fact that these schools are advertised as being *interdenominational* in character. Consequently, lest they should offend and thus lose the support of any of these denominations, they limit themselves as to the scope of their Bible teaching. Church truth is therefore tacitly avoided, and their students graduate with little knowledge of what the Bible has to say regarding the Church, in both its universal and local aspects. Thus, while we thank God for every sound Bible school, our thanksgiving is mingled with regret that this important doctrine receives such scant attention at their hands. It must be emphasized that it requires "all Scripture" to fully furnish the man of God, and contribute to his spiritual maturity. See II Tim. 3:16-17.

Now let us think, for a moment, of

(7) The tragedy of this neglect. The New Testament leaves us in no doubt as to how God views this doctrine of the Church. We are told that its very existence is: "According to the eternal purpose which He purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord." It is described as that which "Christ loved," and for which He "gave Himself." It is spoken of as "The Church which is His (Christ's) body, the fullness of Him that filleth all in all." It is revealed that the Church

is God's present "habitation through the Spirit." Moreover, the Bible states the tremendous fact that the Church is intended, by God, to be the vehicle by which is to be made known, "unto the principalities and powers in the heavenlies, the manifold wisdom of God."

Surely such a vastly important and sublime theme is worthy of better treatment than avoidance and neglect! Let each reader, at this juncture, ponder carefully, prayerfully and reverently these Scripture references: Eph. 1:15-23; 2: 19-22; 3:1-23; 5:22-30. Let him also solemnly determine that he will do nothing, and countenance nothing which would in any way hinder the maintenance of the unity of the body of Christ, which the Spirit of God has made, and which each Christian is earnestly exhorted to "keep in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3-6).

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Having considered the confusion that now obtains in Christendom, let us briefly describe

2. How this confusion came into existence

(1) It was predicted in Scripture.

This confusion in Christendom is not of recent date. The New Testament itself predicts the failure and final apostasy of Christendom. See I Tim. 4:1-6; II Tim. 3:1-5; Rev. 3:14-19. As early as around 60 A. D. Paul personally warned the elders of the Church in Ephesus of the dangers which awaited them. Mark well his words: "I know this, that after my departing, shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also *of your own selves* shall men arise, speaking perverse things to draw away disciples after them. Therefore, watch" (Acts 20:29-31). Here is Paul's own description of "apostolic succession!" Thus Paul predicted that, both from within and without, destructive forces should arise to produce division amongst the assemblies of the Lord's people.

(2) The false teaching of Judaizing legalists.

During the larger part of Paul's ministry, he was continually opposed by subversive teachers who sought to corrupt the minds of the people of God and turn them from "the simplicity which is in Christ Jesus" (II Cor. 11:8).

This opposition stemmed from a two-fold source. First, from Judaizing and legalistic teachers, who endeavored to bring Gentile believers under the bondage of the law. See Acts 15:1-2. Second, from the philosophical teachers of that day. See Col. 2:8. These false teachers, in order to bolster their arguments, also attempted to discredit the authority of Paul as a

Divinely called, commissioned and equipped apostle of Christ, and in this way sought to belittle the worth and weight of his message. Paul's letters to the Galatians, Corinthians and Colossians were written, not only to testify to the Divine origin of the revelation committed to him, but also to defend his apostolic authority. See Gal.1:6-16; 2:4-14; 2 Cor. 3:1-6; 6:1-12; 11:1-15; 12:11-16; 13:3-5; Col. 2:8-23.

The tragedy was that, in many cases, these evil men succeeded only too well in their wicked purpose. Just a few weeks before his martyrdom Paul had to write: "All they which are in Asia be turned away from me, of whom are Phygellus and Hermogenes" (II Tim. 1:15).

(3) Self seekers and lovers of prominence.

The apostle John wrote of another form of opposition he encountered at the hands of corrupt men. Diotrephes receives unenviable notoriety in this respect. John describes him as a person "that loveth to have the preeminence among them. . . He receiveth us not. . . prating against us with malicious words: and not content therewith, neither doth he himself receive the brethren, and forbiddeth them that would, and casteth them out of the Church" (III John 9-10).

(4) Deniers of the faith and teachers of false doctrines.

John had to write in his declining years, around 90 A.D.: "Many deceivers are entered into the world who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh" (II John 7; I John 4:1-6).

(5) A summary of these disruptive forces.

Thus, even in the days of apostolic Christianity, there were those who:

- a. Endeavored to bring the people of God into the bondage of legalism.
- b. Sought, through heathen philosophy, to discredit the truth of Christianity.
- c. Indulged in the malicious slander of Divinely called and approved apostles of Christ.
- d. Sought to exercise lordship over the people of God.
- e. Held and taught wrong doctrine.
- f. Sought to form parties, with themselves as the leaders.

One has only to read a reliable Church History, such as Andrew Miller's 8 volumes, or Broadbent's excellent one volume: "The Pilgrim Church," to learn how rapidly this stream of error widened into a river, and soon developed into a sea of ink; or, to change the figure, how the mustard seed of man-made theories, by its phenomenal growth, became the vast tree of

Christendom which provided shelter for every evil bird of doctrine. See Matt. 13:31-32; Matt. 13:4, 19.

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Now let us trace

3. The further developments of this confusion

(1) The rise of clerisy.

We have already referred to this formation of a special caste amongst the people of God called "the clergy." Among these assemblies of saints were men who had been gifted by the Lord Jesus with the ability to preach, teach and guide. These men gradually began to imagine that their particular gift gave them a superior status among their brethren who were not so gifted. They apparently neglected the exhortation which is addressed to *all* Christians: "As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God" (I Peter 5:10).

At this juncture, it may be well to point out the difference between the common priesthood of *all* believers and the special gifts given to *some* believers. These gifts are described in Eph. 4:8-16 as: "Apostles... prophets... evangelists... pastors and teachers." The purpose for which these gifts were given is also mentioned: "For the perfecting (maturing) of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ."

Thus these gifts were not given by the Lord for the purpose of inflating a preacher's ego or, least of all, to enable him to advance his own interests and secure a place of prominence and power in his home assembly.

As time went on these men, instead of humbly seeking to develop and exercise their gift for the edification of the saints, began to adopt a superior and condescending air towards those not so gifted. Not content with this, they formed themselves into a clique, or a special caste, amongst the believers. Gradually they began to claim the *exclusive monopoly* of preaching, teaching, exhorting and governing the people of God.

Thus they turned what the Lord had intended as *a stewardship among* the believers into *a lordship over* the people of God. In this way the *priesthood* of all believers gradually gave place to the *priestcraft* of a few believers. The words of their Lord no longer seemed to have any weight with them: "One is your Master, even Christ, and all ye are brethren" (Matt. 23:8).

During the years that followed, these men assumed distinctive titles and wore

a different form of dress to mark them out from the "ordinary" believer, or "the laity." They styled themselves "the clergy," and apparently assuming that the assembly was *their* "heritage" instead of the *Lord's*, began to rule the assembly as though it was their own personal property. Needless to say, this is a flat contradiction of the revealed pattern for the functioning of assemblies, as laid down in the word of God.

Each believer should make himself familiar with what God has to say on this subject by carefully studying chapters twelve to fourteen of first Corinthians. A thorough grasp of the contents of these chapters should deliver any Christian from this error of clerisy.

This unscriptural assumption of special privilege on the part of these men produced, as may well be supposed, a keen rivalry among them as to who should be the "head clergyman." From the writings of the early "fathers," who lived immediately after the apostles, we learn that elections were held as to who should be recognized as the chief amongst them. The most popular, when chosen by a show of hands, was formally ordained and placed in charge of the assembly as its "minister."

Now all these innovations took considerable time to fully develop, for there were not wanting those who strenuously refused to exchange the Lordship of Christ for the lordship of the clergy. These faithful brethren were unwilling to forsake the scriptural pattern for the new order, which was based on human expediency. As the years passed, however, this opposition slowly degenerated into tolerance, and finally this invention came to be adopted by the various assemblies of believers.

The gifts of Christ to His Church were now limited, in their expression, to one man. In this way, the evils of professionalism was gradually introduced and ultimately came to be looked upon with complacency. This distinction between "clergy" and "laity" is first mentioned in the writings of Clement, of Alexandria, who died in A. D. 217, and also by Tertullian, who died in A. D. 220.

(2) The development of Episcopacy or the rule of the bishop.

The next phase in the process of degeneration was the appointing of one bishop to be in control of an assembly. The New Testament teaching in regard to elders or bishops is very clear. The terms are used interchangeably. The word, "presbuteros," translated "elder," refers to the *age* and maturity of the person. The word, "episkopos," translated "bishop," means "one who watches over, or an "overseer," and this, of course refers to the *work* that he did.

We also learn, from Scripture, that in each assembly there were several elders, or bishops. These were men of irreproachable character, who were selected and fitted by the Holy Spirit to exercise oversight amongst the believers and thus care for the assembly. Their responsibility was to feed, guide and guard the flock and, by their godly lives, be an example to the saints. Thus there was a *plurality* of bishops in the the early churches. In the assembly at Philippi there were many bishops, as also in the assembly in Ephesus. See Phil. 1:1; Acts 20:28.

The qualifications and duties of these elders or bishops are described in I Tim. 8:1-7; 5:17-19; Titus 1:5-9; I Peter 5:1-5. There is no suggestion whatever, in these scriptures, of *one bishop* ruling over an assembly, or a *number* of assemblies. The word is always in the plural when it describes their service in a company of God's people.

The fact that "elder" and "bishop" are interchangeable terms is frankly admitted, even by those whose ecclesiastical position and whose practice deny it. Jerome (died A. D. 420) wrote: "Among the ancients, presbyters (elders) were the same as bishops, but by degrees, that the plants of dissension might be rooted up, all responsibility was transferred to one person." Lightfoot, himself an Anglican bishop, says: "It is a fact now generally recognized by theologians of all shades of opinion that, in the language of the New Testament, the same officer in the Church is called indifferently, 'bishop,' 'elder,' or 'presbyter.'" Dean Alford, also an Episcopalian, wrote: "The identity of 'episkopos' and 'presbuteros' in apostolic times is evident from Titus 1:5,7." He then adds significantly: "The 'episkopi' of the New Testament have officially nothing in common with our bishops."

Following the rise of clerisy there gradually evolved, in spite of much opposition, the idea of one elder being placed over the other elders and given the distinctive title of "*the* bishop." By the time of Irenaeus (died A. D. 200) the bishop of an assembly had become an established fact.

A later development of Episcopacy consisted of the bishop of a large local Church assuming control over a number of smaller assemblies in the surrounding district. In this way there emerged the "diocean bishop " (from "dia," which means through, and "oikeo," which means to dwell.) This is the origin of the Episcopal form of government, which places a bishop over a "diocese," or "see," or over a given area.

These diocesan bishops soon began to be jealous of each other's influence, and this led to contentions as to who was the supreme bishop of them all. Compare Mark 9:33-37. In A. D. 330, Constantine, the emperor of Rome,

transferred his capital from Rome to Constantinople. This act precipitated a controversy between the bishop of Rome and the bishop of Constantinople as to which was the preeminent bishop of all the churches in the world. Each claimed this "honor," but the bishop of Constantinople was the first to give himself the grandiloquent title of "universal bishop." This claim, together with some other matters of ecclesiastical procedure, finally resulted in the great division of the Eastern and Western churches in A. D. 726.

Since that time, the bishop of Rome, or "the Pope," has made the pretentious claim to be the "Universal Bishop of the Church," and "the Vicar of Christ" on earth! What a tremendous contrast to, and what a horrible travesty of the simple pattern of the church of God which is given in the Scriptures! Sometime ago a friend of mine, in conversation with an Anglican bishop, heard him airily describe these numerous innovations as "the necessary development of the Church." My friend replied: "We have another name for it." "And what is that?" inquired the bishop. The reply he received was only one word: "Departure!"

(3) The "Dark Ages."

Following the rise and assumption of Episcopacy came, what has been appropriately termed, "the dark ages." As time went on, various other innovations were introduced, such as infant baptism, confirmation, litanies, prescribed and recited prayers, an ornate ritual, complete with candles, incense and gorgeous vestments, prayers for the dead, the sacrifice of the Mass, the confessional, celibacy of the clergy, the worship of Mary, the erection of images, prayers to "the saints," an altar, a roped off "sanctuary" for the "priests," the "sign of the cross," the theory of Purgatory, etc., etc.

During this period the Bible was suppressed and forbidden to the laity. All who refused the edicts of Rome were ruthlessly persecuted, even unto death. Ignorance of the most appalling description obtained, and gross superstition held full sway over the people, most of whom were illiterate. Foxe's "Book of Martyrs" is a good book to read in this connection, for it will not only open one's eyes to the corruption of the Roman system, but will cause the Christian to appreciate the liberty he now enjoys, both to read the word of God and practice what he finds written therein.

It is good to remember, however, that during these dark ages there were not wanting believers who rejected the pretentious and unscriptural claims of this false system, and sought to return to the simplicity of the New Testament pattern. These Christians met together in private homes and secret hiding places for Bible study, prayer and the remembrance of the Lord in the breaking of bread. Though cruelly persecuted, and even martyred for their allegiance to the truth, they were never completely silenced.

Thus, through the ages, God saw to it that He had a faithful remnant of believers that "loved not their lives unto death," and who refused to defile themselves with that which denied the supreme and final authority of the holy Scriptures. These faithful believers steadfastly maintained the unity of the one body, the priesthood of all believers, the exercise of Christ's gifts to the Church, and the necessity for the guidance and empowerment of the Holy Spirit both for the worship, edification and government of an assembly of believers.

(4) The Reformation.

The dark ages were followed by what is known as the Reformation. This occurred early in the sixteenth century. It dealt a severe blow to the pretensions of Rome, and introduced the era of Protestantism, so called because it was a protest against the inventions, errors and evils of Roman Catholicism. The leaders of the movement were in a quandary as to how far they should go in cleaning up the horrible mess that faced them in Christendom. One has well put it thus:

"They fully realized the evil of priestcraft and episcopacy, but were not able to shake themselves free from the unscriptural idea that an earthly organization of some kind was necessary to bind together the assemblies. They attempted to 'reform' Churches, instead of exhorting each local gathering to hold fast the Head, from whom alone the love and unity can be obtained that is to be of any real value in binding saints together." (Geo. Goodman).

The advent of the Reformation resulted in the recovery of the truths of justification by faith alone, and the efficacy of the sacrificial work of Christ as the sole foundation for acceptance with God. The tragedy of the Reformation lies in the fact that the truth of the Church of God, as found in the word of God, was largely neglected.

Instead of going right back to the New Testament pattern of assemblies and to those simple scriptural principles revealed therein, they neglected the Divine pattern and began to form *new organizations* which they vainly imagined would secure the unity of Protestantism. Infant baptism was retained as an ordinance and the evils of clerisy and episcopacy were incorporated into the new order. Thus the Reformation, which had promised so much, only resulted in an *incomplete* deliverance from the errors of Rome, and a *partial* recovery of scriptural truth.

As it was in the dark ages so also, during this period, there was a faithful few who refused to accept the error of clerisy and episcopacy and sought to

return to primitive Christianity. These were called "Independents," and they were made to suffer, this time at the hands of Protestantism, for their faithfulness to God and His word! Many were imprisoned, some were martyred, while others were banished from the realm. Some found refuge in Holland and Switzerland, and some emigrated to America and became the founders of the Pilgrim colony in New England.

A good illustration of the real cause of the bogging down of the Reformation is found in the Old Testament, in Ezra, chapters one to five. This describes the return of the Jewish remnant from the Babylonian captivity to Jerusalem. The first act of these Jews was to rebuild the altar of the Lord and to sacrifice burnt offerings thereon. Thus the way to God, by means of the offering of sacrifices, was recovered and reestablished in the land.

This illustrates what took place at the Reformation, when the glorious truth of justification by faith alone in the substitutionary sacrifice of the Son of God was recovered and fearlessly proclaimed. Thus the way to God, through the redemptive work of Christ, was unearthed from the debris of tradition and sacerdotalism under which it had been buried for centuries. For this fact we give to God our grateful praise.

This Jewish remnant, however, neglected to rebuild the temple of God, and for several years it continued to lie in a state of ruin. At length, through the faithful preaching of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, the people of Israel were aroused to a sense of their neglect, and began and completed the rebuilding of the house of the Lord. See Ezra 5:1; Haggai 1:1-15. The temple, of course, answers to the truth of the Church, which is the present "house of God." (I Tim. 3:15).

The Reformers concerned themselves almost exclusively with the rebuilding of the altar, but neglected the equally great matter of the recovery and reestablishment of those principles of Church truth found in the word of God.

While we should praise God for the Reformation, yet we must deeply regret that it stopped short of a return to those scriptural principles laid down in God's word. The Reformation simply substituted the *organization* of Protestantism for the *organization* of Romanism. It merely exchanged the *Roman form* of clerisy for a *Protestant form* of the same thing.

It is quite true that the Protestant organization was a vast improvement on the Roman brand, for its clerics and bishops were far better men; but the fact remains that the word of God gives no warrant for either variety! Few of the leaders of the Reformation seemed to realize this fact, and it was not long before internal dissension arose which divided them into various camps, or

denominations, with its resultant confusion, and thus history repeated itself.

Surely all this goes to prove that when good men, even when acting from the best of motives, ignore the pattern and path which God has laid down in His word, declension and failure must be the inevitable result. Human wisdom and expediency is a sorry substitute for implicit obedience to the revealed will of God as found in the holy Scriptures.

No man can improve on the Divine pattern. When God wished to build a sanctuary so that He could dwell among His people, He gave to Moses minute instructions as to the design, measurements and materials necessary to its construction. During this revelation He constantly emphasized to Moses the absolute necessity for complete obedience to the Divine instructions. Again, and again we read that He said to Moses: "Look that thou make them after their pattern, which was showed thee in the mount." See Exod. 25:40; 26:80; 27:8, etc.

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4. The present order of things

Since the Reformation, Protestantism has been divided into very many different denominations. Some of these are large, with millions of members, while others are quite small. However, one feature seems to be true of practically all: they have retained clerisy, and thus limited the expression of the gifts of Christ to His Church to one man called "the minister." In most cases this man has been specially trained in theology, selected by them, and ordained as their "clergyman."

(1) A recovery of these Divine truths regarding the Church and the Churches.

Around one hundred and thirty-five years ago (1828), a few Christians in Ireland and England, unknown to each other, began to be greatly exercised concerning the confusion that prevailed in Christendom. These godly men commenced to prayerfully and carefully search their Bibles in order to discover what God had to say regarding the matter of the Church and the fellowship of believers in local Churches. The more they studied the Scriptures, the more convinced they became that denominationalism, with its clerisy and episcopacy, together with all the humanly devised ritual, rules and regulations that went with it, *had no Scriptural support whatsoever!*

They began to grasp the Scriptural truth of the sole Headship of Christ over His Church, and of the oneness that united all believers, as members of that one body, to Christ in heaven and to each other on earth. Thus they learned and laid to heart the fact that, in deed and in truth, all Christians were "one in

Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28).

They also discovered that all the gifts of Christ to His Church were necessary, and should therefore be allowed to function in the gatherings of God's people, as they were led and controlled by the Holy Spirit through the Word. They learned that each local assembly of believers was responsible alone to Christ for the order of its worship, edification of the saints, gospel testimony and discipline, or government. They were also convinced that the word of God was not only the sole authority, but the all-sufficient guide for every detail necessary for the proper functioning of an assembly of believers.

Not only did these Christians see these truths for themselves but, better still, they *did something about it*, and began to *act* on what they found written in the Scriptures. It is one thing to see and hold a truth, and another to be held by the truth, lead where it will and cost what it may. As they met together in private homes for prayer and Bible study, they made the further discovery that it was the privilege of all believers, who were sound in life and doctrine, to meet together in assembly fellowship, simply as Christians, to partake of the Lord's supper and thus remember the Lord Jesus in the breaking of bread and the drinking of the cup.

Accordingly, one memorable Lord's day, a table was spread and these believers, who came from various denominations, met together simply in the name of the Lord Jesus and partook of the Lord's supper. Thus, in scriptural simplicity and conscious weakness, they fulfilled their Lord's request: "This do for a remembrance of Me" (I Cor. I 1:24-25).

Other Christians hearing of these things, came to investigate. These, in turn, were convinced from the word of God that this was still God's order for His people, and gladly associated themselves with these little assemblies. It is very important to emphasize the fact that there was no attempt to *create a membership*, or to organize *a new denomination*, or to form *a new unity*. These believers simply *recognized the unity of the one body which God had already formed* and then acted, in simple faith, on what the word of God so clearly revealed. They believed that the Lord Jesus meant what He said when He declared: "Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt. 18:20).

These believers accepted no name but what was common to all Christians. Because of this, they were often alluded to by others as "the brethren." These were "days of heaven on earth" for these believers, who were thus delivered from the bondage of denominationalism into the liberty and joy that only obedience to the Word of God can bring.

(2) *The literature that accompanied this recovery of the truth.*

Among these assemblies of believers, which gradually increased in number, were quite a few of noble birth, superior education and brilliant intellect. Many of these had been clergymen who, when they realized the unscripturalness of their position, resigned their charges. At considerable cost to themselves in the way of position, salary and prestige, they now willingly associated themselves with their like-minded fellow believers in assembly fellowship.

God signally honored these men and women for their wholehearted obedience to the truth. The promise of Christ was fulfilled in them: "If any man will *do* His (God's) will, he shall *know* of the doctrine" (John 7:17). In this atmosphere of scriptural simplicity, wholehearted obedience to the Scriptures brotherly love, humble dependence on the Spirit of God, freedom from sectarianism, clerisy, sacerdotalism and human tradition, there was a marked spiritual freshness and power in their meetings.

These men, as they studied the word of God, became mighty in the Scriptures. From their pens came many volumes of Bible exposition which, for depth of thought and clarity of expression, remain unequaled to this day. The great truth of the personal and premillennial second coming of Christ was also revived, and proclaimed far and wide.

The late Dr. A. J. Gordon, of Boston, U.S.A., thus describes this literature: "If we were to describe, in a word, the theological complexion of these writings, we would say that here we have high Calvinism, preaching free grace with a fullness, and plainness never surpassed; practicing believers baptism, and writing treatises on its symbolism, rarely equaled for deep spiritual insight; laying down a rule of life almost ascetic in its requirement of separation from the world and surrender of earthly possessions for Christ's sake; and holding, with primitive apostolic fervor, to the personal, literal and ever imminent coming of Christ as the hope of the Church. It is our opinion that the best writings of this body have furnished the text books of modern evangelism, and largely determined its type of doctrine and preaching."

(3) The opposition to this recovery.

Opposition was not long in forthcoming. The rapid spread of these scriptural principles alarmed the clerics of all denominations, and they resisted this movement which sought to return to God's order. They realized that this movement not only threatened the very existence of their religious systems, but also their position and livelihood as clergymen.

They charged the brethren with being schismatics, and referred to them as "Independents." The brethren replied: "Independent of whom? Of God?"

Nay, verily! Of Christ? No, indeed, for we own Him as 'the Head over all things to the Church,' and seek to give Him the place of preeminence in our meetings. Of the Holy Spirit? Most decidedly not, for we allow Him liberty to lead and minister through whosoever He will in the assembly of the saints. Of the word of God! Certainly not, for we have a 'thus saith the Lord' for our position! Of our fellow brethren in Christ? No, for we are one with every Christian who knows Him as Savior and owns Him as Lord, and we gladly welcome all such, simply and only because they belong to Christ!" The only independency they did admit was independence of all humanly-invented innovations, organizations and man-made substitutions for the Divine order of things laid down in the sure and certain word of God. They steadfastly refused to bow to any authority save the holy Scriptures and demanded "chapter and verse" before they would accept anything as authoritative.

(4) The British Census Report of 1851

The position of this movement is best summed up by this extract from the British Parliamentary Report of the Census of 1851. Under the heading of "The Brethren," we read:

"Those to whom this appellation is applied receive it only as descriptive of their individual state as Christians, and not a name by which they might be known collectively as a distinct religious sect. It is not from any common doctrinal peculiarity, or definite ecclesiastical organization, that they have the appearance of a separate community; but rather from the fact that, while other Christians are identified with some peculiar section of the Church of God, the persons known as brethren utterly refuse to be identified with any.

"Their existence is, in fact, a protest against all sectarianism and the primary ground of their secession from the different bodies, to which most of them once belonged, is that the various tests by which, in all these bodies, the communion of true Christians with others is prevented or impeded are unsanctioned by the word of God. They see no valid reason why the Church (consisting of all true believers), which is really one, should not also be visibly united, having as its only bond of fellowship and barrier of exclusion the reception or the rejection of those vital truths by which the Christian is distinguished from the unbeliever....

"The brethren, therefore, may be represented as consisting of all such as, practically holding all the truths essential to salvation, recognize each other as, on that account alone, true members of the only Church. A difference of opinion upon anything besides is

not regarded as sufficient ground for separation."

(5) Some scriptural principles

These words, written more than a century ago, correctly indicate the distinguishing features *which still prevail* in hundreds of assemblies of believers throughout the world. Though each assembly is separate from every other as to the government of its own affairs, yet they are all united by the common bond of union with Christ, love for Christ, and loyalty to Him and to the Divinely-inspired word of God as their alone authority for faith and practice.

Though there is not a written creed, yet each assembly holds and proclaims the following scriptural truths:

- a. The absolute Deity of the Lord Jesus Christ, and His sole Headship over the Church universal, and of each local assembly.
- b. The unity of the body of Christ, the Church, consisting of all true believers who have been united, by the Spirit of God, to their Head in heaven and to each other on earth.
- c. The Divinely inspired, and therefore infallible word of God as the sole authority for faith and practice.
- d. The Deity, Personality and absolute necessity of the Holy Spirit for guidance and empowerment in their gatherings.
- e. The fact that all believers have been constituted a "kingdom of priests unto God," and are therefore free to "offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God by Jesus Christ." Therefore the distinction between "clergy" and "laity" is unscriptural.
- f. That the gifts, given by the Head of the Church, such as "evangelists, pastors and teachers" etc., should be allowed to function, as led of the Spirit, in the gatherings of the Lord's people.
- g. The maintenance of godly order in these assemblies, as provided by God-given and spiritual leadership in the form of godly elders and deacons.
- h. The practice of the two ordinances, given by the Lord Jesus: the baptism of believers, and the weekly observance of the Lord's supper.
- i. That all Christians, sound in doctrine and godly in life, who desire to remember the Lord Jesus in the breaking of bread, be warmly welcomed to the Lord's supper as fellow members of the body of Christ.
- j. The glad hope of the personal and literal coming of Christ, when all believers shall be either raised or raptured to be with and like their Lord for ever.

In spite of weakness and failure, this is still the position taken by the vast

majority of these assemblies throughout the world. They do not make any claim to perfection but, in conscious weakness, they are seeking to carry out those Divine principles of gathering which have been laid down for "the assemblies of the saints" in the sure and certain word of God.

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Now let us consider

II. The value of such a study of Church truth to every Christian

1. The problem stated

This should be obvious to each believer, in view of what has already been pointed out.

Here is a young believer recently brought, by the grace of God, and through the preaching of the word of God from darkness to light, from the power of Satan to the salvation of God, from the bondage of sin into the glorious liberty of the children of God, and from spiritual death into the possession of eternal life. This Christian now desires assembly fellowship with other believers. He is immediately faced by the problem as to where to go and with whom to meet. Here are dozens of denominations, each with a distinctive name and a different form of Church government, each claiming to be right and all eager for his "membership."

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2. The problem faced

What should a Christian do under these circumstances? There is surely only one reply to this question. The same Bible, which revealed to him his lost condition as a sinner, showed him God's way of salvation through faith in Christ and gave him assurance as to his security in Christ, must now be opened and studied for his guidance in this matter of assembly fellowship.

If he is sincere in his search, and really desirous to do the revealed will of God, the Holy Spirit, who indwells him, will be enabled to lead him, through the Word, into all truth. As he thus prayerfully waits upon the Lord, seeking only to be guided by the word of God, he will be led on, step by step, to see that, amidst all the confusion of Christendom, God's principles of gathering remain unchanged and unchanging. As he obeys what he sees, further light will be given him, and he will realize the truth of that scripture: "Then shall we know, *if we follow on* to know the Lord" (Hosea 6:8).

Surely, in view of the judgment seat of Christ, before which each Christian

will one day stand, he owes it both to the Lord and himself to discover where he stands in relation to this great truth of the Church of God and his fellowship in a local assembly of believers.

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3. The problem solved

Happy is that Christian who knows *why* he is *where* he is, and who has not only "sanctified in his heart Christ as Lord," but is also able to "give an answer to every man that asketh... a reason of the hope that is in him with meekness and fear." See I Peter 5:15 R.V. Herein lies the value of Bible study, plus obedience to all known truth. Here are some results of such a study of Church truth.

- a. It will give the believer a definite understanding of God's purpose in this present age, which is not the conversion of the world, but the taking out of the world a people for His name (Acts 15:14).
- b. It will enable him to appreciate what the Church really is, as the body of Christ, and thus lead him to rightly estimate its value to the One Who "loved the Church and gave Himself for it "and who is still "Head over all things to it" (Eph. 5:25).
- c. It will furnish him with Divine wisdom as to the path he should take amid all the confusion wrought by man. The Bible will indeed be to him "a lamp unto his feet, and a light unto his path" (Ps. 119:165).
- d. It will enable him to grasp the tremendous fact that these principles of gathering, found in the Scriptures, are not only *applicable* to this present day but are also *workable*, if only Christians will *act* upon what they find written.

The present failure and confusion in Christendom has not altered the truth of the Divine pattern for the Church, as found in the good Book. When Christians seek humbly, believingly, sincerely and obediently to gather simply in Christ's name alone, apart from sectarianism, clerisy and human tradition; they will discover that the truth of the Headship of Christ is no vain dream to be *envisioned*, but a blessed reality to be *enjoyed*!

Thus the Christian will seek, not to form a new unity, or support, by his membership and means, a man-made denomination; but he will endeavor to maintain what God has already formed: "the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." May this be true of every reader!