The Normal Christian Church Life

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PREFACE

After the publication of my book in Chinese, quite a number of missionaries asked for an edition in English. I felt reluctant to comply, for personally I should prefer to have those books translated which better represent my ministry, rather than this one which is liable to be misunderstood and controverted. The book as it now stands is a greatly abridged and slightly revised edition of the Chinese. Neither in expression nor in style is it as English as I should wish, but I trust that in this respect I may count on the leniency of its readers. If all we want is the truth of God, then the difficulty of understanding the book should prove no serious barrier to the reading of it.

Because of the vastness of the subject and the importance of its issues, I have not found it easy either to write or translate this book. Since some of the same points have had to be dealt with in different parts of the book, it will be found necessary to read it right through if full understanding is to result. If, because of seemingly insurmountable difficulty, the book is laid aside before completed, a false position will result; whereas by reading it right through many if not all of the difficulties will be cleared up. Frequently the questions which arise at certain points are answered further on - sometimes much further on. To do the book justice, the reader is asked to finish reading it before passing judgment.

The book is not intended for anyone and everyone. It is for those who feel their responsibility in the Lord's service. But more than this, it is for such as honestly and truly mean business for God, for those whose hearts are open, who have no padlocked mind or prejudices. The book may test one's sincerity and honesty to no small degree, but I believe the Lord has shown something which is of importance to the whole body of Christ.

The whole matter will grow upon the reader and become clearer with relaxed contemplation after the first reading The door must not be closed with a snap of "Impossible!" or "Ideal, but not practical!" By prayerful openness of heart, without argument or discussion, the Spirit of truth should be given a chance, and then what is of Him will cause all our natural reactions to die away and we shall know the truth and the truth shall make us free. What is set forth in these pages is no mere theory or teaching but something we have actually tested in actual practice.

One of the prayers I have offered in connection with this book is that the Lord should keep it from those who oppose and would use it as a chart for attack and also from those who agree and would use it as a manual for service. I dread the latter far more than the former.

- Watchman Nee

INTRODUCTION

The content of the following pages is the substance of a number of talks to my younger fellow-workers during conferences held in 1938 in Shanghai and Hankow. At these two conferences we sought in the first place to examine the teaching of God's Word concerning His churches and His work, and in the second place to review our past missions in the light of our findings.

We trust the readers of this book will bear in mind that its messages as originally given were never meant for them They were intended exclusively for the inner circle of my most intimate associates in the work, but by request we share our findings with the wider circle of all our brethren. This book is something private made public, something originally intended for the few now extended to the many.

During the past eighteen years the Lord has led us through different experiences in order that we might learn a little of the principle as well as the fact of the Cross and Resurrection, and learn something of the Indwelling Life and Lordship of Christ, the Corporate Life of the Body, the Ground of the Kingdom of God, and His Eternal Purpose. It is natural, therefore, that these things have been the burden of our ministry. But God's wine must have a wineskin to contain it. In the Divine pattern, nothing is left for man to decide. God Himself has provided the best wineskin for His wine, which will contain and preserve it without loss, hindrance or misrepresentation. He has given us His wine, but He has shown us His wineskin also.

Our work throughout the past years has been according to certain definite principles, but never until now have we tried to define or to teach them. We have sought rather to stress those truths which have direct bearing on the spiritual life of the believer and the Eternal Purpose of God. But the practical outworking of those truths in the Lord's service is by no means unimportant. Without that everything is in the realm of theory and spiritual development is impossible. We would seek, therefore, by the grace of God not only to pass on His good wine but also the wineskin He has provided for its preservation. The truths set forth must therefore be regarded as the sequence, not the introduction to our many years of ministry.
This book is not a treatise on missionary methods, but a review of our past work in the light of God's will as have discovered it in His Word. The Lord had most graciously led us by His Spirit in our past service for Him, but we wanted to be clear as to the foundations upon which all divine work should rest. I realized that the primary need of my younger brethren was to be led of the Spirit and to receive revelation from Him, but I could not ignore their need of a solid Scriptural basis for all their ministry. There was no thought of criticizing the labors of others or even of making any suggestion to them how the work of God ought to be conducted; we were merely seeking to learn from God's Word, from experience, and from observation, how to conduct the work in the days to come so that we might be workmen "approved unto God."

The book is written from the standpoint of a servant looking from the work towards the churches. It does not deal with the specific ministry to which we believe the Lord has called us but only with the general principles of the work. Nor does it deal with the ``Church which is His Body," but with the local churches and their relation with the work. The book does not touch the principles of the work or the life of the churches; it is only a review of our missions.

The truths referred to in this book have been gradually learned and practiced during the past years. Numerous adjustments have been made as greater light has been received, and if we remain humble and God still shows us His mercy, we believe there will be further adjustments in the future. The Lord has graciously given us a goodly number of associates in the work, all of whom have been sent forth on the basis mentioned in this book, and through their labors numerous churches have been established in different parts of China, Formosa and other countries in the Far East. Though vastly different conditions obtain in these many churches, and the believers connected with them differ greatly too in background, education, social standing and spiritual experience - yet we have found that if under the absolute Lordship of Christ we come to see the heavenly pattern of church formation and government, then the Scriptural methods are both practical and fruitful.

Missionary methods, as such, do not interest me at all. In fact, it is a deep grief to meet children of God who know practically nothing of the hatefulness of a life lived in the energy of the natural man and know little of vital experience of the Headship of Jesus Christ, yet all the while are scrupulously careful to arrive at absolute correctness of method in God's service. Many a time we have been told, "We agree with you in everything." Far from it! In reality we do not agree at all! We hope this book will not fall into the hands of those who wish to improve their work by improving their methods without adjusting their relationship to the Lord, but we do hope it will have a message for the humble ones who have learned to live in tht power of the Spirit and have no confidence in the flesh. It is death to have a wineskin without wine, but it is loss to have wine without a wineskin. We must have the wineskin after we have the wine. Paul wrote the Ephesian Epistle but he could also write the Corinthian Epistle, and Corinthians presents us with Ephesians truths in practical expression. Corinthian teachings are practical and touch the earthly sphere, so if there is the slightest difference of opinion a reaction is felt at once. Corinthians is very practical. It tests our obedience more than does Ephesians!

The danger with those who know little about life and reality is to emphasize mere outward correctness, but with those to whom life and reality are a matter of supreme importance, the temptation is to to throw away the divine pattern of things, thinking it legal and technical. They feel that they have the greater and can therefore dispense with the lesser. But God has not only revealed the truths relating to the outward expression of that life. God prizes the inner reality but He does not ignore its outward expression. We might think it sufficient for God to instruct us through Romans. Ephesians. and Colossians as to our life in Christ, but He has thought it necessary to instruct us through Acts, Corinthians, and Timothy as to how to do His work and how to organize His Church. God has left nothing to human imagination or human will. It is not our place, therefore, to suggest how we think divine work should be done. but rather to ask in everything. "What is the will of the Lord?"

We must seek to follow the leading of God's Spirit, but at the same time we must seek to pay attention to the examples shown us in His Word. The leading of the Spirit is precious. but if there is no example in the Word then it is easy to substitute our fallible thoughts and unfounded feelings for the Spirit's leading, drifting into error without realizing it. If one is not willing to obey God's will in every direction, it is easy to do things contrary to His word and still fancy one is being led of His Spirit. We emphasize the necessity of following both the leading of the Spirit and the examples of the Word, because by comparing our ways with the written Word we can discover the source of our leading. The Spirit's guidance will always harmonize with the Scriptures. God cannot lead a man one way in the beginning and another way today. In externalities the leading may vary but in principle it is always the same, for God's will is eternal and therefore changeless. God is the Eternal God. He takes no cognizance of time, and His will and ways all bear the stamp of eternity. This being so, God could never act one way at one time and another way later on. Circumstances may differ and cases may differ, but in principle the will and ways of God are just the same today as they were in the days of the Acts.

God said to the Israelites: "Moses for your hardness of heart allowed you to put away your wives" (Mt. 19:8), but the Lord Jesus said, "What God has joined together, let not man separate." (Mt. 19:6). Is there not a discrepancy here? Not at all! "Moses for your hardness of heart allowed you to put away your wives; but from the beginning it hath not been so" (Mt. 19:8). It is not that in "the beginning" it was permissible, and later became permissible again, as though God were a changeable God. No, the Lord said, "From the beginning it has not been so" showing that God's will had never been altered. "From the beginning" right on until today it is just the same. Here is a most important principle. If we want to know the mind of God, we must look at His commands in Genesis and not look at His permissions later on, because every later permission has this explanation: "for your hardness of heart." It is God's directive will we want to discover, not His permissive will. We want to see what God's purpose was "from the beginning." We want to see things as they were when they proceeded in all their purity from the mind of God, not what they have become because of "hardness of heart" on the part of His people.

If we would understand the will of God concerning His Church, then we must return to the beginning, to the "genesis" of the Church, to see what He then said and did. It is there we find the highest expression of His will. The Book of the Acts is the "genesis" of the Church's history, and the Church in the time of Paul is the "genesis" of the Spirit's work. Conditions in the Church today are vastly different from what they were then, but these present conditions could never be our example or our authoritative guide. We must return to "the beginning."

A word of explanation may be needed regarding the examples God has given us in His word. Christianity is built not only upon precepts but also upon examples. God has revealed His will not only by giving orders but by having certain things done in His Church, so that in the ages to come others might simply look at the pattern and know His will, God has directed His people not only by means of abstract principles and objective regulations but by concrete examples and subjective experience. God does use precepts to teach His people, but one of His chief methods of instruction is through history. God tells us how others knew and did His will, so that we by looking at their lives may not only know His will but see how to do it, too. He worked in their lives, producing in them what He Himself desired, and He bids us look at them so that we may know what He is after.

In closing, may I stress the fact that this is not a book on missionary methods. Methods are not to be despised, but in God's service what matters most is the man, not his methods. Unless the man is right, right methods will be of no use to him or his work. Carnal methods are suited to carnal men, and spiritual methods to spiritual men. For carnal men to employ spiritual methods will only result in confusion and failure. This book is intended for those who, having learned something of the Cross, know the corruption of human nature and seek to walk not after the flesh but after the Spirit. Its object is to help those who acknowledge the Lordship of Christ in all things and are seeking to serve Him in the way of His own appointment, not of their own choosing. May none of my readers use this book as a basis for external adjustments in their work, without letting the Cross deal drastically with their natural life.

In God's work everything depends upon the kind of worker sent out and the kind of convert produced. On the part of the convert, a real Holy Spirit new birth is essential, and a vital relationship with God. On the part of the worker, besides personal holiness and enduement for service, it is essential that he have an experimental knowledge of the meaning of committal to God and faith in His sovereign Providence; otherwise, no matter how Scriptural the methods employed, the result will be emptiness and defeat.

To the Lord and to His people I commend this book, with the prayer that He may use it for His glory, as He sees fit.

1. The Apostles

God is a God of works. Our Lord said, "My Father works even until now." He is the God "who works all things after the counsel of His will." But God does not do everything directly by Himself. He works through His servants. Among the servants of God the apostles are the most important ones.

The First Apostle

In the fullness of time God sent forth His Son into the world to do His work. He is known as the Christ of God, that is, "the Anointed One." The term "Son" relates to His Person; the name "Christ" relates to His office. He was the Son of God, but He was sent to be the Christ of God. "Christ" is the ministerial name of the Son of God. Our Lord did not come to the earth or to the Cross on His own initiative; He was anointed and set apart for the Work by God. He was not selfappointed, but sent. Frequently throughout the Gospel of John we find Him referring to God as "the One who sent Me." He took the place of a sent one. If that is true in the case of the Son of God, how much more should it apply to His servants? If even the Son was not expected to take any initiative in God's work, is it likely that we are expected to do so? The first principle to note in the work of God is that all His workers are sent ones. If there is no divine commission, there can be no divine work.
Scripture has a special name for a sent one, namely, an apostle. The meaning of the Greek word is "the sent one." The Lord Himself is the first Apostle because He is the first one specially sent of God; hence the Word refers to Him as "the Apostle" (Heb. 3:1).

The Twelve

While on earth, the Lord was all the time aware that His life in the flesh was limited, so that as He went about the work committed to Him by the Father, He prepared a group of men to continue it after His departure. These men were also termed apostles. They were not volunteers; they were sent ones. We cannot overemphasize this fact that all divine work is by commission, not by choice.

These apostles occupy a special place in the purpose of God, because they were with the Son of God while He lived in the flesh. They were not just called apostles, they were called "the Twelve Apostles." They occupied a special place in the Word and plan of God. Our Lord told Peter that one day they should "sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Lk. 22:30). When Judas lost his office and God led the remaining eleven to choose one to make up the number, they cast lots and the lot fell upon Matthias, "and he was numbered with the eleven Apostles" (Acts 1:26). In the next chapter we find the Holy Spirit inspiring the writer of the Acts to say, "Peter, standing up with the eleven" (Acts 2:14), which shows that the Holy Spirit recognized Matthias to be one of the Twelve. The number of these apostles was fixed. God did not want more than twelve, nor would He have less. In the Book of Revelation we find that the ultimate position which they occupy is again a special one - "And the wall of the city had twelve foundations and in them the names of the Twelve Apostles of the Lamb" (Rev. 21:14). Even in the new heaven and the new earth the Twelve enjoy a place of peculiar privilege, which is relegated to no other workers of God.

The Apostles in Scripture Days

The Lord Jesus has now gone, but the Spirit has come. The Holy Spirit is come to bear all responsibility for the work of God on earth. The Son was working for the Father; the Spirit is working for the Son. The Son came to accomplish the will of the Father; the Spirit has come to accomplish the will of the Son. The Son came to glorify the Father; the Spirit has come to glorify the Son. The Father then appointed Christ to be "the Apostle"; the Son while on earth appointed "the twelve" to be apostles. The Son has returned to the Father, and now the Spirit is on earth appointing other men to be apostles. The apostles appointed by the Holy Spirit cannot join the ranks of those appointed by the Son, but nonetheless they are apostles. The apostles we read of in the fourth chapter of Ephesians are clearly not the original twelve, for those were appointed when the Lord was still on earth, while these date their appointment to apostleship after the ascension of the Lord - they were the gifts of the Lord Jesus to His Church after His glorification. The twelve apostles then were the personal followers of the Lord Jesus, but the apostles now are ministers for the building up of the Body of Christ. We must differentiate clearly between the apostles who were witnesses to the resurrection of Christ (Acts 1:22,26), and the apostles who are ministers for the edifying of the Body of Christ. It is evident, therefore, that God has other apostles beside the original twelve.

Immediately following the outpouring of the Spirit the twelve apostles carried on the work. Until the twelfth chapter of Acts they are seen as the chief workers, but with the opening of the thirteenth chapter we see the Holy Spirit beginning to manifest Himself as the Agent of Christ and the Lord of the Church. In that chapter we are told that in Antioch, when certain prophets and teachers were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Separate Me now Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them" (Acts 13:2, Darby). Now is the time that the Spirit begins to send men forth. At this point two new workers were commissioned by the Holy Spirit.

After these two were sent out by the Spirit, how were they designated? When Barnahas and Paul were working in Iconium, "the multitude of the city was divided; and part held with the Jews, and part with the apostles" (Acts 14:4). The two sent forth in the previous chapter are in this chapter referred to as "apostles," and in the same chapter (Acts 14:14) the designation "the apostles" is used with reference to Paul and Barnabas, which proves conclusively that the two men commissioned by the Holy Spirit were also apostles. They were not among the twelve, but they were apostles.

Who then are apostles? Apostles are God's workmen, sent out by the Holy Spirit to do the work to which He has called them. The responsibility of the work is in their hands. Broadly speaking, all believers are responsible for the work of God, but apostles are a group of people specially set apart and bear a peculiar responsibility for its conduct.

We want to examine now the teaching of the scriptures as touching apostles. God appointed His Son to be "the Apostle"; Christ appointed His disciples to be "the Twelve Apostles"; and the Holy Spirit appointed a group of men (apart from the Twelve) to be the Body-building apostles. There are many belonging to this latter order chosen and sent forth by the Spirit of God. In 1 Cor. 4:9, we read: "God has set forth us the apostles last." To whom do the words "us the apostles" refer? The pronoun "us" implies that there was at least one other apostle besides the writer. If we study the context, we note that Apollos was with Paul when he wrote (1 Cor. 4:6), and Sosthenes was a joint writer with Paul of the epistle. It seems clear that the "us" here refers either to Apollos or to Sosthenes or to both. It follows then that either or both of these two must have been apostles.

Rom. 16:7: "Salute Andronicus and Junia, my kinsmen and my fellow-prisoners, who are of note among the apostles." The clause "who are of note among the apostles" does not mean that they were regarded as notable by the apostles, but rather that among the apostles they were notable ones. Here you have not only another two apostles, but another two notable apostles.

1 Ths. 2:6: "We might have been burdensome, as the apostles of Christ." The "we" here refers clearly to the writers of the Thessalonian letter, namely, Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy (1 Ths. 1:1), which indicates that Paul's two young fellowworkers were also apostles.

1 Cor. 15:5-7: "He was seen by Cephas, then by the Twelve; after that, He was seen by about five hundred brethren at once; after that, He was seen by James; then by all the apostles." Besides the Twelve Apostles there was a group known as "all the apostles." It is obvious, then that apart from the Twelve there were other apostles.

Paul never claimed that he was the last apostle and that after him there were no others. Please read carefully what he said: "Last of all He was seen of me also...for I am least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle." (1 Cor. 15:8,9). Notice how Paul used the words "last" and "least." He did not say that he was the last apostle, he only said he was the least apostle. If he were the last there could be no more after him, but he was only the least.

In the Book of Revelation it is said of the Ephesian church: "You have tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and have found them liars" (Rev. 2:2). It seems clear from this verse that the early churches expected to have other apostles apart from the original Twelve, because when the Book of Revelation was written John was the only survivor of the Twelve and by that time even Paul had already been martyred. If there were to be only twelve apostles, and John was the only one left, then no one would have been foolish enough to pose as an apostle and no one foolish enough to be deceived, and where would have been the need to try them?

The Meaning of Apostleship

Since the meaning of the word "apostle" is "the sent one," the meaning of apostleship is quite plain, namely, the office of the sent one. Apostles are not primarily men of special gifts, they are men of special commission. Many called of God are not as gifted as Paul, but if they have received a commission of God, they are just as truly apostles as he. The apostles were gifted men, but their apostleship was not based upon their gifts; it was based upon their commission. Of course, God will not send anyone who is unequipped, but equipment does not constitute apostleship. It is futile for anyone to assume the office of an apostle simply because he thinks he has the needed gifts or ability. It takes more than mere gift and ability to constitute men apostles; it takes God Himself, His will and His call. No man can attain to apostleship through natural or other qualifications; God must make him an apostle if he is ever to be one. "A man sent of God" should be the main characteristic of our entering upon His service and of all our subsequent movements.

Our Lord said, "The servant is not greater than his Lord: neither the apostle [Greek] than He that sent him" (Jn. 13:16). Here we have a definition of the term "apostle." It implies being sent out - that is all, and that is everything. However good human intention may be, it can never take the place of divine commission. Today those who have been sent out by the Lord to preach the Gospel and to establish churches call themselves missionaries, not apostles, but the word "missionary" means the very same thing as "apostle," i.e. "the sent one." It is the Latin form of the Greek equivalent, "apostolos." Since the meaning of the two words is exactly the same, I fail to see the reason why the true sent ones of today prefer to call themselves "missionaries" rather than "apostles."

Apostles and the Ministry

"But to each one of us has been given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ. Wherefore he says, Having ascended up on high, He has led captivity captive, and has given gifts to men. But that He ascended, what is it but that He also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He that descended is the same who has also ascended up above all the heavens, that He might fill all things; and He has given some apostles, and some prophets, and some evangelists, and some shepherds and teachers, for the perfecting of the saints; with a view to the work of the ministry, whh a view to the edifying of the body of Christ; until we all arrive at the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, at the full-grown man, at the measure of the stature of the fulness of the Christ." (Eph. 4:7-13, Darby)

There are many ministries connected with the service of God, but He chose a number of men for a special ministry - the ministry of the Word for the building up of the Body of Christ. Since that ministry is different from others, we refer to it as "the ministry." This ministry is entrusted to a group of people of whom the apostles are chief. It is neither a one-man ministry, nor an "all men" ministry, but a ministry based upon the gifts of the Holy Spirit and an experimental knowledge of the Lord.

Apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers are our Lord's gifts to His Church to serve in the ministry. Strictly speaking, pastors and teachers are one gift, not two, because teaching and shepherding are closely related. In enumerating the gifts, apostles, prophets, and evangelists are all mentioned separately, while pastors and teachers are linked together. Further, the first three are each prefixed by the word "some," whereas the word "some" is attached to pastors and teachers unitedly, thus - "some apostles," "some prophets," "some evangelists," and "some pastors and teachers," not "some pastors and some teachers." The fact that the word "some" is used only four times in this list indicates that there are only four classes of persons in question. Pastors and teachers are two in one.

Pastoring and teaching may be regarded as one ministry, because those who teach must also shepherd, and those who shepherd must also teach. The two kinds of work are interrelated. Further, the word "pastor" as applied to any person is found nowhere else in the New Testament, but the word "teacher" is used on four other occasions. Nowhere in God's word do we find anyone referred to by name as a pastor. This confirms the fact that pastors and teachers are one class of men.

Teachers are men who have received the gift of teaching. This is not a miraculous gift but a gift of grace, which accounts for the fact of its being omitted from the list of miraculous gifts in 1 Cor. 12:8-10, and included in the list of the gifts of grace in Rom. 12. It is a gift of grace which enables its possessors to understand the teachings of God's Word and to discern His purposes, and thus equips them to instruct His people in doctrinal matters. In the church in Antioch there were several such persons thus equipped, Paul included. Teachers are individuals who have received the gift of teaching from Christ and have been given by the Lord to His Church for its upbuilding. The work of a teacher is to interpret to others the truths which have been revealed to him and to lead believers to an understanding of God's Word. Their sphere of work is mainly among the children of God, though at times they also teach the unsaved (1 Tim. 4:11; 6:2; 2 Tim. 2:2; Acts 4:2-18; 5:21,25,28,42). Their work is more one of interpretation than of revelation, whereas the work of the prophets is one of revelation more than of interpretation.

Evangelists are also our Lord's gift to His Church, but exactly what their personal gifts are we do not know. The Word of God does not speak of any evangelistic gift, but it does refer to Philip as being an evangelist (Acts 21:8), and Paul on one occasion encouraged Timothy to do the work of an evangelist and fill up the measure of his ministry (2 Tim. 4:5). Apart from the three occasions in Scripture, the noun "evangelist" is not found in Scripture, though we frequently meet the verb which is derived from the same root.

In the Word of God the place of prophets is more clearly defined than that of teachers and evangelists. Prophecy is mentioned among the gifts of grace (Rom. 12:6) and also among the miraculous gifts (1 Cor. 12:10). God has set prophets in the Church universal (1 Cor. 12:28), but He has also given prophets for the ministry (Eph. 4:11). There is both the gift of prophecy and the office of a prophet. Prophecy is both a gift of miracle and a gift of grace. The prophet is both a man set by God in His Church to occupy the prophetic office and a man given by the Lord to His Church for the ministry.

Of the classes of gifted men bestowed by the Lord upon His Church for its upbuilding, the apostles were quite different from the other three. They were specially commissioned of God to found churches through the preaching of the Gospel, to bring revelation from God to His people, to give decisions in matters pertaining to doctrine and government, and to edify the saints and distribute the gifts. Both spiritually and geographically their sphere is vast. That their position is superior to that of prophets and teachers is clear from the Word: "God has set some in the Church, first apostles..." (1 Cor. 12:28.)

It is important to note that apostleship is an office, not a gift. An office is that which one receives as the result of a commission; a gift that which one receives on the basis of grace. "I was appointed...an apostle" (1 Tim. 2:7). "I was appointed...an apostle" (2 Tim. 1:11). We see here that an apostle is commissioned. It is in this that he differs from the other three ministers, though he may have received the prophetic gift and thus be a prophet as well as an apostle.

An apostle may be a prophet or a teacher. Should he exercise his gift of prophecy or teaching in the local church, he does so in the capacity of a prophet or a teacher, but when he exercises his gifts in different places he does so in the capacity of an apostle. The implication of apostleship is being sent of God to exercise gifts of ministry in different places. It is immaterial to his office what personal gift an apostle has, but it is essential to his office that he be sent of God.

Nevertheless, apostles have personal gifts for their ministry. "Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets and teachers, Barnabas, and Symcon that was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen the fosterbrother of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. And as they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, 'Separate Me Barnabas and Saul for the work which I have called them to'" (Acts 13:1-2). These five men had the gifts of prophecy and teaching, a miraculous gift and a gift of grace. From that company of five two were sent by the Spirit to other parts, and three were left in Antioch. As we have already seen, the two sent out were thereafter called apostles. They received an apostolic commission. It was their gifts that qualified them to he prophets and teachers, but it was their commission that qualified them to be apostles. The three who remained in Antioch were still prophets and teachers, not apostles, simply because they had not been sent out by the Spirit. The gifts of all five were just the same, but two received a divine commission in addition to their gifts, and that qualified them for apostolic ministry.

Then why does the Word of God say, "He gave some apostles"? It is not a question here of apostleship being a gift given to an apostle, but a gift given to the Church; it is not a spiritual gift given to a man, but a gifted man given to the Church. Ephesians 4:11 does not say that the Lord gave an apostolic gift to any person, but that he gave men as apostles to His Church. The gifts referred to in this passage are not the gifts given to men personally, but the gifts given by the Lord to His Church, and the gifts mentioned here are gifted workers whom the Lord of the Church bestows upon His Church for its edification. The Head gives to the Church which is His Body certain men to serve the Body and build it up. We must distinguish between those gift given by the Spirit to individuals and those given by the Lord to His Church. The former are given to believers personally, the latter are given to believers corporately. The former are things and the latter are persons. "For to one is given through the Spirit the word of wisdom; and to another the word of knowledge, according to the same Spirit: to another faith, in the same Spirit; to another gifts of healings in the one Spirit; and to another workings of miracles; and to another prophecy; and to another discernings of spirits; to another diverse kinds of tongues; and to another the interpretation of tongues" (1 Cor. 12:10). This passage provides us with a list of all the gifts which the Holy Spirit gave to men, but it includes no apostolic gift. "And God hath set some in the church, firstly apostles, secondly prophets, thirdly teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diverse kinds of tongues" (1 Cor. 12:28). The first passage enumerates the gifts given to individuals, the second enumerates the gifts given to the Church. In the former there is no mention of any apostolic gift; in the latter we find that "apostles" head the list of God's gifts to the Church. It is not that God has given His Church the gift of apostleship, but that He has given it men who are apostles; and He has not given the gifts of prophecy and teaching to His Church, but He has given it some men as prophets and some as teachers.

The difference between the apostles and the prophets and teachers is that the latter two represent both gifts given by the Spirit to individuals and at the same time gifts given by the Lord to His Church, but they do not represent any special personal gift of the Spirit.

"And God has set some in the Church, first apostles, secondly prophets, thirdly teachers" (1 Cor. 12:28). What church is this? It comprises all the children of God, therefore it is the Church universal. In this Church God has set "first apostles, secondly prophets, thirdly teachers." In 1 Cor. 14:23 we read of "the whole church...assembled together." What church is this? Obviously the local church, for the Church universal cannot gather together in one locality. It is in this local church that the brethren exercised their spiritual gifts. One would have "a psalm," another "a teaching," another "a revelation," another "a tongue," and another "an interpretation" (1 Cor. 14:26), but more important than all these was the gift of prophecy (1 Cor. 14:1). In Chapter 12 apostles took precedence over the other ministers, but in Chapter 14 prophets take the precedence. In the Church universal apostles are first, but in the local church prophets are first. How does it come about that prophets take first place in the local church, since in the universal Church they only occupy the second place? Because in the Church universal the question is not of personal gifts of the Spirit, but of God's gift of ministers to the Church, and of these, apostles rank first; but in the local church the question is one of personal gifts of the Spirit and of these, prophecy is chief, because it is most important. Let us remember that apostleship is not a personal gift.

The Sphere of their Work

The sphere of an apostle's work is quite different from that of the other three special ministers. That prophets and teachers exercise their gifts in the local church is seen from the statement, "There were at Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets and teachers." You can find prophets and teachers in the local church, but not apostles, because they have been called to minister in many different places, while the ministry of prophets and teachers is confined to one locality (1 Cor. 14:26,29).
As to evangelists, we do not know their special sphere, as very little is said of them in God's Word, but the story of Philip, the evangelist, throws some light on this class of ministers. Philip left his own locality and preached in Samaria, but although he did good work there, the Spirit did not fall upon any of his converts. It was not till the apostles came from Jerusalem and laid hands upon them that the Spirit was poured out This seems to indicate that the local preaching of the Gospel is the work of an evangelist, but the universal preaching of the Gospel is the work of an apostle. This does not imply that the labors of an evangelist are necessarily confined to one place, but it does mean that that is their usual sphere.

The Evidence of Apostleship

Is there any evidence that one is really commissioned of God to be an apostle? In 1 Cor. 9:1-2, Paul states that apostleship has its credentials. "You are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord," he writes, as if to say, "If God had not sent me to Corinth, then you would not be saved today, and there would be no church in your city." If God has called a man to be an apostle, it will be manifest in the fruit of his labors. Wherever you have the commission of God, there you have the authority of God; wherever you have the authority of God, there you have the power of God; and wherever you have the power of God, there you have spiritual fruits. The fruit of our labors proves the validity of our commission. And yet it must be noted that Paul's thought is not that apostleship implies numerous converts but that it represents spiritual values for the Lord, for He could never send anyone forth for a lesser purpose. The Lord is out for spiritual values, and the object of apostleship is to secure them. In this case the Corinthians represent these values. But did not Paul say here, "Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?" Is it only those, then, who have seen the Lord Jesus in His resurrection manifestations who are qualified to become apostles? Follow carefully the trend of Paul's argument. In verse 1 he asks four questions: 1) "Am I not free?" 2) "Am I not an apostle?" 3) "Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?" 4) "Are you not my work in the Lord?"

Of the four questions asked by Paul, three relate to his person and one to his work. These three are on the same plane and are quite independent of one another. Paul was not arguing that because he was free and because he was an apostle, therefore he had seen the Lord; nor was he reasoning that because he was an apostle and because he had seen the Lord, therefore he was free. No more was he seeking to demonstrate that because he was free and had seen the Lord, therefore he was an apostle. The facts are he was free, he was an apostle, and he had seen the Lord. These facts had no essential connection one with the other, and it is absurd to connect them. It would be as reasonable to argue that Paul's apostleship was based upon his being free as that it was based upon his seeing the Lord. If he was not seeking to prove his apostleship from the fact of his freedom, no more was he seeking to prove it from his having seen the Lord. Apostleship is not based on having seen the Lord in His resurrection manifestations.

Then what is the meaning of 1 Cor. 15:5-9? "He was seen by Cephas, then by the Twelve: After that, He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once; ...after that He was seen by James; then by all the apostles. And last of all He was seen by me also." The object of this passage is not to produce evidence of apostleship but evidence of the resurrection of the Lord. Paul is recording the different persons to whom the Lord appeared; he is not teaching what effect was produced upon these persons by His appearing. Cephas and James saw the Lord, but they were Cephas and James after they saw the Lord, just as they were Cephas and James before; they did not become Cephas and James by seeing Him. The same applies to the Twelve Apostles and the five hundred brethren. Seeing the Lord did not constitute them apostles. They were twelve apostles before they saw the Lord, and they were twelve apostles after they saw the Lord. The same argument applies in Paul's case. The facts were, he had seen the Lord, and he was the least of the apostles; but it was not seeing the Lord that constituted him the least of the apostles. The five hundred brethren were not apostles before they saw the Lord, nor were they after. Seeing the Lord in His resurrection manifestations did not constitute them apostles. They were simply "brethren" before, and they were simply "brethren" after. The Word of God nowhere teaches that seeing the Lord is the qualification for apostleship.

But apostleship has its credentials. In 2 Cor. 12:11-12, Paul writes, "In nothing am I behind the most eminent apostles...truly the signs of an apostle were wrought among you in all patience, in signs, and wonders, and mighty deeds." There was abundant evidence of the genuineness of Paul's apostolic commission and the signs of an apostle will never be lacking where there is truly an apostolic call. From the above passage we infer that the evidence of apostleship lies in a twofold power - spiritual and miraculous. Endurance is the greatest proof of spiritual power, and it is one of the signs of an apostle. It is the ability to endure steadfastly under continuous pressure that tests the reality of an apostolic call. A true apostle needs to be "strengthened with all power, according to the might of His glory, unto all patience and longsuffering with joy" (Col. 1:11). Yes, it takes nothing short of "all power according to the might of His glory" to produce "all patience and longsuffering with joy." But the reality of Paul's apostleship was not only attested by his patient endurance under intense and prolonged pressure, it was evidenced also by the miraculous power he possessed. Miraculous power to change situations in the physical world is a necessary manifestation of our knowledge of God in the spiritual realm, and this applies not to heathen lands only but to every land. To profess to be sent ones of the omnipotent God, and yet stand helpless before situations that challenge His power, is a sad contradiction. Not all who can work wonders are apostles, for the gifts of healing and of miracle-working are given to members of the body (1 Cor. 12:28) who have no special commission, but miraculous as well as spiritual power is part of the equipment of all who have a true apostolic commission. 2. The Separation and Movements of the Apostles

The church in Antioch is the model church shown us in God's Word, because it was the first to come into being after the founding of the churches connected with the Jews and the Gentiles. In the second chapter of Acts we see the church in connection with the Jews established in Jerusalem, and in the tenth chapter we see the church in connection with the Gentiles established in the house of Cornelius. It was just after the establishment of these churches that the church in Antioch was founded. In its transition stage the church in Jerusalem was not altogether free from Judaism, but the church in Antioch from the very outset stood on absolutely clear Church ground. It is of no little significance that "the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch" (Acts 11:26). It was there that the peculiar characteristics of the Christian and the Christian Church were first clearly manifested, for which reason it may be regarded as the pattern church for this dispensation. Its prophets and teachers were model prophets and teachers, and the apostles it sent forth were model apostles Not only are the men sent forth an example to us, but the mode of their sending forth is our example too.

Since the completion of the New Testament the Holy Spirit has called many of God's children to serve Him throughout the world, but strictly speaking none of these can be regarded as our examples. We must always look at the first act of the Holy Spirit in any given direction to discover His pattern for us in that particular direction. The first recorded sending forth of workers from the first church established on absolutely clear Church ground is our best example in the sending forth of apostles or missionaries.

The Holy Spirit's Call

In the first two verses of Acts 13 we read: "Now there were in the church that was at Antioch certain prophets and teachers as Barnabas and Simeon that was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen, which had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, 'Separate unto Me Barnabas and Saul for the work which I have called them to." (Acts 13:1-2) Kindly note a few facts here. There was a local church in Antioch, there were certain prophets and teachers who were ministers in that church, and it was from among those that the Holy Spirit separated two for another sphere of service. Barnabas and Saul were two ministers of the Lord already engaged in the ministry when the call of the Spirit came. The Holy Spirit only sends to other parts such as are already equipped for the work and are bearing responsibility where they are, not those who are burying their talent and neglecting local needs while they dream of some future day when the call will come to special service. Let us note first that the Holy Spirit chooses apostles from among the prophets and teachers.

"And as they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, 'Separate unto Me Barnabas and Saul for the work which I have called them to." These prophets and teachers ministered so whole-heartedly to the Lord that when occasion demanded they even ignored the legitimate claims of their physical being and fasted. What filled the thoughts of those prophets and teachers at Antioch was ministry to the Lord, not work for Him. Their devotion was to the Lord Himself, not to His service, and it was while Barnabas and Saul ministered to Him that the voice of the Spirit was heard calling them to special service.

It was to the divine call they responded, not to the call of human need. They had heard no reports of man-eaters or head-hunting savages. Their compassions had not been stirred by doleful tales of child-marriage, or foot-binding, or opium smoking. They had heard no voice but the voice of the Spirit; they had seen no claims but the claims of Christ. No appeal had been made to their natural heroism or love of adventure. They knew only one appeal - the appeal of their Lord. It was the Lordship of Christ that claimed their service, and it was on His authority alone that they went forth. Their call was a spiritual call. No natural factor entered into it. It was the Holy Spirit who said, "Separate unto Me Barnabas and Saul for the work which I have called them to." All spiritual work must begin with the Spirit's call. All divine work must be divinely initiated. The plan conceived for the work may be splendid, the reason adequate, the need urgent, and the man chosen to carry it out may be eminently suitable; but if the Holy Spirit has not said, "Separate unto Me that man for the work to which I have called him," he can never be an apostle. He may be a prophet or a teacher, but he is no apostle. God desires the service of His children, but He makes conscripts, He wants no volunteers. The work is His, and He is its only legitimate Originator. Human intention, however good, can never take the place of divine initiation. Earnest desires for the salvation of sinners or the edification of saints will never qualify a man for God's work. One qualification, and only one, is necessary - God must send him.
It was the Holy Spirit who said, "Separate unto Me Barnabas and Saul for the work which I have called them to." Only the divine call can qualify for the apostolic office. The tragedy in Christian work today is that so many of the workers have simply gone out, they have not been sent. Personal desire, friendly persuasions, the advice of one's elders and the urge of opportunity - all these are factors on the natural plane, and they can never take the place of a spiritual call. That is something which must be registered in the human spirit by the Spirit of God.

When Barnabas and Saul were sent forth, the Spirit first called them, then the brethren confirmed the call. The brethren may say you have a call, and circumstances may seem to indicate it, but the question is, have you yourself heard the call? If you are to go forth then you are the one who must first hear the voice of the Spirit. We dare not disregard the opinion of the brethren, but their opinion is no substitute for a personal call from God.

If God desires the service of any child of His, He Himself will call him to it, and He Himself will send him forth. The first requirement in divine work is a divine call. Everything hinges on this. A divine call gives God His rightful place, for it recognizes Him as the Originator of the work. Where there is no call from God, the work undertaken is not of divine origin, and it has no spiritual value. Divine work must be divinely initiated. A worker may be called directly by the Spirit, or indirectly through the reading of the Word, through preaching, or through circumstances; but whatever means God may use to make His will known to man, His voice must be the one heard through every other voice; He must be the one who speaks, no matter through what instrument the call may come. We must never be independent of the other members of the Body, but we must never forget that we receive all our directions from the Head.

Separation of Workers

Yes, it was the Holy Spirit who called Barnabas and Saul, but He said to the other prophets and teachers as well as to them, "Separate unto Me Barnabas and Saul for the work which I have called them to." The Holy Spirit spoke directly to the apostles, but He also spoke indirectly through the prophets and teachers. What was said privately to the two was confirmed publicly through the other three. All apostles must have a personal revelation of God's will, but to make that alone the basis of their going forth is not sufficient. On the one hand the opinion of others, however spiritual and however experienced, can never be a substitute for a direct call from God. On the other hand, a personal call, however definite, requires the confirmation of the representative members of the Body of Christ in the locality from which the workers go out.

Let us observe that the Holy Spirit did not say to the church in Antioch, "Separate unto Me Barnabas and Saul." It was to the prophets and teachers He spoke. For God to make His will known to the entire assembly would scarcely have been practicable. Some of its members were spiritually mature, but others were only babes in Christ. God therefore spoke to a representative company in the church, to men of spiritual experience who were utterly devoted to His interests.

And here was the result - "When they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away" (Acts 13:3). The setting apart of the apostles by the prophets and teachers followed the call which came to them from the Spirit. The call was personal, the separation was corporate; and the one was not complete without the other. A direct call from God, and a confirmation of that call in the setting apart of the called ones by the prophets and teachers, is God's provision against freelances in His service.

The calling of an apostle is the Holy Spirit speaking directly to the one called. The separating of an apostle is the Holy Spirit speaking indirectly through the fellow-workers of the called one. It is the Holy Spirit who takes the initiative both in the calling and separation of workers. Therefore if the representative brethren of any assembly set men apart for the service of the Lord, they must ask themselves, Are we doing this on our own initiative, or as representing the Spirit of God? They must be able to say of every worker they send forth, He was sent out by the Holy Spirit, not by man. No separation of workers should be done hastily or lightly. It was for this reason that fasting and prayer preceded the sending forth of Barnabas and Saul.

As regards all sent ones, they must pay attention to these two aspects in their separation for the service of God. On the one hand there must be a direct call from God and a personal recognition of that call. On the other hand there must be a confirmation of that call by the representative members of the Body of Christ. And as regards all who are responsible for the sending forth of others, they must on the one hand be in a position to receive the revelation of the Spirit and to discern the mind of the Lord; on the other hand they must be able to enter sympathetically into the experience of those whom they, as the representative members of the Body of Christ, send forth in the Name of the Lord. The principle that governed the sending forth of the first apostles still governs the sending forth of all apostles who are truly appointed by the Spirit to the work of God.

The Expression of the Body

On what ground did these prophets and teachers set certain men apart as apostles, and whom did these prophets and teachers represent? Why did they, and not the entire church, separate those workers? What is the significance of such separation, and what is the qualification required on the part of those who assume responsibility in the matter?

The first thing we must realize is that God has incorporated all of His children into one Body.

When we speak of the one Body we emphasize the oneness of the life of all God's children: when we speak of its many members we emphasize the diversity of functions in that unity. The characteristic of the former is life: the characteristic of the latter is work. In a physical body the members differ one from another, yet they function as one because they share one life and have the upbuilding of the whole body as their one aim.

Because the Body of Christ has these two different aspects - life and ministry - it consequently has two different outward manifestations. The church in a locality is used to express the life of the Body, and the gifts in the Church are used to express the ministry of its members. In other words, each local church should stand on the ground of the Body, regarding itself as an expression of the oneness of the life of the Body, and it should on no account admit of division, since it exists as the manifestation of an indivisible life. The various ministers of the Church should likewise stand on the ground of the Body, regarding themselves as an expression of the oneness of its varied ministries. Perfect fellowship and cooperation should characterize all their activity, for though their functions are diverse, their ministry is really one.

A cursory reading of Eph. 4:11-12 might lead us to conclude that apostles, prophets evangelists, pastors and teachers functioned outside the Body, because they were given by the Lord to His Church for her upbuilding (verse 12); but the sixteenth verse makes it clear that they do not stand outside the Body to build it up: they seek to build it up from within. They themselves are part of the Body, and it is only as they take their rightful place in it, as ministering members, that the whole Body is edified.

That churches are the local expression of the Body of Christ is an established fact, so we need not go into that here; but some explanation is called for regarding the gifted ministers whom God has set in the Church as the expression of the ministry of the Body. In 1 Cor. 12 Paul is clearly dealing with the question of Christian service. He likens the workers to different members of a body, and shows that each member has its specific use, and all serve the body as belonging to it, not as distinct from it. In verse 27 he writes, "Now you are the Body of Christ, and individually members thereof"; and in the following verse he says, "And God has set in the church, first apostles, secondly prophets, thirdly teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helps, governments, diverse kinds of tongues. A study of these two verses makes it clear that the gifted ministers of verse 28 are the members of verse 27, and that the Church of verse 28 is the Body of verse 27; therefore, what ministers are to the Church, members are to the Body. The gifted ministers are the functioning members of the Body, and all their operations are as members. They are to the Church what hands, feet, mouth and head are to the physical body. They are in the Body, serving it by the use of those faculties which they, as members, possess.

In reading 1 Cor. 12:28 one cannot but be arrested by the striking difference between the description of the first three gifts and the remaining five. Paul, under the inspiration of the Spirit, takes special care in enumerating them "first apostles; secondly prophets; thirdly teachers." The first three are specifically numbered, but not the rest; and they are quite distinct in their nature as well as their numbering. They are men, the rest are things. The three first-named gifts of the Lord to His Church - apostles, prophets and teachers - stand apart from all the others. They are ministers of God's Word, and their function, to edify the Body of Christ, is the most important function in the Church. They are the representatives of the ministry of the Body.

The only Scriptural record of the sending forth of apostles is found in Acts 13, and there we see that it is the prophets and teachers who set them apart for their ministry. Scripture provides no precedent for the separation and sending forth of men by one or more individuals, or by any mission or organization; even the sending out of workers by a local church is a thing unknown in the Word of God. The only example provided us there is the separating and sending forth of apostles by the prophets and teachers.

What is the significance of this? In Antioch the prophets and teachers were chosen of God to separate Barnabas and Saul for His service, because they were the ministering members of the church, and this separation of the apostles was a question of ministry rather than life. Had it related to life, and not specifically to service, then it would have been the concern of the whole local church, not merely of its ministering members. But let it be noted that, though Barnabas and Saul were not separated for the work by the entire church, they were sent out not as representatives of a few select members but as representatives of the whole Body. Their being separated by the prophets and teachers implied that they did not go out on individualistic lines, or on the basis of any organization, but on the ground of the ministry of the Body. The emphasis, as we have seen, was on ministry, not on life, but it was a ministry representing the whole Church, not representing any particular section of it.

In sending Barnabas and Saul from Antioch, the prophets and teachers stood for no "church" or mission; they represented the ministry of the Body. They were not the whole Church, they were only a group of God's servants. They bore no special name, they were bound by no particular organization, and they were subject to no fixed rules. They simply submitted themselves to the control of the Spirit and separated those whom He had separated for the work to which He had called them. They themselves were not the Body, but they stood on the ground of the Body, under the authority of the Head. Under that authority, and on that ground, they separated men to be apostles; and under the same authority, and on the same ground, others can do the same. The separation of apostles on this principle will mean that the men sent out may differ, those who send them may differ, and the time and place of their sending may differ too; but since all is under the direction of the one Head, and on the ground of the one Body, there will still be no division. If Antioch sends men out on the basis of the Body, and Jerusalem sends men out on the basis of the Bodv, there will still be inward oneness despite all outward diversity. How grand it would be if there were no representatives of different earthly bodies, but only representatives of the Body, the Body of Christ. If thousands of local churches, with thousands of prophets and teachers, each sent out thousands of different workers, there would be a vast outward diversity, but there could still be perfect inward unity if all were sent out under the direction of one Head and on the ground of the one Body.

That Christ is the Head of the Church is a recognized fact, but that fact needs emphasis in relation to the ministry as well as the life of the Church. Christian ministry is the ministry of the whole Church, not merely of one section of it. We must see to it that our work is on no lesser basis than the Body of Christ. Otherwise we lose the Headship of Christ, for Christ is not the Head of any system, or mission, or organization: He is the Head of the Church.

In Scripture we find no trace of man-made organizations sending out men to preach the Gospel. We only find representatives of the ministry of the Church, under the guidance of the Spirit and on the ground of the Body, sending out those whom the Spirit has already separated for the work. If those responsible for the sending out of workers sent them out not as their own representatives or the representatives of any organizations but only as representatives of the Body of Christ, and if those sent out stood on the ground of no particular "church" or mission but on the ground of the Church alone, then no matter from what places the workers came or to what places they went, cooperation and unity would always be possible and much confusion would be avoided.

Their Movements

After the apostles were called by the Spirit and were separated for the work by the representative members of the Body, what did they do? We need to recall that those who separated them had no authority to control the apostles. Those prophets and teachers at the base assumed no official responsibility in regard to their movements, their methods of work, or the supply of their financial needs. In Scripture we nowhere find that apostles are under the control of any individual or any organized company. They had no regulations to adhere to and no superiors to obey. The Holy Spirit called them and they followed His leading and guidance. He alone was their director.

In Chapters 13 and 14 of the Book of Acts we find the first Scriptural record of missionary movements. Though today the places we visit and the conditions we meet may be vastly different from those of the Scripture record, yet in principle the experience of the first apostles may well serve as our example. Let us glance for a moment at these two chapters.

"So they, being sent forth by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia; and from there they sailed to Cyprus. And when they were at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews: and they had also John as their attendant. And when they had gone through the whole island unto Paphos, they found a certain sorcerer" (Acts 13:4-6). From the very outset constant movement characterized those sent ones. A true apostle is a traveler, not a settler.

"Now Paul and his company set sail from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia: and John departed from them and returned to Jerusalem. But they, passing through from Perga, came to Antioch of Pisidia; and they went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day and sat down" (Acts 13:13-14). (The Antioch mentioned here is not the same as the Antioch from which Barnabas and Saul set forth on their first missionary tour). The apostles were constantly on the move, proclaiming the Word of God wherever they went, but until they reached Antioch in Pisidia we are not told anything of the result of their labors. From this point there is a definite development in the work.

"Now when the synagogue broke up, many of the Jews and of the devout proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas: who speaking to them, urged them to continue in the grace of God" (Acts 13:43). Here is the outcome of a short period of witness in Antioch of Pisidia - many of the Jews and religious proselytes believed. A week later almost the whole city gathered together to hear the Word (verse 44); but this enthusiastic response on the part of the people provoked the Jews to jealousy and they opposed the,apostles (verse 45). At this point the apostles turned to the Gentiles (verse 46), and "as many as were ordained to eternal life believed" (verse 48). On the previous Sabbath a number of Jews had received the Word of life. This Sabbath a number of Gentiles believed on the Lord. So not long after the arrival of the apostles in Antioch of Pisidia we find a church there.

But the apostles did not argue, "Now we have a group of believers here, we must stay awhile and shepherd them." They founded a local church at Antioch of Pisidia, but they did not stay to build it up. On they went again, publishing the Word of the Lord "throughout all the region" (verse 49). Their objective was not one city, but "all the region." The modern custom of settling down in one place to shepherd a particular flock has no precedent in Scripture.

Persecution followed (verse 50). The opponents of the Gospel message expelled the apostles from their coasts, and they answered by shaking the dust from their feet (verse 51). Many a present-day missionary has no dust to shake from his feet! But those who gather no dust lack the characteristic of an apostle. The early apostles never settled down in comfortable homes, nor did they stop for long to pastor the churches they founded. They were constantly itinerating. To be an apostle means to be a sent one, that is, to be always going out. A stationary apostle is a contradiction in terms. A true apostle is one who in times of persecution will always have dust to shake off his feet.

What effect had this early departure of the apostles upon the infant church? Here was a group of new believers, mere babes in Christ, and their fathers in the faith forsook them in their infancy. Did they argue, Why should the apostles take fright at persecution and leave us to face the opposition alone? Did they plead with the apostles to remain awhile and care for their spiritual welfare? Did they reason, If you leave us now we shall be as sheep without a shepherd? If both of you cannot stay, surely one at least can remain behind and look after us The persecution is so intense, we shall never get through without your help. How amazing the Scripture record is: "And the disciples were filled with joy and the Holy Spirit" (verse 52).

There was no mourning among the disciples when the apostles went, because the apostles' departure meant an opportunity for others to hear the Gospel. What was loss to them was gain to Iconium. Those believers were not like the believers of today, hoping for a settled pastor to instruct them, solve their problems and shelter them from trouble. Those apostles were not like the apostles of today; they were pioneers, not settlers. They did not wait till believers were mature before they left them. They dared to leave them in mere infancy, for they believed in the power of the life of God within them.

But those disciples were not only filled with joy, they were filled with the Holy Spirit. The apostles might go, but the Spirit remained. If they had had a pastor to throw light on all their problems they would have felt little need of the Spirit's instruction, and they would have felt little need of His power if they had one in their midst who was bearing all responsibility for the spiritual side of the work while they attended to the secular. In Scripture there is not the slightest hint that apostles should settle down to pastor those they have led to the Lord. There are pastors in Scripture, but they are simply brethren raised up of God from among the local saints to care for their fellow believers. One of the reasons why so many present-day converts are not filled with the Spirit is because the apostles settle down to shepherd them and take upon themselves the responsibility that belongs to the Holy Spirit.

Praise God that the apostles "moved on to Iconium," for "a great multitude of both Jews and Greeks believed" (Acts 14:1). Before long "the multitude of the city was divided; and part held with the Jews, and part with the apostles" (verse 4). The saved were obviously "a great multitude," since their coming out from the unsaved so vitally affected the place as to cause a division in the city. Only a short time after the apostles left Antioch in Pisidia, there was a church established in Iconium, and here, as in the previous place, opposition was intense. The apostles might well have argued that to leave "a great multitude" of mere babes in Christ exposed to fierce persecution was heartless, and bad policy besides. But the apostles were true to their apostolic calling, and off they went "to cities of Lycaonia, Lystra and Derbe" (verse 6). And what did they do when they came to Lystra? As elsewhere, so here, "they preached the Gospel" (verse 7); and as elsewhere, so here, there was opposition and persecution (verse 19). It is difficult to estimate the number of believers at Lystra, but judging by the remark that the disciples "encircled" Paul (verse 20, Darby), there must have been at least half a dozen, and there may have been scores or even hundreds. So now there is a church in Lystra!

Does Paul stay to shepherd them awhile, or at least to tend them till the fierceness of the opposition has subsided? No! "On the morrow he went forth with Barnabas to Derbe" (verse 20). And there again the Gospel is proclaimed and many disciples are made (verse 21). So another church is formed! And with the founding of a church in Derbe the first missionary tour of the apostles closes.

Looking back over thee two chapters, we note that a fundamental principle governs the movements of the apostles. They travel from place to place, according to the leading of the Spirit, preaching the Gospel and founding churches. Nowhere do we find them settling down to shepherd and instruct the converts, or to bear any local responsibility in the churches they have founded. In days of peace the apostles were on the move, and in days of persecution likewise. "Go!" was the word of the Lord, and "Go!" was the watchword of the apostles. The outstanding trait of a sent one is that he is always on the move.

On Their Return

But the question arises, How were these new converts shepherded and instructed? How were the newly-founded churches established? In studying the Word of God we find that the missionary tour of the apostles consisted of an outward and a return journey. On their outward journey their first concern was to found churches. On their return journey their chief business was to build them up.

Having "made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, and to Iconium, and to Antioch, confirming the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that through many tribulations we must enter into the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:21,22). Here we see Paul and Barnabas returning to do some construction work in the churches already founded; but as before on their outward journey, so now on their return, they never settle down in any one place.

It is clear then that the apostles did not just move from place to place founding churches, they also did definite construction work. Merely to found churches without establishing them would be like leaving newborn babes to their own resources. The point to note here is, that while the instruction of the new converts and the building up of the churches was a very vital part of the apostles' work, they did it not by settling down in one place but rather by visiting the places where they had been before.

Before they left a place where a church had been founded and some construction work done, they appointed elders to bear responsibility there (Acts 14:23). This is one of the most important parts of an apostle's work. (This subject will be dealt with more fully in a subsequent chapter.)

Thus the early apostles worked, and the blessing of the Lord rested on their labors. We shall do well if we follow in their steps, but we must realize clearly that even though we adopt apostolic methods, unless we have apostolic consecration, apostolic faith and apostolic power, we shall still fail to see apostolic results. We dare not underestimate the value of apostolic methods they are absolutely essential if we are to have apostolic fruits - but we must not overlook the need of apostolic spirituality, and we must not fear apostolic persecution.

Back to Antioch

"And from there they sailed to Antioch, from where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work which they had fulfilled. And when they were come, and had gathered the church together, they rehearsed all things that God had done with them, and how that He had opened a door of faith unto the Gentiles" (Acts 14:26-27). On their return to Antioch the apostles "rehearsed all things that God had done with them." It was from Antioch that Paul and Barnabas had gone out, so it was only fitting that on their return they should give an account of the Lord's dealings with them to those from whom they had gone forth. To give reports of the work to those who are truly bearing the burden with us, is sanctioned by God's Word. It is not only permissible but necessary that the children of God at the base should he informed of His doings on the field, but we do well to make sure that our reports are not in the nature of advertisements.

In the matter of reporting, we should on the one hand avoid all unnatural reticence and soulish seclusiveness; on the other hand we must carefully guard against the intrusion of any personal interest. In all reports of the work our aim should be to glorify God and bring spiritual enrichment to those who share them. To utilize reports as a means of propaganda, with material returns in view, is base in the extreme, and unworthy of any Christian. When the motive is to glorify God and benefit His children, but at the same time to make known the needs of the work with a view to receiving material help, it is still far from acceptable to the Lord, and is unworthy of His servants, Our aim should be this alone - that God shall be glorified and His children blessed. If there were this perfect purity of motive in our reports, how differently many of them would be worded!

Each time we write or speak of our work let us ask ourselves these questions: 1) Am I reporting with a view to gain publicity for myself and my work? 2) Am I reporting with the double object of glorifying the Lord and advertising the work? 3) Am I reporting with this aim alone, that God shall be glorified and His children blessed? May the Lord give us grace to report with unmixed motives and perfect purity of heart! 3. The Elders Appointed by the Apostles
"Elders" is a designation of Old Testament origin. We find reference made in the Old Testament to the elders of Israel and also to the elders of different cities. In the Gospels we meet the term again, but still in relation to the Israelites. Even the elders referred to in the first part of Acts are of the Old Testament order (Acts 4:5,8,23; 6:12).

When were elders first instituted in the Church? Acts 11:30 refers to them in connection with the church in Jerusalem, and this is the first mention of elders in connection with any church; but though their existence is mentioned, nothing is said of their origin. Not till Acts 14:23, when we read of Paul and Barnabas returning from their first missionary journey, do we discover who they were, how they were appointed, and by whom. "When they had appointed for them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord..."

The Appointment

We have seen that the apostles themselves could not remain with the new believers to shepherd them and to bear the responsibility of the work locally. How then were the new converts cared for, and how was the work carried on? The apostles did not request that men be sent from Antioch to shepherd the flocks, nor did one of themselves remain behind to bear the burden of the local churches. What they did was simply this: "When they had appointed for them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord on whom they had believed" (verse 23). Wherever a church had been founded on their outward journey, they appointed elders on their return journey.

Nowhere did the apostles settle down and assume responsibility for the local church, but in every church they founded they chose from among the local believers faithful ones upon whom such responsibility could be placed. When they had chosen elders in each church, they committed them to the Lord with prayer and fasting. If this committal of elders to the Lord is to be of spiritual value, and no mere official ceremony, a vital knowledge of the Lord will be required on the part of the apostles. We need to know Christ as Head of His Church in no mere intellectual way if we are to let all its management pass out of our hands at the very outset. Only an utter distrust of themselves, and a living trust in God, could enable the early apostles to commit the affairs of every local church into the hands of local men who had but recently come to know the Lord. All who are engaged in apostolic work and are seeking to follow the example of the first apostles in leaving the churches to the management of local elders, must be spiritually equipped for the task; for if things pass out of human hands and are not committed in faith to Divine hands, the result will be disaster. Oh, how we need a living faith and a living knowledge of the living God!

The Word of God makes it clear that the oversight of a church is not the work of apostles but of elders. Although Paul stayed in Corinth for over a year, in Rome for two years, and in Ephesus for three years, yet in none of these places did he assume responsibility for the work of the local church. In Scripture we read of the elders of Ephesus but never of the apostles of Ephesus. We find no mention made of the apostles of Philippi. Apostles are responsible for their own particular ministry, but not for the churches which are the fruit of their ministry. All the fruit of the apostles' work had to be handed over to the care of local elders.

In God's plan provision has been made for the building up of local churches, and in that plan pastors have a place, but it was never His thought that apostles should assume the role of pastors. He purposed that apostles should be responsible for the work in different places. while elders were to bear responsibility in one place. The characteristic of an apostle is going: the characteristic of an elder is staying. It is not necessary that elders resign their ordinary professions and devote themselves exclusively to their duties in connection with the church. They are simply local men, following their usual pursuits and at the same time bearing special responsibilities in the church. Should local affairs increase, they may devote themselves entirely to spiritual work, but the characteristic of an elder is not that he is a "full-time Christian worker." It is merely that as a local brother he bears responsibility in the local church. According to the usual conception of things, one would think it necessary for a considerable time to elapse between the founding of a church and the appointment of elders, but that is not according to God's pattern. The first missionary tour of the apostles covered less than two years, and during that period the apostles preached the Gospel, led sinners to the Lord, formed churches, and appointed elders wherever a church had been formed. The elders were chosen on the apostles' return journey. Not on their first visit to any place, but the interval between their two visits was never long - at most a matter of months. They appointed elders "in every church." Some may ask, If all the members of a church are in a low spiritual condition, how is it possible to appoint elders among them? It may solve the problem of many if they only consider the implication of the term "elder." The existence of an "elder" implies the existence of a junior. The word "elder" is relative, not absolute. Among a group of men in their seventy-ninth year it takes a man in his eightieth year to be their "elder," but it only takes a child of eight to be "elder" to a company of children of seven. Even among the spiritually immature there are bound to be those who, in comparison with them, are more mature and have spiritual possibilities, which is all the qualification they require to be their "elders."

A church may come far short of the ideal, but we cannot on that account deprive it of the status of a church. Our responsibility is to minister to it and so seek to bring it nearer the ideal. Even the comparatively advanced ones in a locality may not reach the ideal of elders, hut we cannot for that reason deprive them of the status of elders. We must remember that the office of an elder according to Scripture is limited to a locality. Being an elder in Nanking does not qualify a man to be an elder in Shanghai; but even if his spiritual state be far from what it should, provided he is in advance of his fellow-believers in the same church, then he is qualified to be an elder there.

The appointing of comparatively spiritual brothers to be elders is a principle set forth in the Word of God, though it runs counter to the modern conception of things. But even while we recognize this principle, we must not seek to apply it in any legal way. That would spell death. We must force nothing, but must be continually open to the leading of the Spirit. He will indicate the right time for the appointment of elders in any church. Should there be no leading of the Holy Spirit, and circumstances not permit of an immediate appointment of elders on the second visit of the apostles, then a Titus could be left behind to see to their appointment later. This is the first subject dealt with in the book of Titus, and it is a most important one. Paul gives Titus injunctions to "establish" elders in every city in Crete (Tit. 1:5).

In the appointment of elders the apostles did not follow their personal preferences; they only appointed those whom God had already chosen. That is why Paul could say to the elders in Ephesus, "The Holy Spirit has made you bishops" (Acts 20:28). The apostles did not take the initiative in the matter. They merely established as elders those whom the Holy Spirit had already made overseers in the church. In a man-made organization the appointment of an individual to office entitles him to occupy that office, but not so in the Church of God. Everything there is on a spiritual basis and it is only divine appointment that qualifies a man for office. If the Holy Spirit does not make men bishops, then no apostolic appointment will ever avail to do so. In the Church of God everything is under the sovereignty of the Spirit; man is ruled out. Elders are not men who think themselves capable to control church affairs, or men whom the apostles consider suitable, but men whom the Holy Spirit has set to be overseers in the Church.

Apostles and Elders

Elders were local men appointed to oversee affairs in the local church. Their sphere of office was limited by the locality. An elder in Ephesus was not an elder in Smyrna, and an elder in Smyrna was not an elder in Ephesus. In Scripture there are no local apostles, nor are there any extra-local elders; all elders are local, and all apostles are extra-local. The Word of God nowhere speaks of apostles managing the affairs of a local church, and it nowhere speaks of elders managing the affairs of several local churches. The apostles were the ministers of all the churches, but they had control of none. The elders were confined to one church and they controlled affairs in that one. The duty of apostles was to found churches. Once a church was established, all responsibility was handed over to the local elders, and from that day the apostles exercised no control whatever in its affairs. All management was in the hands of the elders, and if they thought right they could even refuse an apostle entry into their church.

How did Paul deal with the adulterous believer in Corinth? He did not just notify the church that he had excommunicated the man. The utmost he could do was to instruct its members regarding the seriousness of the situation and seek to admonish them to remove the wicked person from their midst. (1 Cor. 5:13). If the church was right spiritually they would pay attention to Paul, but if they disregarded his exhortations, while they would be wrong spiritually, they would be legally right.

An apostle can deal with the disorders of a church whenever his advice and counsel are sought, as was the case with Paul and the church in Corinth. It was because of their enquiries that he could say to them, "And the rest will I set in order when I come." (1 Cor. 11:34). But the point to note here is that "the rest" of the matters which Paul intended to "set in order" on his arrival in Corinth were to be attended to in the same way as those he had dealt with in his Epistle, and they were dealt with doctrinally. In like manner as he had instructed them concerning certain affairs there, so he would instruct them concerning the remaining matters on his arrival; but the Corinthians themselves, not Paul, were the ones who would have to deal with the situation.

Since Peter and John were apostles, how did it come about that they were elders of the church in Jerusalem? (1 Pet. 5:1; 2 Jn. 1; 3 Jn. 1). They were elders as well as apostles because they were not only responsible for the work in different places, but also for the church in their own place. When they went out they ministered in the capacity of apostles, bearing the responsibility for the work in other parts. When they returned home they performed the duties of elders, hearing the responsibility of the local church. It was not on the ground of their being apostles that they were elders in Jerusalem; they were elders there solely on the ground of their being local men of greater spiritual maturity than their brethren.
Paul was sent out from Antioch and he founded a church in Ephesus. We know he did not hold the office of elder in any church, but it would have been possible for him to be an elder in Antioch, not in Ephesus. He spent three years in Ephesus, but he worked there in the capacity of an apostle, not an elder: that is, he assumed no responsibility and exercised no authority in local affairs, but simply devoted himself to his apostolic ministry. Let us note carefully that there are no elders in the universal Church and no apostles in the local church.

Their Responsibilities

It is the responsibility of every saved man to serve the Lord according to his capacity and in his own sphere. God did not appoint elders to do the work on behalf of their brethren. After the appointment of elders, as before, it is still the brethren's duty and privilege to serve the Lord. Elders are also called "bishops" (Acts 20:28; Tit. 1:5,7). The term "elder" relates to their person; the term "bishop" to their work. "Bishop" means "overseer," and an overseer is not one who works instead of others, but one who supervises others as they work. God intended that every Christian should be a "Christian worker," and He appointed some to take the oversight of the work so that it might be carried on efficiently. It was never His thought that the majority of believers should devote themselves exclusively to secular affairs and leave the church matters to a group of spiritual specialists. This point cannot be over-emphasized. Elders are not a group of men who contract to do the church work on behalf of its members; they are only the head-men who superintend affairs. It is their business to encourage the backward and restrain the forward ones, never doing the work instead of them, but simply directing them in the doing of it.

The responsibility of an elder relates to matters temporal and spiritual. They are appointed to "rule," and also to "instruct" and "shepherd." "Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and in teaching" (1 Tim. 5:17). "Tend the flock of God which is among you, exercising the oversight, not by constraint, but willingly, according unto God; nor yet for dishonest gain, but of a ready mind; neither as lording it over the charge allotted to you, but making yourselves examples to the flock " (1 Pet. 5:2,3).

The Word of God uses the term "rule" in connection with the responsibilities of an elder. The ordering of church government, the management of business affairs and the care of material things, are all under their control. But we must remember that a Scriptural church does not consist of an active and a passive group of brethren, the former controlling the latter and the latter simply submitting to their control, or the former bearing all the burden while the latter settle down in ease to enjoy the benefit of their labors. "That the members should...care one for another" is God's purpose for His Church (1 Cor. 12:24). Every church after God's own heart bears the stamp of "one another" in all its life and activity. Mutuality is its outstanding characteristic. If the elders lose sight of that, then their ruling the church will soon be changed to lording it over the church. They were not appointed to be "lords" of their brethren, but to be their "examples." What is an example? It is a pattern for others to follow. For the elders to be a pattern to the brethren implied that the brethren worked and the elders worked as well. It implied that the elders worked with special diligence and care, so that the brethren should have a good example to follow. Such is the Scriptural conception of the rule of the elders.

But their responsibility does not merely relate to the material side of church affairs. If God has equipped them with spiritual gifts, then they should also bear spiritual responsibility. Paul wrote to Timothy, "Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and in teaching" (1 Tim. 5:17). It is the responsibility of all elders to control the affairs of the church, but such as have special gifts (as of prophecy or teaching) are free to exercise these for the spiritual edification of the church. Paul wrote to Titus that an elder should "be able both to exhort in the sound doctrine, and to convict those who contradict" (Tit. 1:9). The preaching and teaching in the local church is not the business of apostles but of local brethren who are in the ministry, especially if they are elders.

On the spiritual side of the work the elders help to build up the church not only by teaching and preaching but by pastoral work. To shepherd the flock is peculiarly the work of elders. Paul said to the Ephesian elders: "Take heed unto yourselves, and to all the flock, in the which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to feed the church of God" (Acts 20:28). And Peter wrote in the same strain to the elders among the saints of the Dispersion, "Tend the flock of God which is among you" (1 Pet. 5:2). The present-day conception of pastors is far removed from the thought of God. God's thought was that men chosen from among the local brethren should pastor the flock, not that men coming from other parts should preach the Gospel, found churches, and then settle down to care for those churches.

The Plurality of Elders

This work of ruling, teaching and shepherding the flock, which we have seen to be the special duty of the elders, does not devolve upon one man only in any place. In Scripture we see that there was always more than one elder or bishop in a local church. If the management of the entire church rests upon one man, how easy it is for him to become conceited, esteeming himself above measure and suppressing the other brethren (3 Jn.). God has ordained that several elders together share the work of the church, so that no one individual should be able to run things according to his own pleasure, treating the church as his own peculiar property and leaving the impress of his personality upon all its life and work. To place the responsihility in the hands of several brethren rather than in the hands of one individual, is God's way of safeguarding His Church against the evils that result from the domination of a strong personality. God has purposed that several brothers should unitedly bear responsibility in the church, so that even in controlling its affairs they have to depend one upon the other and submit one to the other. Thus in an experimental way they will have opportunity to give practical expression to the truth of the Body of Christ. As they honor one another and trust one another to the leading of the Spirit, none taking the place of the Head but each regarding the others as fellow-members, the element of "mutuality," which is the peculiar feature of the Church, will be preserved.