

1 Corinthians - Commentaries by Walter Thomas Prideaux Wolston

Another Comforter, Baptism of the Spirit, The (12:12-13)

That which has been before us on previous evenings, in connection with the Holy Spirit, has been, as I daresay you will all remember, of an entirely individual nature. Nothing that is collective has been before us, but now truth, which is distinctly collective, is our subject. We shall look at the assembly, the Church, in its various aspects, formed by the Holy Spirit, come down to earth on the day of Pentecost. That which is individual must always—precede what is collective, and unless the soul is distinct, and clear, before God, as to what it possesses individually, and as to the blessing which belongs to it individually, it is never at liberty, is never free, to contemplate that which belongs to it in connection with others.

In the New Testament the assembly, or Church of God on earth, is presented to us in a fourfold way. Four figures are used to express its nature, object, and destiny. These four are a body, a house, a candlestick, and a bride. Each figure has its own peculiar place, and teaches its own lesson. The Church is seen to be each of the four, and, save the bride, all belong to its present place. The Church is the body of Christ, the house of God, and the candlestick as the responsible vessel of testimony to the world; but as the Bride, she is seen only in view of the millennial day, and of eternity (see Rev. 19, 21).

The first two of these figures will engage our attention this evening. Both are the direct result of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The body of Christ, and the habitation of God, are distinct relationships in which the Church stands to Christ, and to God, but nevertheless are intimately connected with each other, because both are by the Holy Spirit. We become members of the body of Christ by the Holy Spirit, and the Church becomes—and it is a wondrous thought—the habitation, the dwelling place of God by that same Spirit.

The formation of the body of Christ is dependent on the fact that the Lord is the ascended, glorified, Son of Man, in the presence of God, because it was not till He was risen from the dead that He could be the Head of a body, and therefore I boldly say, and it may help some person to the truth if I do say it, that the Head of the body was never dead. What? someone says, Christ was never dead? I did not say that. I repeat, the Head of the body was never dead. He, who now is the Head of the body was dead. As Messiah He lived, presented Himself to His earthly people, Israel, was rejected, and slain. The moment of His rejection was the occasion He seized to fulfill the purposes and counsels of God, and the cross with all its wondrous fruits for God and men is before us. God then began a new work—the Church—but it was not until redemption was accomplished, the veil rent, and Christ risen and glorified, that He could be the Head of a body. Then the Holy Spirit came down, as we read here, “For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body” (1 Cor. 12:13). The thought of the body, I repeat, connects us with Christ in glory. On the other hand, in the truth of the habitation of God through the Spirit, which we read of in Ephesians 2, the scene clearly is the earth. The Church—the body of Christ—is the habitation of God, through the Spirit, but what God means us to learn by the figure of a body united to the Head is, that we belong to the spot where the Head is, namely, heavenly glory. As the habitation of God, the Church is seen, both on earth (Eph. 2:22), and in glory (Rev. 21:2, 3). We Christians, now passing through this world, are Christ's body, and God's house—wondrous truths!

Before developing, with the Lord's help, these two sides of the truth, I should like to say a few words about the baptism of the Holy Spirit, for, I am persuaded, that in the minds of many dear children of God, there is great confusion as to that which God would have us glean from this expression. If we turn to the first place in Scripture, where the statement comes in, I think we shall get light. I ask you therefore to turn back to the third chapter of Matthew, and there from the lips of John the Baptist we first hear about it. In the eleventh verse, addressing those who had come out to him, repentant, and to be baptized, he says, “I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance; but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear; he shall baptize you with the Holy Spirit, and with fire. Whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” The Baptist predicts of the coming One—the Lord Jesus—that He would have a ministry of a double character. He would baptize with the Holy Spirit, that is blessing, and with fire—judgment. Now, many people think the fire means power. Not so! A fire has no power except to destroy, and that is not what you want. You do not want destructive energy. Fire is always the symbol in Scripture of judgment. You have the two sides of the Lord's ministry here. He was to baptize with the Holy Spirit, and that is the richest and deepest blessing possible. He was also to baptize with fire. That is in a future day, yet to come.

The Baptist explains his words as he goes on to say, “whose fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly purge His floor, and gather His wheat into the garner; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” The distinct thought, in Scripture, as to fire, is testing, and destroying that which cannot stand the fire. For instance, we get in the third chapter of the 1st Corinthians, “Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed in fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is” (vs. 13). All is to be tried by fire, and the gold, and silver, and precious stones—doctrines as well as men, wrought in by God's grace—will stand it; while the wood, hay, and stubble—what is false, those who are, though professors of Christ, still only in the flesh—will be burnt up.

But the Baptist tells us, The Lord is going to “gather his wheat into the garner.” Who are the wheat? All those who are His—all those who through grace are of, and in Him, who is the true corn of wheat. Did He not say to Peter, “Simon, Simon, behold Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat”? Yes. What a blessed fact that Peter was wheat. If he had not been, Satan would never have sifted him. He never sifts the mere chaff I do not deny that the chaff is among the wheat, but, with the chaff—the unsaved, unconverted sinner—Satan does not waste his time—he has no need to sift him—all is chaff. The sinner he leads blindfold to eternal ruin. It is only the child of God, the one born of God—the one who is what the Lord calls the wheat, that Satan will tempt, and try, and seek to trip up. Let us not forget, in this connection, that the Lord also says to Peter, “I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not;” and depend upon it, that the light God has given to a converted soul can never be quenched. I have no doubt the devil may be allowed to sift, and try him, that the chaff may be got rid of,

and Satan may be used of God in that way, as a winnowing machine to clear away the chaff in us. We must learn our own weakness, and good-for-nothingness, and if we fail to learn it in communion with God, we learn it in the company of the devil, as Peter did, in the high priest's palace, when he denied his Lord, whom he had boldly avowed, before all, that he would die for. But this is a very different thing from the deep and terrible judgment that comes on those who are not wheat. "He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire," therefore it is a serious question for every soul—Am I wheat or am I chaff? I ask you solemnly, Are you wheat or chaff, my friend? Are you born of God, or are you still a poor sinner in your sins, though you be professedly religious? If you have not been born of God, have not been washed in the blood of the Son of God, and have not received the Holy Spirit, you may depend upon it—whatever you think of yourself, and whatever anybody else may think of you, your true state, and future destiny, are described here. "The chaff He will burn with fire unquenchable." A solemn truth for unsaved sinners!

Let us now pass on to the first chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. There, again, we hear about this baptism of the Spirit. The Lord Jesus, in resurrection, is, through the Holy Spirit, giving commandments to His disciples, and "being assembled together with them, commanded them that they should not depart from Jerusalem, but wait for the promise of the Father, which, saith he, ye have heard of me. For John truly baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence" (verses 4 and 5). The thought of the "baptism of the Holy Ghost" carries nothing but blessing with it. There is deep, rich, blessing to the soul individually, carrying with it truth, to the renewed nature, of the most precious character. We have seen on previous occasions the way in which the Holy Spirit came. I dwell not, therefore, upon that here, but I simply inquire, If the baptism of the Holy Spirit has taken place at Pentecost, does Scripture carry the thought that it is ever to be repeated? I believe distinctly not. The Holy Spirit has come, He is here. The baptism of the Spirit has been received, and there is, consequently, no fresh baptism to be looked for. Nevertheless many earnest souls are looking for, and earnestly seeking it, forgetful of the precious fact that the Holy Spirit has come. What they desire is to know fuller joy and peace, and that is all right, but this baptism, having taken place, cannot be repeated.

It is of the last importance to get hold of the truth, that it was by the descent of the Holy Spirit, personally, that the Church was formed, and then you will see that the baptism has taken place. I know very well what many souls want. They want freshening up a bit, and thank God for that. They want brightening, more joy, and to be happier. Let them so be by all means, but let us use the language of Scripture, and seek to learn what God would graciously teach us by its statements. We read in the Acts of the Apostles, many times over, of the disciples being "filled with the Holy Ghost"; and in Ephesians 5 I read, "Be not drunk with wine, but be filled with the Spirit." That is quite right. But there is a difference between being filled with the Holy Spirit, and the baptism of the Spirit. If we get hold of God's meaning, and the thought specifically connected with being "baptized with the Holy Ghost," it will be easily apparent, that this baptism cannot be repeated.

We read in 1st Cor. 12:12, "For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ." You understand the figure. The human body is one, but has many members, and all the members in that one body, being many, are still "one body," so also is—what? The Church? No. The Christ. We should have said, The Church; but what God says here is "so also is the Christ." I do not know anything that more beautifully expresses, in a word, the intimacy of the union between the believers on earth, who form the body, and the Saviour in heaven, who is the Head of that body, and yet this form of truth is not altogether new to Scripture. The truth of the body is new, but I mean that the union thus expressed by calling the Church Christ, is not exactly new in Scripture. If you turn back to the book of Genesis, which is the seed plot of the Bible, and contains the germ of almost every truth, we read, "This is the book of the generations of Adam. In the day that God created man, in the likeness of God made He him; male and female created He them; and blessed them, and called" his name, no, "their name Adam, in the day when they were created" (Gen. 5:1, 2). Just look, the woman loses her identity, and her individuality is merged in her husband, as God here calls their name Adam.

I have been trying on previous nights to show that the believer in the Lord Jesus Christ has Him for his life: he has the place, and the position, and the relationship, which the Lord Jesus, as the ascended Man, has now before God, and, further, is united to Him. One is therefore quite prepared when we come to a scripture like this, to hear the Holy Spirit saying, as He speaks of the members of that one body here upon earth, "So also is Christ." God calls His Church upon earth by the name of Him, through whom it gets life, and existence, and every blessing, and to whom it is, by the Spirit, united: He calls it, Head and members together, Christ. How perfectly beautiful Scripture is. The thirteenth verse of 1 Cor. 12 is the explanation of the statement in the twelfth verse. The thirteenth verse expounds the nature and origin of the marvelous truth of the twelfth verse, which is this, that, being many members, we are one body, and that body is called Christ. The Head, in glory, and the members here on earth are called by the same name. "For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit. For the body is not one member but many." Now you see that the baptism of the Spirit carries with it the thought of the formation of a body, of which Christ is the Head. All who have received the Holy Spirit are members of this one body—the body of Christ. It was formed by the descent of the Spirit, still exists, and, as the Spirit yet abides on earth, no fresh baptism is to be expected.

I sometimes meet true earnest Christians, and on conversing with them, find that they are members of such and such a "body." I have met half-a-dozen different people in a day, and found, on inquiry, that they belonged to half-a-dozen different religious bodies. What an anomaly! Look at this The Holy Spirit says, "For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body." This is very simple, and very practical, too! The moment a person really gets hold of this truth, if he wishes to be faithful to his Head, he must drop association with, and refuse to own membership of, everybody but the "one body," of which Christ is the Head. That will be a tremendous wrench. But surely it is better to be cut off from everything that is not the truth; and the truth is, that every Christian is, by one Spirit, baptized into one body, the body of Christ. Now, if you admit the thought of many bodies, each claiming Christ as its Head, you are shut up to one of two things, either that Christ has many bodies, or you are a member of a body without a head, and that is a corpse. There is no possibility of escaping that. As soon as I admit the thought of an ecclesiastical body upon earth, not the body of Christ, I admit rivalry to the truth of the "one body," and the Lord has not His right place.

Our only, and sure, way of getting blessing is to bow to Scripture. If I learn by grace that I am a member at all, then I am a member of "the body of Christ," for the truth is, that the only body Scripture recognizes, is the body of Christ, and every believer in every city, in every country throughout the world, every believer in the Lord Jesus, born of the Spirit, and having received the Holy Spirit, is a member of that "one body," and ought to be ashamed to own membership of any other body. You will forgive me for speaking thus plainly, I am sure, for what profits my soul as well as yours, is what I really have before me.

We learn, then, that it is by the Holy Spirit “we are all baptized into one body,” and now we may profitably see how the body is presented in Scripture. I have no doubt it is presented to us in a threefold way. Perhaps I may explain what I understand by “the body of Christ.” I apprehend the body of Christ to be formed of all believers, who, from the day of Pentecost onwards, receiving the Holy Spirit, are thereby united to the living Saviour, the Head in glory, and each one should learn that he is a member of His body here upon earth. How was this truth brought out? The truth of the mystery of the body of Christ was first revealed to Paul. He was the vessel of that special truth. I do not doubt that the other apostles learned it, but we know it was first revealed to the Apostle Paul, whom God took up, and used, in His grace, to unfold the special truth I am speaking of now—the body of Christ. He learned it on the very day of his conversion. He was on his way to Damascus, to persecute the saints of God, and, as he went on his murderous errand, there suddenly burst upon him a great light, and he fell to the ground. But the very light that shut his eyes to this world, became the means of opening them to see the Lord. Then he said, “Who art thou, Lord?” He had heard a voice saying, “Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?” He was persecuting the saints, yet he heard a voice from glory which said, “Why persecutest thou me?” “Who art thou, Lord?” he asked, and the answer came—“I am Jesus whom thou persecutest.” It was in that moment, and by the form of the question, he learned, that the Saviour in glory regarded every believer in His name upon earth, as part of Himself—a member of His body, and that was why He said, “Why persecutest thou me?” Paul learned this truth in the moment of his conviction, and conversion. That is why, in the epistle to the Galatians, he says, “But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother’s womb, and called me by His grace, to reveal his son—to me, no!—“in me, that I might preach him among the heathen immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood” (Gal. 1:15, 16). He got the revelation, at the moment of his conversion, that the saint on earth, and the Saviour in glory, were now identified, and afterward the Lord revealed the mystery of Christ and the Church to him, which he unfolds fully in the epistle to the Ephesians.

First of all, Paul preached that Jesus is the Son of God, which none of the apostles had done. They had preached that God had exalted His servant Jesus, but Paul at once proclaimed the glories of His person, as Son of God, and then revealed the truth of the body of Christ, to which I ask your further attention for a moment. In the epistle to the Ephesians, and in the third chapter, you find the apostle saying, “For this cause I Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ for you Gentiles, if ye have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which is given me to you-ward: how that by revelation He made known unto me the mystery; (as I wrote afore in few words, whereby, when ye read, ye may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ).” Let me say, in passing, that the word “mystery” here, does not mean something very mysterious, or occult, and not to be grasped, except by a peculiarly intelligent mind. “Mystery” in Scripture refers to something hidden, till the moment when God is pleased to make it known. And now he adds, “the mystery of Christ; which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto His holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit; that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel; whereof I was made a minister, according to the gift of the grace of God given unto me by the effectual working of His power. Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ; and to make all men see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God,” not even hidden in Scripture! for you cannot find “the body” in the Old Testament Scriptures.

Paul, you will thus observe, was the vessel of this revelation, and then you find in the next chapter he tells us, in the third verse, to endeavor to “keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism.” It is the same thought, that by the Holy Spirit this wonderful body is formed. And for what? That Jew and Gentile believers, quickened out of their common death in sin, may be brought together, through the death and resurrection of Jesus, indwelt by the Spirit, and formed into “one new man” as he calls it in the second chapter. If you look there you will see Paul is speaking of the Jew and Gentile. In the fourteenth verse of the second chapter, he says, “For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us;”—between Jew and Gentile that is—“having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make (or ‘create’ as the original really means) in himself of twain one new man”—a brand-new man, if you like, one never seen before, for that is the meaning—“so making peace; and that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby: and came and preached peace to you which were afar off”—these are the Gentiles—“and to them that were nigh”—the Jews. We are confronted by this beautiful truth, now for the first time revealed, and unfolded by the Apostle Paul, as the special vessel of God’s revelation, that there is a new thing on earth, from the day of Pentecost onwards, called “the body of Christ,” formed by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and united by that same Spirit to the Saviour in glory. And let me say this in passing, no one is in union with Christ, except by the Holy Spirit. By living faith, you say, you are united to Him. Not so. Such is not the way of Scripture. You may be connected with Him by faith; but that falls short of the truth of union. Union is a great truth! The union spoken of by the apostle is the perfect identity of life and nature, and place, and position with Christ, in which the Church is set by the Holy Spirit. What is Christ’s is yours, and you are to know that you are brought into that, by the Holy Spirit.

This being the truth as to the believer’s relation to the Lord Jesus, as Head of the body, we are prepared to hear the apostle say (ch. 4:3), “Endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling.” It is an immense point gained when the soul sees it is a member of the body of Christ. It carries with it such wonderful blessing, and such corresponding privileges. I know nothing more marvelous than the thought of being a member of the body of Christ.

If you study the way in which Scripture presents the body, you will find that it speaks of it in a threefold manner. You may have a local expression of the body of Christ, or again you may have a time expression of the body of Christ, and furthermore you have the eternal expression of the body of Christ. If you turn again to the first Corinthians, twelfth chapter, you will find the local expression in the twenty-seventh verse—“Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular.” He speaks of the Corinthian assembly as being the body. That is the local expression. All who were in Christ, in Corinth, were united to Him, and were responsible to walk in relation to one another. Just as the members of the human body, which is the figure used, answer to the volition and will of the head, so ought they, as members of Christ’s body, to do. My head ought to govern every movement of my body, and if it does not, then there is something wrong. We sometimes meet with a disease in which the members of the human body act independently of the head. There is a want of controlling power. That is not a right condition to be in. Again, we meet with a disease, where a limb may be fixed, motionless, in a cataleptic state. I sometimes think that the Church is both cataleptic, and epileptic, nowadays. It takes its own way, and the members thereof do what they like, instead of being subject to the Lord, by the Spirit. The control of the Spirit, in the assembly, is the great thought in the chapter in which occurs the expression, “Ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular,” which gives us the local aspect of the body.

Now, when we come to Ephesians 4, we find that the Lord, in ascension, gave gifts to the Church, and that these were “for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ” (vs. 12). It is the Head of the body who gives these varied gifts, which He considers necessary for His body on earth. The time condition of the body is before us here, and you may well ask, What do you mean by the time condition? There was never a moment when the body of Christ did not exist in its unity, since the Holy Spirit formed it at Pentecost, and yet those who form the body of Christ today, upon earth, are not those who formed it in the day of the Apostle Paul. I will give you a figure which you will all understand. The 42nd regiment of foot, the Black Watch, bears its name, and character, and history, and has its full complement of men today, but there is not a man in it today, who was in it a hundred years ago. Every member who first formed it has gone, still it remains the same, the 42nd regiment; the thing exists, though its component parts have altered. So with the Church. There is never a moment when, as the body of Christ, and seen on earth, in its time condition, it is not perfect, and it ought to walk in unity as does the human body, in the sense of being “one body.”

The Lord gave these gifts of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers, for the edifying and building up of His body. It is a great thing to bear in mind that these gifts belong to the body, the body of Christ, not to this, that, or the other body, as men, and even saints of God, alas! often speak. No! no! such a thought carries its own condemnation. The Lord is the Head of the body, and has given gifts, for the edification of His body, and, consequently, I claim every servant of Christ, and every gift for it today.

All human rules and regulations, and the putting of the servants of Christ in this place, and that town, as is the order of Christendom, and its organizations, today, simply dislocate the servant from his Lord, and hinder rather than further the work of God. How beautifully perfect Scripture is, and how definitely is it stated in Scripture, that the gift is to be only at the control of the Giver, for true ministry is that which alone flows from Christ. Would that all the members of His wondrous body would learn their relation to their Head, and their relation to one another likewise. There is work for all, and each has need of all. What would the four fingers be without the thumb? That all the members of the body are necessary to each other is what the twelfth chapter of 1st Corinthians specially brings out.

There is yet another, the third and larger, namely, the eternal aspect of the truth of the body, brought out in Ephesians 1, where the apostle prays that the saints may know “what is the exceeding greatness of His power to us-ward who believe, according to the working of His mighty power, which He wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and set him at His own right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come: and hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of Him that filleth all in all” (vss. 19-23). The Church is the complement of Christ. Christ, looked at in this aspect as the Head and the body, would not be complete without every member in that assembly, which He has bought with His own blood. I believe here you have the eternal view of the body, because it embraces clearly every saint who, at any time, has been a member of that body, and Christ would not be complete without that one. In this scripture, therefore, the relation we have to the Lord Jesus, though known here upon earth, is an eternal relationship. I mean that, though being members of His body is a figure used for our condition in time—that we might walk rightly—we shall never cease to be in that relationship, although the Bride is more the thought of the Church in eternity.

Let me repeat, then, that, not by faith, but by the reception of the baptism of the Holy Spirit, the body of Christ was formed on the day of Pentecost, and that baptism, having once taken place, is never repeated, though each added believer is embraced by it, and gets his place in the body of Christ. Perhaps I may explain this to some by an illustration. Did you ever stand at the side of a lake, not a very large one, with the water as smooth as glass? While there some one has picked up a pebble, and flung it into the center. What was the result? A circle was formed, and it widened, and widened, and presently it came to a solitary rush, and it got into the circle; then it came to another rush, and it too was embraced in the circle, and so the circle went on till all the rushes in the lake were embraced in it. From the day of Pentecost till now, every soul born of God is brought, sooner or later, when he receives the forgiveness of his sins, and the Holy Spirit, into that unity which is made by the Spirit, and which cannot be broken by man. That is the thought. It is a unity of the Spirit's making, and each believer, on receiving the Holy Spirit, is thereby incorporated. There is no fresh baptism, but He, who at Pentecost first baptized the disciples, and yet remains on earth, by indwelling the believer, for his individual comfort and joy, at the same moment puts him in his place in the body of Christ, which, as we have learned, is formed by Himself, for “by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body.”

We come now to consider the “habitation of God, through the Spirit.” The body is formed, and simultaneously the habitation of God is created, by the descent, and indwelling of the Holy Spirit. You will find this truth developed in Ephesians 2. Let us turn to it. “For through him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father. Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God; and are built”—you have the building now—“upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone.” I take these prophets to be New Testament—as is quite apparent from chapter 4, where they are seen to be given by the ascended Christ—not Old Testament prophets. Apostles were not then known, and the prophets of that day had not the truth of the Church, which was then “hid in God” (Eph. 3:9). We are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, that is their written ministry, which we have in New Testament Scripture. We have the writings of the apostles, and prophets of the New Testament, and our souls are built thereupon. Our hearts and minds rest upon that which has been brought to us by the Holy Spirit through the pens of these writers. By their ministry the Church was administratively set in its place on earth. They were at the foundation. You can easily understand why there are no apostles now. There is no need for them. I know it is claimed by some, that there is still apostolic succession, but that is most solemn ground for any man to take up, for in Rev. 2:2 The Lord says to Ephesus, “And thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars.” These are solemn words, you may say. Yes, but they are not mine. They are God's. There is no need for apostles now, because the foundations are laid, in the revelation of the truth which God gave to them, and which they have, by the Holy Spirit, recorded. If you are building a house you would not think of laying more than one foundation. You would say he is a poor workman who has to lay a foundation more than once. If it be once laid, it is then only a question of going on with the building. That is where the evangelists and the teachers come in. The evangelist goes out to win the soul for Christ, and bring him into the Church. When he is brought into the assembly the pastor looks after him—sees that he is all right, helps him in his difficulties, and comforts him in his troubles. Then the teacher instructs him by the fuller unfolding of the truth.

This, then, is the order in Scripture, and here we find that it is the apostles and prophets we are built upon, “Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; in whom all the building, fitly framed together, groweth into an holy temple in the Lord.” It is yet to be seen in its blessed perfection. That you have in the twenty-first chapter of Revelation, where John sees “the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out

of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice out of heaven, saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them" (vss. 2-3). There the holy temple, with every stone put in, is seen, in eternal glory, as God's habitation. In the meantime the building is going on, is growing, and I trust that many in this hall, who hear me, will be attracted by the truth, and brought to Christ, and will become living stones in this building. That is what took place at Ephesus, for the apostle says, "In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit." You observe that when the truth gets hold of a man, he becomes a stone in this building. He forms part of the house in which God dwells. But more, he comes to Him who is "the living stone," and thus himself becomes a "living stone." He recognizes the Lord as supreme in the assembly.

I quite admit that this truth of God having a habitation on earth is not altogether new in God's ways, although the form that it takes is new, and I ask you, therefore, to turn back to Old Testament Scripture, and see where you first have the thought of God having a dwelling place among men on earth. Exodus 15 presents it, where Moses and the people of Israel sing the song of redemption on the sunny banks of the Red Sea, in resurrection liberty, and joy. "Then sang Moses and the children of Israel this song unto the Lord, and spake, saying, I will sing unto the Lord, for He hath triumphed gloriously: the horse and his rider hath He thrown into the sea, The Lord is my strength and song, and He is become my salvation: He is my God, and I will prepare Him an habitation; my father's God, and I will exalt Him." They caught the blessed thought that had long filled the bosom of God, namely, that He wanted to dwell amongst them. Now it is remarkable, that the book of Genesis, which we have called the seed plot of the Bible, and in which almost every truth is found, has not this thought. Neither the truth of the body, nor of the habitation of God, is to be found in Genesis; and why? Genesis is the book of creation, and creation being ruined by man's sin God could not dwell in it. Exodus, on the other hand, is the book of redemption. No sooner is redemption accomplished, than God comes down in the cloud to dwell amongst His people. But this could not be until, in type, the death of Christ, in two aspects, had been fulfilled. In the twelfth chapter the blood of the lamb was to be sprinkled upon the lintel, and two side posts of the doors. That sheltered the people from the judgment of God—kept Him, as a judge, outside. The fourteenth chapter—the passage of the Red Sea—also a figure of the death of Christ—gives an added truth.

No soul will ever grasp, and enjoy the truth of the fifteenth chapter of Exodus, unless he learn what the three previous chapters bring out. In the twelfth we have the shelter afforded by the blood of the Lamb, and the thought is this, I am screened from the judgment of God, and that is a great thing for the soul to know. When you come to the thirteenth you read, "Sanctify unto Me all the firstborn, whatsoever openeth the womb among the children of Israel, both of man and beast: it is Mine," says God. The blood that shelters me from the judgment of God, is the blood which separates me to God. What do you find in the next chapter? That the Israelites pass through the Red Sea, and all the hosts of Pharaoh are overthrown—the complete power of the enemy is broken. There we read, for the first time in Scripture, of salvation, in its full sense. They are saved by God. In the thirteenth verse of chapter 14 Moses says, "Fear ye not, stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord, which He will show to you today: for the Egyptians whom ye have seen today, ye shall see them again no more forever." "The salvation of the Lord" is a grandly comprehensive expression. And what is this salvation? You say—I have come to Jesus, and my sins are pardoned. True, and thank God for it, but there is more than that in the type of the Red Sea. You say, I believe in the Lord, and therefore I hope I shall be saved. That is hope, not salvation. The salvation of the Lord involves that the hostile hosts of Pharaoh—type of Satan, god of this world—are crushed, and there is not an enemy left to touch me. He has brought me to Himself; as Exodus 19:4 so beautifully expresses it.

There is not a single foe left to interfere with my enjoyment of the One who has saved me. That is what the fourteenth chapter gives us. The Israelites passed through the Red Sea on dry land, but the waters returned and destroyed all their foes, and, when the morning appeared, "they saw the Egyptians dead upon the seashore." They saw that every enemy was gone. Now you see shelter is one truth, sanctification is another, and salvation is again another. The truth of the fourteenth chapter is salvation, and he that is in Christ has not an enemy left. Salvation is an accomplished fact, and then satisfaction follows. Hence, the Israelites began to sing, and what do they say? "He is my God, and I will prepare Him an habitation," and then again, "Thou in Thy mercy hast led forth the people which Thou hast redeemed; Thou hast guided them in Thy strength unto Thy holy habitation" (vs. 13). Further they celebrate in praise the full result—for us the heavenly glory—"Thou shalt bring them in, and plant them in the mountain of Thine inheritance, in the place, O Lord, which Thou hast made for Thee to dwell in; in the sanctuary, O Lord, which Thy hands have established" (vs. 17). They are a holy people now. It is a remarkable thing you do not get holiness until this chapter is reached. In the eleventh verse we have, "Who is like unto Thee, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like Thee, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders?" You do get the thought of holiness implied in the Sabbath, in the second of Genesis, but here the thought brought out is, that the moment His people are redeemed, they have to do with a holy God, and they learn that holiness becomes the house of the Lord. It is the holy One they have to do with, and who is going to dwell among them. In Ephesians we have, "In whom all the building, fitly framed together, groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord," and in the Revelation John saw "the holy city," the new Jerusalem, come down from God out of heaven.

Redemption puts God's people upon the ground where Christ is, puts their souls into the very presence of God, to dwell there in the enjoyment of His love. But then He is holy, and His temple must be a holy temple likewise, because there dwells therein the One who is holy. I ask you, beloved friends, when you come into the assembly, is the thought before your mind—I am in a spot where God dwells? Gathered in separation from what is unsuited to His presence, in His house we can enjoy His presence, though that presence is an abiding fact in Christendom since Pentecost. Nothing can be more blessed. Nothing can be more solemn. I think it is an exquisite thought that God has a house, and He comes and dwells in it by His Spirit. What for? To make Himself known! He dwells in His house. He is not only the builder, and owner of the house, but it is a sweet thought that He is also the dweller therein, and there only is He, as we say, at home in this world. It gives the assembly a character that nothing else could, and it surely should impress us with a sense of gravity, which I fear is not always present in all our hearts, When I go there, whom do I go to meet? My brethren? Yes! thank God, but not primarily. The blessed truth is, that the Lord is there. It is God's habitation through the Spirit, and it is Himself I go to meet.

There is another side of this truth, in the epistle to the Corinthians, which I just refer to. In the third chapter of the 1st Corinthians the Apostle Paul says, "Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you? If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy: for the temple of God is holy, which ye are" (vss. 17-18). It is a holy temple. It is a wonderful thought that believers here upon earth are the habitation, the dwelling place of God by the Spirit, and, I need scarcely say, if such be the case, how careful ought we to be not to defile it in any way, and further, to let the Lord have His way in His own house. I need scarcely add that we should leave God to manage His affairs in His own house, yet man thinks he can manage the house of God; he can arrange, order, and appoint who shall minister, and all that shall take place. He can fix who shall read or speak, better than God Himself. In Christendom today, when the Church so-called

assembles, it is almost universally prearranged how God is to speak to His people, and that is by the mouth of one man, whom men have put in the place that belongs to the Holy Spirit. I do not deny ministry, for here I am myself, seeking to help your souls, but I am not doing it at the bidding of the Church. God forbid the thought! Every servant of Christ has his own individual responsibility to exercise his gift. I am talking now about the Church—the assembly. When the Lord's people go to worship, what usually takes place? They listen to the ministry of some man, more or less gifted, as the case may be. That is not the order of the assembly according to God. The Church worships God, the servant ministers from God to the Church. Worship goes up, ministry comes down. The difference is vital. If you read carefully the twelfth and fourteenth chapters of 1st Corinthians you will find this brought out.

In God's house every arrangement must be of God, and the Holy Spirit is distributing to every man severally as He will. His action, and it is always independent of man's arrangements, is paramount. The presence of the Holy Spirit is above all to be recognized in the assembly, when gathered to worship God, and I believe there is nothing in which Christendom has more failed before God than in this—in not yielding itself to the control and leading of the Spirit of God. We should enter into the assembly of God with the feeling that He will order, He will arrange, He will take care of Christ's glory, better than we can, by any arrangement of our suggesting. Everything in the Church of God must be left to the action and guidance of the Spirit of God, who dwells in the bosom of that assembly. By making creeds and confessions, rules and regulations, you are trenching on the action, the liberty, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It is a remarkable thing that every creed, every confession—no matter by whom made or penned—is marked by the omission of any adequate testimony to the personal presence in the House, and the indwelling in the individual, of the Spirit of God. I do not say that such creeds deny His existence, or being, but I repeat—it is a remarkable thing that all the creeds, and confessions, that were ever formulated, and propagated, omit the thought of the personal presence of the Spirit of God, as dwelling in the House of God, and in the individual, for all that relates to the order of the former, and the comfort of the latter. That kernel truth of Christianity is conspicuous by its absence, in every such creed or confession.

Christians have forgotten that the Holy Spirit is here. His aid may be invoked, and His influence besought, but His actual presence is ignored, by the fact of prayer being offered for His coming. What is the result of this? That man makes his arrangements for the so-called worship of God, after a sort that renders him independent of the necessity for the Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit is left out of these arrangements, as if He were not here at all. These arrangements provide for so-called worship in the Church, nowadays, without reference to the actual presence, and direct guidance and action of the Spirit of God. As you are aware, a formula takes the place of the unhindered action of the Spirit in some quarters, and the intervention of men—appointed by man—in others. Now the Church has, in all this, departed from the truth, and not listened to the words of her Lord, so clearly uttered in this respect. I feel sad when I speak of it, but I dare not shirk the truth, for the blessing and growth in grace of the Lord's children depends so on this grave matter. It is in direct ratio, as we give the Holy Spirit His place in our lives, individually, and in the assembly, that we advance spiritually. I believe the crying sin of Christendom today is this sin against the Holy Spirit, namely, infidelity as to His abiding presence in Christ's name. The Holy Spirit has not had His right place in the thoughts and hearts of God's children.

But I hear some saying—If you do not make arrangements, then you will be sure to get into confusion. I will ask these good people one simple question, Who orders matters in your house? You or your servants? I order my own household, is the reply. I think God can keep order in His own house better than we can. Do you not think so? Let us remember that the Church is the habitation of God, and has the real, and ever-abiding presence of the Spirit of God. The presence of that Spirit is a real thing, and if there be only two or three who care to own the truth of the body of Christ, and the truth of the habitation of God, there will the Lord Jesus be, and the ever-present Spirit will greatly bless them. God always honors faith, and you may be certain of this that the very best arrangement man can make, is contemptible folly, if it displace the arrangements God has made.

But there is another aspect of the House of God, to which I must briefly allude, namely, its responsibility. Hitherto we have been regarding it as the sphere of infinite privilege, as having God's Spirit taking up His abode in it. When this first took place the body and the house were practically the same; they were coextensive in the day of Pentecost. But the house that Christ builds, in grace (Matt. 16:18; Eph. 2:22; 1 Pet. 2:5) is one thing, as being permanent and eternal, whereas what man builds, in responsibility, is another thing altogether. The one is unailing, the other utterly failing, and therefore will be judged. This solemn side of the truth we get in 1 Corinthians 3 where the apostle says, "According to the grace of God which is given unto me, as a wise master-builder, I have laid the foundation, and another buildeth thereon. But let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon." Paul laid the true foundation; none other could be laid; other builders might build "gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble." Fire would test all, and the enduring of the work depended on the materials. The teaching of the servants brought in souls according to its own character. The superstructure of the building was raised on the foundation of Christ in this world. Man builds, his responsibility is in play, and the result depends on the materials. He has built badly, and the result will be judgment.'

What was at first God's house, and composed only of real saints, has now become "a great house" to God's dishonor. This is unfolded in 2 Timothy 2:17-22. God's foundation standeth sure, having a seal with two devices—1st, the Lord knows His own; and 2nd, "Let every one that nameth the name of the Lord depart from iniquity." This is the responsibility side. Thus we get the actual condition of the house—the Lord's house—as confided to men. "But," says the apostle, "in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and of silver, but also of wood and of earth; and some to honor, and some to dishonor. If a man therefore purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honor, sanctified, and meet for the master's use, and prepared unto every good work."

The path of the saint amid this evil, is not to leave the house—for this he cannot do—but to purge himself from the evil, and "follow righteousness, faith, charity, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart." But the end of the house of God is judgment. Its course is given in 2 Timothy 3, where a form of godliness, but not the power, is seen—a condition at the end of Christianity more sad than existed before its revelation. (Compare Rom. 1:26-32, and 2 Tim. 3:1-8.) This state culminates in the apostasy, and "the man of sin," which 2 Thessalonians 2 describes.

That such is to be the end of the house of God, in responsibility, is manifest from the testimony of the Apostle Peter. "For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God; and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God?" (1 Pet. 4:17.)

It is this view of the Church, in responsibility, that is brought before us in Rev. 2; 3, where the Lord walks among the candlesticks; in a judicial character. Laodicea gives the final character of the Church, as the responsible witness for God on earth. It is to be spued out of Christ's mouth as nauseous, and judged by Him whose name it has falsely borne, and grievously dishonored.

It is most important to bear in mind that it is only the Church, in this aspect of responsibility, that is judged. As the body of Christ, every member is eternally secure. Grace has given us our place there, and will perfect its own work. Christ's building—which answers to the body—will be complete, and perfect, and will be manifested in glory. What man has built has been badly built, has become corrupted, and will yet come under the deepest, and most severe judgment of God.

What an infinite mercy to be a member of Christ's body, and a "living stone" in the building that He raises! Let me ask you, my friend, are you this?

Handfuls of Purpose, That the Church May Receive Edifying (12:28-31)

(1 Corinthians 12:28-31; 1 Corinthians 14:1-5,29-40)

The first epistle to the Corinthians, we all know, differs largely from that to the Ephesians, but what has struck me much lately is the way in which the apostle brings the soul of the saint into the presence of God in connection with the truth of the Assembly. I will turn back for a moment to the earlier part of the epistle to show what I mean, for although many here have been long on the road, there are some younger ones, and it is for them I chiefly speak. It has often been said we are apt to forget the recruits. I say, thank God for the recruits! and thank God also for the recruiting sergeants — those who seek to get them into their places in the Assembly. We all have to learn, and we have to remember there are always those who are just beginning.

It is very interesting to see that of all the epistles in the New Testament those to the Corinthians are the only ones addressed "To the church of God" (chap. 1:2). This remark holds good also with regard to the second epistle. Both are addressed "Unto the church of God which is at Corinth." The point was that in the midst of heathen darkness there was that which God could claim as His own, and address as His own. There was a spot where He was to be known and revealed, and where He showed Himself to His people. That was His Assembly. There is nothing more blessed for the soul to carry in mind than that. At the same time it is a very serious matter — I feel it increasingly — it is a very solemn thing to have anything to do with the things of the Lord, and the Assembly, just because it is God's Assembly, not man's.

As you run through the epistle this thought comes out in various ways. Go back to chapter 3. If it be a question of husbandry — "Ye are God's husbandry." If Paul and Apollos were fellow-workers they were God's fellow-workmen. We too are His fellow-workers, we belong to God, if it be in your hands or mine it is God's work. If it be a question of tillage — it is God's field; or if it be a building it is God's building — God's temple. So in chapter 4, if it be a question of judgment of their stewardship, he says, wait till the Lord comes, and "then shall every man have praise of God." This principle renders you independent of everybody, clear of every influence but this — "I have to do with God: I have to say to God." It makes no difference if I be praised or censured of man. It is a small thing to me, says Paul, whether I am praised or judged — "Judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come." Our souls are set down before God for everything in connection with His people, and His testimony, and His service.

A great deal more of the same kind is in the epistle, and a very striking word is found in the end of chapter 3 (vs. 19). "The wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, He taketh the wise in their own craftiness." "The temple of God" is in view, and as I come up to this building — and it is God's building — I see written over the portico, as it were, these words, "He taketh the wise in their own craftiness." It conveys to me this thought — If you bring the wisdom of the world into this building you will be found out. When I come to the steps of the building, that is the first thing that strikes me. Remember this is God's temple, and what is of the world — what is human — will all be found out and judged. Human wisdom is of no use there. There is another inscription inside the building to which I will come presently.

Passing on now to the chapter which I read, it is very interesting to see the way in which the truth that comes out in chapter 12 is introduced in connection with the parenthesis which intervenes between it and chapter 14 — which of course is a continuation of the subject, gifts and ministry. For many a long day I failed to see the reason why the apostle stopped his instruction as to the gifts in connection with the body in chapter 12. He stops his subject, as you observe, and then gives us the unfolding of divine love — what love is — and what it is not, in chapter 13, and resumes his instructions regarding the Assembly in chapter 14. I trust I see the point of it now. No matter what I may have, or you may have in the way of power — because that is what is unfolded in chapter 12 — no matter what you may have in the way of gift and power by the Holy Spirit, it is of no use without love. Manifestly power is not grace; spiritual power is not grace. A man may have a great deal of power in connection with a gift imparted by the Lord, but it is not grace. So whatever may be the greatness or measure of the gift in chapter 12, I do not think it is of the slightest use in chapter 14 — which is the Assembly in function, the sphere and field of its exercise — unless it be baptized into, and permeated with the spirit of chapter 13 — that is love. It is just what our brother was saying this morning — love is everything. You may not have gift, but there may be that which is more profitable — the outflow of that love which is the mark of a soul belonging to, and walking with God.

The supremacy and sovereignty of God in His Assembly is much pressed in chapter 12.

We read in verse 28, how "God hath set some in the church." If in verse 4 Paul talks of "diversities of gifts," then in verse 6 he says, "It is the same God which worketh all in all." Evidently in Corinth (and I do not think, beloved brethren, Corinth was the only place where the tendency came out, if I know the history of the Church of God, whether in days gone by, or in our own) there was the working of the human will and mind, and a desire on the part of some to have a place of importance. Manifestly there was no desire on the part of Paul or Apollos to take this place, but there was the endeavor, on the part of some foolish men, to put either them, or others, up (see chap. 4:6-7). Notice how the apostle slays all this factionary work. "It is God that worketh all in all." He would slay all schism, and division, and school and party of every kind. If it is a question of the body, it is not Paul or Apollos, but, "Now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath

pleased Him" (vs. 18).

If I think of the church as it is presented here in Corinth, I see that God has set the members in the body according to His own will. Do you know, beloved brother, why you are where you are? Why you are located just where you are? If there be true subjection to God, and subservience to Him, you will feel and own that you are in the spot where it has pleased God to set you, and that is everything. The moment I see that God has set that brother in his place, and this one in his, I am content, and say, Thank God for that servant and his ministry. It is his place, not mine, so, if I am right, I neither emulate nor ape it, being just satisfied with my own place and niche in the body (vs. 24). "God has tempered the body together," and so forth. God has arranged all, for we read, again (vs. 28), "God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers," and so forth. Here we have not a complete list of gifts, for that we do not get anywhere in Scripture. We have some mentioned in Romans 12, others in Ephesians 4, and many here, but not in any case a complete and detailed list. In each passage the gifts named are seen to be in connection with the special truth the Spirit of God is bringing before the saints at the moment.

Here it is striking to observe that the list includes no evangelist. The reason is not far to seek. The apostle is instructing the saints about their coming together, and the order of the Assembly before the Lord, and it is not there that the gift of the evangelist is in exercise. I feel strongly the force of what our brother said this morning, that the evangelist is of the Assembly, and belongs to it. No evangelist is working according to the truth, unless he is working in conjunction, and if possible, in whole-hearted fellowship with the Assembly, and he then naturally helps his converts to gravitate towards the Assembly. In the apostle's days that was a natural thing, and the convert was like a fish out of water if he did not get amongst the saints. In the Assembly was the power of the Spirit: there the Spirit reigned, while outside, darkness and the devil reigned. Today, in the divided state of things which marks Christendom, it is very different, and I think an evangelist ought to be very careful how he foists his converts into the Assembly. For myself I am very careful how I seek to introduce any who profess to have been blessed by my ministry. I think my brethren are far better able to judge than I am myself of my work. This is a most important principle, and I think I see it in Scripture, for example, Acts 8, where Philip went down to Samaria. Philip is the only man in Scripture called "The evangelist," and a fine warm-hearted fellow he was — a real fisher of men — he caught a great many fish in Samaria, and he thought he had caught a great fish when Simon the sorcerer professed to believe, and was baptized. Philip would have brought him into the Assembly if the Lord in His grace had not sent down Peter and John to detect him and keep him out.

It is a great thing for the Assembly to be exercised about the reception of souls who confess the Lord. I would like to add a little word with regard to the responsibility of the saints generally in regard to the reception of souls desiring fellowship in the breaking of bread. This is far too much left to the two or three who may commend such. It is necessary, and very nice that they should be commended, but we ought to have in our souls more distinctly the sense that it is the Assembly that receives, as it is the Assembly who may have to dismiss or put away. If the saints were more exercised as to this it would be greatly for the profit of the Assembly, and tend to practical fellowship.

And now as to the gifts and their exercise, "God has set some in the assembly; first apostles, secondarily prophets" and so forth. We still have them, if I may so say, in the writings of the New Testament. We "are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets" of the New Testament. In other words, our faith rests on that which is revealed in their writings (Eph. 2:20.). Another subsidiary sense in which prophets still remain, we have in chapter 14:3. Pursuing, we read "thirdly teachers." The reason why you get the gifts placed in the order of their value — why you have them numbered 1, 2, 3 — is because the Corinthians were very full of their sign-gifts, and very much occupied with the man who had power to speak with tongues and the like, and they very little valued these other gifts which were of far deeper importance and value for edification. The Lord comes in and puts things in their true place, and estimates the gifts in their real value before Him, as made known by Him, and "tongues" are put last.

Among the rest we read of "helps." That is a very nice little word, "helps." There are many persons who may be helps in the Assembly who may not be the possessors of any very great gift. It is very nice to be a "help," and it is very gracious that God allows us to be "helps" to one another, as well as to be His helpers. I was much struck the other day with a word in Judges 5. There was a great crisis in the history of Israel, and we see a certain company who did not rise to the occasion. "Curse ye Meroz, said the angel of the Lord, curse ye bitterly the inhabitants thereof; because they came not to the help of the Lord, to the help of the Lord against the mighty" (Judg. 5:23). It is a great thing to be always free, and fresh, and simple in heart, and ready to be in the hand of the Lord to do just what He would give one to do. Every one has his own little niche for God, and it is good to remember our Lord's word when He "left his house, and gave authority to his servants, and to every man his work, and commanded the porter to watch" (Mark 13:34). We can all be "helps." The Lord gives us each an opportunity in our little corner, to sweetly and simply serve Him and His people. This is open to every one.

I pass over chapter 13 — a wonderfully choice and interesting subject — for time fails to expound this "more excellent way." Whatever gift you and I may be possessed of, it might be augmented, and if we do not possess any gift, I wonder if we are covetous in the sense of chapter 12:31? Brother, are you covetous after this sort? My young brother, are you covetous of "the best gifts"? If not, I have the privilege tonight of exhorting you to be covetous. Mr. Darby used to say, "If there were more devotedness there would be more gift." True indeed, and if there were more devotedness to the Lord, more seeking from Him that we might be helpers to His saints, I am sure there would be more gift than there is. The apostle's exhortation is very striking.

What is the "more excellent way"? This beautiful atmosphere of love of chapter 13. You remember the word of the apostle to his son Timothy, "God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind" (2 Tim. 1:7). These three words bring before me these three chapters: chapter 12 is "power"; chapter 13 "love"; and chapter 14 "a sound mind," and I sometimes doubt, brethren, if we have it; and certainly we have it not if love does not rule our ways and words in the Assembly unto "edification."

I now pass on to chapter 14 for a minute or two. Verse 1. Prophecy has the double sense of (1) foretelling events, or (2) is that class of ministry which reaches the conscience and brings the soul into the presence of God. You have it beautifully illustrated in the case of the Lord with the woman in John 4 His word, "He whom thou now hast is not thy husband," reached her conscience fully, as she says, "Sir, I perceive that thou art a prophet." Here, however, clearly, prophesying has a wider range than that, for "he that prophesieth speaketh unto men to edification, and exhortation, and comfort" (vs. 3). It is a most blessed line of ministry that. "Edification" builds up. "Exhortation" stirs up. "Comfort" binds up. If the ministry is of a really prophetic character there will be the building up, the consolidating of the Assembly. And there is more than that, "exhortation" which stirs us up. I ask any one who looks over the scene today, Do you not think the saints of God

want stirring up? I know I need it, and I am always thankful to the man who stirs me up. The ministry which stirs you up makes you to feel, I must wake up; I must lay aside this or that weight. And more than that — this ministry comforts, it binds up, it makes Christ precious to the heart. May the Lord give us more of that kind of ministry, beloved friends. I am speaking of the ordinary round of ministry in the Assembly day by day.

There is one word that marks this chapter. The keynote of chapter 14 is one word, “edification.” What will edify? That will always be a serious question to every one who possesses any gift. I may think I am edifying the Assembly, and be mistaken. If I do not edify, I think you ought to tell me. If my ministry is unprofitable, I think brothers ought to be faithful to me — while withal they are gracious and tell me that my ministry is not to profit, and then I trust I shall have grace not to plague you with it. The great point is, what will edify. You find that over and over again in the chapter. It is very important that what takes place in the Assembly should be of that character, and love would desist from continuing ministry which fails to edify. Note how this is pressed in verses 12-14, “Forasmuch as ye are jealous of spiritual gifts, seek that ye may excel to the edifying of the church.” We are bidden also “to utter by the tongue words easy to be understood.” Often in our meetings there is a good deal that is not edifying, simply because it is not heard. How can you say “Amen” to a brother’s prayers if you do not hear them? You may say, The Lord hears. Yes; but if the part I take is to be profitable to others, I ought to speak so that you can hear, and so, plainly that you can understand. If it be the giving out of a hymn, or praying, I judge it ought to be in a way that saints can hear. Here is God’s Word for it. I am only drawing attention to what is often lacking, and which many are conscious of. I trust the Lord will use His Word. Let us remember profit is the great thing, and what we can neither hear nor understand will not profit either me or others.

Another point I would touch on. “Let the prophets speak two or three, and let the others judge” (vs. 29). I apprehend this is an occasion when the Assembly is together. It may be open to question whether a meeting like this where I am now speaking is to be regarded as a meeting of the Assembly. It is, I know, a moot point; but I think “two or three” puts a limit on the number of speakers in a meeting of this kind. As to this I feel speakers need to be individually before the Lord. I name it, because one has heard of not only two or three but more speaking on such occasions; but I take it, the Lord has given us His mind very plainly here — “two or three,” and not more.

“If anything be revealed to another that sitteth by, let the first hold his peace” (vs. 30). What does that mean? That the second has to wait till the first sits down? I do not think so. If the Lord gave a revelation to another prophet, he was to rise to deliver it, and the first would hold his peace and sit down. Now there is no revelation, and as another has said: “Order is before power. God is never the author of confusion.” Subjection is the great point here. It is beautiful to note the way the Spirit of God looks for profit. What is more profitable than to see a man subject to the Spirit? The prophet ought to be under the control of the power of the Spirit of God, and in subjection to Him, because he might have risen in the power of the Spirit to speak, and gone on beyond his measure.

May the Lord give us all to know what it is to be always before Him for real profit, not only now, but when we are at home in the little meetings from whence we all come.

The apostle winds up very beautifully with verses 39-40. This is what I see written inside the building,

all round the wall, as it were, “Let all things be done decently and in order.” Outside the building I saw everything will be detected that is not of God, for “He taketh the wise in their own craftiness.” Now, inside there is what suits the presence of God, and what is to mark His servants and His saints in His Assembly. This injunction speaks for itself, and I desire to have the abiding recollection of it in my heart.

It is a wonderful thing when you think that the Church, the Assembly, is now the lesson-book of angels — that angels are to learn, beloved fellow — Christians, the manifold wisdom of God, as they see the Spirit’s blessed activity and power in God’s Assembly.

The Lord give us each to be more suitably filling our little niche, as individuals in His service, and likewise to know in our hearts the blessedness of being members of that body of which Christ is the Head, so that when we come into the Assembly we may remember it is God’s Assembly, and that all things may be done “decently and in order,” for His name’s sake.

Thy precious name is all we show,

Our only passport, Lord;

And full assurance now we know,

Confiding in Thy word.

O largely give, ‘tis all Thine own,

The Spirit’s goodly fruit:

Praise issuing forth in life, alone

Our living Lord can suit.

Henceforth let each beloved child

With quickened step proceed,

To walk with garments undefiled

Where’er Thine eye may lead.