Matthew 16:10-18 (F Prod'Hom-Berthet) 171960

The Local Assembly and Its Responsibilities, Local Assembly … and … Its Responsibilities, The (16:10-18)

Translated from the French

THE Gospel of Matthew, we know, presents Christ as Son of David and Son of Abraham, the Messiah promised to Israel, and, remarkably enough, it is the only Gospel which mentions the Assembly, the Church, which is there named for the first time in Scripture. The Lord speaks of it in chapter xvi, as His own, and as that which He was about to "build." "On this rock," He says—this rock, the Christ the Son of the living God— "I will build My Church" (verses 10-18). Here He speaks of the assembly as a whole, during the entire period which elapses between the descent of the Holy Ghost at Pentecost and His return to this earth. It was His definite rejection by Israel that led the Lord to speak of the assembly; that is also why, in the same chapter (verse 20), He directs His disciples to tell no man that He is the Christ. The presentation of His Messianic character was now no more in season; He was rejected. The Lord's thought turns therefore to that which was to follow His rejection by Israel; that is, to His assembly.

But it is no less remarkable that, in this same Gospel, besides the mention of His universal church, the Lord gives us His thoughts concerning "a local assembly," composed though it may be of only two or three persons (18:15-20). Though still suffering from His rejection, as expressed in chapter xi, the Lord was already looking forward to the dawn of that time when He would make known to His "brethren" as their present portion, the relationship with the Father which He came to reveal; when also these same redeemed ones would be gathered together in His name upon the earth. The Lord's heart must indeed have been, if we might so say, blessedly preoccupied with that coming time, when teaching the lesson of grace towards little children (18:1-14), and of the exercise of this same grace amongst "brethren" (15, 16); for He seizes the opportunity for speaking of the assembly in the following verses—no longer of the church as a whole, but of the local assembly, though it might be found in the smallest possible number. Thus we have from the Lord's own mouth the words which reveal to us the character and duty of an assembly of God, upon which the Lord confers His authority to act on His behalf and in His name, so that the acts of this assembly are ratified in heaven. This passage therefore is of the last importance. It is not repeated in the epistles of Paul, which contain, however, its development and application.

It is plain that the Lord's thought in Matt. 18 refers to a Christian assembly, and not to a Jewish synagogue, to which the disciples' thoughts might naturally have turned. Neither was the universal church in the Lord's mind, for when He says (verse 17), "And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church," He certainly did not mean the universal church composed of all believers. The Lord had before Him a local assembly which would—and should today—comprise all saints living in the locality. The two brethren, one of whom had trespassed against the other, both belonged to the assembly; and this it is which gives so serious an importance to the action of the one whose duty it was to gain his brother. The "one or two more" whom he was to take with him as a last resort before communicating the matter to the assembly, also doubtless formed part of it. The same may be said of the "two of you" mentioned in verse 19.

The value which the Lord attaches to such an assembly is brought home to us by the fact that if the brother who had sinned against the other refused to hear the church, all was over. There was no fourth effort to be made, since he had despised the assembly in which the Lord was present, and His name to which they were gathered.

We see further that if the one who sought to gain his brother had still in pity continued his relations with him after his refusal to hear the church, he would have been acting contrary to the Lord's mind, and would in his turn have ignored and set aside the assembly in its true character as indicated by Him. In spite of all his heart might suffer, that brother was bound to obey the Lord's injunction: "Let him be unto Thee as an heathen man and a publican."

Let us note too the seriousness of any assembly decision— "Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth, shall be bound in heaven" (verse 18). The assembly derives its authority from the Lord it owns; it is governed by His authority, and it decides or administers within the limits and according to the powers which He has conferred upon it, so that what is bound or loosed on earth is bound or loosed in heaven. The assembly binds and looses nothing in heaven; but its actions on earth are held in heaven as so done, and are consequently to be considered as so done by those who acknowledge the Lord's presence in its midst.

In chapter 16:10, we see another authority; that which the Lord confers on Peter when giving him the keys of the kingdom of heaven. By virtue of this authority conferred upon him individually, that which Peter bound or loosed on earth was also bound or loosed in heaven. We have an example of this when Peter at Caesarea opened the door to the Gentiles, and caused them to be baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus, after they had received the Holy Ghost (Acts 10). They were truly loosed from their former state, and certainly this was ratified in heaven.

There was then, at that time, in the church, an apostolic authority which had been conferred by the Lord with regard to the affairs of the "kingdom" and men's bodies, as in the case of Ananias and Sapphira. Thus Paul at the end of his Second Epistle to the Corinthians speaks of the authority which the Lord had given him "to edification, and not to destruction" (2 Cor. 13:10). A similar, but not the same authority, affecting spiritual relationships, was given by the Lord to the two or three gathered together in (or unto) His name (chapter 18), on account of His presence in their midst; but we must not lose sight of the governmental side of it, namely, that the assembly is held responsible for what it has done.

There were, then, in apostolic times, two authorities; that of the assembly, and that of the apostles. Since the departure of these last, the responsibility of the "two or three" gathered in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, alone subsists, and will subsist until His coming.

The First Epistle to the Corinthians shows us that the authority of the apostles and that of the church did not encroach one upon the other, but each had its respective sphere. The apostle on his own responsibility could direct and stimulate the assembly, or urge upon it the accomplishment of its duty; but it was the assembly which decided and acted. Paul, in the exercise of his apostolic authority, does not act in lieu and place of the assembly in the matter of the wicked person (1 Cor. 5). He shows certainly that, as an apostle, he had power to deliver to Satan (3-5); and this he carried out on other occasions (1 Tim. 1:20). Here, he declares his judgment that such action was indeed applicable to this case, “for the destruction of the flesh,” but this apostolic judgment was in no way to relieve the assembly from the responsibility of carrying out its duty within the limits prescribed by the Lord. Instead of acting for it, Paul stimulates the conscience of the Corinthians, in order to make them feel their own responsibility as an assembly. As an apostle, he had judged for himself “to deliver such an one unto Satan”: the assembly had quite another thing to do, namely, to put away the wicked person “from among themselves.”

Such is the method followed by an apostle in his acting towards an assembly; he exhorts, he seeks to awaken its conscience, and shows it its responsibility. He recognizes, however, the competence and authority which it has to put away the wicked person, and so much so that, later, when inviting the Corinthians to make good their love towards this same man (2 Cor. 5-11), he does not give him the title of “brother” until the assembly had received him back. Awaiting this, Paul still speaks of him as “such a man.”

Let us notice another point in confirmation of what has been said. An assembly of God is shown to be such by the Lord’s table spread in its midst. A gathering of Christians which had not the Lord’s table would not constitute an “assembly.” But the Lord’s authority for administration amongst those gathered around the table is found in connection with the ordinance which calls Him to mind. Further, the Lord’s table spread in different assemblies of God is that which establishes and proves their joint responsibility, for they profess subjection to the authority of the same Lord. Finally, without the Lord’s table, there would be no discipline; for there would be nothing to prove that they hold fast His Name to which they are professedly gathered.

1 Cor. 10:17, shows us that the truth of the unity of the body of Christ upon earth is expressed at the Lord’s table. “For we being many are one bread, and one body; for we are all partakers of that one bread.” “We,” the members of the Body, who are “many,” are all members of the “one Body,” and are shown to be so by partaking of the broken loaf in remembrance of the Lord’s death. On this ground the table is spread. There is but one loaf of which all partake, thus affording a practical expression of the unity of Christ’s mystical Body upon earth.

The table is the Lord’s table, not that of the saints. The Lord alone has authority at His own table. The saints are found gathered there as being members of the Body, in order that, in showing His death and remembering Him, they may at the same time express the unity of His Body upon earth by this breaking of bread amongst themselves. For that reason also, it is the responsibility of each assembly of God to watch and see that the Lord’s rights over His own table be maintained.

There can no more be many kinds of assemblies of God, than there could exist two bodies of Christ upon the earth. For the same reason, it is impossible that there should be many independent “tables of the Lord.” As we have seen, there is but “the Lord’s table” (1 Cor. 10:21), expressive of the unity of the Body (verse 17).

By breaking bread together, the members of the Body express the unity of that Body, and there is no other Scriptural way of breaking bread. Any table spread without recognizing this principle, is not “the Lord’s table.” It is man’s table, expressing, whether intentionally or not, independence with regard to this Scriptural principle.

This is surely worthy of serious attention from every member of the Body of Christ. We do not sufficiently realize the gravity of the fact that an independent table is a denial of the unity of the Body, nor do we take enough into account the Lord’s rights over His own table and His own supper. The children of God are “members of the Body of Christ,” and cannot dispose at pleasure of the Lord’s supper; in taking the supper amongst themselves, it is needful therefore that this collective action should be at the same time expressive of the unity of the Body, otherwise it could not rightly be called the Lord’s table.

This ground of testimony to the unity of the Body is consequently that of the joint responsibility of all the assemblies of God amongst themselves. If, as we have seen, the actions of an assembly of God are ratified in heaven, they should also be so recognized in all the assemblies of God, which form together not a confederacy of assemblies, but the Body of Christ.1

Let us suppose for a moment that there are five thousand assemblies of God upon earth, and that, according to God’s thought, all the children of God in the world are found in these assemblies:—the Lord having given His authority to the local assembly, each one of these assemblies has the competence to carry out its responsibility in administration. The Lord is Lord over them all: “there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Ephes. 4:5). The Spirit acts and directs in each assembly, and is “one Spirit.” Duty, spiritual capacity and responsibility are localized in each assembly, but the joint responsibility is universal, so that the actions of each one of those five thousand assemblies are accepted by all the others. So far all is simple. But now suppose that by the interference of the enemy (as alas! has happened) one of the five thousand assemblies refuses to accept the solemn action of another, and persists in its refusal:—this fact, surely, immediately constitutes the refractory gathering schismatic and sectarian. It forfeits its character as an assembly of God. It puts itself out of communion with the rest of the five thousand, breaking its links with them and cutting itself off from them. If, after that, a person from this assembly should present himself in one of the others which are still in communion, expecting to be acknowledged as a member of the Body of Christ, and putting forward the plea that there is nothing in his walk which would morally incur discipline, should he be received? No; for unless he could adduce proof to the contrary, he had tacitly endorsed the action of the assembly to which he belonged, and which is in opposition to the Lord’s authority. To receive that person as he is, would be to accept the opposition of the assembly he came from, and the assembly which received him would in turn find itself endorsing that opposition. But if such a person should come to understand the obligation he is under to purify himself from his avowed membership with the schismatic assembly, and should free himself personally from its guilt, he would then have right to his place in any of the other assemblies, as a member of the Body of Christ.

We have supposed that all the children of God upon earth are found in these five thousand assemblies. This is not actually the case on account of the ruin; but the principle is none the less true, and applicable to all the assemblies of those who are gathered to the Name of the Lord Jesus, owning the truth of the one Body of Christ, and their individual responsibility in connection with it.

We could not better close these pages than by recommending the tracts by J.N.D., entitled “On Ecclesiastical Independency” and “Is the One Body the ground of gathering?” which should be read in conjunction with his 1879-81 “Letters” (Vol. 3) and which more amply develop the subject which has just occupied us.

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