Matthew - Commentaries by Walter Potter

Gathering Up the Fragments, Chapter 11

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Gathered to the Lord's NameMatthew 18:20

Matthew 18:20: "For where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them."

Some of us have had to learn through quite bitter experience what it is to be gathered to the Lord's Name, and what it is to be gathered upon the ground of the church of God. God's people are His house, His dwelling place.

The division took place in Montreal in 1884 and reached us in 1885. For four or five weeks some missed the path entirely. It no doubt was affection for certain ones that had a great deal to do with it, but there was real stirring up about the way things were going on, which led some to the wrong position, and in that position some remained four or five weeks. What one got to see was this: you can never leave a meeting that is divinely gathered, gathered to Christ, upon the ground of the church of God, to His Name, until you can say that it has ceased to be a meeting that the Lord owns. There may be a great deal to bear with, humbling too, and we may know it is grieving to the Lord, still you are to go on and look to God, and persist in it.

The Lord is there where two or three are gathered together in His Name. There is no such thing in the things of God as voluntary association. We cannot choose our company. Voluntary association is as human as it can be, and nothing but human.

There is a Gatherer here in this world, and there is a Person to whom that One gathers. Just as truly as the servant of Abraham went down to get a bride for Isaac, just so we have the Holy Spirit down here. He unites to Christ and gathers to Christ, as Head of the body; then they are gathered as God's house, and Christ as Son over it.

If you consider the first ten chapters of the first epistle to the Corinthians, you will find continually, the Lord, the Lord, the Lord, the Lord Jesus, and Lord Jesus Christ because of His authority over the house of God. It is very remarkable how continually His Lordship is spoken of in the first ten chapters. When you come down to the middle of the tenth chapter, you begin a new line of things. Until then it is the house, but the house is His body and His body the house: the one in relationship to Christ and the other in relationship to God. We are speaking of the house as built by God, not simply as God's lightbearer here in the world.

Another sad thing about missing one's way is that you are very apt to lead others, but you seldom can get them to follow you back. You can retrace your steps, but they won't follow you. That remains a kind of thorn in the flesh.

Suppose this gathering got into a terrible state. The thing to do is to humble ourselves before the Lord, not to get out of it. I feel it important to bring before us what gathering to the Lord's Name is. This passage is dreadfully abused.

If Christians are gathered in system without knowing their wrong position and counting upon the Lord being present, isn't He in a way present too? He graciously grants blessing but is not there personally. He blesses everywhere and no doubt gives individual souls enjoyment of Himself and His love. Suppose the Lord gave His presence now to the different denominations, what would He be doing? He would be sanctioning what is contrary to Him. He can't do that. In His sovereign love and pity He grants blessing. It isn't a question as to whether there is blessing here or there but the question is, "Am I where I am in obedience to the Word of God?" It may be a most trying position, and you may see others getting blessing and you feel the lack of it, a thing that is very important. People say, "Why don't you join some church?" Which one would you have one join? One takes that ground with them.

Of course, you will say you want me to join the one you are in. Why? And why are you where you are? It is only optional with them and you can do as you like. That is a problem with many evangelists. The converts are left to choose their own place in the various denominations and never get to know what the church of God is, that truth so precious to God and to Christ.

You see, people say, "We are gathered to the Lord's name." Let us see if you are. How came you to be gathered to the Lord's name? To go back a number of years (to make it as simple as I can), when we were first gathered here in Chicago, there was but one meeting, not even a meeting of open brethren. That was 42 years ago (1868). There are a number of meetings now. I have got to find out why I am where I am. I never questioned, had no reason to question, but that I was divinely gathered at that time, and to be simple, show me where I missed my position, when I went wrong. I was in the strife and conflict of affections for certain brethren—beloved servants of God, too, from whom I had received much blessing, but then I retraced my steps and did it with bitterness and got back to the original position. Perhaps you say, when did you miss it? It was when that division took place in Montreal. What I want to make plain is the solemnity and reality of being gathered to the Lord's Name.

Instead of being in Chicago, suppose you and I had been in Montreal at that time. There was much strife and conflict, and presently judgment was given against a certain brother. He had a large following, and his followers advised him to begin a new meeting altogether. The thought didn't come from himself, according to his own word by letter, but from his followers. The next Lord's day after he had been put away on the ground of Titus 3:10, there was a new meeting at Montreal, known as the Craig St. Meeting. They sent out a circular, telling the brethren everywhere what they had done, calling upon these gatherings to disown the old gathering and recognize the new. Well, that is a pretty solemn thing. Then the question came, suppose they have made a mistake in their judgment, suppose there has been fleshly action, had they lost their standing as a gathering? (They had been gathered 25 years). That was the simple question: not as to whether their action had been wrong but whether they had lost their standing as a gathering, and I never heard anyone yet say they had. In the first place, the Lord always gives space for repentance. And about four days after this one was put away, a new meeting was started! It wasn't his suggestion as he told

me himself by letter, but he was friendly to it.

What have you in that new meeting? The question is not as to whether those men were godly. There is no question but that they were godly, but the question is, has the Lord removed His Name from the old meeting and placed it at the new? There is everything to humble one in the other meeting, but what we have to see to is this: has the Lord been pleased to place His Name there in the new meeting? If He has, that is your place. If He has not, that is not your place, and that is where the passage in Deuteronomy is so important: "Take heed to thyself that thou offer not thy burnt offerings in every place that thou seest: but in the place which the Lord shall choose in one of thy tribes, there thou shalt offer thy burnt offerings, and there thou shalt do all that I command thee." There was just one place in Israel where God placed His Name. If there are a dozen gatherings, we must go back to the origin of the meeting. It is not a question as to persons: get that out of your mind. We are to love all the saints. You will find gifted and godly brethren in the different gatherings, and is it not in some sense these that led others off, according to that passage, "of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them."

Suppose the Lord has not been pleased to place His Name there, what is the character of the new meeting? Now, face it! It is schism and a schismatic meeting no matter who is there. You can never change the character of the meeting. That was its origin, and it remains that in the sight of God as long as it is in existence.

There might be 300 in one city, only two or three in another. I believe the thought of the Lord in saying two or three is that you can't have fewer than two or three gathered. There can be individuals, so He comes down to the lowest possible number. You don't mean to imply that the Lord is not in the midst of any others in the same sense? Decidedly He is not. That is the very point; for instance, you get the church of God at Ephesus. We are thinking of one city. There may be different meetings in the same city but all in fellowship with each other, the churches of Galatia—districts there. But you never get the churches which are at Corinth, and we find the church in so-and-so's house. There may be more than one gathering in one city because of distance, just as in London there are twenty meetings, all in the same fellowship. The Spirit of God doesn't gather in separate meetings, and if He gathers you and me, the next thing is that we are in fellowship one with another. What the Spirit of God has before Him is always Christ's glory, and I believe especially as Head of the church.

There is confusion, but still the Spirit of God goes on. If He gathers at all, He gathers as He did at the first. He never changed His course of action—He couldn't do it. That seems to be my point. If gathered to Christ and to Christ Himself, it must be in fellowship with one another, whether in the same meeting or not. The question is: are they there in separation one from another? They couldn't be. But they are. They are in separation, and I go to such a meeting and I say, tell me the origin of the meeting. That would seem to contradict the first epistle of John, first chapter, "If we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship one with another . . ." Don't you see, it is where a Christian walks, not how, and every Christian is in the light in that sense of the word, and not a Christian unless in the light in that sense of the word.

There are just two left here of the original ones gathered. I am one of them. Tell me when I missed the path, for I want to know it if I have. Then you know where the other one missed his? Yes, I do. When a meeting refuses to judge evil, it has forfeited its character. What is the Scriptural authority for this? The ground for action is generally taken from Leviticus. First in leprosy in the person, then in the garment, then in the house. Leprosy in a person is leprosy in a person—flesh in activity in a saint of God. In the garment, is one's circumstances and surroundings. I might be in a business in which I might not be able to walk with God. Suppose I am converted, and I am a saloon keeper. I would have to give it up. It might be other business. A.M.B. gave up his position as a conductor on a Pullman sleeping car. I asked him why he did it. And he said, It's a leprous garment—a constant defilement. When you come to leprosy in the house, it is in the assembly. There is the greatest of patience in dealing with it. Did you ever notice how many verses we have on leprosy? 116. Think of God giving it such a place in His Word. It typifies sin in the flesh.

In Leviticus the man doesn't decide it himself but says, "It seemeth to me there is leprosy in the house," and the priest says, "Go and clean everything out so I can get a view of it." He goes and looks and shuts it up seven days. He goes and looks again and if the leprosy is in the walls, he commands the stones and mortar to be removed and others put in. There it is—leprosy in individuals in the meeting. The point is to put such individuals out. You've got a leper in the house at Corinth, but not a leprous assembly. After all the apostle's labor, had they refused to put the leprous man out, it would have been a leprous house. He comes and looks again after taking out the stones and it is broken out again; then he makes short work of it.

Pull the house down; it is a leprous house. When a meeting refuses to judge evil, the meeting as such has fallen under the power of evil. It is important to see the man in the house didn't declare it leprous, but said it seemeth to me. He called attention to it. I believe that to be the scriptural course with a gathering. You and I are burdened and we labor and can't get things as we believe they should be. What do we do? We write to a nearby assembly and call upon them to come and see. They are not connected with it and would not be influenced by things there. Wouldn't that be taking the place of Christ as judge? No, they would be acting as His representatives. In the addresses to the seven churches, it is the Lord Himself who is judge. So He is now, but He would do it through these instruments.

The nearest instance in apostolic times is that in John's 3rd epistle 9-10. He didn't tell them to leave the meeting any more than the apostle Paul told the Corinthians to, but "if I come." He would come with apostolic authority. Do we realize what a blessed thing it is to be gathered to the Lord's Name and what a serious thing too and what an exceedingly serious thing to leave it? If the Spirit of God has gathered us to the Lord's Name, we dare not leave that position until we have the Word of God for it. Some that have left it have learned some of the sorrow incident to leaving it. At the same time the Lord has used it to teach us what it is to be gathered to His Name and what it is to be on the ground of the house of God and church of God. One learns oftentimes through failure what might have been learned in another way and the whipping they get in connection with it makes it very practical to them.

The original gathering to the Lord's Name at the beginning of the church's history would seem to assume that they were gathered to Christ's Name. In the 2nd of Acts, "The Lord added to the church," rather, added to them such as should be saved. We never get the truth of the church as the body of Christ until we get it through the Apostle's letter to the Corinthians.

I had more in mind. We say this is the meeting in Chicago that is on the ground of the church of God— the one where the Lord has set His Name; and in other meetings He has not set His Name. What I want to do is to trace the authority for that from the beginning down to the establishment of this meeting: the authority for the meeting as initially established.

I can give you the origin of the meeting in Chicago in this way: In 1866 a brother and his wife came to this city from England, from a meeting that had been formed there about a year before. That meeting in England had been formed by a very devoted man named J.C. He got to see the evil of denominations— not the people in them—but to see they were wrong. He was a devoted man. The result was he left and quite a few gathered to the Lord's Name. One thing very striking: he said he never had at that time seen any books of the "brethren" to his knowledge.

In the spring of '66 this brother and his wife and another who was in that meeting in England and myself came to this country. I had never broken bread with them, and when I came here, went to a mission on _____Street. One Sunday afternoon I came in rather abruptly into the little cottage where they lived, and what did I see but this brother and his wife with a loaf and a cup, breaking bread together. That is the origin of the meeting here.

Soon after that a brother came along from Canada— Mr. Robert Grant. A brother in the old country had written to him about us, and he came to look us up. And when he came we saw this gifted man, Whitby was his name, and Mr. Robert Grant in conversation.

We loved Mr. Whitby and it was through him I took my place. I never heard one speak from the 13th of John as he did. During the week, those two brothers went to Milwaukee where there was a meeting. We saw there was something wrong between these two brothers. All at once Mr. Grant called us together and said I will have to tell you Mr. Whitby is a man who has been put out of the meeting in Toronto for sin. He was a clever, gifted man. The first sorrow we had was to put that man away—not to put him away either, for he was already away, but tell him we could have no fellowship with him.

We went along till '84 when the sad trouble came at Montreal which split us clean in half, and it was a question then of whether we would break with the old and recognize the new, what scripture were we to do it on?

In 1 Corinthians 11:2 Paul says, "Now I praise you, brethren, that ye remember me in all things, and keep the ordinances as I delivered them to you." But in the 17th verse he writes "now in this that I declare unto you I praise you not, that ye come together not for the better, but for the worse" and in verse 19, "for there must be also heresies among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you." Turn to the first chapter of the same epistle, 10th verse, the mind of God for His people: "Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment." But in the 1 lth chapter and the 19th verse we get what becomes necessary because of the state of the church of God. It is like this: here is a meeting going on apparently all happy and prospering in every way, and the Lord says there are some there that are not grounded at all and are not going on in a way pleasing to Himself at all, though outwardly going on all right. He says I will have to let some trouble come that those who are walking with Him might be made manifest. These divisions do make manifest where we are and who is going on with God. It has been illustrated by a captain and a new crew of sailors. They all do very well in calm weather, but he says, I will have to wait till a storm comes to find out which are good sailors. Our weakness and where we are is shown by that passage, "That they which are approved may be made manifest." Isn't that a searching word? It means all were not approved by Him.

If we were keeping in fellowship with the Lord above, we would have no trouble with our brethren. If each were trying to be most like Christ, we would get along fine. As we have said, the thing we have to see to is this: Not, are others more godly than we? But, has the Lord been pleased to place His Name there? I hold for my soul that I am not in division at all. If I thought I was, I would give up my convictions that I am on the original ground. Others have gone from it.

What led to the terms "open and exclusive" was this: The open took this position that they would receive anyone coming from Mr. Newton's meeting, provided he had not imbibed his doctrine. The fact of his being in fellowship with Mr. Newton was no hindrance. The other said no, anyone so unfaithful as to remain in fellowship with Mr. Newton we will exclude. He is a partaker of his evil deeds.

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