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Deviations from the truth of the 'one body'

When saints endeavour to walk according to the truth of the church as set forth in Scripture, and thus come together in practical fellowship according to the apostolic pattern, we must not expect that they will be left in peace. The adversary of God and His people is too watchful and untiring for that. More to be feared than open and gross breaches of God's trust or order are the more subtle deviations from truth and simplicity which spring up almost imperceptibly in the course of years, and entrench themselves in people's minds or ever they are aware of them; until finally the deviation becomes accepted as the original main road of truth, and is tenaciously contended for as such.

By way of illustration we mention three specific matters which have come under our own observation. The first concerns *the truth of the 'one body'*. The chapters in which this truth is alluded to are Romans 12; 1 Corinthians 10 and 12 to 15; Ephesians 1 and 4; Colossians 1 and 2; and if these be carefully read and considered, it will be found that the bearing of this truth is in the direction of unity, love, consideration, mutual forbearance, and the like, and that nothing in the nature of church order and discipline stands connected with it.

Ephesians 4:1–4 may be taken as summing up the apostolic application and bearing of the truth in question. We have, however, lived to see a very different use and application of it. Years ago, when believers walking according to the truth of Scripture somewhat increased in number, and groups of them were found in many

parts, it was recognized that the truth of the unity of the body, equally with other truth, should regulate their dealings with one another as much as it would have done, if instead of being a small and insignificant remnant they had been the whole church in their various localities. From this it was deduced that in such matters as cases of discipline, or other assembly acts, the local gathering acted for all, and hence its actions were bound to be respected unless evidently contrary to Scripture. The unity of the body was thus rightly invoked to prevent independency, and consequent confusion of action.

Of later years this last-named ecclesiastical application of the truth of the one body seems in many minds to have been so magnified out of all proportion that it has quite eclipsed the primary application as Scripture presents it. With some it seems now to be regarded as the truth itself, instead of a secondary application, which is deduced from Scripture, rather than plainly stated in it.

Hence in some difficulties that have arisen an altogether disproportionate amount of effort has been expended in trying to show that this or that group of saints is 'off' the ground of the one body by reason of their having made some false ecclesiastical step, such as the non-recognition of a judgment, or act of some other meeting, and the like. Moreover, by the magnifying of this secondary application to the obscuring of the primary, the truth of the unity of the body has become the great ground of excommunication or rejection, rather than that of reception. Who, for instance, has heard of a meeting receiving [or rejecting] some one and then demanding that all other meetings shall receive [or reject] him under penalty of being regarded as 'off' the ground of the one body? Such dealings are always entered upon in order to produce acquiescence in acts of excision or rejection.

Thus, by over-emphasizing the secondary, the primary force of the truth is overlooked, indeed is nullified. Similar cases by which the Word of God was made of none effect were common in the time of our Lord, as the Gospels show. The above naturally leads one to inquire whether there may not be a further misconception underlying this diversion of the truth from its proper setting. We submit that one such misconception entertained by not a few is the assumption that the fact of saints gathering in the light of the truth upon the ground of the one body confers upon them a corporate status, distinct from that which belongs to the church as a whole.

Certain parts of Scripture contemplate the breakdown in the professing church, and indicate our path and resources in view of it. Such are Acts 20; 2 Timothy; 2 Peter; and 2 and 3 John. What have these to say bearing upon this point? They make it clear that though wolves would enter from without, and there would be no safety

in the elderhood (i.e., rule as originally established by God) within, yet God and the Word of His grace are always available: that no matter how high the tide of evil might rise, the foundation of God would stand sure, and faithful men be found able to teach others; and not only so, but that to the end there would be some calling on the Lord out of a pure heart, if only a few: some who love the truth, and have a good report of the truth itself. There is, however, no hint that such faithful souls by so doing acquire any special corporate status. They may enjoy much collectively which they would not as single individuals; but corporately they have nothing apart from the whole body of Christ.

In the New Testament the truth of the mystery was committed to Paul. He was also the “wise master-builder” who not only laid the foundation, but afterwards in his Epistles treated of matters connected with order, discipline, and administration in the churches. It is especially striking, therefore, to find that in his farewell Epistle to Timothy he addresses simply a faithful individual, and that he designates the aggregate of faithful individuals, not by a phrase which indicates any special corporate status as belonging to them, but by one which indicates their moral character, “Them which call on the Lord out of a pure heart.”

The position of a remnant, then, in all dispensations, is an individual one. The present moment is no exception. Saints who in later years have rallied to the truth and met on the ground of the one body have not acquired any special corporate status by so doing; at best they have been but faithful individuals walking in the truth. The fact that they have no status beyond the original status of the church, which all the saints share with them, does not give them licence to disregard any part of the truth. Though individuals they are responsible to be governed by ‘assembly’ truth, because by all truth.

The third thing to which we now refer is *the fact that the cup and the loaf of the Lord’s supper are linked with the oneness of the body*. The cup and the loaf represent the blood and body of Christ. In 1 Corinthians 10 they are spoken of as the communion of His blood and body rather than the representation of it, inasmuch as “we being many are one bread, one body”; and hence not only is there the thought of our identification with the death of Christ, as the Jew is identified with his altar, or the heathen with demons, but also the thought that we are all so identified together as one body, for as it adds, “we are all partakers of that one bread” (verse 17).

It should be carefully noted that these words simply indicate that the partaking of the one loaf in the Lord’s supper is the expression of that unity, and therefore may be appealed to as the sign or proof of it. It does not mean that our eating of the

one loaf is the cause of the unity. We say, for instance, "It will be fine tomorrow for the barometer is rising", and by this we mean not that the barometer produces the fine weather but that it is the sign of it. So our common participation in the one loaf is the sign and setting forth of the fact of our being one body. This is important, because the almost certain result of believing that saints who meet upon a Scriptural basis thereby obtain a special corporate status will be to connect the Lord's Supper and its communion with that "inner circle" instead of with the whole body; making it thus the expression of 'our' fellowship instead of proper Christian fellowship.

This in turn creates a tendency to the exclusion of people from the Lord's supper apart from the authority of Scripture, because they do not please us, or are out of harmony with the aims we are pursuing, or for other similar reasons. If an individual sits down and partakes of the Lord's supper, he is thereby recognised as a member of the one body and as fit for Christian fellowship; no such point is raised as that of whether all can agree with all his views and actions. This is pretty clearly indicated by verses 23 to 29 of 1 Corinthians 10. It is a striking fact, and one for which we beg careful and special attention, that the very chapter which most enforces the fact of fellowship or partnership in connection with Christ's death and His table, does not close without dealing with matters in which liberty for the exercise of individual conscience and faith is claimed. A clear proof that the extreme view of fellowship which makes all in it responsible for and identified with every individual act, has no foundation in Scripture. We are not, of course, supposing views and acts that challenge the truth.

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