

Unanimity the Divine Method of Church Government

by G.H. Lang

The Lord's method of revealing His will is through the bringing of His people to an unanimous judgment, and it is the duty of the church to seek unanimity in all matters.

Scripture: Proverbs 3:5, John 17:20, Acts 15:25, Romans 15:5, 1 Corinthians 1:10, 1 Corinthians 14:33, Ephesians 4:3, Philippians 2:2, James 1:5

Topics: "Church Government", "Unity In Christ"

Description

G.H. Lang preaches about the importance of seeking unanimity in decision-making within the church, emphasizing the need to defer decisions until a unified mind and judgment are reached, as opposed to relying on majority voting. He argues that the scriptural method involves waiting for the Lord to reveal His will through unanimous agreement, rather than through uncertain majority votes. Lang highlights the significance of oneness of mind and action in reflecting the unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and how this unity serves as a powerful testimony to the world. He draws examples from the Old and New Testaments, particularly Acts 15, to support the principle of seeking unanimity in church matters, showing that the Lord's authority is recognized when decisions are made unanimously.

Transcript

To my fellow-believers in our Lord Jesus Christ gathered

in Church fellowship at Unity Chapel, Bristol.

BELOVED FRIENDS,

In accordance with the resolution passed at a recent meeting, I have here set forth my views upon the question we have been lately discussing, namely, Whether the Word of God gives the sanction of the Lord to the practice of deciding upon matters coming before us as a church by a vote of a majority of the members present ; or whether the Lord through His Word, does not rather teach and exhort us to defer our decision until one undivided mind and judgment is arrived at.

My own conviction, as explained to you, is that the latter course is the scriptural method ; and some of my reasons for this and objections to the former course are these :-

Considering that the Church of God occupies the responsible office of visibly representing before the world the kingdom of the Lord Jesus, so that worldly men judge of Him according to that which they see in us, it is manifestly of the utmost importance that, before carrying out any proposed action, we should make as sure as can possibly be that the course proposed is a right and proper one, and well pleasing unto Him whose will we seek to do. Now experience has abundantly shewn that the minority is frequently in the right, and the majority in the wrong ; and it is therefore manifest that the vote of a majority is at best a very uncertain means of deciding as to what is right and advisable ; and if this be so in human affairs, with which men may be supposed to have some fair acquaintance and experience, it will be much more so in divine matters affecting the kingdom of God, with which things we have no natural acquaintance whatever.

And that we shall in these latter concerns be yet more likely to fail to arrive at a knowledge of His will by such an uncertain method as is now in question, will be yet more clearly seen if it be the case, as I shall hope to show, that so far from having engaged to make known to the Church His wishes by this plan of voting, the Lord has the rather promised to reveal His will by and through the bringing of His people to an unanimous judgment.

Considering the vast importance, both for the glorifying of His name and for the blessing of men, that attaches to the doings of His people ; and considering also that we cannot as a church be at all sure of doing that which shall glorify Him and be for the good of our fellows unless we have His directions, it appears to me it would have been very strange, had He left no more sure method of learning His will and receiving His directions than this very uncertain plan of acting according to the view of the majority only of those considering the matter at issue.

A special likelihood of our making greater errors in things concerning the heavenly kingdom than in the things of this world arises from the sad fact that we are often, alas, so very carnally and so little spiritually-minded that divine things are but slowly apprehended by us. This is manifestly a great reason for the more carefully going over in our minds any matter, and taking a longer time to consider it than it would be needful for us to take were we discussing the same matter in a merely secular relationship ; but it is undeniable that matters decided by a majority present can almost invariably be disposed of when first discussed, because, should there be an equal number for and against, the person presiding, being given an extra or casting vote, can make a majority immediately. I cannot but think that, amongst other reasons, it is to guard against the mistakes inevitably arising from this too frequent haste that the Lord wishes us, as I believe He does, to defer our decision and continue our conference until unanimity is reached. At least, it seems to me to be clear that a method which is as likely to lend to a wrong as it is to guide to a right decision cannot be a divine method, and ought not to be followed by those possessing the divine nature, and therefore capable of having the mind of Christ (2 Pet. 1:4, 1 Cor. 2:16), in whose workings mistakes are unknown.

A second and very serious objection is that this plan is eminently calculated to lead to dissension both secret and public ; a truth with which any who have had much experience on the subject must, I fear, be sadly familiar. Can anything be thought of as more likely to stir up contention and cause disaffection than that a section of the church should have their wishes and, possibly their sincere convictions as to what is for the good of the work, rejected and shelved by there being another section of the church, with no greater advantage or claim than that of being slightly stronger in numbers, who have different opinions ?

Here, also, I urge that a method at all calculated or even likely to cause disagreement and possibly open division, cannot be of that God who is "not a God of confusion, but of peace," (1 Cor. 14:33).

But when nothing is done till one judgment is come to, everyone is pleased with that which is done ; and so discord and disunion are averted, while concord and union are strengthened, bringing spiritual blessing to the whole community.

It will doubtless be agreed that, seeing that we pray, "Lead us not into temptation," a method which tends to so lead us cannot be of God, who delivers us from the Evil One. But given a brother possessed of an ardent and honest conviction that the plan he proposes is right and good, does not the method now under discussion present very manifest and severe temptations to him unseemly conduct ? He has every inducement to "pack" the meeting, by secretly urging those who think with him to be present in force, rather than leaving it to the Lord to bring together those who it is known to Him are qualified to deal with the particular matter to be discussed. He is tempted by vehemence in argument to gain other adherents to his own view, rather than by patient reflection to submit his judgment to the Lord. In his eagerness to gain a majority of votes he is more likely to be anxious to persuade others by his reason than he is to be willing to be persuaded by what they may say, even though they may speak with the mind of the Lord.

Now the fact that such temptations as these do beset us, and that not infrequently brethren fall under their power, as the result of a desire to obtain a majority of members on their side, at once leads me to question whether the method giving rise thereto can be of the Lord.

On the other hand, the first temptation--that to "pack" a meeting--is absolutely banished by the necessity for entire accord, and the other two, if not entirely removed, are very much weakened in force ; while the desire on the part of all to give up their private views, if needful, and to arrive at the mind of the Lord, as the only possible means of reaching an unanimous judgment, is very much increased.

In short, the one method appears likely to lead me to press forward my views (possibly honestly believing them to be right and best) ; the other to necessitate my carefully waiting upon the Lord for His views.

The fourth objection I submit is as follows. In Romans 14, verses 4 and 5, 1 Cor. 12:12-27, Ephesians 4:11-16, and other scriptures, the Church is compared to, and its relationship to Christ illustrated by, the human body. Of this spiritual body each believer is individually a member, while the Lord Jesus is the head of the whole body. The more this analogy is prayerfully studied, the more it will be seen to be the most perfect comparison the divine wisdom of God has presented to us to illustrate the working of the Church.

Very little thought is required to see two things concerning the human body--(a) that it is not the members that plan and will and control the body ; these functions are vested solely in the head, it being the duty and beauty of the members to recognise and respond to the impulses and directions of the head : (b) that any back of unity and harmony in the co-operation of the members in doing the will of the head indicates a measure of disease in those members where the failure is found ; as, for instance, if one arm or hand fails to co-operate with the other for the completing of a desired piece of handiwork, it is clear that the member has become more or less independent of the head.

Now, when this latter state is reached, the proper and hopeful course to take is patiently to resort to such means as will result in the restoration of the undisputed control of the head ; and so when it is found in the church that there is a divergence of opinion upon a matter connected with the church life and work, the proper plan to adopt is by patience and prayer to wait for the whole body to be again brought under the control of the Lord and into united judgment and action. It is true this is sometimes found impossible in the human body, and means have to be taken to prevent the diseased member from taking any part in the

working of the body and from injuriously affecting other members ; yet this necessity does not interfere with the remaining members still unitedly submitting to the head : so likewise is it true that sometimes a believer so far ceases to submit to the Lord as to necessitate his being similarly dealt with and prevented from leading astray other believers, either by the Lord laying him aside by sickness, or by removing him by death (1 Cor. 11:30), or by the church, at the direction of the Lord, taking the needful steps to prevent the offender further obstructing the work of the Lord ; but here also this does not hinder the remaining members from cordially and undividedly submitting to the Lord.

Thus the difficulties which arise in the way of unanimity have their simple and sufficient solution, and afford no ground for the body departing from the law of entire submission to the head and unbroken co-operation of the several members with each other.

For a church to depart from this rule and to act according to the desire of a majority only of the believers in its membership, is as if the affairs and actions of a man's body should be decided upon by the impulses of a certain number of the members thereof, which is a practical denial of the truth that the head alone has the right to and can control, and, moreover, is a sure means of producing confusion and not co-operation, for what would be the case with my body if it moved in a certain direction and attempted to work with no surer means of knowing the will of my head than the fact that two legs and feet, one arm and hand and one eye, being a majority of my active members, manifested certain impulses, as opposed to the other eye and the remaining hand and arm, a minority of my working members ?

The violence done to this striking analogy of the body and the church, is to me a sure proof that voting by majorities is not a divinely instituted or scripturally sanctioned practice, however convenient and sufficient it may appear in worldly societies.

The last remarks lead on to the consideration of the fact that by the failure to act in complete unity the church ceases to give one of the most effective forms of testimony to the world that is possible.

In John 17:20-21, the Lord Jesus, in speaking to the Father, says, "Neither for these only do I pray, but for them also who shall believe on Me through their word ; that they may all be one even as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be one in us : that the world may believe that Thou didst send Me. And the glory which Thou has given Me I have given unto them ; that they may be one even as we are one ; I in them and Thou in Me, that they may be perfected into one ; that the world may know that Thou didst send Me, and lovedst them, even as Thou lovedst Me."

Without attempting an exhaustive exposition of this passage, it is sufficient for us to notice three things :--

- (a) The Lord's desire for all His people to be perfected into one ;
- (b) The pattern of that oneness to be the oneness of the Father and the Son ;
- (c) The object of this oneness to be the testimony thereby given to the world.

With regard to (a) the prayer of our Lord was in effect that the Holy Spirit might be sent into every one who should believe on His name, so that by the Spirit of God indwelling each of us we might all be united into one in God ; so that (b), the pattern of our unity should be the oneness of the Father and the Son, who are one in the communion of the third Person of the Godhead, the ever-blessed Spirit. But, as bearing on our subject, it is to be specially observed that the Father, the Son and the Spirit are not only one in Person, but also in action ; in all their doings there is the most perfect harmonious unity : and it would be sheer

blasphemy, in fact it would logically involve the most absolute atheism, to suppose the doings of the Godhead to be regulated by the decision of any two of the Person thereof, the one Person being either opposed to the view of the two, or merely submitting to being outvoted.

But this being the case with the three Persons of the Deity, and it being utterly incompatible with the oneness of the Father and the Son in the unity of the Holy Spirit, how can it be any more in order on the part of those who, being indwelt by the same Spirit, are to be so united in life and action as to conform to the pattern of the oneness of God, even as our Lord prayed "that they may be one even as we are one"?

As to our last point (c) it is to be observed that believers are to manifest a corporate union publicly, for the world is to see it. The object the Lord desires to attain is that the world may know and believe that He was sent by the Father, and that the believer is a sharer in the love of the Father to the Son. Why He chose this method I shall hope to next show, but for the moment what I strenuously urge is that the deliberate departing from oneness of action by adopting the practice of majority voting is undeniably not even attempting to attain such united working as is set forth in these words of the Lord Jesus, and cannot, therefore, result in that testimony which He taught oneness alone could give.

I submit it as an invariably true principle for the guidance of the children of God, that any course of action which tends to, if it does not wholly accomplish, the marring, if it be but partially, of their testimony before the world, is not a line of conduct which is of the Father but the rather of the world.

Out of the foregoing there arises an objection in dealing with which we may discuss how it is possible for unity of judgment and action to be attained.

Not but what in divine things the question of "How?" is of comparatively small importance. It is for us to at least endeavour to obey the revealed will of the Lord, and to seek after unanimity ; and we may leave to our God the question of how it is possible for Him to bring to one mind many persons of different types of character, of different habits of thought, having varying ways of looking at the same subject and sometimes opposite ways of doing the same thing.

I freely concede the point that humanly speaking unanimity is not possible. To bring together scores, and perhaps hundreds, of mere men and women and expect them to come to one unanimous decision upon questions of frequently a perplexing and delicate nature is to look for more than fallen human nature is capable of. Because each human spirit is a separate individuality possessed of the power and tendency of acting independently of every other being, therefore it is true, "many men, many minds."

But, as we have seen, the glorious and all-important fact concerning the children of God is that in place of being any longer entirely severed spiritually from every other creature, we are all indwelt by one and the same Spirit, the Spirit of Christ ; and when this fact is clearly recognised and acted upon, the humanly impossible is seen to be divinely possible. The human body is composed of many various substances, and the several members--hands, ears, eyes, &c.--vary vastly in form and use, and yet these manifest differences do not hinder the whole body working together, because each part is under the personal influence of the one spirit inhabiting the body. So it is true the members of the body of Christ differ greatly, but because we are every one indwelt by the one Spirit, the co-operation of all members is possible, and should be sought after. It may be that with this, as with other Christlike graces, full and eternal harmony will only be attained when the last trace of the rebellious carnal spirit shall have been removed at the coming of the Lord ; but, on the other hand, with this, as with other fruit of the Spirit, we should aim at perfection and "gien diligence to keep the unity of the Spirit" (Eph. 4:3= ; and then a unanimity can be

reached which will astonish us, just as time back should have been astonished had we been told that love, joy and peace could be ours to the degree they now are through the Spirit.

Here I state why I believe the Lord chose this oneness of mind and working as His testimony to the world. It was that through the fact of His people acting upon a principle and in a manner that the world has never found continuously possible, it might be made apparent that a divine power was at work amongst them, that the Spirit of God, not the spirit of the world, controlled them all. And, therefore, it is that I say the testimony is utterly ruined by the plan of a majority vote settling a question, for this is the very method which worldly men uniformly adopt as the only practicable plan known to them ; and I doubt not it was from them that this, like numerous other evil practices, was borrowed and adopted by the Church, in days when, by the toleration of evil doctrine and doing, she had so grieved the Holy Spirit as to forfeit His unifying and directing help.

But to take up the leading thought of this sixth section of my argument, and definitely state the objection I have before me, I suggest that, seeing it is one of the functions and rights of the Spirit to control the whole body, for us as a Church to arbitrarily say He shall express His will through a section only of the members of the body here present, is to assume the office of dictating to Him whom it is our duty and wisdom to obey, and to thus prevent Him from fully doing that which He would graciously do for our blessing, namely, lead to unanimity ; and also to forfeit that certainty of knowing what is His will which an undivided judgment alone can give ; for while it is certain what is the desire of my spirit if my whole body works to the one end, it would be by no means so certain were some only of my members to seek that end, and the rest to oppose.

Seventhly, it is to be noted that the whole burden of Scripture testimony is on the side of unanimity. This is the more clearly seen by observing two very remarkable lines of thought--first, that unanimity is in the Word of God associated with spiritual prosperity ; and, on the other hand, a divided judgment with lack of spirituality.

For instance, Israel in the wilderness were in a state of unbelief at the time the spies went up to search out the land, and ten of the twelve selected men reflected the condition of the people, dissuading the nation from going forward, and the two only, Joshua and Caleb, persuading them to do so. A very striking instance of the minority having the mind of the Lord, but of their being hopelessly outvoted ; and by acting on the view of the majority the whole people made a fatal error.

Again, how sad was the state of the kingdom while some of the people followed Saul, and a smaller company helped David ; but how significant the statement, (1 Chr. 12:40 and 38) that "there was joy in Israel" when "all Israel were of one heart to make David king." Once more, what a time of spiritual prosperity was inaugurated when David proposed to once again seek the Lord and worship before the ark of the Lorde ; "and all the assembly said they would do so, for the thing was right in the eyes of all the people." (1 Chr. 13:1-4)

On the other hand, how miserable was the condition of affairs when most of the people worshipped Baal, while 7,000 followed Jehovah (1 Kings 19:20) ; but what a revival of godliness in Judah is indicated by the words, connected with the proposal to return to the keeping of the passover feast, "the thing was right in the eyes of the king and of all the congregation," (2 Chron. 30:4).

Yet again, what a startling contrast is seen between the rapidly increasing prosperity of the people during the undivided allegiance of the twelve tribes to David and Solomon, as compared with the surely

downward course after the division under Rehoboam.

And how terrible was the condition of Israel when it could be written (1 Kings 16:21) "Then were the people of Israel divided into two parts ; half of the people followed Tibni, the son of Ginath, to make him king : and half followed Omri. But the people that followed Omri prevailed against the people that followed Tibni" : as compared with the comparative prosperity of Judah and Benjamin in their unbroken submission to the rule of the godly Asa.

I am aware that it may be said that these examples from the Old Testament have no very direct bearing upon the government of a Christian Church ; but they were "written for our admonition," and the remarkable frequency with which unanimity and prosperity are connected in these and similar instances, gives an emphatic Scriptural testimony in favour of undivided action by the people of God ; and the lesson is yet more impressive when it is seen that the New Testament follows upon the same side, and sets before us under the new covenant, the same precept and example as was set before the earthly people of God.

Take, for example, such exhortations as these--

Rom. 15:5, 6 : "Now the God of patience and of comfort grant you to be of the same mind one with another according to Christ Jesus : that with one accord ye may with one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

1 Cor. 1:10 : "Now I beseech you, brethren, through 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 perfected together in the same mind, and in the same judgment."

2 Cor. 13:11 : "Be perfected, be comforted, be of the same mind ; live in peace ; and the God of love and peace shall be with you."

Galatians : The direct object of this epistle was to bring the Church to oneness of mind upon the question discussed ; to exhort them to all walk by the Spirit, and thus to avoid the "strife, factions and divisions," spoken of as being of the flesh, (ch. 5:20).

Ephesians 4:3 : "Giving diligence to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." The "unity of the Spirit," is that unity which is manifested by the Spirit through united action on the part of the body ; and therefore in this passage the apostle at once proceeds to a revelation of the inter-working of the whole body in perfect harmony. See verses 3 to 16.

Philippians 1:27 : "Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ ; that, whether I come and see you or be absent, I may hear of your state, that ye stand fast in one spirit, with one soul striving for the faith of the gospel."

Philippians 2:2 : "Fulfil ye my joy, that ye be of the same mind, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind ; doing nothing through faction or through vain glory."

Philippians 4:2 : "I exhort Euodia, and I exhort Syntyche, to be of the same mind in the Lord."

Colossians 3:17 : When this Church met together to discuss the work of the Lord they were met with this injunction, "Whatsoever ye do in word or deed do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God

the Father through Him." Now, if a matter had been decided by a majority only, the members of the minority could not have given thanks for the doing of that which they had urged should not be done ; therefore the plan of so deciding a matter forces some to take part in doing things for which they cannot give thanks, and which they cannot do in the name of the Lord Jesus. Can a method which forces unscriptural conduct upon some members, be itself Scriptural? The only alternative is that they continue to show their objections by refraining from the work to which they objected. Can this be considered a Scriptural course in the face of the above quoted exhortation in Phil. 1:27, "with one soul striving"?

1 Thessalonians 5:13 : "Be at peace among yourselves." In section 2 I have sought to show that dissension is one of the probable and, indeed, frequent results of the plan.

2 Thessalonians 3:16 : "Now the Lord of peace Himself give you peace at all times in all ways," which must include business meetings.

1 Timothy 6:3, 4 ; 2 Timothy 2:23 ; Titus 3:9 : In the first passage certain men, and in the second and third certain questions are condemned, and the avoidance thereof exhorted, because they "gender strifes ;" that is, not that every time a foolish question is discussed it leads to strife, but that there is a general tendency in such discussion to provoke dissension. So it does not require, before the method stands condemned, that every time a matter is decided by a majority vote it should provoke strife. It is sufficient if it has a tendency that way ; if it is not surprising that strife results.

James 1:5 : "If any of you lacketh wisdom, let him ask of God, who giveth to all liberally, and upbraideth not ; and it shall be given him." When a church meets together and some think one course the best, and some another, it is evident one, or both, of the parties has not the wisdom of God in the matter. This Scripture indicates what should then be done. Not the opinion of the majority to be acted upon, for they may be wrong in their judgment ; and for the same reason, not that of the minority : but let all wait on God for wisdom, and it shall be given -- in God's time -- to those who ask in faith.

Thus saith the Scripture ; and in addition to these passages, exhorting to "peace," to "oneness of mind," to "all speaking the same thing," to being "perfected together in the same mind and in the same judgment," we have the already commented upon words of the Lord Jesus, from John 17, and the Scriptural analogy of the body ; and also the example of a church transacting affairs in its corporate capacity recorded in Acts 15, which we shall now proceed to consider.

As if the Lord foresaw that the precepts and whole tenour of His Word would not be sufficient to preserve His people from adopting almost universally the practice of the world in the matter now in question, He caused to be given a very full narration of the discussion of an important and intricate question by the church at Jerusalem, including the apostles, to whom was specially committed the knowledge of His will, and who were undoubtedly those most likely to know what method was most accordant with the mind of the Spirit. This record is found in the 15th chapter of the Acts. When closely studied the story gives not only the decision upon the question actually discussed, but also the principles by which the judgments of believers were influenced, and, further, that which directly bears on our subject, the order of discussion.

Before the reader goes further I would earnestly ask that the chapter be carefully read, and then the following remarks may be the better considered.

To the Gentile church at Antioch there had come from Judea certain men who taught the brethren that, as circumcision had from the time of Abraham been the sign of a person belonging to the visible company of

the people of God, they could not be saved unless they were circumcised. Paul and Barnabas dissented from this teaching, and in order to the obtaining of the opinion of the apostles and the mother church, the brethren at Antioch deputed Paul and others to proceed to Jerusalem and there discuss the question ; and, we read, "when they were come to Jerusalem, they were received of the church and the apostles and the elders."

The order in which the matter proceeded is then shown as being --

"They rehearsed all that God had done with them," evidently including in their remarks a statement of their having refrained from teaching Gentile believers that they must be circumcised, and also laying before the church the facts concerning the discussion that had gone on at Antioch. That they did this is clear from verse 24, where the apostles display a knowledge of what had transpired at Antioch, which things they evidently learned from the information of Paul and Barnabas.

This the matter was laid before the church, and the proposal to enforce circumcision thrown open for discussion ; whereupon we find,

Certain of the Pharisees, not having been yet divested of their sectarian spirit, rose and urged that it was needful that Gentile Christians should be circumcised and enjoined to keep the law of Moses. This imposing of the ceremonial Judaic law upon Gentils had not been the practice of the early church, as may be seen by the recorded teaching of the apostles and their speeches on this occasion ; but the addresses of these Pharisees made it clear,

That there was existing a division of judgment upon the question. Now, had their method been the more modern plan that we are discussing, it would have been recorded that they ascertained on which side of the question there was a majority of members, and so settled the matter. But, as opposed to this, we learn that when this divergence of view is manifested,

The meeting is adjourned, and a fresh gathering of apostles, elders (v. 6), and the whole multitude of the disciples (v. 12), constituting the "whole church," (v. 22), is called together to consider the matter.

Then we learn that upon the subject being again brought forward, there was "much disputing" (v. 7), showing that those wide and opposed differences of opinion which now manifest themselves were seen then also. Here again I remark that had the apostolic method of reaching a decision been the present one, we should expect to find a record to that effect ; but, on the contrary, the disputing and speech-making uninterruptedly continued,--Peter, Barnabas, Paul and James all freely expressing their thoughts, until we find the significant record (v. 22),

"Then it seemed good to the apostles and elders with the whole church," to do certain things. This is the essence of the whole question--nothing done until all differences have disappeared in unanimity ; then action taken. So that, with the approval of the whole church, it could be written to the brethren at Antioch, "it seemed good to us, having come to one accord," (v. 25). And it is of the most momentous importance that we should notice that the church thus "being of one accord," (Phil. 2:2), and having learned to "all speak the same thing," so that there were "no divisions among them" but that they were "perfected together in the same mind and in the same judgment," (I Cor. 1:10), they are then able to calmly and confidently claim the authority of the Lord Himself for their decision, and say, (v. 28), "it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us."

Thus would our divine Lord impressively set before His people the method to be followed by the church when considering matters in a corporate capacity, and teach us that when, by patiently waiting before Him and focussing upon the particular subject in hand the light He has given, the church comes to oneness of mind in their decision, we can then claim His approval of and authority for that which we do.

This teaching is the underlying basis of the seemingly difficult passage, Mat. 18:15-18. There the Lord says that if my brother sin against me, and I cannot by personal influence lead him to repentance, and thus bury the matter, I am then to take one or two more brethren and see him with them. It is evident that these brethren would not agree to help me unless they are convinced that I am in the right and my brother is the offender ; so that there is thus found a consensus of opinion on the subject. But if the sinning brother will not listen to these further remonstrances, I am then to narrate the circumstances to the church. Once more, it is evident that the church will not side with me unless I am in the right ; but if they--the church, not a section thereof, but "the church," implying the whole church, just as when we speak of "a city," we mean the whole city--agree with my view of the case, we have the fact that a body of those indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and so having the mind of Christ, are of one judgment in the matter ; and that if the offending brother will not hear and submit to the church, he must be dealt with and treated as a Gentile and a publican, that is, he must be put out of church fellowship. When the church thus unanimously deals with a case, the Lord assures us that we may be certain of doing the right thing, and that "what things soever we shall so bind on earth shall be bound in heaven," for the simple reason that it is the will of our Lord in heaven, that, through the Spirit, we have done on earth.

So, again, Paul having instructed the Corinthian church to thus deal with a wicked person (I Cor. 5), upon learning that the discipline had produced in him the desired repentance, instructs them (II Cor. 2) to now forgive and receive back the offender and restore him to the joy of the fellowship of saints ; and having invoked the name of the Lord Jesus for the former measure, he now claims the authority of the Lord for the latter course ; and thus the one who had been "bound" over to Satan as an evil-doer for the destruction of the flesh, is now, upon repentance, "loosed" by the Church from the sentence, that no advantage may be gained by Satan.

This, in this practical matter also the Lord indicates His willingness to recognise the decision of a church, if that decision be unanimous ; nor is there one single precept or example in His Word to indicate or even appear to sanction the thought that He allows the authority of those of His name to be attached to the will of a section only of those of His people who have to decide a question. They may, and sometimes do, by that means decide according to His will ; but they have no Scriptural right to claim His authority and profess to act in His name ; such authority being clearly given to the company of His people, and to them only, who act unanimously.

Against the application of Acts 15 to the matter in question it has been urged that the plan there shown is doubtless advisable and possible in matters of such great importance as the one then discussed, but that it is neither needful nor likely that unanimity should be or can be reached in details say connected with the construction or fitting up of a hall or schoolroom, most of the church being unacquainted with such matters. But surely this is a very irrational objection, for if the Lord has undertaken to produce oneness of mind upon important and intricate questions, why should there be any difficulty in His doing so upon questions comparatively simple and unimportant? And as to the necessity of these latter things being brought within the rule, I would ask is it not often over absurdly trifling matters that personal differences most frequently arise? and ought not these things therefore to be dealt with in the way most likely to produce and preserve peace?

Beloved brethren, these numerous passages are written, and this clear example is given, for our guidance, and it is for us to conform our practice to the Scriptural pattern, nor is there the least suggestion in the Word of God that any other than this procedure was followed, whatever the question to be decided by the church might be.

It now only remains for me to offer some concluding and confirmatory remarks.

I am asked -- Do you really believe this plan possible? My reply is that in divine things the question is both irrelevant and irreverent. For the believer in Almighty God there is but one question -- not, Is it possible? but, Is it Scriptural? not, Can it be done? but, Does God, in His holy Word, bid us do it?

I have endeavoured to show clearly and definitely settle the latter question, and, I say, It is Scriptural! Then it is also possible. It was impossible humanly for the man with the withered arm to stretch it forth. He would have done so long since had he been able. But when the Lord bade him do the impossible, it was at once done ; for the question of power rested with Him who gave the command. Thus it is with this question, and all other His commandments.

Moreover, I would point out that the Apostles uniformly insisted that they were men of like passions with others, (Acts 10:26, 14:15). The believers, also, who gathered at that pattern church meeting had very deeply rooted prejudices, very stubborn human wills, yea, all those infirmities of mind and spirit which some fear must render this plan of church government inoperative in our days. But the thing was not impossible the, and, therefore, is not now on this account.

Yet, again, as I informed you, there is in this very city of Bristol a church numbering many hundreds of members, the affairs of which, since its founding on August 13th, 1832, by the late George Muller and Henry Craik, have been constantly settled in this way. Further there is the China Inland Mission, the Councils of which deal with the evangelising of the vast country of China ; involving the support and control of nearly 750 missionaries and large numbers of native teachers, and the securing and disbursing of many thousands of pounds annually ; involving the also the solving of problems far more intricate than nay that usually come before home churches ; involving further the central governing not of one but of scores of scattered churches in that immense empire ; and yet the Secretary writes me that since the foundiing of the Mission in 1865 the affairs of its great work have been conducted on the plan proposed by Scripture.

Thus, dealing with these two cases only we have, in the aggregate, 103 years of modern and satisfactory experience of the method ; simply proving, as might be safely expected, that in the "keeping of His commandments there is great reward," (Psalm 119:11).

What reward? it will perhaps be asked. Is there not great risk of matters needful to be decided proplytly being delayed, to the injury of the work? Let the Secretary of the China Inland Mission answer, and confirm my remarks under section 1, page 5. I asked him, -- Has any matter which it would have been for the good of the Lord's work to have had decided propmtly, been delayed to the prejudice of the work by the waiting for unanimity? He replied -- No, decidedly not. Whenever there has been delay, it has always proved to have been a wise step, and the necessary guidance has come later on.

I asked also -- Has the experience of this plan shown any distinct advantages accruing therefrom? The reply is -- Yes, after-experience has proved that by this method mistakes have been avoided which might otherwise have been made.

And I am further informed that no inconveniences have been found to arise from the plan.

Is it not a great gain to avoid mistakes? Does not this method wholly cast us upon the Lord, and so, by our dependence, glorify Him? Do we not thus corporately "acknowledge Him in all our ways"? and should we not so secure the fulfilment of the accompanying promise "He shall direct they paths"? (Prov. 3: 5, 6).

I am persuaded that by attention to three things all difficult in this matter may be removed, and unanimity always attained, when the Lord deems it desirable.

The most diligent and careful enquiry in ascertaining that candidates for church fellowship are (a) scripturally converted to God through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, so as to be indwelt by the Holy Spirit, Whose working it is produces unanimity ; and (b) that there is every reason to suppose from their past life and present conduct that they are really desirous of knowing and doing the will of God.

The sedulous cultivation of personal communion with God the Father, through our Lord Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit ; by regular meditation upon the Scriptures, so that we may advance in the knowledge of His will ; and by habitual prayer, wherein we bring all our doing and thinking beneath His inspection, and have discrepancies and evils shown us ; and whereby we receive grace to do those things which are pleasing to Him.

The due and loving exercise of discipline against any on whose conduct the Word of God commands discipline.

So our corporate life would be lived beneath the eye and under the control of God ; and the Spirit of the Lord would obtain continually increasing power over us, working in us to will and do of God's good pleasure ; so that we should be one in action in and through the Spirit, even as the Father and the Son are One in the communion of the Spirit, and thus would our Lord's desire and prayer be fulfilled more and more perfectly ; so would the harmony and love of our church life be secured and promoted ; and so should our joint testimony before the world be unceasing and effective, to the honour and praise of Him to whom belongs the glory for ever and ever.

For reference sake I subjoin the terms of the motion now under our consideration.

That the God of all grace may give us grace to do His will for ever is the prayer of

Your fellow servant of Jesus Christ,

G. H. LANG

Globe House, Old King Street,

Bristol, August 1900.

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