

Commitment to the Assembly Mission 93

by William MacDonald

The assembly is the capstone of scriptural revelation and the unit on earth that God has chosen to propagate the faith.

Duration: 58:29

Scripture: Ephesians 4:7

Topics: "Commitment"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of the church as the body of Christ. He uses the analogy of a torn index card to illustrate that the church is the completion of Christ. The speaker believes that the church is essential for expressing Christ to the world. He references Ephesians chapter four, which talks about the grace given to each believer and the gifts given by Christ after his ascension. The speaker also warns against the danger of gathering people to a man instead of to Christ and the hindrance of one-man ministry in the development of gifts in the assembly.

Transcript

What is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God, who created all things through Christ Jesus, to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places, according to the eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. Last night, we spoke on commitment to the Bible. Commitment to the Bible is the inspired word of God.

The commitment to the Bible as verbally inspired, the very words of Scripture. And, we believed in the plenary inspiration of the Scriptures, inspired from cover to cover. We talked about the sufficiency of the Scriptures.

Tonight, we want to speak about commitment to the assembly. The assembly is very important in the mind of God, and in the word of God. Let me just mention a few things in connection with it.

It's important because it's the only society on earth to which God has promised perpetuity. He said, Jesus said, on this rock I will build my church. The gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.

That is not valid for any other group on earth. The only society on earth to which the Lord has promised perpetuity. The importance of the assembly is seen by the prominent place that it's given in the New

Testament.

I think we are justified in judging the importance of the subject by the amount of the New Testament that is devoted to it. And, as I do that, I realize that vast cracks of the Scripture are covering this subject. In Ephesians chapter 1, verses 20 through 23, just let me read those verses.

Ephesians chapter 1, verse 20. Paul's sentences are so long, I just have to break into the middle of them. It says, verse 19, What is the exceeding greatness of his power to us who believe according to the working of his mighty power which he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead, and seated him at his 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 age, but also in that which is to come.

And he put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church. Notice, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. What does that mean? His body, the fullness of him that fills all in all.

I hold in my hand a little three-by-five index card. I'm just going to tear it in half to illustrate it. If this represents the Lord Jesus Christ, this represents the body of Christ the church, the fullness of him that fills all in all.

I wouldn't dare to say that if I didn't see it, is the word of God. In a sense, the church is a completion. To use a language of human appearance, it almost seems that the Lord Jesus doesn't consider himself complete without the church, his body.

And his body is his vehicle on earth for expressing himself to the world. When I see these things, I realize the church is important, the assembly is important, and we must have convictions concerning the assembly. Very important.

And to be enthusiastic about it, not apologetic about it. I'm afraid some of us just get kind of tentative when we come to that subject, and we're afraid to boom out the truth about it. The church is spoken of as an object lesson to angelic beings.

We read that in Ephesians chapter 3, verse 10, to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly place. Just think of angelic beings, or celestial beings at least, looking down on the earth and seeing what God has done with the church, how he took the two greatest divisions of human life, the Jew and the Gentile, and he brought them together, believing Jew, believing Gentile, with all kinds of different personalities, you know, all the different warts and wrinkles and all the rest, and he brought them together and made one new man out of them. This came home to me very powerfully some years ago when I was in Haifa, and there's an assembly there in Haifa, and you have believing Jews and believing Gentiles breaking bread together.

The really beautiful exhibition of what we have in the word of God, and I tell you, celestial beings look down and they're gaping at it and saying, the wisdom of God. And we see that in our own assembly, don't we? We look around and we see people save, all of us, save from lives of sin, some more than others, and you think of what the grace of God has done in the lives of men. No wonder angels gasp when they see something like that.

Paul speaks of the assembly in Colossians chapter 1 verse 25 as the capstone of scriptural revelation. Colossians chapter 1 and verse 25, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God

which was given to me for you to fulfill the word of God. Oh, actually, Colossians wasn't the last book of the New Testament to be added, and yet as far as a revelation of new important doctrines, it was the capstone of scriptural revelation, and that had to do with the revelation of the church.

And then in 1 Timothy chapter 3 and verse 14, we read that it's the unit on earth that God has chosen to propagate the faith. 1 Timothy chapter 3 and verse 15. I thought it was the, well I don't have the, but it speaks of the pillar and the ground of the truth, and I take it to mean exactly that, that the unit on earth that God has chosen to propagate the faith.

14? 15. Oh, yes, it is 15. But if I am delayed, I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.

I want to tell you tonight, God loves the assembly. God had this secret in his mind from all eternity, that in the fullness of time he was to form a new society with a heavenly calling and a heavenly destiny, and that he was going to send his son down to this world to seek a bride, and at such a cost thou didst choose to bear above at such a cost thy bride. Don't tell me the assembly isn't important in the eyes of God, and if I'm going to be thinking God's thoughts after him, it better be important in my eyes, too.

Christ loves the assembly. 15. I found this in Troy Slaney's calendar some time ago.

If we could but realize that the dearest object in this world to our Lord Jesus is his church, we would spend less time in peripheral activities and concerns. Our efforts would then be directed toward the up-building of the local church, where we fellowship and our love would reach to every member of his body. Thus we would be caring for that which he loves most in the world.

God loves the assembly. Christ loves the assembly. The apostle Paul loved the assembly, and that's why I read those verses in Ephesians 3. Would you just turn back to that briefly, Ephesians chapter 3, and I'd like you to look at this chair plan.

I think it's very important for us. It says in verse 8, "...to me who am less than the least of all the saints this grace was given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make all people see what is the fellowship of the mystery which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Christ Jesus." Now, to some young believers here, that might just seem like a jumble of holy words, but let me just simplify. In those verses, the apostle Paul is saying that he had a two-fold ministry.

Can you see it? Look carefully. A two-fold ministry. What was the two-fold ministry of the apostle Paul? First of all, that I might preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ.

That's the gospel, isn't it? That's the gospel. But he doesn't stop there. He says, "...and to make all men see what is the fellowship or administration of the mystery." That's the church.

Think about that for a while. Two-fold ministry of Paul. The gospel and the church.

Now, I can't say that he loved one more than the other. He just kept those things in balance. Sometimes I think we're more enthusiastic about gospel work than we are about the local assembly.

Paul wasn't. Paul's great desire was to preach the gospel, see people saved, and see them brought into that fellowship of the local church, and see them grow in the things of the Lord and become reproducing

Christians. It's a great vision, isn't it? And I would challenge your heart tonight.

Where do you stand in this two-fold ministry? You're probably an aggressive soul in it. I thank God for that. It's wonderful.

Don't stop there. Have the two-fold ministry that the great apostle Paul had. God loved the assembly.

Christ loves the assembly. Paul loved the assembly. Could I just bring my squeaking voice in and say, I love the assembly, too.

It's my mother. I owe an awful lot to the... I owe everything, in a way, to the local assembly. It's in that assembly that I heard the gospel preached.

It's in that assembly I came under the convicting power of the Holy Spirit of God. One night a male quartet was singing, and if they had swords and were piercing it, it wouldn't have been any more real to me. They sang, Ashamed of Jesus, can it be a mortal man ashamed of thee? Ashamed of thee, who angel's praises' glory shine through endless days.

Ashamed of Jesus, yes I may, when I've no sins to wash away. And I knew the convicting power of the Holy Spirit of God that night in the meeting. In a very short time later, I was in a hurry to come to Christ.

It's in the assembly I was taught the word of God. It wasn't very spectacular to outward view. It wasn't very dramatic.

It was Christians sitting around in conversational Bible reading and going through books of the Bible. The first Sunday school lesson I ever remember is the parables of the mysteries of the kingdom. Matthew 13.

Pretty tough for a kid, you know. My first memory. The first conversational Bible reading I remember is going through the book of Isaiah.

Imagine. That was my background. That was my training.

I thank God for today. I love the assembly. I really do.

And I'm enthusiastic about it. I want to go over with you tonight some of the truths of the assembly, the truth found in the word of God. Let me just say this.

There shouldn't be any assembly distinctive. Does that shock you? Well, there shouldn't be any assembly. Look, the truth is there for all the people of God, isn't it? It's all there in the Bible.

The only thing that makes it distinctive is some people practicing it, and others not practicing it. That's all. But the principles themselves are there for everybody to believe.

The first principle I love is that there's only one body. I love that. Ephesians chapter 4 and verse 4. Ephesians 4 verse 4. There is one body and one spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism.

This is the death knell of denominationalism. I hate, loathe, despise, and abominate sectarian titles. That's just a gentle, subtle way of saying I don't like them.

I don't like the title Plymouth Brethren. Brethren is universal. Plymouth is rather local.

Makes me think of Roman Catholic. Catholic means universal, and Roman means not universal. It means Roman.

I don't like those titles. I don't even like the title Christian Brethren, because all of God's people are Christian brethren, and I don't want anything that sets me apart from other members of the body of Christ. Makes me think of a little girl.

Her friend asked her to go to her church, and she said, I can't go to another abomination. When H. A. Ironside was asked what denomination he belonged to, he'd reply in the words of Psalm 119, 63, I'm a companion of all of those who fear you, and of those who keep your precepts. Isn't that lovely? That's the right denomination to belong to.

I'm a companion of all those who fear you, and of those who keep your precepts. But if somebody comes to you and says what denomination he belonged to, just say the same one that Paul did, and that'll make a Bible student out of him. He'll have to go to the word of God and see what denomination Paul belonged to, and it'll open his eyes.

There really is a glorious truth. One body here on earth made up of all true believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. But you know, you found it.

People want to get you into a pigeonhole, don't they? If you ever want to get other Christians agitated, just say this to them. You say, what are you? Well, I'm a Christian. Well, of course, we're all Christians too.

What else tell you? Well, I'm a disciple of the Lord. Well, I know you're a disciple of the Lord Jesus, but what church do you belong to? Well, I belong to the church which is his body, and pretty soon they're doing mental convolutions. They're crying, and they're never happy, never happy.

They cannot rest until they get you in some plot. Don't yield to it. Very important.

Christ is the head. Proof number two. Christ is the head of the church.

Ephesians chapter 5 verse 23. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is the head of the church, and he is the savior of the body. No man is the head of the church, be he pope, archbishop, or president.

Even the elders are not the head of the church. Christ is the head of the church, and the only head of the church. And three, he's not only the head of the church, he's the gathering center of his people.

This is a wonderful truth. I wish it were more appropriated today. When we meet together, we don't meet to a man.

We don't meet to a church in the denominational sense. We meet to Christ. Christ is the gathering center, and we go there because we believe the Lord Jesus Christ is there.

We appropriate that by faith, because he says, where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them. You say, I don't see him. I'm not conscious of him.

Well, sometimes you go to meetings, and I tell you, the heavens come down very low, and the priest can't minister because of the glory of the Lord. And I want to be there of those times, don't you? Christ is the gathering center of his people. And then I also mention number four.

All believers are members of the body of Christ. First Corinthians chapter 12, verses 12 and 13. For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body being many are one body, so also is the Christ.

For by one spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and have been all made to drink into one spirit. All believers are members of that body. I'd like you to notice something at the end of verse 12, and I could use my card again.

It says, For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body being many are one body, so also is the Christ. That's a very unusual use of the word Christ there. There it refers to Christ the head and the church, his body.

Amazing, isn't it? Sometimes we become so used to these verses, we don't realize how breathtaking they are. But the Spirit of God would use the word the Christ to describe Christ the head plus the church, his body here on earth. All believers are members.

All believers are members. I love all believers in the Lord Jesus. I love all of those who've been redeemed by precious blood.

They're my brothers and sisters in Christ, fellow members of the body. I think I mentioned in the seminar today, I can learn something from all. We need one another, and I don't think there's a believer in the Lord Jesus that I can't learn something from, and I want to, too.

And not only that, I should pray for all believers, not just those in my own local cellars, for all believers. Because we're fellow members of that body, and I should rejoice when Christ is preached by them. I might not agree with the way they cross their T's or dot their I's, but I can rejoice, like Paul did in Philippians 1, that Christ is preached.

But that doesn't mean I can do everything that they do, and I think this is where we have to be careful. I can love them, I can learn from them, and learn zeal and love and dedication of the Lord from them, but I can't do a lot of the things they do. I have to go, my conscience, like Luther's, is captive to the word of God, and I have to go by what the word of God teaches me.

For instance, it doesn't mean that I can cooperate with other believers in crusades where converts are sent back to an apostate church. I can't do that, and that's what's happening today. If you come from a certain apostate church, and you profess faith in Christ, you're sent back there.

That bothers me. It makes me think of what Moody said. He said, I wouldn't put live chicks under a dead hen, and he was right on when he said that, too.

That's a great truth. All believers are members. I don't think I ever appreciated that truth until those four years when I was in the Navy, and you're overseas, and you meet a fellow who came to me one day and said, Are you a Christian? I said, Yes.

He said, Are you a born-again Christian? I said, Yes, I'm a born-again Christian, and I can still see that big hand that is going out, and we shook hands, and I tell you, it really meant something. I didn't say, What denomination do you belong to? I just knew he loved the Lord, and that's all I cared. We became lifelong friends.

Lifelong friends. Quite the glorious truth. All believers are priests.

I'm sure most of you are familiar with this in 1 Peter 2, verses 5 and 9. We're holy priests, and we're royal priests. 1 Peter 2, verse 4, Coming to him as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious. You also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

Verse 9, But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, his own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of him who calls you out of darkness into his marvelous light. All believers are priests. Male believers are priests.

Female believers are priests. All believers are, and all believers have this function of offering up the sacrifice of their persons, and the sacrifice of their possessions, and the sacrifice of their praise, and the sacrifice of their service to the Lord. All believers.

But the Spirit of God puts control on the public exercise of the priesthood. He commanded, and we shouldn't be surprised at that. Think of the controls that the Spirit of God put on the use of tongues in an assembly, but I think you know them, in 1 Corinthians 14.

If anybody speaks in tongues, it must be an interpreter. Not more than three may speak in tongues at any time. They must speak one at a time.

What they say must be edifying. The women must remain silent. All things must be done decently and in order.

And so it is with regard to the public use of the priesthood of the believer. I will, therefore, that the males pray everywhere. 1 Peter Chapter 2. I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over a man.

We shouldn't be surprised at these things. If the Spirit of God can put controls on the public use of gifts in the assembly, why can he not do it on the priesthood believers as well? Number 6. A local assembly is made up of saints, elders, and deacons. Philippians Chapter 1, and I consider this rather a crucial verse.

There is no place that I know in the New Testament that defines a local church, but I like to take this verse, Philippians 1.1, while in Timothy, servants of Jesus Christ, were all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi with the elders and the deacons. That church in Philippi was made up of saints, elders, deacons, period. And they were gathered together for fellowship, for the breaking of bread, for the apostles' doctrine, and for prayer.

And I think if you bring those thoughts together, you really do have a definition of what a local assembly is. It's a group of people composed of saints, elders, and deacons who gather together for those four functions. And second, I mean, number 7, a great truth of the assembly is there's no such a thing as a clerical system in the assembly.

There is no one man officiating. This is a glorious truth. It's the saints who are to do the work of the ministry.

Ephesians Chapter 4. I might just dwell on this for a minute. Ephesians Chapter 4, beginning in verse 7. And incidentally, it's because of this portion of the word of God that I fellowship in an assembly today. I was out in Honolulu, and the Spirit of God came to me in a very real way and said, why are you in an

assembly? Would you be just as happy in a denominational church, or a Bible church? Are you in the assembly because your father was in the assembly? Is that why you're there? And I said, that does it.

And I'm going to go to the word of God and see what the word of God teaches, and I stand here before you tonight, and I really believe the Spirit of God led me to this passage of scripture. Ephesians Chapter 4. There, each one of us was grace-given according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore, he says, when he ascended on high, he led captivity captive and gave gifts to men.

This, of course, refers to the ascension of the Lord Jesus. After his glorious work of redemption, he went back to the Father, led captivity captive. Not some captives in hell or in Hades, but a glorious triumph over all the forces of evil.

He made a show of them openly, and the Father gave him gifts as a result of his glorious redemptive work, and he turned around and gave them to men. Now, that he ascended, what does it mean that we also first descended into the lower parts of the earth? Paul is saying, now, when it says he ascended, well, it certainly presumes an earlier descent, and he's speaking there of incarnation. I'm not speaking of him going down to one of the sections of Hades at all.

I'm speaking of the fact that how could he ascend? He had been in heaven from all eternity. Ah, he came down to Bethlehem. That expression, the lower parts of the earth there, is a figurative literary expression for the virgin's womb.

Does that shock you? Well, that's what it is. If you turn back to Psalm 139, David speaks about how he was formed, but he describes his formation in his mother's womb, and he calls it the lowest parts of the earth. Where was he born? Where was he formed? Underground? No, it has nothing to do with underground.

Maybe we should turn back. I see some of you turning back there, so let's turn back to Psalm 139. Verse 13, we'll begin there.

For you have formed my inward parts, you have covered me in my mother's womb. And the word covered there means woven. That's beautiful.

What a beautiful Psalm. And it speaks about the tendons, and the nerves, and the muscles, and the arteries, and it's just like a weaving in the human body, isn't it? How beautiful. I will praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

Marvelous are your works, and that my soul knows very well. My frame was not hidden from you. My skeletal structure was not hidden from you when I was made in secret and skillfully wrought in the lowest parts of the earth.

Lowest parts of the earth? I ask again, where was all this taking place? It was taking place in his mother's womb, and yet it's called the lowest parts of the earth. What is it? Well, it just helps to have the soul of a poet when you study the Bible. That's what it is.

It just helps to have the soul of a poet. It's poetic language, it's figurative, but it has to mean that, doesn't it? What else could it mean? You or your eyes saw my substance being yet unformed, and in your books they all were written. The days fashioned for me when as yet there were none of them.

The whole diary was written before he ever saw the light of day. Really wonderful. Let's go back to Ephesians chapter 4. We were in verse 9, and we see the Lord Jesus coming down first of all, being born of the Virgin Mary.

He who descended is also the one who ascended far above all the heavens that he might fill all things. This refers to his glorious ascension to the Father's right hand. What happened? He himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers.

Now, we believe that apostles and prophets were connected with the foundation of the church. Ephesians 2 says, "...and are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone." The apostles and prophets weren't the foundation of the church, but they laid the foundation of the church in what they taught about the Lord Jesus, and he goes on to say that, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone. Now, you only lay the foundation of a building once, and we believe that there are no apostles and prophets in the primary New Testament sense today.

It was these men who gave us the New Testament, and it is given once for all. The faith, once for all, delivered unto the saints. In that sense, we do not need apostles and prophets today.

But it also lists evangelists, pastors, and teachers. Evangelists, his parish is the world. He goes forth with the gospel.

Pastors, shepherds, teachers who expound the word of God and apply it to the hearts of people. Now, here it is, "...for the equipping of the saints for the work of the ministry." This is very, very important, and I tell you, when I saw that, it was as if a great light went on inside of me. "...for the equipping of the saints for the work of the ministry." It's not what is practiced today in evangelical circles, but there it is in the word of God.

"...for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come in the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." And so, he says that the purpose of gifts is not to become permanent structures that people are going to depend on forever, but to build up the saints so that they can go forth and do the work of the ministry. I read that in Honolulu, and I thought, hmm, I saw that work in my own family. I saw my father coming over to this country with a minimum of education, and he got saved by the grace of God.

And the brethren discipled him and led him into the word of God, and pretty soon he was preaching the gospel. They were teaching the word of God. He was a furniture finisher by trade, but he knew God, and he knew the Bible, and pretty soon he was an elder in an assembly.

It works, it works, and it really does work. But, you know, because of centuries of tradition revolving around the clerical system, it seems hard to believe that the idea of one man officiating in a church, doing most if not all the preaching, is not in the New Testament pattern. Yet, the whole idea of dividing an equal brotherhood into clergy and laity is completely without scriptural support.

It's foreign to the New Testament. There's no biblical warrant for anyone to speak of my pastor, or for any preacher to speak of my church. It just isn't found in the word of God.

Nowhere in the New Testament is any reference ever made to a one-man minister in the church. I'm going to read you some quotes from men, many of whom held the office of a cleric in a church, and they're all going to say the same thing. It's not right.

Let me read you. Barnes, who wrote a commentary on the New Testament, he says there's no, and he's speaking on 1 Timothy chapter 3, he says there's no allusion to anyone who was to be superior to the elders and deacons. He says, if Paul supposed there was to be an order of prelates in the church, why is there no allusion to them? Why is there no mention of their qualifications? That's a good point.

You have the qualifications of bishops, of elders, but you don't have any qualifications for the minister. Why is that? He brings that out. He was probably a cleric himself.

If Timothy was himself a prelate, was he to have nothing to do in transmitting the office to others? Were there no peculiar qualifications required in such an order of men which it would be proper to mention? Would it not be respectful? I like this. Paul was a gentleman, and if there had been such a man in Philippi, he certainly would have mentioned him there in verse 1 of chapter 1. He says there, would it not be respectful at least if Paul to have made some allusion to such an office if Timothy himself held it? There was none. People say, well, Paul himself was a minister.

Listen, the longest Paul ever stayed in one place at one time was two years in Ephesus. During his total ministry, he stayed three years there, but at any one time he only stayed there for two years, and his strategy was to see them saved, to go in and see them built up in the faith, and to move on. He, as a gift to the church, considered himself expendable.

Timothy in Titus, he said, well, Timothy, in fact, the old Bibles used to say he was the first bishop of the church at Ephesus. Thank God they've removed that now from a subscript to the epistles to Timothy. Timothy wasn't a minister in the church.

Timothy was a troubleshooter for the apostle Paul. He was an itinerant. He went around, and so did Titus, not a settled man in the church.

Certainly the New Testament teaches a plurality of elders, but not of one-man ministry. Alexander McLaren wrote, I cannot but believe that the present practice of confining the public teaching of the church to an official class has done harm. He was one himself.

Why should one man be forever speaking, and hundreds of people who are able to teach sitting dumb to listen, or pretend to listen to him? I hate forcible revolution, and do not believe that any institutions, either political or ecclesiastical, which need violence to sweep them away, are ready to be removed. But I believe that if the level of spiritual life were raised among us, new forms would naturally be evolved in which the great principle of the democracy of Christianity is founded, namely, I will pour out my spirit on all flesh, and on my servants, and on my handmaidens I will pour out in these days of my spirit, and they shall prophesy." Now, J. I. Packer adds his testimony. He says, by clericalism, I mean that combination of conspiracy and tyranny to which the minister claims, and the congregation agrees, that all spiritual ministry is his responsibility, and not theirs, a notion that is both disreputable in principle, and spirit-quenching in practice.

J. I. Packer. Strong words, aren't they? In his book *God's New Society*, John R. W. Stott says this, What model of the church, then, should we keep in our minds? The traditional model is that of the pyramid, with the pastor perched precariously on the pinnacle, like a little pope in his own church, while the laity are arrayed below him in serried ranks of inferiority. It is a totally unbiblical image, because the New Testament envisages not a single pastor with a docile flock, but both a plural oversight and an every-member ministry.

This is not written by somebody from one of the assemblies. This is written by a man who was a cleric in the Church of England. Incredible! I have young people come, and say, Why do they say that? Well, I say it's a paradox.

A paradox is a troop standing on its head to attract your attention. Some of you perhaps remember Donald Gray Barnard. I have to admit, he was really one of the greatest Bible teachers I've ever heard.

He was a pastor of the 10th Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. He said, By the close, and this is very strong, you know, if we said something like this today, people would just jump on us. He said, By the close of the first century, there was a party within the church organization which had gained a victory over the laity by exalting itself to a place of dominance, even though Peter had warned against it.

As seen in the letters of the church at Ephesus in the second chapter of the book of Revelation, there was in the first century a party called the Nicolaitans, who, as their name in Greek indicates, had gained supremacy over the laity. There it is stated that God Almighty hates the works of those who advocate and enforce rule over others within the body of Christ. Strong language.

Leighton Ford. Leighton Ford is the brother-in-law of Billy Graham. He writes in the Christian Persuader, Our whole vocabulary of church activity will change if we really begin to take seriously the New Testament pattern.

Then he quotes Richard Halverson as saying, When we ask, How many ministers does your church have? The traditional answer is one or two or five, depending on how large the paid staff is. The true answer is two hundred or two thousand, depending on how large the membership is. Every believer is a minister.

It's incredible, isn't it? Incredible to hear men like this saying it. In some senses, they're knocking the ground from under themselves. He says, A church which bottlenecks its outreach by depending on its specialists, its pastors or evangelists to do the witnessing, is living in violation of both the intention of the head and the consistent pattern of early Christians.

E. Stanley Jones was a Methodist minister in India years ago. He said the church at Antioch was founded by laymen, carried on by laymen, and spread through that ancient world by laymen. This is important for the reconstruction of the church today.

The next great spiritual awakening is going to come through the laity. Now, he uses the expression, the Bible doesn't use the expression. I have to read it and explain that these are the words he uses.

Hitherto, the center of gravity has been on the minister. Now, the center of gravity has to be shifted to the laity. We ministers, missionaries, and evangelists are never going to win the world.

We're too few to do it, and if we could do it, it wouldn't be good, for it would take away from the laity that spiritual growth and development which comes through sharing our faith. But we will never get the laity to take the responsibility for the Christian movement, and it's spread by saying, come on and help the pastor. Their inner response, and sometimes outer response, is why should we? That's his job.

We pay him for that. The very setup of the ordinary church tends to produce the anonymous. I think that's beautiful.

The very setup of the ordinary church tends to produce the anonymous. The congregation is supposed to be silent and receptive, and the pastor is supposed to be outgoing and aggressive. That produces, by its very makeup, the spectator and the participant.

By its very makeup, it produces the recessive, the ingrown, the non-contributive, and the parasite. I didn't say it. Men and women who, during the week, are molders of opinion, directors of large concerns, directors of destinies, are expected to be putty on Sunday, and are supposed to like it.

They have little responsibility, hence make little response except perhaps to say, I enjoyed your sermon. They have little to do because they do little. You'll notice that many of these men keep talking about clergy, laity, ministers in the exclusive sense, not realizing that these are unscriptural terms.

However, I give them credit that they sense the weakness of the clerical system. Brian Greene says, The future of Christianity and the evangelization of the world rests in the hands of ordinary men and women, and not primarily in those of professional Christian ministers. Harnack claims that when the church won its greatest victories in the early days of the Roman Empire, it did so not by preachers or teachers or apostles, but by informal missionaries, the people going everywhere and gossiping the gospel.

And then, finally, I'd like to read what J. A. Stewart said. He reminds us that each member of the local assembly went out to win souls for Christ by personal contact, and then brought these newborn babes back into these local churches where they were indoctrinated and strengthened in the faith of the Redeemer. They, in turn, went out to do likewise.

In another place, Stewart says, The world will never be evangelized as God intended as long as we have a clerical system. That's powerful. The world will never be evangelized the way God intended as long as we have a clerical system.

Now, dear friends, at a time when many evangelical Christians are moving away from the clerical system, many in the assemblies with only elders and deacons are moving toward clerisy, hiring one man to perform their religious functions for them. They're buying high and selling low. Their cry is, Give us a minister like the other churches.

They're like those in the social sciences who adopt popular trends of thought at the time that secular professionals are beginning to subject the trends to serious criticism. It's just a matter of climbing on the bandwagon as it's slowing down. So, that's what's happening today.

What's the harm of the clerical system? Summary. It always has the danger of gathering people to a man instead of to the blessed Lord Jesus Christ. There's always a danger, too, when the teaching is done, when all the teaching is done by one man.

No one man has the monopoly, and the Spirit of God loves to take different people and speak through them. It's easier to introduce error when people look to one man as their teacher. And then, as we've seen, the one-man ministry hinders the development of gift in the assembly.

The laity--this is, I think, E. Stanley Jones again. The laity--yes, it is E. Stanley Jones--the laity on the whole have been in the stands as spectators, and the clergy have been on the field playing the game. If the clergyman kicks a goal or makes a touchdown, he's applauded.

Good pastor, hope he will stay. This setup must be changed. The laity must come out of the stands and take the field as players.

Four, the clerical system ignores the purpose for which the gifts were given. They were given for the perfecting of the saints unto the work of the ministry. The saints are the ones who are to do the work of the ministry.

So, you go to an assembly with a hundred believers and someone asks you how many ministers you have. The answer is a hundred, hopefully. To quote Stuart again, the world will never be evangelized the way God intended it to be as long as we have a clerical system.

And with the clerical system, oftentimes, you go salaried ministry, and this is a curse in the work of God. This has a terrible danger where a man is judged by the size and growth of a church, a temptation to lower the standards. And you know, as I know, that those who pay the piper call the tomb.

Other great truths of the New Testament assembly. Worship is central. I mean, so many people who fellowship for years in an assembly such as you're used to, and then they leave and go elsewhere, and they always say, well, I do miss the breaking of bread.

They say that. I feel sick. Why did you leave? That's it.

Worship is central. Dear friends, if you don't like to worship, you won't like heaven, because worship is going to be the central activity of heaven. It really is.

And Revelation gives you the hymn book. It's the poetry of the New Testament. Every believer has some gift for gifts.

We believe this. There should be liberty in the assembly for the exercise of gifts. These gifts are given for the benefit of the body.

Not for selfish display, but for the benefit of the body. I would like to emphasize this. New Testament principles require New Testament power.

There is no substitute for spirituality. There's nothing worse than to see people trying to go through the motions unspiritually. God wants a people who are in touch with himself, people who are walking in the spirit day by day, people who are walking in fellowship with the blessed Lord Jesus Christ.

It's not enough just to have correct doctrine. We must be correct spiritually. I'd like to also mention this toward the end here.

There's a reproach connected with maintaining the truth of the church today, the truth of the assembly today. If you're not willing to bear that reproach, you're going to really drift. If you stick to the truth of the New Testament, you'll always be a second bird in the evangelical community.

I could give you instance after instance of that, but I think of this. On the day before her execution, Anakin wrote to her infant sons, where you hear of a poor, simple, cast-off little flock which is despised and rejected by the world, join them. For where the cross is, there is Christ.

I like that. Where you hear of a poor, simple, cast-off little flock which is despised and rejected by the world, join them. For where the cross is, there is Christ.

Dear friends, get convictions. Your fathers won't do. Your mothers won't do.

Your friends won't do. Get convictions with regard to the New Testament church, and be enthusiastic about them, not apologetic. What your parents believe should not be enough for you.

Years ago, Alfred Mace said to me, Bill, when you get divine principles, stick to them. And that saying stuck to me, and I've sought to follow it. When you get divine principles, stick to them.

Don't compromise them, and don't drift away from them. And he said something else, and he said, no man's gift is too big for God's principles. I might say, such a gift, I should be reaching a wider constituency.

He said, no, no, no man's gift is too big for God's principles. I say to you, night in closing, be committed to the assembly. Be enthusiastic about it.

Don't be a church hopper. Don't be a religious butterfly. Be one to whom Christ can say, you have continued with me in my temptation, and I appoint unto you a kingdom.

I believe, as I stand here tonight, I believe with all my heart, that the smallest, weakest assembly of God's people, and I don't use that in a sectarian sense either, the smallest, weakest assembly of God's people means more to God than the greatest empire in the world. When God talks about an empire, he speaks about drops in the bucket. That tickles me.

He never says that about the church. A body and pride of Christ imagined. And I believe the work of a godly elder in assembly means more to God than the ruler of a nation.

More space is devoted in the New Testament to the work of an elder than to the work of a president or a king. Get these convictions. Let them mold your life, and live in the light of them.

May the Lord bless his word through our hearts tonight. Shall we pray? And I believe Brother Larry has a closing hymn for us. Oh, Father, we're so often influenced by the currents that are blowing in the world.

We think of the assembly, we think of the church which the Lord Jesus came and bled and died. Oh, we pray that we might just think your thoughts after you in this regard. That we might be men and women who are dedicated to this assembly, not just to the gospel, but to the fellowship of the mystery.

Lord, the administration of this marvelous ministry. Help us to be faithful to you, we ask it in all things. We give our thanks in the Savior's name.

Amen.

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