

A
WORD
IN ITS
SEASON

1st Series

No. 355

October 2002

CONTENTS

[WHAT IS "AMONG YOU"](#)

[THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY](#)

Edited and Published by:

E.C.Burr

50 Red Post Hill London SE24 9JQ

WHAT IS “AMONG YOU”

1 Peter 5 1-4; 1 Thessalonians 1: 2-10; Acts 6: 1-6; 20: 29, 30

R.D.P. I was thinking of what is among the saints that comes into all these scriptures. What is among the saints and what is to issue from among the saints is a most important consideration. In 1 Corinthians how many things are said to spring negatively from among the saints; there are divisions among you, sects among you, fornication among you. There is a whole list of negative things which come out from among the saints and it seems to me that it is something that we need to pay great attention to with a view to what is positive.

Jude speaks of “the faith once delivered to the saints”, (Jude 3), not delivered to a church or to a hierarchy, or to an ecclesiastical few, but delivered to the saints. Then Paul’s references in Timothy to the deposit being kept by the Holy Spirit which dwells in you. It says of the Lord Jesus that He came in and out among them; it distinguishes what we are to know by way of assembling from what is merely congregational. In other words the persons are there not just incidentally, or as an audience – I hope we are not here today as an audience – but as livingly part of it. Assembling involves that. It involves coming together as integral to each other and it seems to me to be very precious. The Lord Jesus said in Luke, “I am among you as the One that serves”. The last scripture read indicates that it is clearly something which the enemy will attack – “from among your own selves”. The impression I have is that what is among the saints is to be marked by mutuality of affection, knowledge and object.

I read in Thessalonians because I believe the whole idea is set out there, the truth there is amongst the saints. Thessalonica is the second church that Paul established – Philippi, Thessalonica, Corinth and Ephesus in that order. Philippi is the church established in relation to suffering and Corinth bears upon the public testimony and Ephesus in relation to the heavenly side of the truth, but Thessalonians is the church in its beginnings and marked by affection, not marked by doctrine – there is not very much by way of

doctrine in the whole of the two epistles – but by great affection operating among the saints and becomes a testimony in itself.

The scripture in Peter says, “Shepherd the flock of God which is among you”. The flock of God is a very precious thought. Why is it that Paul, as he leaves Ephesus where the greatest teaching as to the assembly, the full revelation of God, had been, speaks of “all the flock”, and shepherding the assembly of God. Why does the flock come out there? What is the flock of God? What is the difference between the flock of God and what comes out elsewhere as to the body and the head?

Then in Acts 6 in a crisis, in one of the first thrusts of the enemy at the church through the murmurings of the Hellenists, the apostle said, look out, “from among yourselves”. It is not something that apostles did themselves, but “Look out therefore, brethren, from among yourselves seven men”, so something emerges positively and powerfully from among the saints, and then that final warning in Acts 20 where Paul says, “from among your own selves shall rise up men speaking perverted things”. That is a warning at the end. I would like to get at the importance of what is among the saints positively. I believe that we are in a time where we need to go back to what is basic, lest the negative side of things that came out at Corinth should prevail. At Ephesus, the first church to depart, they left first love; it is as if they lost contact with their moorings, their affection for Christ, and they are exhorted to do the first works. It goes back to the very basic things. Thessalonica is the church in its beginnings and affection is working amongst the saints. Paul was exhilarated by the news that the work of God had borne fruit at Thessalonica. The great basics were there, as to the coming of the Lord and the testimony that there was another King, Jesus. You may say what about the teaching of sonship, the teaching of the assembly? Very little is said of those things, but what was basic there resulted in such an atmosphere of love and mutuality among the saints that they could be called the assembly of Thessalonians.

P.M. Was there what God had set among them first? I was thinking of the appearings of the Lord Jesus that you referred to, His coming

in and going out among them. Had he left something in the company, and the presence of the Holy Spirit in the company, so that what was there was from the divine side first?

R.D.P. I think so and it results in fruit appearing very quickly, a remarkable testimony of what came out there so that in a very short time they became models for those in Macedonia and around. They were not models exactly in their knowledge of doctrine; they were models in how the truth was among them. What they were by nature was submerged and what was coming out was Christ in expression. It seems to me to set out what is among the saints. Let us not become like Ephesus where they had much knowledge, and ability to distinguish between things that were right and wrong such as the works of the Nicolaitanes, but they had come adrift at their moorings, the first works needed doing again. These things are very important, that we do not become experts in distinguishing points of truth and yet lose sight of the basics of fellowship together, of affection, love and mutuality and appreciation of the Lord Jesus and His coming. I think Thessalonians gives us the beginnings, a real assembly in function; it gives us the assembling of the saints in simplicity and yet power.

G.N. Do you think the company had the character of the living water that issued from the rock? I was wondering whether what should issue from the saints is what is living. Would that be characterised by the living water?

R.D.P. I think that is right, so Achsah says, “give me springs of water” Judges 1: 15. What should mark the assembly in its local expression is “give me springs of water”. You may say, we do not have many who are gifted, and may be that is so, but let the local assembly, as it was in Thessalonica, be marked by the springs of water. It was almost irrepressible at Thessalonica; it was something that captivated Paul, the apostle, that in such a short space of time there could be such a result among the saints.

J.W. Does Paul refer to the way that he and others with him were among the saints in Thessalonica, and that they became imitators of

them, so that what was there was seen in those who had served there.

R.D.P. We get that in the Acts, they went in among them and in the three Lord's days that they were there the enemy attacked viciously and quickly, almost as though there was such a potential for what was strikingly of God there that he attacks within three weeks, so that Paul has to move on. He comes in from Philippi to Thessalonica and goes in among the saints. He would be a man who was bearing in his body the brands of the Lord Jesus, and as he goes in among the saints he finds a resting place there, and the truth was received among them. There was something established among the saints that was solid and very precious.

D.E.B. The epistle is not addressed to the saints in Thessalonica; it is addressed to the Thessalonians, the only case where Paul writes in that fashion.

R.D.P. We have been reminded that it is not like "the assembly of God in Corinth" which brings out its dignity, but it the assembly of Thessalonians, the people who walked there in their daily occupations. They were persons who expressed something of what had come to them in the truth as to the Lord Jesus in their walk, their life, what they were in their affections together. Do not let us lose this amid all the teaching and the truth that we have and all the many things that occupy us – let us not lose the preciousness of the simplicity of our links together in the Lord Jesus.

He speaks here of, "remembering unceasingly your work of faith, and labour of love, and enduring constancy of hope" (v 3). These are three basic things among the saints. Hope is something which sometimes runs short, it seems to dry up. They were persons who were looking for the Lord to come, looking for His appearing, the question of the rapture was something that puzzled them. Teaching comes in at the end of this first epistle as to the rapture, but what they had before them was the coming of Christ. If you go to the Acts the testimony of the affect of the lives of these people was that there was another king, Jesus! Is that what I convey? What do we convey

today? The impression given here was that there was another king, Jesus.

D.J.H. The first works you referred to are that – “ye turned to God from idols to serve a living and a true God and to await his Son from heaven”. Are they the first works that we have to not let go, but to keep close to them?

R.D.P. I am sure there has been a lot of definition as to the first works in Revelation 2 as to Ephesus and it may include assembly affections and close attachment to Christ and appreciation of Christ, but just the words themselves appeal, “do the first works”. Is that something that we should be thinking about as to whether the first works need to be done again, that we might touch again afresh the preciousness of things with no complications? No complications had come in at Thessalonica, they were together in Christ, they were looking for His coming, they were a demonstration here of love and mutuality among persons who were quite disparate – Greeks, Jews, chief women, all these had come together and they had one object and one voice, one song, and one testimony that there was another king, Jesus.

D.J.H. I was thinking that. It is “to await his Son from the heavens whom he raised from among the dead, Jesus”. That is the other king. That was there at the beginning, as it says “how ye turned to God ...”, but it was maintained by them and kept fresh in their hearts.

R.D.P. Perhaps we might stop sometimes and say, How are things among us? How are the basic features of fellowship, as united together in appreciation and love for Christ, appreciation for the truth, love for one another, things working mutually among the saints? How are things among us? I ask the question of myself. What was among the saints at Corinth was yielding a crop that was a disgrace to God’s Name, but that is not what is in view; what is in view is that what is among us should yield something that is precious to God.

M.W. You mean things were actually working here. We have faith, love and hope (1 Cor 13: 13), but it was the work of faith, it was the labour of love and the enduring constancy of hope. I am sure we all

have faith, love and hope, but I ask myself often how much of it is at work?

R.D.P. That is good, the work of faith. The light of God has entered our souls and what you find in the scriptures over and over again by example in the men of faith is that they put it to work. Abraham had faith in God, and though every indication in his life and in his circumstances as to Isaac was negative, and he could not see a way through, he who put his faith into operation. He had waited for his son for all those years, and finally Isaac is born. Think of the joy of his heart. Then God says to him now offer up Isaac as a burnt offering, and he goes to the mountain and the work of faith meant that he trusted that God was able to raise him from among the dead – faith in operation. It was working. Rahab turns her back upon her nation, she sees that God was with the people and in faith she puts the scarlet line in the window. I think these three things are connected; if there is a work of faith there will be a labour of love, if there is a labour of love there will be an enduring constancy of hope and so the things work together.

M.W. They were certainly making themselves heard. In Numbers 10, you have the silver trumpets and here they sounded out the word of the Lord. There was what was inside among the saints and it is infectious, is it not, and outside the testimony was going out, the word of the Lord, no uncertain sound.

R.D.P. Brethren will remind me of the great truth of sovereignty which is vital, but I hope they will bear with me in stressing the importance of this great matter of what is mutual amongst the saints so that we do not have what came out at Corinth (where persons became polarised round various opinions), because the fact that we have one precious Lord Jesus and one hope is working among the saints. It is almost as if the whole place was galvanised by the saints at Thessalonica and it is the beginning of Christian fellowship, it is not the whole thing. Corinth is the public testimony. Ephesus is the great truth of what is heavenly, but we need to begin at the foundations and see that the foundations are kept right.

D.J.R. Is it important to be absolutely certain about these things?

The Thessalonians, although young in the truth were, and Paul started with “the Christ must have suffered and raised from among the dead”.

R.D.P. Perhaps we should go over why we are we here, why are persons gathered together in fellowship? They are gathered together because Christ is Lord and because there is something here for Him and there is a testimony of Himself in simplicity first of all and there is another king Jesus, and we are awaiting for His Son from heaven. These things were manifest amongst the Thessalonians. Perhaps we sometimes lose the grasp of all that.

Ephesus, the first church that fell away, had the greatest light and they were still marked by great endurance and judgment in the things of God (Rev 2: 2,6), but it says, “I have against thee, thou hast left thy first love”. He then says, “do the first works” (v 5), and you can lose the power and effectiveness of judgment and the knowledge of the truth if the first works are let go.

A.M. I was noticing that work of faith and labour of love are both in the singular. The saints here were a disparate company but were working one work together, labouring in one labour. I was thinking of the mutuality seen, they were working to the same end in affection for Christ and for what He has down here.

R.D.P. It is like the bees, they all work with one end in view, unselfish in the way that they operate. You get the impression here that these persons were like that, their hope was outside this scene. They were looking for Christ to come, they were looking for His appearing, but in the meantime there was something being demonstrated here in the lives of men and women in which they were all included. Let us not be excluded. I do not want to feel excluded in any part of my life among the saints of God, I want to feel included and that is what “among the saints” involves.

D.E.R. The background to this epistle is that the Thessalonians were under a great reproach and opposition. Does that show their reality, that they were so delivered from this present evil world that

they incurred the opposition and reproach of men and went on, notwithstanding? They would remain true to the truth, true to the truth as to fellowship, and incurred the antagonism of the world as a consequence.

R.D.P. Yes, it was the worst kind of rabble that was stirred up at Thessalonica against them. The Jews stirred up hatred amongst the people and so on and they were true in the midst of that. My point is that what was seen as a united testimony there in the place was not the testimony of truth as such in what they held (you get that later), it was in what they were. That is, I think, the testimony of the truth of fellowship in what the persons were, the way they worked together, the way they were united in their object and the way that there was a testimony going out from them. It says, "Ye became models to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia for the word of the Lord sounded out from you". I do not think that was just the preaching, or just the words they used; it was the very fact of their living and by living a Christian life there was something sounding out from them that was a tremendous testimony. We know that there is the articulation of the truth that comes in in other epistles, the truth as to witness and Christian fellowship in its full development at Corinth, the truth of what is heavenly at Ephesus – these things are all important and we must not set them aside – but underlying it is the fact that there were persons who had one heart, one voice and one life.

P.M. It says, "how ye turned to God from idols to serve a living and a true God". It was not just an initial movement, but they turned to God to serve: with one heart they were involved in that. Was the centre for them outside this world altogether?

R.D.P. They had something that was beyond, "there is another king, Jesus". Have we another king? It was not what they said of themselves, but the testimony of the persons who were opposed to what was said. What is the testimony that rings out, not from words that we say, but from the lives that we lead? Is it that there is another king? Or is it sometimes what gives no honour to Christ? Is that what is there? These are the basic things. The knowledge of

the truth is to be built up among us but underneath it is that which is basic to it and if we lose that we lose it all. We lose the joy and blessing of it all.

V E.W. One of the features that set them together was that they accepted the word with much tribulation. It cost them much.

R.D.P. It cost them something. I suppose that would be true of anything worthwhile in spiritual things. Most of them were Greeks.

There were Jews and a large number of Greeks, and then there were those called chief women there as well. This was not perhaps, you might say, the ideal constituents of a local assembly, naturally there was potential for disagreements, but that is what was there and they merged together so that there was no evidence of these individual characters as far as we can see in the assembly at Thessalonica. They are all there but they are merged in one object, one life and one love.

P.J.M. There may have been tribulation but there was also a lot of care. It speaks of their entering in. I was rather taken with that expression “we have been gentle in the midst of you as a nurse would cherish her own children”. It is not a nurse cherishing someone else’s children but her own, Paul felt that they were his flesh and blood and he goes on to develop that later. He says we have given “our own lives also because ye had become beloved of us”.

R.D.P. The whole thing is couched in affection. Paul says he was among them as a nurse her own children, which also brings in the mother, and then he speaks of the father – “you know how as a father his own children, we used to exhort each one of you and comfort and testify that ye should work worthy of God”. The nurse feature goes on for a long time. In the history of Jacob Rebecca’s nurse extends a long the way in his history. He is almost back to Bethel before it says that Rebecca’s nurse died. The nursing feature suggests welfare. Paul saw the need if the local assembly was to be maintained in its beautiful features of a welfare system. That is not handing out money – it may involve that, and we thank God for the

fact that there is that – but spiritual welfare. The mother and the father and the nurse are very important in the make up of a place.

P.J.M. Sometimes if a child is intransigent it gets excluded from the nursery. You sometimes hear of children, even very young children, who are banned, they have to find somewhere else, but if it is your own child you cannot do that.

R.D.P. That is helpful and we cannot do that with the brethren. In that sense they belong to us and the nurse would operate. Things might be difficult, it may take a long time. It is very interesting that scripture should use such simple illustrations of the way things were developed in the local place.

B.E.S. Where there is a locality distinguished in the scripture you usually find something said about faithful individuals in it. I was thinking of Aristarchus, he came from Thessalonica – if we follow up his history in the scripture we find it is very interesting.

R.D.P. Another name that comes to mind is Ephaphras: it says, “he is one of you”. I think what you say is interesting. I think it is important that we are ready to submerge anything that we may be, certainly what we think we may be in relation to what is amongst the saints. All the saints are part of this, there is no one excluded. We do not get the body of the saints and then those that lead, and so when it comes to the elders it says, “the elders which are among you”. They come from among the saints and if persons are distinguished they are distinguished as being part of that whole. If they become detached then they may become as Paul says of some at Jerusalem who were conspicuous as being somewhat, those who “communicated nothing”.

D.E.B. In the second chapter that you read the apostle uses the word to exhort “each one of you and comfort”. It is interesting that it is each one of you as though he would know them personally and have dealings with them but with the exhortation there was comfort too.

R.D.P. That brings us to our second scripture where he says, “shepherd the flock of God which is among you”. I think the flock of

God brings out that side of each one of you. He says, "I know my own sheep by name and am known of those that are mine". The flock of God is among the saints. That is John's way of describing how persons come together collectively. If you read John's gospel you find that it is largely individual up to chapter 10: chapter 9 is the crown of what is individual. In chapter 10 you get the beginning of the company, you get the flock of God. When Paul speaks about what is collective he refers to the body of Christ which perhaps suggests more the side of responsibility and representation, but the flock of God is that which is Christ's which is the subject of His care. I believe, "each one of you", refers to the flock of God. Peter in addressing the saints of the dispersion says, "shepherd the flock of God which is among you". It is one of the things that is positive among the saints.

D.E.B. The elders too are among you; they are not above them or having separate conclaves together, but they are among the saints, among the sheep.

R.D.P. That is my exercise that this basic line of things might be maintained among us, because we shall become detached and lose the gain of the greatest truth unless these first works are maintained among us. The flock of God, what does it mean? Is it the saints viewed as the objects of the care of the Lord Jesus, persons that He knew intimately, He knew them by name. He says, "I know those that are mine and am known of those that are mine". The man in John 9 becomes a prime candidate for the flock of God, cast out of the world, but claimed and cared for by Christ and it seems to be something that runs right through to Acts 20 where the flock is spoken of again. The Shepherd goes right through the scriptures.

P.M. How do you shepherd the flock? We often speak of shepherding in relation to the individual sheep, but what is involved in shepherding the flock?

R.D.P. It is Peter who is speaking here to the saints of the dispersion, those who were scattered under the government of God, and it is striking in that way that he should speak about the flock of

God. I suppose in practice there would be a lot of individuals and little groups, but Peter says, “shepherd the flock of God”. I think it is the whole thought.

P.M. I wondered if elderhood and shepherding seem to go on together here and would have in view the maintenance of what is for God in the company and would secure and hold the individuals in relation to that.

R.D.P. Yes. Elders here seems to be a fairly general thought because Peter speaks of being “a fellow elder”. Elders generally were related to a place, but Peter speaks of being your fellow elder. I think it is what is characteristic here, a “witness of the sufferings of the Christ”. Think of that! Peter had an advantage over Paul because he had witnessed the sufferings of Christ.

P.J.W. Would the thought of the model link with shepherding the flock. Peter speaks of it, we have had it in Thessalonians, models not to the world but “to all who believe” and models for the flock. The Lord Jesus in Matthew 11 said, “come to me” and “learn from me”. We have been taught that that is a model. Would that be involved in shepherding?

R.D.P. I think the idea of models belongs to this basic side of the truth. The Thessalonians became models when they were very young in the faith, and yet they were models. There was something seen, not so much in what they said (although I am sure there was what was said), but there was something seen in them. That is where you see a model. It is not exactly what you hear, but what you see. Models are fairly extensive through the writings of Paul and Peter.

P.J.W. The Corinthians might have thought they were superior to the Thessalonians, but it says, “you became models to all who believe in Macedonia and Achaia”. One local assembly, in that sense, can learn from another, do you think?

R.D.P. Yes and then they imitated what was seen in Judea which was a long way away. They witnessed what was current in the assemblies of Judea and they became imitators of that, there was

something seen there and they took it on. There was something demonstrated in the saints. That is what people will remember about us, they will remember the kind of person we were. We may know a lot of truth and be extensive in our knowledge, but what kind of person are we? Models for the flock, something seen that is an answer to the truth worked out in persons?

J.W. Would giving a right lead be included in shepherding the flock? Peter here refers to the sufferings of the Christ? Do you think one who leads would be prepared for suffering? The thought of a model comes out in that. I think the saints are helped if a right lead is given in any place.

R.D.P. I was thinking of Peter particularly because really the care of the flock was entrusted to him. Peter went off on his fishing expedition in John 21 and led them nowhere. The Lord speaks to him and he says, “feed my lambs, shepherd my sheep, feed my sheep”. I am sure it was to include a right lead, a right direction, but I think that direction is going to be seen as much in what the person is and what their life is as in what they say. A person is effective in what they say by what they are.

H.T.F. I wondered if these two words, “willingly” and “readily” bore on that. They are about what they were rather than what they said. They are very difficult things to imitate, they are the things that we remember about the way we are together.

R.D.P. So exercising oversight would link with what has been said. We need oversight to be exercised. It is not official. It says, “the elders which are among you I exhort”. There are no references to elders at Corinth, or in Thessalonica. At Corinth I suppose elders may have attached it to themselves and at Thessalonica they were young in the truth. These are persons who can be relied on to bring guidance, leadership, love and affection, nursing care and all that is necessary as among the saints.

R.M.B. I wanted to ask as to the verse you quoted in John 10, “I know those that are mine, and am known of those that are mine” (v

14). What I wanted help on was, “as the Father knows me and I know the Father” – how do you understand that?

R.D.P. I think it is a remarkable verse. We think of the flock of God in a diminutive way in a sense as very basic, sheep tend to stray.

John’s sheep, as we have been taught, do not stray, but think of the preciousness of these words, “I know those that are mine” we can understand that, “and am known of those that are mine as the Father know me and I know the Father” – that seems to me to be a very precious truth that those of the flock of God have this knowledge of the Lord Jesus and He has the knowledge of them and the level of this knowledge is the way that He knows the Father. Is that not a very precious truth? That is something that is to be preserved among the flock. If you shepherd the flock of God you would not want that precious touch to be damaged. The man in John 9 comes into the flock of God. He did not know everything, but what he did know he held to. You may say, how did he know these things? How can a man who had so recently been converted be brought into the truth of the Son of God, but that is the way the scripture presents it. I think what you refer to is a very affecting verse, “as the Father knows me and I know the Father”. That is the character of knowledge between the sheep and the Lord Jesus.

D.J.H. It could not be more profound. There is what we sang in the first hymn as to what was before the incarnation, but it is just beyond us to understand how deep that knowledge is, and yet he applied that to the flock.

R.D.P. Every believer who has the Spirit, every servant, every gifted person is part of the flock of God and if we are to shepherd the flock of God it is in view of these precious features being maintained so that every brother and sister is someone of whom the Lord Jesus could say, “I know those that are mine, and am known of those that are mine”.

B.E.S. Mr Raven says of that verse that it is not just the knowledge of acquaintance, but the knowledge of kindred nature. In Isaiah God says, “the ox knoweth its owner, and the ass his master’s crib, but

Israel does not know, my people have no intelligence". Even that elementary kind of knowledge they had not got, but there is something greater than that in Christianity and that is this that is referred to in John 10. God gives us in new birth that which is capable of receiving the knowledge of the Lord in a parallel to the Lord's knowledge of the Father and being known by Him.

R.D.P. "The sheep follow him because they know his voice ... they know not the voice of strangers". This is the flock of God, this is not exactly the assembly as presented in Ephesians but it is the basics.

I believe we have been taught that up to John 9 it is largely individual and then in John 10 you get the beginnings of the company: it is very profound.

E.O.P.M. You spoke earlier as to not leaving our moorings, as it were; we never get beyond this, the need among us for this character of care and oversight. Sometimes even in the medical profession there are things that medicine cannot do. It is said this case needs 'tender loving care' and we never get beyond that in our local companies or individually, however helped we may be in the truth. If we leave this behind we will make shipwreck.

R.D.P. That is my exercise, that in seeking to hold to the fulness of the truth which is our privilege and also our responsibility we do not become detached from the moorings, because if we do it will render the rest null and void to us. If we shepherd the flock of God we would be concerned that what is basic amongst the flock is preserved and one of the basics of the flock of God is that there is a link, not exactly through teaching but through nature, by kindred nature to Christ in the flock of God.

E.O.P.M. I can remember older brothers telling us that we disregard the feelings that are there in the body of the saints at our peril.

R.D.P. I think that is right. It is something that we need always to be aware of, what is among the saints, listen for it, the shepherd would do that. Peter was exhorted by the Lord to "feed my lambs". Why does he not speak about the sheep first? Why does He not say shepherd the lambs? Surely we may think the younger ones need

keeping on the right track, but that is not what the Lord says, He says, “feed my lambs”. Then He says, “shepherd my sheep”, not feed, but shepherd. Surely older persons will not need shepherding first, they do not go astray do they? But older persons do go astray, so look at what the Lord says to Peter, “feed my lambs ... shepherd my sheep ... feed my sheep”. That is the order and there is something in that worth looking into.

J.W. Do we need to be kept in relation to the Lord Himself as to this service? If the Lord’s voice is to be heard we get the Lord’s own feelings about the flock, about the saints. I feel the need to be kept in relation to the Lord, we are responsible to Him in caring for the saints.

R.D.P. We are very responsible to the Lord in relation to the saints. We want to be preserved in the truth, and we want the saints to be preserved as well. I think what you say is very important. Peter is brought back from his diversion to be reminded of the fact that he needed to be among the flock, feeding them and shepherding them. We need to feed young people. You will find interest is maintained as we feed them. What is the last time we really thought about feeding the young people? Things can get difficult sometimes, perhaps they seem to want to go their own way, but let us feed the lambs, that is what it says, and shepherd the sheep. That is another thing, do not forget the older ones. Young people can take on these characteristics as well, shepherd the sheep. Do you ever go after a meeting when everybody rushes out to have a cup of tea, to talk outside, or to play on the swings – have a look back in the room, have a look and see the ones and twos who remain there, they cannot walk too well. Go and shepherd the sheep, go and have part in this lovely thing that is shepherding the flock of God. They belong to Him, He loves them, and I think it is a marvellous thing that He should entrust the shepherding of the flock to His people. He says, it is among you.

P.M. In John 21 Peter had ceased to be a model and had ceased to have a view of the flock, but he still had influence. Does it show that

in every department of our lives we should be exercised that what we do could be imitated by others?

R.D.P. So he says, "I go to fish". He did not say to the others, do you want to come? But they said, "we will go with you". He had tremendous influence and he led them in a way that was unprofitable. There was nothing came out of it. The Lord did not rebuke him for it, but nothing came out of it.

P.J.M. There is a day of reckoning according to Peter. I know it is in the context of receiving a crown of glory but he refers to when the chief Shepherd is manifested. The Lord speaks in His day of those who serve for wages and Peter speaks of not serving for base gain.

We need to guard that anything that we do should not be on this level. The Lord loved the flock so much that He would lay down His life for it.

R.D.P. "I lay down my life for the sheep". I would like the brethren to look at John 10; there is no reference to their sins, there is no reference as to the hands of wicked men taking His life from Him, you find One coming in with a purpose that He would lead out the sheep and he would lay down His life for them because He loved them. He did it because He rejoiced in them, they were His flock.

The door of the sheep is not the door to the fold; it is the door to heaven, and He loved them and cared for them, and He commits them to the elders "which are among you", "shepherd the flock of God which is among you". I think that is something that we might all very well take note of. The crown of glory, Peter's crown is connected with the flock and with the time of suffering.

Just to refer to Acts 6 – "look out from among your own selves" – seven men. The thrust of the enemy was here, there was murmuring amongst the Hellenists because they were being overlooked in the daily administration, "And the twelve, having called the multitude of the disciples to them, said, It is not right that we, leaving the word of God, should serve tables". Was this the beginning of the breakdown? Certainly Paul took on the serving of tables. "Look out therefore brethren, from among yourselves, seven

men, well reported of, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom ... And the saying pleased the whole multitude: and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit". This is not the apostles making a selection but the multitude of the disciples, and what emerged from among the saints were persons who took on and met the need but more that emerged from that was a person like Stephen who was able to go further in relation to the great things of God. But it was from among their selves.

E.O.P.M. You will remember the expression we used to hear, 'assembly-minded men'? Do you think these would have been that? It is very encouraging that they found seven. I have often thought of that in regard to Acts 2 when they came to make up the number to 12 that there were two who fulfilled a very tight brief and here, what a brief this was, full of the Holy Spirit, well reported of, and yet they found seven. So, there is that resource amongst the saints, there are persons who have set themselves quietly to go on with the Holy Spirit and when the time comes they are available.

R.D.P. I think there were more than seven available but supposing at the present time this were required. And the service? To look after the widows, serve at tables and do all the necessary work: it is pretty basic, but it needed persons full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. And what emerged from persons ready to take this on is a man like Stephen, a man who really brings one epoch of God's dealings with men to a close in the next chapter. They emerged from amongst the brethren, from amongst themselves.

R.H.B. This was an administrative matter, yet the qualification is not someone who is good with money or book-keeping, but full of the Holy Spirit. Is that the secret of what you are speaking about? The way things operate in love among the saints involves that administrative matters are dealt with at that level, persons that are full of the Holy Spirit.

R.D.P. I think that is good. They did not pick out seven accountants or seven persons who were qualified and expert in this particular

problem, but seven men full of the Holy Spirit. That is how things are to be met amongst the saints, not met on the line of what is natural.

R.H.B. Anything to do with the assembly of God, however menial, requires spirituality because of those that are being served. We might easily think that a matter like this could be given to someone who is adept in administration or management, but because it relates to the assembly of God the essential need is spirituality, not administrative expertise.

R.D.P. I think what you say is helpful and should remain with us because perhaps if we put ourselves in this position we might have referred to natural thinking and would have said, this is something for the young people to do or like the apostles who say, it is not for us to do this, we have greater things to do, but they were full of the Spirit.

If they were full of the Spirit it must be that they were not full of themselves. But they emerge from amongst the saints and I believe that there is character amongst the saints at the present time which can come forward. Let it do so, because the character of service in the last days amongst the saints is not apostolic, it is in persons like this who come forward full of the Spirit from amongst the saints who will do what is needed to be done and be available to God for anything else that He may have in mind.

A.G.S. The last verse you read in Acts 6 speaks of Stephen as being “full of grace and power” (v 8). We are so often taken up with what this world’s wealth is, but what wealth he had. The exhortation to Timothy is “be strong in the grace which is in Christ Jesus”. He had substance which was useable and then it says “and power”.

R.D.P. I believe these are the features that will emerge from what is among the saints, an area of things that involves affection, mutuality and respect.

The scripture in Acts 20 is a warning to us, “from among your own selves shall rise up men speaking perverted things to draw away the disciples after them”. I think it is interesting that Paul, who as far as I know, says very little about the flock, in his last public

appearance in ministry refers to shepherding the assembly of God. I think it is a telling word.

R.H.B. You spoke of the flock of God as relating to care, nurture – “shepherd the assembly of God” – what does that convey to you?

R.D.P. I think the assembly is a similar thought. The flock in John and the body the assembly in Paul’s writing are two views of the same thing, but the assembly conveys more the thought of dignity and assembling. The flock leads to mutual respect and appreciation of each other. Perhaps the assembly is a more dignified thought.

R.H.B. I am struck that they are both connected with God, “the flock of God” and “the assembly of God which he has purchased with the blood of his own” a most profound and touching expression that underlies what you are at in this reading.

R.D.P. So the blood of Jesus here is not shed exactly for the dealing with the matter of sin but for the purchase of the assembly of God. That must involve the assembly in its setting here and it seems very affecting that Paul should use these expressions at the end of his public service.

D.E.B. The deacons did need wisdom. If you have the Holy Spirit you might think you need not necessarily have wisdom, but you want both.

R.D.P. That is a good word to end with; they needed wisdom.

Stephen was a man who was marked by the Holy Spirit and power and wisdom, a man who emerges from among themselves. This is encouraging for the young people, there is no reference to Stephen before yet he comes forward and he is a man that God promotes and uses. He has been referred to as one who “obtained for themselves a good degree” (1 Tim. 3:13), he took on the service and shows he has a whole range of knowledge of assembly truth.

Do we have that? Do we know about the great challenges that have entered into the testimony, not only in the scriptures and how the apostles fitted together, but even in the recovery of the truth?

Stephen was a man who had all this in his day and he had an

overall sense of the way that it fitted together as seen in the next chapter, and he emerged from among the saints.

COLCHESTER

November 2001

Key to initials

R.M.Brown, East Finchley; R.H.Brown, East Finchley; D.E.Burr, Buckhurst Hill; H.T.Franklin, Grimsby; D.J.Hutson, London; A.Martin, Buckhurst Hill; E.O.P.Mutton, Walton; P.Martin, Colchester; P.J.Mutton, Walton; G.Napthine, Colchester; R.D.Plant, Birmingham; D.J.Roberts, Gillingham; D.E.Remmington, St. Albans; A.G.Smith, Bexley; B.E.Surtees, Felixstowe; P.J.Walkinshaw, Gillingham; M.Wood, Dundee; V E.Wraight, Gillingham; J.Wright, Havering

THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

Ron Plant

Exodus 26: 15-25; Ephesians 4: 1-7

We referred in the earlier meeting to John's presentation of the flock of the God, one flock and one Shepherd, and the contrast to Paul's writings who speaks about the body and the head. The flock seems to particularly refer to the Lord's care and love for it. It is not presented as organic but presents unity, the flock of God. It is to impress us with the preciousness of what there is for Christ here.

The flock is not presented exactly as that which is doing things, or representing God, it is here in his pleasure, here for His care and He loves it. Paul's presentation of what is collective bears more upon its responsibility and what it is as representative of Himself, and yet it is the same personnel. Scripture is very precious, setting out in different ways how God has to do with us.

We had a remark at recent meetings which has remained with me that what is presented in Romans 12 is the Christian community. You and I might be among the saints and we may appreciate the dignity of being part of the assembly, we may hold the most precious truths and we are thankful for them, thankful for the teaching that we have, we may have a real sense of what the saints are to God and the heavenly inheritance that is theirs, but the practical aspect of all that privilege is that if we believe at all then we form part of the Christian community. I would like to speak about that at this time.

The epistle to Romans is largely individual, but what is presented in Romans 12 is the beginning of the company, the features of the Christian community. Not so much what you get later in the epistles in the way that the assemblies are organised, but the lovely features that come out in what it is to have their sins forgiven, who know what it is to have a real link with the Saviour, persons who know what it is to be so affected by the death of Christ in relation to them that they are moved inwardly, that there must be an answer in them to God's love that has come out reached them and blessed

them where they were. That, I think, is the presentation of the Christian community and, before we talk about the operations and the economy of local assemblies and the way things are to work administratively, I would like to just ask you and myself whether we are conscious of being part of the Christian community, persons who are here, not exactly as their own, not just as members of a congregation, but those who have been affected by the way that God has dealt with them personally. That is my simple impression that we should not – in taking up all the glorious things that we have in the Holy Spirit and all the extent of the truth that is open to us – forget what lies basic to it because if we miss that eventually we will lose the gain of it all. Basic to all that you get in Paul's teaching the collective side of the truth a company of persons who each have to do with Christ.

Are you one of those? Did you come in that way? Did you start there? Did you begin where Romans begins as conscious of being lost? Lost in trespasses and sin far away from God and given to see how God has come out in Jesus. Has it touched your soul?

We need that, it must affect the way I do things. Do not let me be amongst the people of God and certainly not attempting to have anything to do with administration among the people of God unless there is a real sense in my soul of having to do with the Lord Jesus personally and being attracted to Christ, because otherwise I will not represent Him in the sphere where He would have me to operate here at the present time.

So, I think in Romans 12 you get this culmination. What you have in the first five chapters of Romans is God for men, coming out in all His love where there was nothing to call out His love. The gospel in all its fulness, man as a religious creature or as an educated creature, all it says, without exception, have all come short of the glory of God. God has come out freely in Jesus and presented Him as a mercy-seat and there at His throne through the precious work of the Lord Jesus meeting the sinner in grace.

Commending His love to all when there was nothing there to merit it, sounding out His gospel that while we were still sinners, Christ has

died for us. Romans is presented that way and leads through to a person who is inwardly convicted that they cannot go on as before.

God has come out to me in Jesus, who has laid down His life for me, and met all the horror of my sins and my guilty state, given of Himself, justified me, reconciled me, all these wonderful things you get in the teaching of Romans, and there is a moral result in the man. God does not force you to do anything in Romans, God does not make you become a Christian, but the believer says, I cannot go on continuing in the things in which I sinned now that God has come out in me in such a way, I must yield my members and my body as instruments of righteousness to God where before they have been instruments of sin.

Now Romans 12 Paul speaking to believers there does not say I demand you, he says, "I beseech you ... by the compassions of God, to present your bodies a living sacrifice ... which is your intelligent service". The path of the Christian can no more be the same because His life is totally changed by the way that God has come out to Him in Jesus and His will has now receded and God's will comes to the fore and he submits himself to the will of God.

Then in Romans 12 he finds that he is not alone: that is my point, the Christian community comes to light, he finds that there are others who are there alongside him, and in Romans 12 the company starts to fit together. Are you fitting into the company? Not just as someone who has been brought up in a Christian home and has always known divine things, but as someone who has come the divine way and has appreciated the work of Christ and becomes part of the Christian community which begins to operate in Romans 12. I think what you find is the features that come to light in those who are believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. They do not do it because they are told to, they do not operate the way they do because that is what is required by others or by the church, they operate that way because God's love is working in them and they begin to link together. Let us read these things, "Let love be unfeigned; abhorring evil ... as to brotherly love, kindly affectioned towards one another; as to honour each taking the lead in paying it to the other; as to

diligent zealousness, not slothful; in spirit fervent; serving the Lord.

As regards hope, rejoicing: as regard tribulation, enduring: as regards prayer, persevering” and the features that belong to the Christian company start to bind us together. All this lies underneath fellowship. That is the point I am working to, that our fellowship is not based only upon precept and principal, it is based upon affection for Christ and Christ’s affection for me. Beloved brethren do not let that slip ever, because if we do we just develop into what is sectarian.

I have read about the boards of the tabernacle, Romans 12 has been linked with the boards of the tabernacle – God’s dwelling in Exodus. In the scripture we read you get the tabernacle being assembled for God in the wilderness and where we read we have the description of the curtains and the boards. You have the precious things before, chapter 25, the ark, the table and the candlestick, these speak directly of Christ, but when you come to the boards, the curtains and the hangings it may refer to what is of Christ in the saints. The ark of the testimony, the divine dwelling which was to contain the tables of stone, God’s will, had the mercy-seat upon it. Young people I would urge you to look at these things in the scripture, have a look in the tabernacle. The spiritual import is tremendous. It was God’s dwelling in the wilderness and all of it was foreshadowing the coming in of Christ. You get the court of the tabernacle, and in the court of the tabernacle the altar of burnt-offering and the laver and inside in the holy place the table of show bread and the candlestick opposite it and the golden altar and then in the holy of holies was the ark of God and all these things are very suggestive spiritually. Here in Exodus it is being assembled, the divine dwelling, and all speaks of Christ. Then in chapter 26 these precious things were to be protected and the boards were put up and the curtains and the hangings.

The boards of the tabernacle speak of what is of Christ in the saints. Are you interested in these things? All these things that you can find on the computers of this world and all these games and things pale into insignificance with the wonderful detail of what God

has arranged and set out in the Holy Scriptures and will let you see, not only in writing, but He will show it to you set out amongst His people. Here it says, "And the boards for the tabernacle thou shalt make of acacia wood, standing up", they were fifteen feet high, more than twice as high as any of us, two and a half feet wide, these must have been immense structures. They represent Christ in the saints as here as in a position of being surrounding the precious things and providing that which is for its protection and care. Each of the boards was covered in gold and then underneath were the two tenons, the two feet of each board and each of the tenons fitted into the sockets of silver which stood on the desert sand. They are suggestive of the redemption which is in Christ Jesus. Are you a board of the tabernacle? Are you forming part of that which is protective of what is of Christ here, standing in all redemption's glory? Are you conscious of it? Have you ever tried to put up a structure in the desert? You will find that it is very uneven. What levels things up amongst the saints – the fact that you may be a very intelligent person and I am not, or you have a lot of money and I do not? What levels things up among us is the redemption which is in Christ Jesus so that the basis among the saints is exactly the same everywhere, though the desert sand is uneven, the redemption which is in Christ Jesus puts a level basis to every one of us. The rich, it says, shall not pay more and the poor shall not pay less, it is the same price for every one. There were two tenons. Paul says, "he loved me" that is one tenon, and "he gave himself for me", that is the second tenon, standing there in perfect balance.

Do you, like Paul, have any sense of that? These boards, although they could have stood alone were never intended to stand alone, they stood side by side and you find the second matter that you get here is that there were five bars, five bars to each side connecting them together and one bar which went from one end of the side of the tabernacle to the other and that is a very interesting thing. There were rings in the boards that the bars of the tabernacle were put through and the whole thing was bound together. So what you find is that God has in view that you could stand here alone, but

you will not stand here alone because you stand, not only in the sockets of silver, that is redemption, but you stand as bound together with other believers by the bars and the rings in the boards.

It think it has been said that Romans 12 is like putting the rings on the boards, in other words you are lining yourself up to receive the one bar that goes through all of us, the appreciation of the preciousness of Christ that is in us and continually magnified among us by the Spirit of God. These features that are set out Romans 12 are like the rings in the boards of the tabernacle, and suggest how we learn to fit together and how things can be joined together amongst us in the Christian community. It is not only that I have a link with Christ, but I learn to appreciate and make way for others who love Him too. Beloved brethren, I do believe that among the saints with whom we have the privilege to be in fellowship at the present – although difficulties may come from time to time – basically not only do I love the Lord Jesus, but they love Him too. Let us hold to that that the saints want to go on with what is right, they want to move rightly. I want to go along, as it says here, not minding high things but going along with the lowly. It is very fine. You say, I have got to line up myself to connect with my brother. Have you ever thought of twenty boards with a ring and so adjusted that you can feed one bar right the way through? It takes a lot of exercise and a fair bit of work and so it is with fellowship, so it is that we have to work things out. If I am a person who is minding high things I am not going to fit in. It says, “not minding high things but going along with the lowly”.

I would like the brethren to look at this section in Romans 12 where the appeal of the apostle is there towards them all. He says, “I beseech you there, brethren, by the compassions of God, to present your bodies a living sacrifice ... which is your intelligent service”. All these precious features that come out in these verses that I read is the saints being prepared to receive the bars. Are you like that in your local place? Are you not only prepared to be there individually but prepared to receive the bar that is going to go through that is going to link me to the next believer, and the next and

the next, that the whole thing may stand, not only in my links with the Lord Jesus in redemption but stand there held together in the bars that join us all. The Holy Spirit of God would join us together in appreciation for Christ.

I just refer to Ephesians, “keeping the unity of Spirit in the uniting bond of peace”. I think that is a bit like the middle bar that went right the way through. I think the five bars that link the sides of the tabernacle are perhaps like what we are in our local places in our various relations together, but the one bar that goes through I am sure must refer distinctly to the Spirit of God. Here in Ephesians it says, “keeping the unity of the Spirit”, keep it. He says, “with all lowliness and meekness”. I think lowliness is towards God and meekness is towards the saints, keep it that way – “With long suffering, bearing one another in love, using diligence to keep the unity of the Spirit in the uniting bond of peace”. I would just leave these thoughts with the brethren, you use diligence to keep it. It is a wonderful setting of things in Ephesians. I read about the three circles, the great circle of one God and Father of all who is over all, through all and in us all, that is the greatest circle of all. We all operate there, we are in the centre of that. A wonderful sphere of His dominance, Paul says He is not far from any one of us.

Wherever you go in the whole world, whoever you speak to, in whatever situation it may be there is one God and Father of all who is over all, and through all and in us all. That is the wonderful great circle. Within that, we have been taught, you get the circle of one Lord, one faith, one baptism, that really links with Christ and His administration and all that is under His hand, and then you get the circle in the middle, one body and one Spirit and that is where we have our part. We cannot add anything to the great circle of ‘one God and Father of all’, it is there; nor can add anything to the great kingdom side of things that is in Christ, but you and I have a part to play in the Christian community in maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the circle of one body and one Spirit. I would just suggest these things to the saints. Please pardon the frailty of it all, but I am concerned that these basic underlying things might be maintained in

affection amongst us, that the great truths that are committed to us might be worked out in their fullness and divine affections might be known flowing and experienced amongst the saints without hindrance. May these things be so, for His Name's sake.

COLCHESTER

November 2001