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FELLOWSHIP

Richard Brown

1 John 1: 5-2: 2

R.M.B. I thought we might consider the way that fellowship is presented in the passage we have read. I believe that before the Lord comes again He would seek to stimulate in the hearts of His people a desire for a deeper and more living experience of Christian fellowship. It has been said before that John's writings have in mind that we should be brought, in life and power, into the things that were taught by the apostle Paul. It seems to me that Paul gives us the principles of fellowship. He helps us as to how fellowship is to be located, and how it is to be maintained. John would exercise us as to what our experience is in practice. I would like to suggest that the key to understanding John's presentation is this principle: *fellowship with God must come before fellowship with one another.*

We have read a relatively short section. That is partly because John's writing are so concentrated, but also because it might give us the opportunity to look in a little more detail at what the scriptures mean, and that we might seek the Lord's present mind from a passage that may otherwise be familiar to us. I trust that we will be encouraged to work our way steadily through the verses, but in order to give a framework to our enquiry I would draw attention to four principal points in the passage. The first is that "God is light". We might consider what that means and what bearing it has on fellowship. Secondly, that God has come into the light. That is a further thought. We might consider how it is that God has done that, and what He had in mind in doing it. Thirdly, there is the principle to which I have already alluded, that we must be walking in the light with God if we are to be in a position to walk with anyone else.

Finally, we might consider the provision that has been made to help us to be maintained in the light. We have, first of all, this lovely reference to the cleansing power of the blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son. I trust that as we are together we shall have an enhanced appreciation of that precious blood. Then there is the service of our

Lord Jesus as “patron with the Father”. We may get some impression together of God’s pleasure in One who is great enough, not only to be “the propitiation for our sins ... but also for the whole world”.

E.C.B. I think it would be very valuable. Referring to the four points that you have made, it is of note that what I might call the positive items come before the possibility of failure. It is not that you work your way up from sin, but fellowship, in the sense in which you have spoken of it, is preservative against sin.

R.M.B. I thought we might be encouraged to consider that the fellowship we have been called into is at this level; it is in the light with God; and that we might be attracted into it, and therefore be able to face more readily the negative side to which you refer, do you think?

E.C.B. Yes, I do. 1 Corinthians bears on this whole matter. “Called into the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord” (1 Cor 1: 9) would have a connection with this section that you have read. And that throws into relief the shortcomings that had led to sins in Corinth.

R.M.B. So we might consider, in the first place, what the scripture means when it tells us that “God is light”. The way John refers to it is interesting. He says, “this is the message which we have heard from him, and declare to you, that God is light.” I wondered why it was that John presented it in that way, as being a message that the apostles had received from God. I would suggest that it is because he would highlight the capital importance of this particular point, that “God is light”.

E.C.B. It is not so much that God is light as bringing things to light, but “God is light” as an expression of what He is in Himself in purity of display.

R.M.B. That is, it must connect in some way with God’s holiness. You can see the importance of understanding that, because if we are to have fellowship with God we need to know Him. In order to know Him we need to know His nature. Therefore it is important that

we understand what the scripture means when it says that “God is light”.

D.J.H. Referring to nature, it has been said, and I would like your comment on it, that “God is light” is His moral nature. Does that bear on what we have been saying as to His holiness, that nothing which is contrary to that can be retained in His presence.

R.M.B. I think that is right. It has been said that light is the purest thing known to man. And the scripture emphasises the point: it says not only that “God is light”, but adds, “in him is no darkness at all”. That could only be said of God.

D.A.B. James also says, “no variation nor shadow of turning”, James 1: 17. In other words, it is not like the moon where sometimes you can hardly see it. There is a steady constant absoluteness about what shines out in God, is there?

R.M.B. Yes. Now there are two statements in this epistle as to God’s nature. There is this one that “God is light”, and there is the other one in chapter 4 that, “God is love” (v 16). A question would be, Why is it that “God is light” comes first? What would you say about that?

D.A.B. What strikes me is that everything that we may know of God, including His nature, depends on what shines out from God. It is not, speaking reverently, that anyone can cast any light on God. But all that we know of God is what has shone out, and that would include His nature, which comes into the other reference.

R.M.B. I think that is right. Although we perhaps speak more about the fact that “God is love”, it occurred to me that the reason “God is light” is put first is that we will only truly understand what the scripture means when it says that “God is love”, if we first grasp what it means when it says that He is light. Do you think?

D.A.B. Yes, and I think that is true of everything that God brings us into, including fellowship. I think that is your thought, is it not? Many of us were born into the company in which we now experience fellowship, but we need some sense that what we have been

brought into originated with God, and that it was He who brought us into it.

R.M.B. And that this is the nature of the God with whom we are to have fellowship. There is no darkness at all in Him. We could not in any way seek God's sanction for any kind of evil or unrighteousness, because "in him is no darkness at all".

D.J.H. When the gospel first affects us it is in relation to our conscience. I think it has been said as to Adam that his conscience was reached but his heart was not touched. Is that not the order, "God is light" and "God is love"; the conscience first, and then the heart, in the way in which the gospel has reached us and affected us?

R.M.B. So it has been said the two great features of light are that it reveals its source and it exposes its object. We see that illustrated in the life of the Lord Jesus here, in His dealings with persons. Take, for example, the woman in John 4. The more she discovered that her own heart was exposed, the more her eyes were opened as to the greatness of the One who was there. We need both.

H.A.H. I was wondering about the gospel and what was manifested in the Lord Jesus, and whether what you are saying relates to the fact that He is the living God? As to what was manifested in the Lord Jesus, it says, "the life was the light of men" (John 1: 4). I wondered whether light and love are the outshining of the life of God in that way.

R.M.B. I am sure that is right.

J.S.G. Would the reference at the beginning of verse 5, "this is the message which we have heard from him, and declare to you. . .", be suggesting that what John is speaking about had come to him from apprehending the glory of the Person of Christ come into manhood? He speaks earlier of "that which we have heard" (v 1). I wondered if the message therefore that "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all" in some way had come into John's apprehension by a view of Jesus in manhood.

R.M.B. I am thankful you say that, because I had wondered whether this impression that “God is light” was something which the apostles would have experienced through accompanying the Lord Jesus in His pathway. We know that it would have been very blessed to have been with the Lord Jesus when He was here. But from another point of view it would have been very testing to have been in the company of One who knew what you were thinking about, who knew what you were going to say before you said it.

That would be a very great test. It conveys to our hearts some impression of what it must be that “God is light”. In that sense everything is exposed to Him. Do you think the knowledge of that would promote in our hearts the desire that we should be in a right relationship with Him?

J.R.W. Could you say a little more as to the connection between light and fellowship?

R.M.B. I think the first thing to understand (and I suggest that this is the foundation stone of John’s presentation) is that we must have fellowship with God before we are in a position to have fellowship with anyone else. That is to say, walking with God is really at the centre of all our Christian experience. The question then arises, if we are to have fellowship with God we need to know Him, and in order to know Him we need to know His nature, and according to this scripture His nature is “light”. Well, we need to think very carefully about what that means.

D.H. In verse 3 it says, “that which we have seen and heard we report to you, that ye also may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is indeed with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ.” I have heard it said that this verse is largely confined to the apostles’ experience in the company of Jesus. What would you say about that?

R.M.B. I think that would be right because in that verse he refers to “our fellowship”, meaning the fellowship of the apostles. So it would be right to say that the fellowship that is referred to there would have been specially enjoyed by them from the commencement of the forty

days after Christ's resurrection. But while I can see that there is a sense in which it is special to them, he does then say, in verse 6, "If we say that we have fellowship with him", indicating that there is also a sense in which it is to be known by us all, do you think?

D.H. It is a very exalted thought.

R.M.B. It is the divine standard. I would like to encourage us all to have a view of the divine standard of fellowship.

E.C.B. Is it not the case that what hinders fellowship is darkness? Therefore, if fellowship is to be enjoyed there must be light, and only light. Surely this is a matter of common experience to everybody here.

R.M.B. It is important to emphasise that point. While what is primarily in mind in this scripture is the fellowship of the saints, nevertheless it applies to all our relationships. If we take, for example, the relationship of husband and wife, if the husband and wife are not walking in the light *individually*, they will not enjoy *together* the blessings in that relationship that God has in mind for them.

E.C.B. Hence you can understand why John says, "this is the message". There will be light and no darkness.

R.M.B. It is a very arresting presentation. To illustrate the point: consider if the apostle John were to come to our local meeting and say, 'I have heard this message from God that I want to disclose to you, and it is simply this: "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all"'. Now the question is, What effect is that to have upon us?

D.A.B. He knew that not just as a matter of doctrine, but from his experience that has been referred to. He had been in the company of Jesus, in the sense of having fellowship with the Father, and what he was saying he knew to be true because that is how fellowship had laid hold of him. Your exercise is about the experience of fellowship; there is nothing theoretical about the teaching of John.

R.M.B. You can understand that you would not be able to make many claims in the company of a man like John before he would ask

you what your practice is, what your experience is.

R.H.B. John says in his gospel, “He that practises the truth comes to the light” (3: 21), in contrast with, “every one that does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light” (v 20). I was thinking of what you were saying as to the testing character of living in close proximity to One who was “the light of the world” (John 8: 12), that their motives and thoughts were apparent to Him. But they were among those that came to the light. It did not repel them. They were attracted through practising the truth.

R.M.B. So the apostles would have known that they could never have obtained the sanction of the Lord Jesus for anything that was unrighteous in them. They could never have obtained His support or countenance for anything like that. He was perfectly just and fair with them, as well as being loving and kind. Hence John says that we are only deceiving ourselves if we think we can enjoy fellowship without holiness. If we think that we can enjoy fellowship as it is presented in the Scriptures without holiness, then really we are only deceiving ourselves.

D.E.R. Could you say something as to what fellowship is? I think it has been described as joint participation with another in any activity for mutual pleasure or profit.

R.M.B. I could not improve on that definition! It is a good question that you raise. It is noticeable that John speaks of ‘having’ fellowship. He does not speak about being ‘in’ or ‘out’ of fellowship. But to “have fellowship” seems to indicate that it is a possession. As I think you are suggesting, fellowship consists of the enjoyment of a spiritual relationship. The first thing to see is that that must be enjoyed with God, before we can enter into it with one another.

G.C.B. I suppose we could say that up to the end of Acts 4 the assembly was a vessel of light and love; which makes it all the more serious what Ananias and Sapphira did by way of hiding their motives in chapter 5.

R.M.B. It is an evidence of just how good the state was that that matter was so quickly exposed and dealt with.

R.H.B. You are making a distinction between the statement that “God is light” and that He is “in the light”. Could you explain that for us, please?

R.M.B. The statement that “God is light” is a reference to His nature. But the fact He has come into the light is a reference to something that He has done. There has been a great movement from God’s side into the light. If we only had the statement that “God is light” we might feel that any thought of fellowship with Him was hopeless, that we could not possibly have fellowship with Him. But the fact that He has come into the light indicates that God has taken up a position where men and women can be with Him. I think that should greatly encourage our hearts. What would you say about it?

R.H.B. Does the second reference involve that God can be known? We know that in His essence He dwells “in light unapproachable; whom no man has seen, nor is able to see” (1 Tim. 6: 16): unknown and unknowable. But in coming into the light He has revealed Himself to us in order that men might have fellowship with Him.

R.M.B. It reveals to us what was in God’s heart, that He has actually sought the fellowship of men by coming into the light. I think that should greatly attract our hearts to answer to the challenge of these verses.

P.J.W. Could you say a little, if it bears on it, as to the verse in John 1, “No one has seen God at any time; the only-begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, *he* hath declared him” (v 18). You spoke about light not only exposing its object but revealing its source, but John says, “No one has seen God at any time”. Could you help us as to that?

R.M.B. That scripture bears very much upon it because, as we know, God has come into the light through Jesus. He has been fully revealed in that blessed Man. Is that what you were thinking?

P.J.W. Yes, I wondered that. That is the only way we can really know God, is it?

R.M.B. It seems to me that in that statement in John 1 you have the great announcement that God was coming into the light. Then, as John's gospel unfolds you see how different persons respond to that. We have referred to the woman in John 4 as an example, but there are others who were themselves brought into the light as a consequence.

P.J.W. It has been said, on the negative side, that in John 13 Judas was forced out by what was there in the company. If fellowship was maintained rightly, and held rightly, and practiced rightly, what is evil would be forced out, do you think?

R.M.B. I am sure that is right; but it does raise a very practical question as to why in many cases it has not been. But there are other examples in John's gospel, such as the woman who was taken in adultery (see John 8). The Jews there were not prepared for the exposure and they went out. But persons like the woman in John 4 and the man in John 9 show us the benefits of coming into the light.

J.W. This scripture in 1 John 1, and John's writings generally, show that there can be no mixture in light and darkness. We are either walking in the light or walking in darkness. So that walking in the light would involve that in our practice and ways we are acting in accordance with what God is, and reflecting God in that, would you say?

R.M.B. That is very important. I would like us, in the first place, to see what a blessed thing it is that God has come into the light, because then we can be stimulated to, as it were, step into the light ourselves that we might be with God. By way of illustration, we can think of the children of Israel. We know that in the old dispensation God dwelt "in the thick darkness", 1 Kings 8: 12. As a consequence His people were outside. They were not able to come into His presence, and therefore they knew nothing of fellowship with Him. But now, by contrast, through the Person of our Lord Jesus and His wonderful work God has come into the light. He has been fully revealed. I think the understanding of that would awaken in our hearts the desire to be in the light with Him.

J.R.W. I wondered whether the reference brought in here to “the blood of Jesus Christ” has a distinct bearing on God coming into the light?

R.M.B. I think the reference to the blood there is to show how it is that we can be in the light. God has come into the light from His own side. That is a very blessed thing to lay hold of, even objectively. But then we might raise the question, How can we possibly be in the light with God? I think we find the answer in “the blood of Jesus Christ his Son”, do you think?

J.R.W. I was thinking, speaking carefully, that God might come out into the light, but there would be no way in which we could appreciate that, were it not for the provision that God has made from His own side.

R.M.B. I think that is right.

R.W.F. Would the reference to the blood help us to understand the depths of God’s own desire as to fellowship? He has gone so far as to provide this means, “the blood of Jesus Christ”, that *He*, first of all, might enjoy fellowship; and, of course, that we might. But the depth of His desire is to be understood more by us, do you think?

R.M.B. I think so very much. And as we understand that it should stimulate a desire in our hearts to face these exercises.

D.A.B. Did you refer to the woman in John 8 because the Lord brings in the idea there of “the light of the world” (v 12)?

R.M.B. No, I had not thought of that.

D.A.B. I was thinking that He says “him that is without sin” (John 8: 7), perhaps alluding to Himself and corresponding to what we have here, that “in him is no darkness at all”. But then He says, “. . . among you”. That was God come into the light. And He stooped down and wrote with His finger on the ground. That was the manner of His coming into the light. But then He does not speak to the woman about the sin that occupied the Pharisees. He shines that light down her *future* course, “Go, and sin no more” (v 11), as if what might issue out of that which, according to this scripture would

include fellowship, has to be governed by what we might encounter at the outset of that exercise.

R.M.B. I suppose it would be a practical question for each of us: are we prepared to come into the light? As I understand it, this reference to walking in the light is not exactly to *how* we walk, but to *where* we walk.

D.A.B. So, perhaps we have to be honest, and a lot of us would say, Partly. But that will not do, will it? You are not in the light if you are partly.

R.M.B. And, as I said earlier, if we think that in any way we can allow darkness, whether it be in our hearts or, in some way in our walk, and have fellowship with God, then we are only deceiving ourselves, according to this scripture. But I desire to encourage our hearts that we should come into the light, in order that we might know the blessed experience of fellowship with God.

P.M. Why did God come into the light?

R.M.B. I thought it was because He desired that there might be ground on which man could be with Him. What were you thinking?

P.M. You said earlier that you would like us to get some impression of what lay in the heart of God in coming into the light. If man is to be at liberty in the presence of God he must be in keeping with the light that has come out in God Himself.

R.M.B. So that it is good to review where we are. It is one thing to have the divine standard before us as to fellowship: that there is only one standard of fellowship that is according to scripture, and it is fellowship that is in the light with God. Then we have to ask ourselves what we know of that. We may be able to get on with one another up to a point, but is it “fellowship” in the sense in which the scripture presents it?

P.M. Would it be right to say, then, that the character of that walk is what has come out from God, but the life of that walk is maintained in the One in whom that light has been expressed?

R.M.B. And if we were to ask, Of what does fellowship with God consist? it seems to me that, fundamentally, it would centre in a shared appreciation of that blessed Man.

E.C.B. The scripture does not refer to God coming into the light. A lot has been said in the last few minutes about God coming into the light. But "God is light". And the question is not whether God has come out towards us, but our approach to Him.

R.M.B. Well, I think there is a distinction between the statement in verse 5, that "God is light", and the one in verse 7, "As *he* is in the light". The first, as I said, relates to His nature, and the second to where He is. Would you agree that God has not always been "in the light"? We get that expression in 1 Kings 8 to God dwelling in "the thick darkness" (v 12), for example. But in Christ God has come out, as witnessed to in such things as the rending of the veil, would you say?

E.C.B. I think that is true if we look at things in the light of Christian revelation. But God was always light. He is light. The first few verses of Genesis bring out that God Himself said, "Let there be light" (v 3), in order that darkness might be removed. That is the substance of this section as well, that what God is in Himself finds out every condition in man, whether God has, as we say, come out or not. But God is God.

R.M.B. It is certainly true that God has always been light. It has not always been the case that God has been fully revealed. For that it needed the coming of Christ, and it is on that basis that we are able to have fellowship with Him.

D.A.B. You are suggesting that it is a contrast to what is said in relation to the Old Testament; that God dwelt in the thick darkness, are you?

R.M.B. Yes. The children of Israel had no fellowship with God. They could not come into His presence.

D.A.B. It was not as though there was anything dark about the presence of God, but the light of it was not good in them. I was

thinking of the way that is brought out in John's gospel. The saddest deficiency of the woman in John 4 was that she worshipped a God she did not know. The man in John 5 and the man in John 9 were both asked as to the Lord Jesus, and they say they do not know.

Would you say the object in John's heart is that God might be known, and that He might be known in Christ? Is that behind this reference in verse 7?

R.M.B. I think it is, in the sense that God has been fully revealed in Christ. Is what we are saying right?

J.M. Yes, I am sure it is. The two women have been referred to, the woman in John 4 and the woman in John 8. I think the light was shining there, but the great thing was that both the women were prepared to remain in it. Those in John 8 went out one by one. But the women remained in it. That would allow the light of God to penetrate into their souls.

R.M.B. So the question would be, What would help us to be prepared to be for the exposure of the light? What would help us to remain in it?

J.M. I think it is what came in earlier – it is really a desire in us to know God; to know Him in this character. I think that would help us. It is quite remarkable that the Lord did not spare these women. He brought the light in which exposed them fully, but they had no tendency to leave it. They remained in the circle of light that was there, and they got the gain of it.

R.M.B. Walking in the light refers to *where* we walk. That is a constant exercise. We might be walking in the light one day, but not necessarily the next, if we allow some darkness, do you think?

J.M. Yes, I think so. If you think of Enoch, there is a certain limit upon him because, as you say, God had not been fully revealed then, but he walked with God. He must have walked in the light – the light that was extant at that time. He could not possibly have walked with God if he was not walking in the light.

R.M.B. Enoch is a good illustration, because evidently his walk with God meant so much to Him that one day God took him home with Him.

J.R.W. Could you say a little more as to your comment about the fact that it is “have” fellowship, not ‘in’ fellowship. It is interesting in these verses that it is “in the light” or “in darkness” in relation to our walk; but in relation to fellowship it is “have fellowship”. Did you have any further thought about that?

R.M.B. Only that where the fellowship is to be had is “in the light” with God. I think it works like this: as I am exercised, individually, to walk with God in the light, and as you are exercised to walk with God in the light, the practical consequence is that we shall “have fellowship with one another”, do you think?

J.R.W. Yes, I think that is most important. And to “have fellowship” seems to suggest that there is a conscious living enjoyment of it. Otherwise we have not got it, have we?

R.M.B. No. So we would emphasise the importance of our personal relations with divine Persons. That is foundational to all that we may seek to experience together.

D.E.R. The Supper is the expression of fellowship, and if we rightly apprehend the truth as to the Supper, that will govern us very much in our practical walk, do you think?

R.M.B. I do think that. However, I believe that it is one thing to have taken right ground *outwardly*, as far as the principles and the truth are concerned, but what is our experience *in practice*? As I said earlier, we may be able to get on with one another up to a point, but is it “fellowship” in the sense in which the scripture speaks of it? Are we actually all walking, in our individual pathways, in the light with God?

G.J.N. To make an Old Testament application, I suppose the Hebrew bondman was someone who was walking in the light. “I love my master, my wife, and my children, I will not go free”, Exod 21: 5. Love is the whole law. I was wondering whether God revealing

Himself in light actually reveals Himself as love. And love is the answer. But then I understand what you mean by saying that the light governs us. But love is the whole law, Paul says (see Gal 5: 14).

R.M.B. I believe the more we understand what it means when the scripture says, “God is light”, the more we shall understand that He is love.

P.J.W. What you are saying is that we might be *in* fellowship, but not *have* fellowship.

R.M.B. That is exactly the point.

R.H.B. It says in verse 6, “If we say”. Is John dealing with profession? We would all “say” in this room, as believers, that we have fellowship with Him. We would all make that profession. But the verse goes on to bring out the reality of it in a day when many make profession with which their walk is incompatible.

R.M.B. That is the great test. We would not want anyone to deceive themselves. We would not want anyone to think that they had it, if they did not have it at all. I think we just have to accept that if there is darkness with us – it may be something in our hearts or in our lives – then for the moment we shall not enjoy fellowship with God.

J.M. I do not want to get too much into what is negative, but it is very important to see here that you have light and darkness. As we have often been taught, there are no shades of grey with John. I think we need to see that light is of God, and darkness is of Satan. I do not want to develop that, but I think it is enough to say that, so that the brethren are warned, and know what the situation really is.

R.M.B. It seems to me that this is a constant exercise, in the sense that it applies not only to when we may sin, but to every fresh matter that comes up in our lives. We may desire, for example, to acquire a new possession, or we may desire to do something, or to go somewhere. If we are walking in the light the question that will first come into our mind is, Can I bring this matter into the light? Is it

compatible with a walk that is in the light with God? In that way it becomes a means of preservation to us.

C.H.S. Those who know something of this seem to be characterised by a deep sense of self-judgment. When they walked with the Lord, for instance in the end of Mark 9, He often spoke to them to help them about it.

R.M.B. I thought therefore that, moving on, we might see the wonderful provision that God has made to maintain persons in the light. You speak of self-judgment. Alongside that, where we are progressing rightly, our appreciation of the blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, would continually be being deepened with us.

J.W. To get the gain of the blood in this sense there is the confession of our sins. What would you say about that? "If we confess our sins".

R.M.B. There are perhaps two things to understand: first, how are we brought on to right ground in the first place? We look to the blood as it is presented here. Second, from verse 8, John proceeds to deal with the things that may come in subsequently. I wondered if, before moving on to the second, we might get some impression together as to the cleansing power of the blood of Jesus Christ God's Son.

J.W. We are cleansed persons, would you say? We begin with that, so that we can experience fellowship.

R.M.B. The cleansing in this sense is once for all. Other things may come in, but they do not alter the *ground* of our relationship with God. They may affect our *enjoyment* of that relationship. But it is important to understand the ground that the blood brings us on to. It is possible for us to be before God "as white as snow", Isa 1: 18. What a tremendous thing that is!

E.C.B. Would it be that if being in the light brings to our conscience the fact that we have sins, we have immediately pointed out to us that there is a remedy for that?

R.M.B. I think one of the first effects of the light is to expose in our hearts the things that would hinder us enjoying fellowship with God.

Then immediately, as you say, John brings in this beautiful reference to the blood.

E.C.B. It seems to me that what you have in mind is so vital amongst us at the present time, that what we need to grasp is how our being in the light can be promoted.

R.M.B. He says, "If we walk in the light as *he* is in the light, we have fellowship with one another". Now, dear brethren, can we grasp that that, and only that, is the divine standard of fellowship?

E.C.B. Therefore the real test is what is our personal knowledge of God.

R.M.B. I think that. This comes back to our individual relations with divine Persons.

J.R.W. Do you think the more we have an impression of what is involved in, "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all", the greater will be our appreciation of this precious blood, and its tremendous power and efficacy, that is able to bring us into relation with that?

R.M.B. I think that. We might say, how could we sinners ever know what it is to have fellowship with a God who is light? How could we possibly know it? As you say, the answer is in "the blood of Jesus Christ his Son". Now, what do the brethren say as to this name, "Jesus Christ his Son"?

J.W. "Jesus Christ" brings us to the kind of Man. It is particularly the kind of Man. "His Son" would bring out the cost it has been to God, do you think?

R.M.B. That is helpful. So that "Jesus Christ" would emphasise the character of the life that was given up. That is a consideration for our hearts. We can think of the holy life of Jesus Christ, and what an infinite source of pleasure to God that precious life was. Then to consider that it was *that life* that was terminated in order that His blood might be shed for us.

J.S.G. As to the use of that name, verse 3 of the chapter refers to the special place of the apostles as having fellowship “indeed with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ”. So it seems that the same name is used in connection with the divine thought that we might have fellowship with God, as is used in connection with the wonderful means of clearing the way of what stood to hinder it.

R.M.B. It seems that John had a particular impression as to that name, because, as you say, in that verse he speaks of fellowship with “his Son Jesus Christ”; then in verse 7, “the blood of Jesus Christ his Son”; then in chapter 3, “the name of his Son Jesus Christ” (v 23); then in chapter 5 we are “in his Son Jesus Christ” (v 20). It seems to me that “Jesus Christ” emphasises the character of the life that was given up; and “his Son” brings out His greatness and His personal preciousness to God.

J.R.W. It is interesting to note that in Matthew 8, when the Lord calms the wind and the waves, the question raised is, “What sort of man is this?” (v 27). In the same incident in Mark 4 the question is raised, “Who then is this?” (v 41). Does that give two considerations for our minds in relation to your question, and particularly what has been said?

R.M.B. Yes, that is interesting.

E.C.B. The reference in chapter 2, “Jesus Christ the righteous” (v 1), refers to One in whom the light could bring nothing to light but what was suitable to God.

R.M.B. That is good. Then it seems that John also had an impression as to “his Son”. I was noticing that that expression, “his Son”, is used more times in this epistle than in any other book. It is not *‘the Son’*. But “his Son” seems to emphasise His preciousness to God.

D.E.B. Would you say that whilst the relationship of Son cannot be carried back into past eternity, yet that Person was there in the past eternity?

R.M.B. I would say that.

J.G. I wondered if what we have been talking about, as to the Father and the Son, brings out the perfection of fellowship. The Son was in the Father's bosom. He shared His interests fully. Do you think we see in that relationship the perfection of fellowship?

R.M.B. I do. If we want to see perfect communion, we see it between the Father and His Son. This verse 7 is intended to impress our hearts with the fact that, not only has blood been shed for us, but it was not any blood; it is the blood of Him who is none other than Jesus Christ God's Son.

D.A.B. It says in Hebrews, typically, that the blood was carried within the veil. I was thinking that the veil speaks very much of what this Person is to God. There is a preciousness that only God sees. But the blood was brought in relation to the mercy-seat, as if it represents to God the basis on which we can have fellowship with Him. It is not only that it is a basis for us, but it is a basis for God.

R.M.B. And it is when we consider the One whose blood it is, we can understand why it has such power with God, such cleansing power.

D.E.R. Paul reminds the Corinthians that we "have been called into the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord" (1 Cor. 1: 9), which would instruct us that there is only one divine fellowship. There are not numerous divine fellowships, and it is one and universal too.

R.M.B. It is important to underline that.

D.E.B. Could I just refer to another practical matter? Each of us here today, breaking bread, are in fellowship with one another, and we break bread with one another in every locality that is represented here. Now supposing something takes place in another locality that I personally do not approve of, is it in order for me to say I will not go to that locality?

R.M.B. I do not know whether I would say that I would not go to that locality. In the context of this scripture, I think that if something is allowed in another locality which can be described as "darkness", then practically I shall not enjoy fellowship with it. We may be on the

same ground *outwardly*, but if such a thing as “darkness” is permitted, then *practically* we shall not “have fellowship” for the time being.

R.H.B. In Revelation 1 John speaks of, “Him who... has washed us from our sins in his blood” (v 5), as done once for all. But in this passage it seems to be spoken of as subsisting, “cleanses us”. What is the significance of that, please?

R.M.B. I think we have been taught that the point in verse 7 is not *when* it cleanses us, but that it is the blood that does it. What is it that makes it possible for us to be in the light? It is the blood. Why the blood? Because it is the blood that “cleanses us from all sin”. These truths are familiar to us, but it is a very blessed thing to lay hold of, that it is possible for me to stand before God, on the basis of this precious blood, “as white as snow”!

P.M. Does this reference to cleansing from “all” or “every” sin show the efficacy of that blood in every detail, so that there could be no shadow left but perfect light in the presence of God?

R.M.B. I am sure that is right. So that the blood is the thing, in the first place, which makes it possible for us to be in the light with God. Then from verse 8 John begins to address the things we find in ourselves, and the things we do, that practically hinder us from walking in the light. It seems that then we need what he refers to as the service of our Lord Jesus as “patron with the Father”.

D.A.B. If we allow these things we take our fellowship together on to a different ground. Whatever we profess, whatever we say, we have taken our fellowship on to different ground, and interfered with God’s part in that fellowship. I was thinking, for example, of the reference made earlier: it is the *Lord’s* Supper. It is not the Brethren’s supper, or the church’s supper. Do we need to remember these things as setting the standard? We often fail, of course, but it is something that we need to recognise that subsists before God.

R.M.B. That is important, because one has detected as to certain issues a reluctance to bring them into the light. A scripture like this would show us that if our motives are right, we have nothing to fear

from bringing a matter into the light. I do believe, dear brethren, that if we were more prepared to bring matters into the light, the Lord would help us to walk in the truth.

D.J.H. The service of Jesus Christ as patron is with a view to the restoration of communion, where communion has been broken. I was just thinking that we have not used the word 'communion' to any degree. It is helpful to see that 'communion' and 'fellowship' are often transposed. So that what we are speaking of really is a test as to whether I can speak to God about everything in my life: where I go, what I do, what I have, and so on. You referred to practical questions earlier. Am I at liberty in speaking with God about these things? That is really what it would lead to, communion and fellowship.

R.M.B. That is right. Am I ready to bring everything that I do into the light? Am I ready for God's searching? Just take a practical example: God has made it quite clear in the scriptures that He expects women to have long hair. Take a woman who cuts her hair. It seems to me that if someone is disobeying God's word, he or she cannot, for the time being, experience fellowship with Him. I only refer to that as a simple and obvious example, because there are things with all of us, that we have found in our own hearts, things that we cling to which hinder practically our fellowship with God. And one reason why they hinder us is because we do not fully appreciate the blessings of walking in the light with God.

D.J.H. If I am enjoying something, whatever it may be, can I thank God for it? All these things I find are very testing; very salutary though. And they make it simple. It is not that I must not do this, and I must not do that, not a code of rules; but am I free in speaking with God about it, giving thanks for it and speaking to God in relation to it? It makes life very simple.

R.M.B. When we say these things it is not because we do not know what it is to have been tested by them ourselves. But is there anything in my heart or in my life that is more important to me than walking with God? Some of us have had to face the fact that there

have been things that we did not want to give up. The reason we thought like that was because we never realised what a blessed experience fellowship with God is.

A.McS. Would you say a bit about propitiation, please?

R.M.B. I have often thought that a simple way to help understand propitiation is to contrast it with another great truth, and that is substitution. These are the two great aspects of the work of the Lord Jesus: propitiation is that aspect of the work that is for God, and substitution is that aspect of the work that is for the sinner. What were you thinking about it?

A.McS. I am sure that is right. It just occurred to me that whatever condition you might be in, God is always favourable towards you.

That is what propitiation involves, that the favour of God is towards all, and is upon all those that believe. It just impressed me that what you are saying is very testing, and we would seek to take it to heart.

But there is a God in heaven who is always towards us. Get back to Him and His love is just the same.

R.M.B. I think that. Propitiation is for the one who has been offended. It is for the one to whom the offence has been caused.

Substitution is for the one who has caused the offence, it is for the sinner. It says here, "*he* is the propitiation for our sins". What that is to lay hold of, that Jesus *is it!*

E.C.B. Because He is there as Man. Do not these latter verses, to which reference is being made, bring out that from God's side there is every help to our enjoying fellowship?

R.M.B. It is important to understand that, and in connection with what has been said about propitiation. John says, "if any one sin", 1 John 2: 1. We need to understand that when we sin our standing before God is not altered, but for the moment we are deprived of the enjoyment of it. Our standing remains because Jesus is there, as you say. But we have also to understand that to sin hinders the enjoyment of communion with the Father.

P.J.W. I do not want to divert, but could you say a word as to the Holy Spirit, in what you have been bringing before us. I was thinking of the reference to the fellowship or communion “of the Holy Spirit”, 2 Cor 13: 14.

R.M.B. I had wondered why it was that nothing is said of the Holy Spirit in this first chapter. He is brought into chapter 2, in the reference to “the unction” (v 20). Alongside the service of our Lord Jesus as patron on high, there is also the work of the Holy Spirit in us and with us here below, to bring us into the good of these things. What were you thinking?

P.J.W. I was thinking that we have spoken a lot of our practical walk, whether the Holy Spirit is vital in that; and whether we perhaps should covet to know more of fellowship or communion with the Holy Spirit, which would be a very similar thought to fellowship with God. Help us, please.

R.M.B. I think what you say as to the Holy Spirit would be included in fellowship with God. The scriptures do not speak of fellowship ‘with’ the Holy Spirit.

I would like us, before we close, to get some impression of the service that the Lord Jesus carries out as our Patron. It is something that is going on all the time. I wonder to what extent we appreciate it. Some of us would have to say that we tremble to think where we would be today, if it were not for this blessed service that He carries on so unceasingly before God.

D.A.B. It is not nominal. It is not simply that He is there. As you say, it is service. I remember a conversation with Dr. Roberts, in which he said that a solicitor (which carries a bit of this idea) holds it to be his duty to do his very best for you. And that, you might say, is the spur to the activity of Jesus on our behalf above.

R.M.B. I thought of these two references to Him being “with the father” and being “the righteous”, simply, as being the best possible Person in the best possible place.

J.W. He is the only One who could take up this service because of His blood being shed, the propitiation He has made, and that He is “the righteous”. He is able to take up our case before the Father, so that we really judge ourselves, and communion is restored. I was just wondering if when we confess our sins it is a result of His service to us in this way.

R.M.B. I am very glad you say that. I am sure that if someone is brought to self-judgment and the confession of their sins it is the evidence that Jesus has been active on their behalf.

E.C.B. Is there a sense that God looks at Jesus rather than at me? A solicitor acts on instructions, but the patron acts of himself.

R.M.B. Although it has often been drawn attention to in this connection, I think it is helpful to refer to Peter’s experience: “And the Lord said, Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded to have you, to sift you as wheat; but / have besought for thee that thy faith fail not; and thou, when once thou hast been restored, confirm thy brethren”, Luke 22: 31,32. In those verses we get a little insight into the service of the Lord Jesus as our Patron.

E.C.B. That is to say, He took things up on His own initiative for Peter’s sake.

R.M.B. And it was before Peter actually sinned.

A.McS. Do you think that, although this relates to what Christ does, practically there is something set out in what you have referred to in Luke 22, and also in John 21, as to the recovery of a sinner?

R.M.B. So we might ask the question, Why is it, if Jesus is carrying out this service unceasingly before the Father, that believers go astray?

A.McS. I think we all know the secret of that in our own heart. But what we have in Genesis, for instance, is that Abraham knew how to deal with that matter in the recovery of Lot. And there are various illustrations right through scripture that things like that do come in, and there is what is available in divine Persons to effect recovery, do you think?

R.M.B. Yes, so the patronage of the Lord Jesus does not take away our responsibility. It is interesting that in Luke 22 the Lord does not pray that the disciples might not be sifted. The Lord recognised that they needed the sifting; Peter especially. What He prays for is that Peter's faith might not fail, and that prayer was answered; for although his courage failed, his faith never did.

R.H.B. John writes "in order that ye may not sin". The patron comes in "if any one sin". But the reading of that verse shows that John does not accept that sins after conversion are normal, does he?

R.M.B. It has often been said that there is no excuse for a believer to sin.

D.J.H. When we think of it, this is an amazing service. It is for the individual. He did not pray that the disciples might not be sifted, but "*I have besought for thee*". When we think of the multitude of saints on earth at the present time, every one is the subject of His personal care in this propitiatory service of the Lord Jesus. How great He is! How wonderfully it enhances the glory of this blessed One to us when we think of it in that way.

R.M.B. That is a good note to finish on. May our hearts be freshly strengthened in our apprehension of the greatness of the Lord Jesus, and what God's pleasure in Him must be, that He is great enough not only to be "the propitiation for our sins ... but also for the whole world"!

LONDON

20 May 2006

Key to Initials

R.M.Brown, East Finchley; R.H.Brown, East Finchley; D.A.Burr, London; D.E.Burr, Colchester; E.C.Burr, London; G.C.Bywater, Buckhurst Hill; R.W.Flowerdew, Sunbury; J.Gray, Tunbridge Wells; J.S.Gray, East Finchley; D.Hawgood, Bexley; D.J.Hutson, London;

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Havering

WALKING IN THE LIGHT OF THE ASSEMBLY

Richard Brown

Exodus 33: 7-16

I desire to say a word as to walking in the light of the assembly. I want to show that the great object of walking in the light of the assembly is that it brings us on to ground where we can know God's living presence, in days that are otherwise marked by such gross departure from Him. I also want to suggest that in order to walk in the light of the assembly two things, fundamentally, are needed: firstly, a vision of what the assembly is in the mind of God, apart from any questions of breakdown; and secondly, the ability to discern what is in accordance with that vision amidst the actual state of ruin in which the assembly is found. My burden for this occasion is to persuade you of the importance of the first, rather than to examine the many questions relating to the second; but if you can keep the two thoughts in your mind they form the basis of all that I wish to say this afternoon. I believe these truths are illustrated for us in the passage we have read. Exodus 33 shows how one man was true to God's highest thoughts in circumstances of great public breakdown.

It shows how one man provided for God's presence even when His people at large had departed from Him.

Now I have said that in order to walk in the light of the assembly the first thing needed is a vision of what the assembly is in the mind of God. That can be illustrated from the passage we have read by asking the question, How did Moses know what to do in this situation? The background to the chapter is that moment when the children of Israel sank into idolatry by making and worshipping the golden calf; a breakdown so severe and so complete that even a man like Aaron was carried away in it. There was nothing in Moses' experience to guide him in this situation, and the circumstances were unprecedented in the history of the people. Yet Moses acts boldly.

He acts without any instruction from God. He acts according to his spiritual instincts. And, as the sequel shows, what he did received God's very marked approval. What was his secret? God had been

preparing him for this moment. Prior to this Moses had enjoyed forty days and nights of uninterrupted communion with God, during which time God had disclosed to him the pattern of the tabernacle. He had received from God the light of God's dwelling place on earth. It meant that as Moses stood there at the threshold of the camp, confronted by that scene of confusion, he was not baffled by a situation that would have confounded any other man. For he was not obliged to take his bearings from what he found, but, because of the light that filled his heart he was able to be true to God's highest thoughts. I trust that we can all see this as a starting-point: that Moses' actions in this chapter were governed, not by what he found, but by the light that filled his heart.

That illustrates the importance, in the first place, of receiving light from God, of having a vision of what the assembly is in the mind of God. It is important to understand that light from God is sovereignly given: who God gives light to, and who He does not, is His own matter. That applies just as much to the light of the assembly, as it does to the light of the gospel, or indeed to any other light. God is pleased to grant light to His people where He sees persons who are exercised about the truth. If a person is not interested in the truth, if a person is not prepared to commit themselves to it, it is unlikely that that person will receive light from God. But where a person is in earnest, and is exercised to walk in the pathway of God's will, God is pleased to grant that person light.

Of course, He may search you as to the depths of your desire, and He may challenge you as to whether you are prepared for the demands that the possession of the truth will place upon you; for let us never forget that with every accession of light so our responsibility to God increases. But let us lay hold of this, that God is pleased to grant light to His people, especially the light of the assembly, as it is a truth that is very dear to His heart. In the first place, then, if someone is exercised to receive the light of the assembly, we can tell you nothing better than to have to do with God about it.

The next thing is to read the Holy Scriptures, because all the light of the assembly is contained therein. We should begin with the

New Testament. The assembly is not mentioned in the Old Testament, for the simple reason that it did not exist then. It does not even appear in Old Testament prophecies, because, as the apostle Paul tells us, it is a truth that was “hidden throughout the ages in God”, Eph 3: 9. We must therefore begin with the New Testament; but when we have grasped the teaching that the New Testament gives us as to the assembly, we can then shine that light back over the Old Testament, and what emerges are many precious types of the assembly; for it has always existed in God’s heart. So, for example, of the many women who feature in the Old Testament, it has been observed that seven of them stand out in a particular way as types of the assembly.

Now I trust the elder brethren will bear with me if I take a moment or two to draw attention to some of the leading truths as to the assembly, having specially in mind the younger brethren, with the desire that this might form the basis of your own prayerful enquiries. I would start by drawing attention to what I would speak of as the three cardinal truths of the assembly. The first one is that the assembly is a body of persons. That is what the Greek word *ecclesia* implies. In fact the assembly includes every person between Pentecost and the Rapture who is a believer on the Lord Jesus, and has received the gift of the Holy Spirit. Why do I bring in the Holy Spirit? Because it is by receiving the Holy Spirit that a person becomes part of the assembly. As the apostle Paul says, “in the power of one Spirit we have all been baptised into one body”, 1 Cor 12: 13.

That leads to the second cardinal truth: that the Holy Spirit dwells in the assembly. When the Holy Spirit descended at Pentecost He was not, as the Lord Jesus, sent out into the world, but He came, on the one hand, to take up His abode in the hearts of believers, and, on the other, to dwell in the assembly. And the effect of the Holy Spirit’s dwelling in the assembly is to unite the members of the body to one another, and to unite the body to its Head in heaven.

That brings us to the third cardinal truth: that the assembly has one heavenly Head, and that is our Lord Jesus Christ. I would say that if you can keep those three things in your mind, that the assembly is a body of persons, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and united to its Head in heaven, it will preserve you from many errors.

Assembly history shows what disaster follows when any one of those truths is given up.

As we pursue our enquiries through the New Testament we find that the assembly is presented to us in many different aspects. But there are two principal ones: 'the house of God', and 'the body of Christ'. The house of God emphasises the public, outward, aspect of the assembly. The body of Christ is more its inward, spiritual, side. I wish to refer to them briefly, and also to a third, that is, 'the bride'. If we think of these three aspects of the assembly – the house of God, the body of Christ, and the bride – we shall find in the unfolding of the truth in the Scriptures that they were revealed in that order.

If we think of the house of God, firstly, I would suggest that that was specially Peter's impression of the assembly. It is not that Paul does not also speak of the house God. But it was the way in which the Lord Jesus revealed the assembly to Peter. The very first reference we have to the assembly is in Matthew 16, where the Lord Jesus says to Peter, "On this rock I will build my assembly" (v 18).

That shows us, simply, that the assembly can be regarded as a building. It is that impression that forms the basis of Peter's first epistle; and in that epistle he goes on to explain how the saints "as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house", 1 Peter 2: 5. Now, we might ask, What is the leading thought in relation to the house of God? Which particular aspect of the assembly is brought before us in this way? I think it is this: the house of God is the place where God dwells. He dwells there by His Spirit. Though you may be familiar with that, think of what a momentous thing it is, that there is a spot on earth where God dwells by His Spirit. The question that I would raise with you is, Have you located it? I trust you will understand that I am not speaking of this company or that company.

I am simply seeking to present to you the way that the assembly is presented to us in the Scriptures. Mr Taylor senior observed that if you consider the principal gospel parables in Luke's gospel, they all feature a house (JT vol 1: 114). This shows that in the glad tidings God has in mind not only the relief of sinners, but He has in mind that persons should be brought into His house. So it is a question one can ask of any true heart, Have you located that spot on earth where God dwells by His Spirit?

Now I referred, secondly, to the body of Christ. This view of the assembly is very specially Paul's. Only he speaks of the assembly in this way. We have often noted the way that the seed of this great truth entered into his experience at his conversion when, on the Damascus road, Jesus said to him, "Saul, Saul, why dost thou persecute me?", Acts 9: 4. How could Saul be persecuting Jesus? If Jesus was in the glory He was surely beyond Saul's reach. But Saul came to understand that by persecuting the saints, the members of Christ's body, he was persecuting Christ. In that sense there was here on earth what Jesus could refer to as "me". How precious that is! What is the leading thought in relation to the body of Christ? I think it is that as the body of Christ the assembly derives everything from Christ, and that she is to be expressive of Him. I would like you to think of that, for I believe it has a very practical bearing on us all, and especially those who have any part in the work of the ministry; to understand that *nothing* will edify the body of Christ but what comes from its Head. Paul goes on to expand on this great truth in his epistles, where he shows us how every member of the body is necessary, and every member of the body has its own place and function, and how all are to be working together to the same common end (see 1 Cor 12). I ask, have you considered that as part of the assembly you are a living part of Christ? You are actually a part of Christ, or, to use the language of Scripture, you are a "member of Christ". Then to ask the question that has often been raised in the ministry, Have you identified what your place and function in the body is? And, are you filling out that place according to His will?

I referred finally to the bride. I would suggest that the bride is particularly John's impression of the assembly. It is not that Paul does not also allude to the assembly in this way, for it would be difficult to think of any aspect of the assembly which he, as the great minister of the assembly, did not refer to. But it is only John who refers directly to "the bride", and then only in the last two chapters of the Bible¹. The first reference is in Revelation 21, where the assembly is described as "a bride adorned for her husband" (v 2); the second is in verse 9 of that chapter, where John is shown "the bride the lamb's wife"; and the third is in chapter 22, where it says, "the Spirit and the bride say, Come" (v 17). The first reference is to the assembly in the eternal day, the second to the assembly in the world to come, and the third to the bride at the present time. You might say chronologically that seems to be back to front. The point is that these views of the bride in the future are to give character to what she is at the present time. For the bride is only ever recorded as saying one word, and that is, "Come". We do not have to ask who she says that to, because the leading thought as to the bride is that she is wholly for Christ, and that she is devoted to His interests here. What a blessed thing that is! To think that the bride of Christ is capable of satisfying His heart. She will do it perfectly. She will do it through all eternity. Is there anything that gives us greater joy than that? To think of that loving heart, that we have come to know so well, being perfectly satisfied in His heavenly bride. The question that I raise with each one of us is, Where is this cry of "Come" to be heard at the present time? How is it to be expressed? I have met plenty of believers who *individually* are looking for Christ to come, but what about the cry of "the Spirit and the bride"? I believe it is not only expressed in what we say, but also in the way we live. Allow me to give a simple example: if someone were to come in to this room, and take account of us, take account of the way we were dressed, take account of the way we lived our lives, would they see people who had settled down in things here, or would they see a company of persons who had only one desire, and that was for the

coming again of their beloved Lord? I believe we would all desire, for His sake, that it might be the latter.

I trust one has said enough to show you that the assembly is presented in different aspects. I also trust you will understand that we can only pass over these things very rapidly within the scope of this occasion. Much more could be said about the assembly. We could speak, for example, of the way that God, in His infinite wisdom, has seen fit that the assembly should be administered through the economy of local assemblies; and how, at the beginning, every local assembly was joined to every other by the most intimate links of holy fellowship; and how the local assembly represented the whole assembly in the place where it was, so, for example, the apostle could address a letter to “the assembly of God which is in Corinth” (1 Cor 1: 2), because the saints at Corinth represented the whole assembly in that city. It has been said, for illustrative purposes, that if you were to go down the street in Corinth, there would be the heathen temple, there would be the Jewish synagogue, and there would be assembly of God; because all the believers in that place were together. Someone might say, To what extent does that apply now? That is a question. But what I desire at this point is to lodge in your hearts the importance of our hearts and minds being established in the truth as it is presented to us in the Scriptures.

One further point might illustrate it for us. I would like you to think of the two epistles to Timothy. I would suggest that Moses alone on the mountain with God corresponds to 1 Timothy, which gives us the house of God in order. Moses outside the camp corresponds to 2 Timothy, which gives us our path in days of breakdown. And I would suggest further, for your consideration, that there is a sense in which you have Moses’ vision in the first three chapters of 1 Timothy: in chapter 1, for example, you have the brazen altar, in that lovely reference to “the glad tidings of the glory of the blessed God” (v 11), that is, God coming out; in chapter 2 the saints are going in, and you have the altar of incense in the reference to “supplications, prayers, intercessions, thanksgivings be made for all men” (v 1); then in the second half of that chapter you

have the priests, the personnel of this functioning system; in chapter 3 you have the Levites, the persons who serve the saints; and then it comes to this remarkable reference to “the assembly of the living God, the pillar and base of the truth” (v 15), and we can see how “the pillar” corresponds to the boards of the tabernacle, and the “the base” would link with the bases of silver upon which they stood, and “the truth” is like the hangings, which together combined to form a holy enclosure for the ark; and in 1 Timothy 3 we have the ark itself, where it says that “God has been manifested in flesh” (v 16). I only refer to that in passing to show how you have, in those first three chapters, the pattern of the tabernacle. And our hearts must be established in that, before we are ready to move on to face the exercises that are suggested to us in 2 Timothy. If I could put it simply, we cannot launch straight into 2 Timothy 2. I would appeal for men and women whose hearts have been formed in divine truths *for their own sake*, who love God and who cherish His thoughts, as those thoughts are, fresh from His hands, untarnished. When you have that, you have persons who are ready to go on and face the difficult and often complex exercises that are addressed in 2 Timothy.

Well, I trust I have said enough to persuade you of the importance, in the first place, of having a vision of what the assembly is in the mind of God. May I repeat that that can only be received from God Himself.

The second point was that in order to walk in the light of the assembly we need to be able to discern what is in accordance with that vision amidst the actual circumstances of ruin in which we find ourselves. It might be useful if we consider what we mean by ‘the breakdown’. It is an expression that is in common usage amongst us. We need to understand what it means. Two illustrations may suffice. We have said already that at the beginning the apostle Paul could address a letter “to the assembly of God which is in Corinth”, because all the saints in that place were together. Now, what if, for illustrative purposes, the apostle were to arrive in this city today, and ask for directions to ‘the assembly of God which is in London’.

Where would we send him? What a scene of utter confusion would meet his eyes. Whereas he wrote, “There is one body” (Eph. 4: 4), even within this single city there must be dozens of bodies.

Now consider the Lord’s Supper, the breaking of bread. One of the original thoughts in the breaking of bread was that it was to be the *outward* expression of the *inward* unity of the saints. Paul says, “we, being many, are one loaf, one body; for we all partake of that one loaf”, 1 Cor 10: 17. That is to say, the saints expressed their spiritual oneness, their spiritual unity, by all putting their hands to the same loaf of bread. What must the Lord Jesus think, when that precious memorial that was originally intended to be the outward expression of the unity of His people, has in our day become the most obvious indicator of our broken and divided state? What must be His feelings as to that? It may be a situation that we are familiar with, but I believe if we were nearer to Him the more deeply we should feel the shame of it, the more deeply we should feel what has befallen His beloved church, and that departure in which we have had such a responsible part.

What has happened? The Acts of the Apostles shows us how God first established the assembly on the earth, the wonderful glory in which it was inaugurated, and the powers with which it was invested. I would like you to think of it as a beautiful ornate vase.

God entrusted the care of this assembly to the responsibility of men and women. They having failed in that responsibility, the assembly, like a beautiful vase, has been smashed into a thousand pieces. It has not ceased to be the house of God, it has not ceased to be the body of Christ, but those things have become greatly obscured through its fragmented state. The question that we have to ask ourselves is whether the present state of Christendom as we find it – many churches, much profession, different claims – is in accordance with the mind of God? It is remarkable how many Christians believe that it is. It is remarkable how many persons believe there are, what they refer to as, different ‘Christian traditions’; and who believe that Christians are in some way free to choose which ‘church’ they go to, or the mode of worship that suits them. It is ironic that Christians

who rightly insist that God has only one way of salvation, should be content to accept that there are many ways in which His people should gather together and worship Him. I believe the principle is a false one. God's people have never been free to make those kinds of choices. If we go back to Old Testament times, and think of the children of Israel, they could only approach and serve God by the appointed way. We find, for example, all the instruction in Deuteronomy as to the place where Jehovah would set His name, and there, and there alone, was He to be served. Although there are many bodies as far as we are concerned, in the sight of God the situation remains that "there is one body". There is only one company of believers that is recognised by God, and that is the whole assembly. That means that there is no scriptural support for belonging to Brethren, nor indeed to anyone else. The only membership that is authorised for a believer, by the Scriptures, is membership of the body of Christ.

What does this mean for us in practice? I think it means that if there is one body in the sight of God, it follows that there must be *one ground of gathering* that is in accordance with His mind. Thus I would remark, that when we speak of walking in the light of the assembly, we are not talking of a speciality of some obscure saints.

It is both the privilege and the responsibility of *all* God's people to walk in the light of the assembly. It is not only that we have our *individual* responsibility to God, but by virtue of being called to have part in His assembly we also have what I might refer to as a *corporate*, or a collective, responsibility. Thus it is the responsibility of all to walk in the light of the assembly. Whether all are doing it is another thing, but I must begin with myself.

How do we do that when the church has broken down? Well, if we come back to Moses again, here he was at the threshold of the camp, and he would understand immediately as he viewed the situation there that there was nowhere in that camp where he could erect the tabernacle. He must therefore give up any thought of providing for the presence of God, or he must separate from the evil, he must set himself apart for God. The latter verses that we read

show us how important to Moses the presence of God was. You can understand that Moses would say, 'Whatever anyone else wants to go on with, I cannot do without the presence of God'. So it says that, "Moses took the tent, and pitched it outside the camp, far from the camp, and called it the Tent of meeting". I believe that, in principle, is what men like Mr. Darby and his contemporaries did less than two hundred years ago. They saw that Christendom corresponded to the camp, and they separated themselves from the various religious systems of the day, in order to meet on scriptural lines alone. If we take Mr Darby as an example, it is important to understand that the reason why he left the Anglican Church (where he was a clergyman) was not because of the abuses. He had his judgment of them. But what brought him out, as he says, was the light of the body of Christ (see, for example, JND 14: 247, 293). That is to say, as Mr. Darby understood, for the first time, what the body of Christ was as it is presented to us in the Scriptures, he also understood that what he was part of was not it. In fact, he goes on to say that the Anglican Church was no church at all, as far as the Scriptures are concerned (JND 14: 188). That serves to illustrate the importance of having this vision, of understanding what God has said about the assembly.

Once you have that in your soul you are able to hold it up, and you are able to test every claim by the light. And it is very instructive to see the way those godly men gathered together. They realised that God had not authorised them to form anything themselves. They were not authorised to set up any body of their own. They simply desired to gather on scriptural lines alone, in order to satisfy their own consciences. And it is very blessed to see the way the Lord vouchsafed His presence to them, as they gathered without pretension, and in much lowliness.

It is good to read of, and reflect on, what was undoubtedly a movement of God's Spirit then; but what about today? Historians of church history will tell you that no spiritual movement can retain its original character beyond the second and third generation. Once the men of faith and vision, once the gifted men, have passed off the scene, there is a tendency for things to become fossilised. Such an

idea does not take into account the power that is resident in the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, you can see the force of it. We have to see that right ground has to be maintained. It does not maintain itself.

And I am more than ever convinced that it can only be maintained in spiritual power. Spiritual power comes from devotion to Christ, and from faithfulness to the truth. I say that because one discerns an increasing danger that the precious spiritual heritage that has come down to us may in our own day be lost to us, simply through ignorance of it or neglect. The fact is, where these truths are rightly apprehended in the soul, they call for a movement on our part. At the very least they call for a movement of heart and mind. It says in verse 7, "Every one who sought Jehovah went out to the tent of meeting which was outside the camp". The majority never moved at all. Verse 10 says, "all the people rose and worshipped, every man at the entrance of his tent". That shows us that the majority were content to remain within their own circle of family and friends. They remained there without God, because God was with Moses outside the camp.

Now, dear brother, dear sister, the question that I raise with you is to what extent are you conscious that you have received light from God? And to what extent are you conscious that the reason you are where you are today is because, as having received light from God, you have sought to move out, if only in heart and mind, with a view to being on ground where you can know God's living presence? I would say, soberly, that I believe these questions are of all moment for us in view of the continuing experience of God's presence amongst us.

I want to say a word in closing as to Moses' recompense. How do we know that what Moses did was right? We have already said that he acted boldly. We have said that he acted without instructions from God. Would God forsake him or would He support him? We have the answer in verse 11, it says, "Jehovah spoke with Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend". How blessed that is!

It was the only confirmation that Moses had that what he had done was right. I say the only confirmation, but taking into account the

dark background, it was everything. Surely in the days in which we are the presence of God is everything.

At this point Moses rises to one of the greatest moments in all his history. If we turn to Deuteronomy 34, the chapter which records the death and burial of Moses, it would seem that the writer wanted to convey an impression of the greatness of God's servant. Which event from that eventful life, which incident in that life that was rich with experience with God, would the writer draw on to bring home to us the moral and spiritual stature of the man? We might have thought it was the moment when Moses divided the Red Sea, or one of the many other extraordinary miracles that he performed. But you will see from verse 11 that the one incident the writer refers to is that day when, with all the people having gone astray from God, there was one man who was "face to face" with Jehovah. How glorious that is! Think of God's pleasure in Moses personally at that time. It brings home to our souls what is possible for faithful individuals in days of breakdown.

Now the question is, dear brethren, do we covet the continuing experience of the Lord's presence amongst us? Is it something we really want? Do we want it enough that we are prepared to separate from evil? Do we want it sufficiently that we are prepared to set ourselves apart in heart and mind for Him, in order that we might provide suitable conditions for His dwelling amongst us? I desire that before the Lord comes He might awaken in the hearts of His beloved people such a longing for the experience of His blessed presence, that we might be moved with a sense of burden and urgency to put away the worldly things, and that we might freshly set ourselves apart for Him, in order that we might know what it is, in the language of this scripture, to be "face to face" with our beloved Lord. What that must be in such a dark day as we are in, in a day that is otherwise marked by such gross departure. What it must be to look up into the unrebuking gaze of Jesus, and to receive from Him the assurance that we are just where He would have us to be, and that He desires to be with us. Is there anything that we would desire more than that? Is there anything that we think would give us

greater satisfaction than the consciousness of the Lord's face shining upon us, and that He should speak to us "as a man speaks with his friend"? That is, that He should regard us as His confidants, that He should regard us as persons whom He can entrust with disclosures of what is upon His heart, and with whom He can share His precious things.

May the Lord give us the grace, the strength, and the courage, to answer to these things. May He open our eyes once more to the blessed possibilities that are open to those who, in lowliness and in dependence upon Him, desire to walk in the light of the assembly for His sake.

LONDON

20 May 2006

Notes

[←1]

There is a reference to “the bride” in John 3: 29, but I believe John the baptist may have had Israel in mind (see Isaiah 62: 5).