

Each Member — A Help or a Hindrance: Which?

A question for all in the assembly.

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Of the many favours conferred upon us by our ever-gracious Lord, one of the very highest is the privilege of being present in the assembly of His beloved people, where He has recorded His name. We may assert with all possible confidence that every true lover of Christ will delight to be found where He has promised to be. Whatever may be the special character of the meeting; whether it be round the Lord's table, to show forth His death; or round the Word, to learn His mind; or round the mercy-seat, to tell Him our need, and draw from His exhaustless treasury, every devoted heart will long to be there: and we may rest assured that any one who wilfully neglects the assembly is in a cold, dead, dangerous state of soul. To neglect the assembling of ourselves is to take the first step on the inclined plane that leads down to the total abandonment of Christ and His precious interests. See Heb. 10: 25-27.

And here, at the very outset, we would remind the reader that the object of this brief paper is not to discuss the oft-raised question, "How are we to know what meeting to go to?" This is, assuredly, a question of cardinal importance, which every Christian — man, woman, and child — is bound and privileged to have divinely settled ere he takes his place in an assembly. To go to a meeting without knowing the ground on which such meeting is gathered, is to act in ignorance or indifference wholly incompatible with the fear of the Lord and the love of His Word.

But we repeat, this question is not now before us. We are not occupied with the ground of the meeting, but with *our state and conduct on the ground* — a question, surely, of vast moral importance to every soul professing to be gathered in or to the name of Him who is holy and true. In a word, our thesis is distinctly stated at the head of this article. We assume that the reader is clear as to the ground of the assembly, and hence our immediate business with him just now is to raise the solemn question in his heart and conscience, "Am I a help, or a hindrance, to the assembly?" That each individual member is either the one or the other is as clear as it is weighty and practical.

If the reader will just open his Bible, and read, thoughtfully and prayerfully, 1 Cor. 12, he will find most clearly established the great practical truth that each member of the body exerts an influence on all the rest; just as, in the human body, if there be anything wrong with the very feeblest and most obscure member, all the members feel it, through the head. If there be a broken nail, or broken tooth, a foot out of joint; any limb, muscle or nerve out of order, it is a hindrance to the whole body. Thus it is in the Church of God, the body of Christ: "If one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or if one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it." The state of each member affects the whole body. Hence it follows that each member is either a help or a hindrance to all. What a profound truth! Yes, and it is as practical as it is profound.

Be it remembered that the apostle is not speaking of any mere local assembly, but of the whole body, of which, no doubt, each particular assembly ought to be the local expression. Thus he says, in addressing the assembly at Corinth, "Now *ye are the body of Christ*, and members in particular." True, there were other assemblies; and had the apostle been addressing any of them on the same subject, he would have used the same language; for what was true of each was true of all; and what was true of the whole was true of each local expression. Nothing can be clearer, nothing simpler, nothing more deeply practical. The whole subject furnishes three most precious and powerful motives for a holy, earnest,

devoted life — namely, first, that we may not dishonour the Head to whom we are united; secondly, that we may not grieve the Holy Spirit by whom we are united; and, thirdly, that we may not injure the members with whom we are united.

Can anything exceed the moral power of such motives as these? Oh that they were more fully realized among God's beloved people! It is one thing to hold and teach the doctrine of the unity of the body, and quite another thing to enter into and exhibit its holy formative power. Alas, the poor human intellect may discuss and traffic in the highest truths, while the heart, the conscience and the life have never felt their holy influence! This is a most solemn consideration for every one. May we ponder it in our hearts, and may it tell upon our whole life and character. May the truth of the "one body" be a grand moral reality to every member of that body on the face of the earth.

Here we might close, feeling, as we do, that if the glorious truth on which we have been dwelling were held in the living power of faith by all the Lord's beloved people, then, assuredly, ad the precious practical results would follow. But in sitting down to write, there was one special branch of the subject prominently before the mind; and that is, the way in which the various meetings are affected by the condition of soul, the attitude of heart, and the state of mind, of all who attend. We repeat, and with emphasis, all who attend — not merely all who audibly take part, but all who form the meeting.

No doubt a special and very weighty responsibility rests on those who take any part in the ministry, whether it be in giving out a hymn, engaging in prayer or thanksgiving, reading the Word, teaching, or exhortation. All who do so should be very sure that they are simply the instruments in the hands of the Lord for whatever they undertake to do. Otherwise they may do serious damage to the meeting. They may quench the Spirit, hinder the worship, interrupt the communion, mar the integrity of the occasion.

All this is most serious, and calls for holy watchfulness on the part of all who engage in any branch of ministry in the assembly. Even a hymn may prove a hindrance; it may interrupt the current of the Spirit in the assembly. Yea, the precious Word of God may be read out of place. In short, whatever is not the direct fruit of the Spirit can only hinder the edification and blessing of the assembly. All who take part in the ministry should have the distinct sense that they are led by the Spirit in what they do. They should be governed by the one commanding, absorbing object — the glory of Christ in the assembly, and the blessing of the assembly in Him. "Let all things be done unto edifying" (1 Cor. 14: 26). If it be not thus, they had better be quiet, and wait on the Lord. They will render more glory to Christ and more blessing to the assembly by quiet waiting than by restless action and unprofitable talking.

But while feeling and owning the gravity of all that has to be said in reference to the holy responsibility of all who minister in the assembly, we are thoroughly persuaded that the tone, character, and general effect of public meetings are very intimately connected with *the moral and spiritual condition of all*. It is this, we confess, that weighs upon the heart, and leads us to pen this brief address to every assembly under the sun. Every soul in the meeting is either a help or a hindrance, a contributor or a waster. All who attend in a devout earnest loving spirit: who come simply to meet the Lord Himself; who flock to the assembly as the place where His precious name is recorded; who delight to be there because He is there — all such are a real help and blessing to a meeting. May God increase their number. If all assemblies were made up of such blessed elements, what a different tale would have to be told!

And why not? It is not a question of gift or knowledge, but of grace and godliness, true piety and prayerfulness. In a word, it is simply a question of that condition of soul in which every child of God

and every servant of Christ ought to be, and without which the most shining gifts and the most extensive knowledge are a hindrance and a snare. Mere gift and intelligence, without an exercised conscience and the fear of God, may be, and have been, used of the enemy for the moral ruin of souls. But where there is true humility, and that seriousness and reality which the sense of the presence of God ever produces, there you have what will most surely, gift or no gift, impart depth of tone, freshness, and a spirit of worship, to an assembly.

There is a vast difference between an assembly of people gathered round some gifted man, and one gathered simply to the Lord Himself, on the ground of the one body. It is one thing to be gathered *by* ministry, and quite another to be gathered *to* it. If people are merely gathered to ministry, when the ministry goes they are apt to go too. But when earnest, true-hearted, devoted souls are gathered simply to the Lord Himself, then, while they are most thankful for true ministry when they can get it, they are not dependent upon it. They do not value gift less, but they value the Giver more. They are thankful for the streams, but they depend *only* upon the Fountain.

It will invariably be found that those who can do best without ministry, value it most when they get it. In a word, they give it its true place. But those who attach undue importance to gift, who are always complaining of the lack of it, and cannot enjoy a meeting without it, are a hindrance and a source of weakness to the assembly.

Alas. there are other hindrances and sources of weakness which demand the serious consideration of all. We should, each one of us, as we take our places in the assembly, honestly put the question to our hearts, "Am I a help, or a hindrance — a contributor, or a waster?" If we come in a cold, hard, careless state of soul — come in a merely formal manner, unjudged, unexercised, unbroken; in a fault-finding, murmuring, complaining spirit, judging everything and everybody except ourselves — then, most assuredly, we are a serious hindrance to the blessing, the profit and the happiness of the meeting. We are the broken nail, the broken tooth, or the foot out of joint. How sorrowful, how humiliating, how terrible is all this! May we watch against it, pray against it, firmly disallow it.

But, on the other hand, those who present themselves in the assembly in a loving, gracious, Christlike spirit; who delight to meet their brethren, whether round the table, round the fountain of Holy Scripture, or round the mercy-seat for prayer; who, in their hearts' deep and tender affections, embrace all the members of the beloved body of Christ; whose eyes are not dimmed, nor their affections chilled by dark suspicions, evil surmisings, or unkindly feelings toward any around them; who have been taught of God to love their brethren, to look at them "from the top of the rocks," and see them "in the vision of the Almighty"; who are ready to profit by whatever the gracious Lord sends them, even though it may not come through some brilliant gift or favourite teacher — all such are a divinely sent blessing to the assembly, wherever they are. Again we say, with a full heart, may God add to their number. If all assemblies were composed of such, it would be the very atmosphere of Heaven itself; the name of Jesus would be as ointment poured forth; every eye would be fixed on Him, every heart absorbed with Him, and there would be a more powerful testimony to His name and presence in our midst than could be rendered by the most brilliant gift.

May the gracious Lord pour out His blessing upon all His assemblies throughout the whole earth. May He deliver them from every hindrance, every weight, every stumbling-block, every root of bitterness. May the hearts of all be knit together in sweet confidence and true brotherly love. May He crown with His richest blessing the labours of all His beloved servants at home and abroad, cheering their hearts and strengthening their hands, giving them to be steadfast and unmovable, always abounding in His precious work, in the assurance that their labour is not in vain.