

The Re-dividing of the Reunited Brethren

– An attempt to diagnose –

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It was Sunday the 14th of July 1994. After the morning worship meeting, my wife and I rushed to the local hospital in Pereira (Colombia). She was 9 months pregnant with our third child, and her contractions had started. On arrival, we were informed that the local hospital was full, so we phoned around until we found an alternative. The delivery was somewhat stressful, because the baby refused to turn round. A few hours later, our little Edward was born, legs first! After local paediatric inspections, mum and baby were sent home to join a relieved father and two excited little sisters.

For a few days things went well. We were pleasantly surprised that our little Edward did not wake us up at night. Perhaps baby boys are better sleepers than girls, we thought. He was breast fed. We couldn't determine easily how much he was eating, but we did notice that he would feed for a short while and then fall asleep exhausted. Happily satisfied, we thought. My wife and I come from fairly healthy families. It didn't cross our mind that anything could be seriously wrong with our baby. Big health problems happen to other people. But after a week or so, a number of these small things began to make us feel uncomfortable: Compared to his sisters, his cry was very weak. In fact, his constitution was weak. He was small even for Colombian standards. A number of those who visited politely remarked how cold he looked. We would tuck the blanket nicely round him, trying to deny to ourselves the fact that he did look quite blue. His feet were rather blackish. With nice navy blue baby socks on, they looked better. The thought that something might not be right with our new son was frightening. Unconsciously we denied the emerging evidence. Just the thought of the possibility was acutely painful. It was at my mother's insistence (she being a trained midwife) that we took him to an alternative paediatrician. As I write this, I wonder why we didn't do this before. On seeing the baby, the doctor confirmed that he probably had serious heart or lung problems. Tests showed that he had a congenital heart disorder (called "corrected transposition of the great arteries and pulmonary atresia" for those of you who understand the jargon) and that his life was in danger. Within 2 weeks he was operated back in England.

The point is this: sometimes the pain of facing reality as it really is forces us to live in denial. Unconsciously (and sometimes consciously) we explain away the emerging unwelcome evidence. We become willing to accept very strange and improbable explanations. Why? Because we greatly fear the alternative. Have you noticed strange, sometimes even eccentric behaviour within our circle of Brethren assemblies? Given the deep pain we Brethren inflict on each other, could it be at all possible that there is something seriously wrong with our understanding of Scripture? Given our ever increasing excommunication of beloved and well taught brethren and their home assemblies, could it possibly be that the assembly principles as we practise them, are in some way defective? I realise that it is very painful for us to allow in our minds the remote possibility of this being

true. Could it be that we Brethren have moved away somewhat from the Lord's design for His Church on earth?

A PERSONAL PLEA

May I plead with you to consciously lay aside your natural fears for a while. It is clear that a lot is at stake. What we shall consider may well endanger your livelihood or your position of respect. As an active missionary, I risk both as I write. You may have been instrumental in implementing some decisions you now begin to regret. You may feel you have been following the current for too long to speak up now. You may feel too old to consider any form of change. I hereby invite you to reconsider together a few key issues. I can assure you that my heart, like yours, has a sincere desire to please the Lord above all. If wrong, I am happy to change. We must be prepared to assume the uncertainty and pain of facing reality as it really is. As you read you may be tempted to label me open, divisive, liberal, charismatic, idealist, perverse or something worse. Please hold your guns. Try not to shoot until you have finished reading the whole paper. If the Lord is to use this paper in any positive way in our personal life and assembly fellowship (and I pray He will), we must take a painful fresh look at reality.

A BIRD'S EYE VIEW

Through this paper, I would first like to show that our set of assemblies (called by some the Reunited Brethren after a number of happy reunions following past painful divisions) have serious problems. Although our pride and flesh contribute to these problems, I suggest that our root problem is doctrinal in nature. We shall then look at these problems in turn. First we shall look at our strange way of handling defective assembly decisions. Then we shall consider a possessive view of the Lord's Table which is held among us. Finally we shall explore the contradictory tension between some teachings on defilement and our practice of occasional fellowship. That ends the diagnosis.

In the last 3 sections, I try to suggest a constructive way forward. First I elaborate on what we might call the Spiritual Principle of Recognition, which I believe is central to the way forward. Then some comments on bitterness and paralysis, which are currently grave lurking dangers. Finally I suggest some possible priorities.

I claim no final word on all this. I write from the standpoint of a spiritual engineer rather than a spiritual scientist. My felt calling is to evangelise, disciple and stimulate the formation of new assemblies here in Colombia. To date we have had no division here, but outside pressures may well cause one to happen. Our divisive doctrine is bearing its sad fruit on this mission field, as it already has in Africa. Something must change. Dear reader, **is this the best we can leave our children, grandchildren and new assemblies?** Are we really living and promoting the Divine design? I warmly invite you Bible teachers, writers and godly thinkers to join in. But I write this paper for every brother and sister, young and old. You may wish to raise some of these issues in your home assembly Bible study group, or with other serious saints. The Lord may lead you to better solutions than the ones I propose. You may disagree with me (that is fine). Perhaps the Lord may lead you to develop further one of the thoughts in this paper. We need to recapture the freshness of the early Brethren. I am sure the Lord still has more light to shed on His Word.

THE PARABLE OF THE WHITE RABBITS

Perhaps some readers may be tempted to put this paper down thinking they are not qualified to think through the complex development of some Brethren teachings. You prefer to leave that to the experts. You have decided to simply accept what you are told, secretly deciding to leave your assembly when you feel they have gone too far. This parable is for you.

It was an important conference of genetic engineers. All those present had spent years experimenting in laboratories, studying, discussing and developing genetic models. In a four hour lecture, Professor Smith “proved” to the specialised audience the conclusion of his studies: that rabbits could only be born white. They all clapped and the conference was dismissed. All were duly impressed and convinced by the Professor’s careful research and arguments.

One day, much to the genetic engineers’ dismay, a local farmer presented them with a brown rabbit. At first they ignored him. They avoided him. He was advised not to show the rabbit to anyone. A cousin of the professor had even suggested that the farmer should be put out of town! One day, the engineers called the farmer aside and explained to him the professors’ research. “You now see”, they said, “why rabbits can only be white”. Although the farmer nodded, he really understood very little of the complex reasoning. The only thing he was sure about, was that he had a brown rabbit in his bag.

This is the power of a counter example. You only need one case to destroy a thesis. But to prove a thesis is much more difficult. Even presenting 1000 white rabbits would not prove the thesis that “all rabbits must be white”. But only one brown rabbit disproves it. In the course of this paper, we shall make reference to 3 brown rabbits:

(1) If we claim to be the only ones in the world to have the **Lord’s Table** and we find another network of assemblies, who don’t want to be part of “we” but have the same rights as “we” and also claim to be the only ones to have the Lord’s Table, then we’ve found a brown rabbit. Therefore it is not true that we are the only ones.

(2) If we claim that all **assembly decisions** (rightly or wrongly) must be accepted immediately (at least until retracted or the assembly is excommunicated) and we find two simultaneous contradictory assembly decisions which simply cannot be accepted together immediately, then we have found a brown rabbit. Not all assembly decisions can be accepted immediately.

(3) If we are told that to receive a Baptist brother to break bread a couple of times will cause a **defiling linkage** between our assembly and the non-Scriptural practices held by Baptists, and then we find that educated saints like Darby and Kelly were very happy to receive sincere Baptist believers, then we have found a brown rabbit. If we claim to be on the same old paths as they, and it didn’t defile them, then it won’t defile us.

The parable continues: The confused genetic engineers called a special emergency private conference and invited the professor and the farmer. The farmer fidgeted in his chair. He felt out of place. The Professor placed a bound copy of his research and genetic arguments on the table. The atmosphere was tense. There was a lot at stake, specially the reputation of the University, that of a number of professional publications and not least, the reputation of the professor. The professor stared as he saw the brown rabbit emerge from the farmer’s bag. He felt like killing the rabbit (some scientists have been known to eliminate unwanted evidence in the past!). “That rabbit should not be”, he ex-

claimed, "it cannot be!" A long silence followed. Then, in a calm and frustrated manner, the professor handed the bound copy of his thesis to the farmer. "Tell me then" he asked the farmer, "where has my research gone wrong?" The poor farmer hadn't got a clue!

It is quite simple to show something is wrong. If brown rabbits exist, it is simply a matter of time before you will see one. But it is not so simple to determine what exactly has gone wrong. We shall try to look at what has probably gone wrong with our doctrine. It is much more difficult to suggest a healthy alternative. At the end of this paper we shall suggest a possible way forward. Please read on to the end. I hope you will find this understandable, useful and not too complex. The subject matter affects you and me deeply, and we are either part of the problem or contributors to the solution. Let's hope we form part of the latter.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Do we have a Problem?
2. Assembly Decisions
3. The Body of Christ & Local Assemblies
4. The Lord's Table
5. Defilement & Occasional Fellowship
6. The Principle of Recognition
7. Anarchy or True Dependence
8. Politics, Bitterness & Paralysis
9. Priorities and Conclusion

1. DO WE HAVE A PROBLEM?

For years we have been presenting the gospel of grace to lost sinners here in Colombia. But before we can progress with the happy message, the person must sense his sinfulness. Most people here come from a Catholic background. Most will readily admit to being sinners. "Every one is", they quickly reply. They enjoy their religious activities, and life goes on. They can always point their finger at someone more sinful. Sadly, they don't **feel** sinful. Until they do, no action takes place. Until we sense the awfulness of sin (at least to a degree), we have no need for Christ. That is clear and evident. I suggest we Brethren need a similar awakening.

SOMETHING IS GOING BADLY WRONG

Until we really acknowledge that something is really wrong, we shall not act. Consider the following:

- It is no secret that our branch of the Brethren movement is small and is not growing, although from time to time our statistics increase a little with some "take overs" on the mission field. We say that numbers don't matter, that we are called to be faithful. This is true, but is it the whole truth?
- World-wide old assemblies are slowly closing. Many of our assemblies (particularly marked in the English speaking world, but evident elsewhere) are now reduced to less than 20 adults in fellowship, and mostly elderly. We say that we live in closing days.

Just keep the meetings going. The Lord will come soon. This is true. But why have so many assemblies become so weak and so small?

- Most European assemblies have relied on believers' children for growth. Many families within the assemblies are now related through marriage (particularly marked in the French speaking world). I have been told that during the last 40 years only some of the Dutch assemblies were attracting any significant number of outside sinners and Christians from other groups. Alarming few of our assemblies have baptised and received converted outside non-Christians into their fellowship. We say that if other Christian groups grow where we are not growing, they must have a watered down gospel. They must be men pleasers. This may be true in some cases. But is this the whole truth?
- Many young families are leaving our assemblies (especially so during these last 5 years of tensions) tired of their men being absorbed in long stressful brothers meetings, analysing critical letters, forced to consider foreign problems they really don't relate to. Most families simply seek a Biblically based, loving and positive Christian fellowship in which to raise their family for the Lord. We say they love their family more than the Lord himself. Perhaps some do. But is that the whole story? Why is it so difficult to find happy and constructive fellowship around Christ without endless meetings and letters to assess assembly problems? Are we really faced with only 2 options: automatic acceptance of all decisions or the time consuming study and investigation of every new problem? Must we really **state our position** on every new controversy? Is this symptomatic of something?
- As Brethren, we have spent years and years repeating again and again the painful process of division. Can we begin to imagine the amount of sorrow and sleepless nights we have collectively lived over the last 150 years? We adjust to it because we love the Lord. We are told that the pain is the price of faithfulness to the Lord. Is the Lord really looking for this pain offering? Consider the hours and hours of meetings, the many travels and letters to negotiate and orchestrate happy reconciliations between previously separated networks of assemblies around the world. All this in the face of a perishing world and a growing Muslim advance. And now we redivide again. We relive the self inflicted pain of our grandparents and great grandparents. Are we so sure we are still on the divine path?

In Revelation 2:5, we read that Christ himself threatened to remove the Lampstand from the assembly in Ephesus. It was once a beautiful and promising assembly. I wonder how would the saints within the Ephesus assembly know when their lampstand had been removed. How would the surrounding assemblies know that the Ephesian lampstand had been removed? Has the lampstand been removed from **your** local assembly? Could it be that we, as a fellowship of Brethren assemblies have had our lampstand removed? "Impossible!" you may say. But why impossible? In what ways would our assemblies be different today if the Lord had chosen to remove our lampstand 20 or 50 years ago? The truth is that we are in no good shape today. But praise God, He remains. "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the Churches" (Revelations 2:7).

WHAT IS OUR PROBLEM?

During December 2002 and January 2003, I had the privilege of visiting a number of brethren and assemblies in England, Holland, France, Germany and Belgium. As I travelled, I discussed some of the issues of this paper. Most brethren agree that something is seriously wrong. But what is the cause?

(1) The flesh: A common feeling expressed was that if it were not for our flesh, our understanding of assembly principles would work very well. Many blame “the operators”. Clearly our flesh causes problems. But does this in itself explain totally our predicament? Is this a complete diagnosis? I suggest not. If there were no flesh, there would be no difficult, no carnal believers. There would be no need for assembly discipline. If there were no flesh, there would be no defective assembly decisions. But to think of no flesh is to think of heaven. Surely biblical principles for the functioning of assembly life are designed to function here in a fallen world. Like marriage, the correct arrangements must be robust enough to function happily even under normal difficult conditions.

(2) Lack of instruction: Some think the root of our evil is that we haven’t taught assembly truth as much as we should have. Perhaps, but some of those who leave (or are cut off) have been teachers of assembly truths themselves. We claim they have become non-spiritual or unwilling to pay the price of obedience. Is that really true? Can this be claimed for every faithful saint, leading brother, godly sister, experienced missionary who is now considered out? Is it really lack of teaching?

(3) Hierarchy: Some suggested that, although we do not hold to modern day apostolic authority, we suffer from the excessive influence by a small circle of brothers. A disproportionate influence of a few personalities. The Brethren movement expanded and then divided repeatedly under the guidance of chief brethren. Have you ever wondered how your assembly came to be in happy fellowship with quite **different** assemblies in France and Philippines, Germany and Greece, Italy and India, Egypt and England, America and Australia? The international networking of assemblies has always been the job of chief brethren. They help formalise national and international assembly lists. The influence of informal hierarchy is more strongly felt in some regions and countries than in others. But is it really fair to blame today’s chief brethren for our current redividing?

(4) Over preoccupation with Brethren writings: One of the brothers I stayed with thought our problems stem from the excessive reading, studying and teaching of Brethren writing’s. This has displaced the calm meditation directly in the word of God, coupled with a living communion with Him. Would you agree?

(5) Unbalanced emphasis: An American brother wrote to me recently. He was concerned by our disproportionate emphasis on a few “pet doctrines”, at the expense of the development of Christian character. Order and doctrine have become more important than our communion with Christ himself. We have become, as one put it, “a theologically diverse community of powerless Pharisees”.

Some have suggested that our downfall is connected with our un-welcoming attitude driven by a exaggerated preoccupation with positional purity. Others point to our excessive fear of any form of change. Allowing one brother to veto an assembly proposal and expecting all assemblies to seek regional agreement, makes change of any kind nearly impossible. Some are convinced that our sense of doctrinal superiority has been our ruin. God hates pride and has judged us.

OUR CORE PROBLEM IS DOCTRINAL

The flesh is undeniably evident. Our flesh is driven by fear. The fear of change. Fear of unforeseen consequences of change. Fear of losing a position in a little world empire. When non-spiritual leadership is threatened, it tries to exert authority in unexpected fleshly ways. Some whom I considered godly men until a couple of years ago, now be-

have more like amateur religious politicians. Secret dealings. Truth becomes relative. Factual reports and “narrative of facts” become selective distortions. A sad show of self protecting manoeuvrings ... all in the name of God. An attempt to protect the Divine with dirty hands (2 Samuel 6:6,7).

But, of course, not all brethren, by far, are like this. What I submit is that even if we allow for godly operators of our assembly principles, we will still have bitter and painful periodic world-wide divisions. Although our flesh plays its part, our root problem lies in the machine, that is, in our procedures for dealing with problems within and between assemblies.

WE HAVE NO OFFICIAL BOOKS

From time to time we teach our young people here in Colombia a course on false doctrines. We consider that, in order to protect them from their errors, and to equip them to be able to help people within these groups, a basic understanding of the main defective doctrines is necessary. We use an official catholic catechism to show that the catholic church (at least in Colombia) promotes salvation by works, the false hope of purgatory, the co-redemptive role of Mary, etc. Mormons, the Jehovah’s Witnesses also have their official publications. When it comes to looking at our own doctrinal positions, we Brethren of course have no official literature. In fact, as a matter of principle we say that the Bible alone is our only official book. Well known authors in one language group, can be virtually unknown in assemblies in other language groups. For example, how many English speaking brethren take the French “Messager Evangélique” as authoritative? Most have never seen one of its 143 annual volumes. Do our German brethren know many of our Egyptian brethren writers?

Given our diverse backgrounds, we enjoy a variety of forms and doctrinal statements. Much to the frustration of beginners, our Brethren literature is not always consistent. I shall try to keep quotations to a basic minimum, mainly limiting myself to those I think are fairly well known writers. As you proceed you may be tempted to exclaim, “I am being accused of something I do not hold”. If you don’t hold it, fine. May you be confirmed in your understanding and warned not to shift in the direction of error. Relax, I have no desire to accuse you. But if you or your assembly do live some of the problems I here identify, then I invite you to think, pray and reconsider.

2. ASSEMBLY DECISIONS

Very few, if any, would claim that the believers who meet in “our assemblies” make up the Church of God. What many do teach is that “our assemblies” collectively seek to represent that one Body of Christ on earth today, and that we represent it in some unique way. Many hold strongly that each individual assembly should always act as representing the whole Church of Christ, and that their decisions must be accepted by all saints everywhere.

I suggest that a careful look at our procedures in dealing with defective assembly decisions is the starting point which will help us identify our doctrinal problem. At the root of nearly every global assembly division, is the insistence on some questionable assembly decision. The times change, the personalities change, the issues change, but our divisive

algorithm (procedures) remains. In fact, much of our teaching on this matter sounds quite reasonable until you see it work out in practice. Until you hear that godly men that you know are being put out. Until you feel the pressure to accept a decision against your conscience.

A HELPFUL PROTOCOL – BUT IS IT BINDING?

Has the local gathering been delegated an independent authority? Can an assembly really bind in heaven and impose on all other believers on earth a decision which they may consider correct, but which is lacking Divine approval? Surely not. The more you think about it, the more irrational it is: that a group of believers in Florida, because they claim to have Christ in their midst, can thus force the whole church of Christ on earth to accept their decision.

It was during the first Vatican Council in the 1870's that the Catholic Church gave the Pope similar authority over the whole church. "We Brethren", a brother remarked, "seem to have given Papal authority to every local gathering!" But, to be fair, we have a happy difference. We have an agreed protocol (among most, not all) whereby other assemblies may send investigators to the assembly which has made the questionable judgement. If the assembly refuses to cooperate with the visiting brethren, it can be excommunicated. After dialogues and an investigation, these brethren may encourage all saints everywhere to accept the original decision. If they disagree with the decision, they will encourage the rash assembly to reverse its decision or face being cut off. This particular bit of protocol has worked reasonably well in many situations, but it has some great weaknesses:

(1) The New Testament does not teach it. It is a man made protocol (and I would say a reasonable one) designed to correct some of the obvious excesses caused by the teaching that assembly decisions are universally binding. It is questionable exegesis to equate each tribe of Israel with an assembly, and to conclude that the method used by the tribes to resolve one of their problems, is a binding procedure for the Church of God (Joshua 22, Judges 19–21).

(2) It allows for wickedness to be bound temporarily on the whole Church. For some days, usually months and years, all saints everywhere are forced to go along with an unrighteous decision. Christian faithfulness is equated with adherence to the protocol.

(3) It is very time consuming. In my experience, the work of shepherding in the local assembly, evangelising, encouraging the weak, helping in difficult family problems, disciplining, dealing with local baptisms, receptions, disciplines ... is about as much as one can do properly. To further involve leading brothers in regional, national and international problems, usually means local work will suffer. Family life will suffer.

(4) It can create in practice a new tier of authority. We all know that Christ is head of His Church. Once the apostles of Christ passed away, the maximum authority in the Church on earth are the leading brothers in each local assembly. They will give account to the Lord Himself of how they watch over the flock in their assembly that is under their care (Hebrews 13:17; 1 Peter 5:1–4). But sadly, it is evident in a number of parts of the world, that the well intended protocol encourages smaller and weaker assemblies to fear and become dependent on larger assemblies. In practice, some assemblies and their leaders develop **regional authority** over other assemblies. This is unhealthy and dangerous. Perhaps you are aware that in sectors of contemporary Protestantism, there is a

revival of the notion of “apostleship”. It is useful to have powerful influential brothers sorting out our problems. But is this the divine design?

(5) It doesn't always work. The visiting brethren are also human and, as is evident, they can be politically minded. Their recommendations may also be questionable. If they recommend acceptance, still the consciences of many may not be satisfied. If neighbouring assemblies excommunicate the assembly which does not wish to retract, that also causes wide trouble.

STATUS OF ASSEMBLY JUDGEMENTS

Prior to conversion, we make it clear to the dear Catholic soul seeking Christ, that on conversion we agree to submit totally to the Word of God. The Scriptures, we teach, are our only source of authority. We criticise the denominations that have “statements of faith”. We criticise the Catholics because they have 2 sources of authority: the Scriptures and The Church. Yet, when we expel saints or assemblies from our fellowship for not accepting assembly judgements, aren't we giving assembly judgements the same status as Scriptures themselves? Aren't we in practice presenting new believers with two binding authorities: Scriptures and assembly judgements? (As you can imagine, this is difficult to “sell” to a recently converted Catholic – he has just left all this behind!). **When we say that we accept all Biblical assembly judgements (because they are Biblical), we are protecting the important fact that the Scriptures are the ONLY source of authority.** And this, I strongly urge, we should never compromise.

FORGIVENESS, PRAYER AND DECISIONS

At the heart of assembly decisions, is **Matthew 18:19**. Let's take a closer look.

V. 18: “Verily I say to you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on the earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatsoever ye shall loose on the earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

V. 19: “Again I say unto you, that if two of you shall agree on the earth concerning any matter, whatsoever it may be that they shall ask, it shall come to them from my Father who is in [the] heavens.”

V. 20: “For where two or three are gathered together unto my name, there am I in the midst of them.” JND Translation.

Church history contains a number of sad examples of humans misusing these verses. With either pride or piety, some use these verses to make themselves think that they can direct heaven. The other verse in Scripture that is similar to this in category is **John 20:23**. Here the resurrected Christ breathes on his disciples the Holy Spirit and then gives them some instructions about forgiveness of sins.

In the JND translation we read: “whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted to them; whose soever [sins] ye retain, they are retained.”

In the NIV we read: “If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”

We have here 3 topics: **decisions** (Matthew 18:18), **prayer** (Matthew 18:19) and **forgiveness** (John 20:23). In each case, something happens in heaven and on earth. Much time has been spent on discussing timing. That is, does something happen in heaven first, or on earth first. Or in heaven and earth at the same time. Perhaps, for now, we could look

at it from a different angle, namely, that what happens on earth and in heaven must be the same. If we pronounce **forgiveness** and the Lord has not forgiven, our words are empty. If we **pray** for something outside the will of God, our words are empty. If an assembly makes a **decision** outside the will of God, its words are empty. Whenever there is a difference between heaven and earth, heaven is right, and earth is wrong.

(a) Forgiveness: As we well know, the Catholic Church takes John 20:23 and gives their ordained priests special powers to forgive sin. The ideal situation is that the offending person truly repents and, at this point, he is forgiven by his heavenly Father. Any human pronouncement of forgiveness will then be in harmony with this. In the event that heaven forgives, and for some reason we have not, heaven wins: the repentant sinner is forgiven without us. In the event that we pronounce forgiveness when the heart is not repentant, heaven wins again: our words are ignored and the sin is still outstanding. This is not the only verse on forgiveness. By comparing with other Scriptures, it is evident that pronouncements of forgiveness are only effective when earth is in harmony with heaven.

(b) Prayer: Perhaps you have heard on the radio a prayer of one of those enthusiastic Pentecostal preachers: they pray in the Name of Christ and demand an affirmative response from heaven. Their support is Matthew 18:19. "If we agree", they say, "and if we pray in the Name of Christ (and they sincerely believe they are doing so), the Father has to act. Christ promised "it will be done by my Father in heaven" and Christ cannot lie. We must pray believing". Pentecostal preachers may well have more prayers answered than we do, but we must still insist that all prayers must agree with the mind of Christ. We may be all pressured to say "amen", but that in itself will not help. This is not the only verse on prayer. By comparing with other Scriptures, it is evident that prayer is only effective when earth is in harmony with heaven.

(c) Decisions: When an assembly of believers convinces itself that it can use Matthew 18:19 to impose its decisions (however noble) on the Father in heaven, it is committing the same mistake as do some Catholics on forgiveness and as do some Pentecostals on prayer. This is not the only verse on decisions. By comparing with other Scriptures, it is evident that decisions only have effect when earth is in harmony with heaven.

If we are not in the will of God, pronouncements of forgiveness, intense prayer and solemn assembly decisions are simply empty words.

CAN HEAVEN REFUSE AN ASSEMBLY DECISION?

This may sound like a simple question, but it is really a pivotal one. A lot hinges on the answer. If Christ is sovereign (which He obviously is), then no person or assembly (however educated or large) can force Christ to accept its judgement. If Christ is holy, just and righteous (which He obviously is), then no person or assembly (even if they are convinced that they are acting in the name of Christ) can force Christ (or anyone else in heaven) to accept an incorrect or an unrighteous judgement. In my mind this is very clear. I think you will agree.

Commenting on Matthew 18, brother Henk L. Heijkoop (my grandmother's brother) writes: "And so the Lord Jesus, the Son of God, says here that whenever the assembly makes a decision here on earth – even if it is only made up of two or three people – God recognises the judgement and that whatever it has bound is bound in heaven ... **The question is not whether the decision is wise and agrees with what the Father desires**. No, the Lord says, "if two of you shall agree." He says it in connection with the

assembly ... **Could heaven refuse a decision that has been made in the Name of the Son of God? Certainly not!**" (Taken from "The Assembly of God" pages 25–27, by HLH, printed by GBV, Dillenburg, D). With due respect to my dear great uncle, his exegesis is dangerously defective on this point. The will of the Father and the will of the Son are always in harmony. The Father in heaven will always honour whatever is in harmony with the will of the Son and always reject what is not in harmony with it. It is not true to Scripture to affirm that the Father must honour anything an assembly decides, even when He disagrees, simply because the assembly claims to act "in the Name of the Son of God".

Look at the following verse (v. 19) and then ask: **Could heaven refuse a prayer that has been made in the Name of the Son of God? It certainly can! And it does!** The prayer must not only be "made in the Name of Jesus", it must agree with the will of the Lord Jesus. If our prayers and assembly decisions do not agree with the will of the Son of God, we are pronouncing empty words.

IS A BAD MARRIAGE BOUND IN HEAVEN?

When a Christian marries a non-Christian, he sins. But God recognises this sinful marriage as a valid marriage. Can this support the view that sinful assembly decisions are also considered by God as valid decisions? I do not think so. (1) Marriage is a personal act, like stealing or dying. It is a reality that cannot be denied on earth and in heaven. A defective assembly decision involves others. If it is defective it does not reflect reality. (2) Marriage is a covenant given by God to humanity. Christian couples are not more married than non-Christians. When an assembly makes a decision, no covenant is involved. (3) When the Christian partner becomes conscious of his sin of marrying a non-Christian, he must live the sad consequences. He cannot say "I have sinned, I will now leave you". In contrast, when an assembly becomes aware that it has sinned in a judgement, it must correct it. Heaven has never accepted it. The nature of a marriage and a decision made by an assembly are clearly very different.

AN ODD CASE: CONTRADICTORY ASSEMBLY JUDGEMENTS

An interesting phenomenon developed while I was in England during 2001. There were (perhaps still are) some controversies connected with an assembly in the north east of England. Neighbouring assemblies visited to try to help clarify the matter. Within the same week, two letters were circulated: One of the neighbouring assemblies expressed their judgement that the controversial assembly was OK for fellowship. Another neighbouring assembly expressed their judgement that it was not OK for fellowship. We were presented with an awkward yet technically interesting situation.

There were two contradictory assembly judgements. Which judgement is binding? The first letter to be drafted? The first letter to be posted? The first letter to be read? Do you think there was any confusion in the heavens over this matter? Clearly not. Christ knows what is happening in the controversial assembly. He knows if it is OK or not OK for fellowship. It is our job to recognise reality. It is our job to seek and recognise the mind of Christ on this matter. And this may not always be an easy job. The Lord will confirm what is true in His time and way. When the Lord grants clarity, decisions follow naturally. For this we need to be spiritual. It is not a matter of simply accepting a decision because it is made by an assembly. It is accepted because it evidently reflects the mind of Christ. But in those days, weeks or months, until the Lord makes the matter clear to Godly consciences, which of the two contradicting assembly judgements remains valid?

WHO DETERMINES WHICH DECISIONS HOLD?

The need to insist on an automatic acceptance (even temporarily) of decisions reflects poorly on our confidence in the power of the Holy Spirit among us. Can't the Holy Spirit impress on the hearts of brethren in a receiving assembly who they should receive and who reject? How did all this work before we had formal assembly lists with "ins" and "outs"? Have these lists helped us to become more holy ... to grow in dependence on the Holy Spirit? ... to seek and follow the Lord's guidance more closely?

Brother Darby detected the danger as assembly lists began to circulate back in the late 1800's. "As to the danger of slipping into sectarianism, that is, making ourselves a body apart, I recognise it fully; but it has through mercy received a rude shock. The printed list of meetings tended to it, for evil slips in unintentionally, and for this reason I never would have anything to say to it, though very convenient, and done with this view ... The line between narrowness and fidelity is a very narrow one. **But the Spirit of Christ can guide and keep us on it**". Letters of JND Vol. III page 62, 63. 1879.

In reality, a decision made by an assembly is either in harmony with the mind of Christ, or it is not. It is either a correct decision (if it follows the divine), or a wrong decision (if it differs from the divine). The assembly concerned must be a "spiritual assembly" if it is to sense and follow the mind of Christ. But it is difficult to be and remain spiritual. Perhaps we prefer the mechanical. Could it be that if a number of **godly men** differ on an issue, it is evident that the mind of Christ is not yet clearly revealed? Those who are not clear should wait. It is not a time to make decisions. It is no time to force decisions. It is not time to accept others' decisions.

ACCEPTANCE IN PRINCIPLE?

Some would say "we accept all assembly decisions in principle" because they are made in the name of Christ. Does this reasoning help? Perhaps a little, but not much. It opens the door to ignore or reject defective judgements in practice. It creates dichotomy between principle and practice which is dangerous. If I said to my wife "I will be faithful to you in principle", she would not be very pleased. She would like me to be faithful in principle and in practice! It would be better, more biblical and more practical to say "we accept (in principle and practice) all decisions which have the mark of God on them". When we doubt, when there isn't peace, we should wait for Him to clarify (Philippians 3:15,16). We must avoid trying to move others or allow ourselves to be moved by human pressure. We must learn to recognise divine reality. We must seek and accept what God decides. He leads. We humans (individually or collectively) must always follow. We shall develop this further in section 6.

FREED COLOMBIAN DRUG BARON

The Cali drug cartel, probably the biggest in the world, is run by a couple of families. On the 8th of November 2002, to the dismay of all Colombians, a local judge in the south of Colombia announced that one of the Cartel's leading men was being released from prison early after serving a very short term. The current government did its best to intervene, but to no avail. He is now free. A sense of impotence and frustration swept the country as we all watched on the TV news the criminal and his well paid lawyer leave the high security prison, walk toward his bullet proof Toyota, and be driven off escorted by his private body guards. It was a scandal. The president called it an insult to every law abid-

ing Colombian citizen. A scar on humanity! This should not happen. But why did it happen? Why was the whole Colombian government powerless before such an obvious miscarriage of natural justice? Why were they all bound to a defective decision? Because previous Colombian governments, influenced by fear and big drug moneys, weakened the law by introducing ambiguous wordings and some loop holes.

Returning now to our subject matter, do we really think that our all wise God will sanction in Scripture a mechanism that will bind Him and the whole Body of Christ on earth to a defective assembly judgement? I just can't see it! Bible commentaries propose a number of alternative explanations of verse 18. Before the Lord, take your pick, but let's be clear on one thing: The verse cannot mean that our mistakes and defective assembly judgements are bound on heaven. What a comfort to know that our all powerful, all wise, just and sovereign Lord reigns unaffected by human folly.

In every country we see that a questionable assembly judgement is the "lever", that when forced, brings about distancing, separation and division. We must seek and adopt an interpretation of Matthew 18:18 which is in harmony with the other teachings of Scripture.

If, to remain within our particular brand of brethren assemblies, we are being asked to endorse in principle or in practice a distortion of divine sovereignty, the choice is clear. The Lord I have given my life to, the Lord I have grown to love and serve, the Lord we share with lost sinners here on the mission field, is by no means a weak Lord who finds himself bound to human error or folly, be it by one assembly or a thousand assemblies, be it for one year, one month or one minute.

3. THE BODY OF CHRIST & LOCAL ASSEMBLIES

In November every year, leading brethren of the different assemblies here in Colombia meet for a weekend to enjoy fellowship and help each other. A while back, a foreign visiting brother arrived at this meeting to inform the Colombian brethren about some decisions and divisions in his home country. On finishing his presentation, he asked us: "Are we part of the same Body? Yes or no?" With that he sat down. Good question. Since then, I have thought much about it. But how many Bodies are there? Of course we understood what he was trying to do. He wished to use the "One Body" doctrine to impose his home assembly judgements on Colombian assemblies. The doctrine underlying this procedure clearly needs some further investigation.

Scripture is very clear that Christ only has One Body. God himself puts each believer in this Body at the moment of his conversion. This body is made up of all the true believers in Jesus Christ. That is, all those who are Christians in reality. A few years ago I recall a discussion over the nature of the One Body of Christ: Is it made up of assemblies or individuals? At first I thought the discussion was rather technical and of little interest. Since assemblies are made up of individual saints, what was the point of the discussion? What was the difference? It was months later that the importance of this distinction dawned on me. The biblical distinction is very helpful when dealing with reception, and is also helpful in our understanding of assembly decisions.

IS THE BODY OF CHRIST MADE UP OF SAINTS OR ASSEMBLIES?

If you put all the assemblies together, would they make up the Body of Christ? No. The immoral brother of 1 Corinthians 5 was put out from his assembly, but was still part of the Body of Christ. If the sum of assemblies make up the Body of Christ, we would then exclude the immoral brother from the Body of Christ because at that point he did not form part of any assembly.

The frequent references to the Body of Christ in the New Testament all suggest that the One Body is made up of individuals and not of assemblies.

In **Romans 12**, for example, we read:

- v. 5 “we who are many, form one body”, the “we” referring to individual saints.
- v. 6 “we have different gifts ... if a man’s gift is ...” individuals have gifts, not assemblies.

In **1 Corinthians 12**, for example, we read:

- v. 13 “we were all baptised by one Spirit into one body ...” The “we” are saints, not assemblies.
- v. 27 “Now you are (the) body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.”

In **Ephesians**, for example, we read:

- 4:25 “each of you must put off falsehood ... for we are all members of one body”, each referring to individual saints.
- 5:30 “we are members of his body”

We shall explore the matter in three steps: First we shall consider the similarities between the Body of Christ and the assembly, then their differences, and finally some practical consequences.

SIMILARITIES BETWEEN “THE BODY” AND “A BODY”

The image of a body is much used in the New Testament to describe organic living relationships. For one, it describes in a very visual way, the relationship between Christ (as Head) and all Christians (The Body) and the interaction between all Christians among themselves. But in a local and geographical sense the term body is also used to illustrate the headship of Christ over the local gathering (the assembly) and the dynamic functioning between saints locally. Here we rejoice and weep together, we work together, we feel for each other. In the universal sense and in the local sense, the Body is made up of individual saints.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE BODY OF CHRIST AND THE ASSEMBLY

The local church (or assembly) cannot be a copy or a miniature of the Body of Christ. We can see body functions in an assembly. We can see evidence of the One Body in an assembly. But a group or network of assemblies, however orthodox their doctrine, cannot be a miniature of the Body of Christ. It is also incorrect to state that a specific group of assemblies represent in some unique way the Body of Christ here on earth. Why not? We cannot represent it, because we are it. Let’s look at some differences:

(1) **Entrance:** We are made part of the Body of Christ at conversion, when we receive the Holy Spirit. But to enter into a local assembly we notice that believers must first be con-

verted, then baptised and then “added” to a local fellowship (Acts 2:14,42). There are Christians who have never formed part of an assembly.

(2) **Its essence:** The Body of Christ is a spiritual entity and the truths associated with it are positional, while the assembly is a physical and geographical entity and the teachings associated with it are practical (Ephesians 1:22,23; 1 Corinthians 1:1,2).

(3) **Male-Female distinction:** In the Body of Christ there is no difference between sexes, there is “neither male nor female” (Galatians 3:20), but in the assembly, there is well marked difference between male and female (1 Corinthians 11:1–16; 14:34; 1 Timothy 2:12–15).

(4) **Unity:** There is perfect unity in the Body of Christ (Ephesians 4:3,4), but in an assembly or between assemblies there is often evidence of jealousy and quarrelling (1 Corinthians 3:3).

(5) **Infiltrated:** The Body of Christ is made up only of the genuine Christians (1 Corinthians 12:13), but the assembly may be infiltrated by “savage wolves” (Acts 20:29), and people who may prove not to be Christians (1 John 2:19; Matthew 7:23).

(6) **Discipline:** No true believer can ever be separated from the Body of Christ (Romans 8:38,39), but it may become necessary to separate a true believer from the assembly (1 Corinthians 5:11).

SOME PRACTICAL CONSEQUENCES

Here I suggest four important practical consequences (perhaps you can see some more). Clarifying in our minds the distinction between the Body of Christ and the assembly will:

(1) **Protect us against looseness in reception:** Because the Body of Christ and the assembly are different, membership of the Body of Christ is not in itself a sufficient condition for being received into a local assembly. If the assembly were a miniature of the Body of Christ, membership of the Body of Christ would automatically make you member of its miniature, the assembly.

(2) **Protect us against “unisex”:** As members of the Body of Christ, males and females have an equal dignified standing. In the assembly, they clearly have different roles.

(3) **Protect us from imposing on other assemblies:** The prime responsibility we have been given is to maintain the purity in our local assembly. We may express our concern and offer our brotherly assistance, even plead with fellow saints in other assemblies. But we must distinguish between our local responsibilities and those responsibilities that rest with Christ alone (Ephesians 5:25–28).

(4) **Protect us from being imposed on by other assemblies:** It is very possible to reject a defective assembly decision and hold firmly (in principle and in practice) to the Unity of the One Body of Christ. The unity of the Body of Christ cannot be strengthened nor destroyed by our acceptance or rejection of assembly decisions. As members of the One Body of Christ, we can encourage one another, support one another, feel for one another, but not decide for one another. Binding decisions naturally come from the Head. In the unusual event that an assembly makes a premature or defective judgement, in faithfulness to the Head we must not follow.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN AN ASSEMBLY IS “PUT OUT”?

When an individual is excommunicated or no longer allowed to be part of a local assembly, we all agree that we are not excluding him (or her) from the Body of Christ. No one can do that. Because of his sinful behaviour or for serious doctrinal error, he is no longer welcome in the assembly fellowship. And he is told so. There is good New Testament support for this.

What do we mean when an assembly is “put out” of fellowship or excommunicated? Some saints have a problem with excluding assemblies. We have no apostolic teaching on this particular case, neither do we find any New Testament example. Some wonder what would have happened if the immoral brother was not excluded at Corinth. Scriptures remain silent because he was properly excluded. So that doesn’t help much! I would suggest that there is no technical reason why a whole assembly should not be excommunicated. Look, if one brother can be excluded because of immorality, then two immoral brothers can be excluded. If two can be excluded, then 20 immoral brothers can be excluded. If an assembly is made up of 20 immoral brothers, and all are excluded, then the whole assembly is excommunicated. But perhaps, it would be more correct to talk about **excluding individuals**, and **cease to recognise assemblies**. We stop recognising the collection of 20 immoral brothers as an assembly. Why? Because it is evident to any spiritual mind that the Lord is no longer in the midst of such group. We don’t stop it being an assembly, we simply recognise that it is no longer a New Testament assembly.

When we have divisions, a number of assemblies cease to be recognised by the others. What exactly is the state of these rejected assemblies? Can they still gather “unto Christ”? Is Christ still in their midst? Can they still have the Table of the Lord?

4. THE LORD’S TABLE

Some think the Lord’s table is the piece of furniture which holds the cup and loaf when the Lord’s supper is celebrated. This is not the meaning in Scripture. Some among us insist that we alone (our branch of the Brethren) have the Lord’s table. In a recent Colombian brother’s retreat, a foreign visiting brother carefully explained using 1 Corinthians 10 and Leviticus 3 and 7, that there are many dear believers in the denominations, but that in the denominations they only celebrate the Lord’s Supper. We, however, celebrate the Lord’s Supper AND have the Lord’s Table. I recall reading this view before, but it was the first time I have heard it expressed like this in public. Do the Scriptures support this view?

Since then, I read again the Spanish translation of a booklet titled “The Lord’s Table” by Rudolf Brockhaus (a central brother among assemblies in Germany prior to the Second World War) printed by “Ediciones Bíblicas”, Vevey, CH. I was happy to read in its first few pages that he corrects the view that a group of believers can exclusively claim for themselves the Lord’s Table. He is happy to concede that the Lord’s Supper belongs to all believers, to all who have been redeemed by the blood of Christ. The Lord’s Supper, he writes, is celebrated by all Christianity, be it in state churches, in denominations, and in other Christian congregations. Then he turns to the theme of the Lord’s Table. He explains that in a way, the Table and the Supper refer to the same idea, but there is also a contrast:

The **Table**, for example, speaks of collective responsibility, the **Supper** speaks of personal responsibility. The **Table** is an expression of communion, the **Supper** is an expression of a memorial. The **Table** reflects the state of the assembly, the **Supper** reflects the state of the soul. Furthermore, the **Table** expresses the idea of the authority of the Lord.

We would not wish to deny these interesting distinctions, but simply say that they are not as black and white as some would insist. The term **the Lord's Supper** also expresses the idea of the Lord's authority since it is HIS Supper. The term **the Lord's Supper** also includes the idea of collective responsibility. The term **the Lord's Supper** also includes an expression of communion, of fellowship, because meals speak of communion. These differences between Table and Supper are more a matter of emphasis than of essence.

WHERE IS THE LORD'S TABLE?

In a number of books I have read on this topic, after an agreeable introduction, one notices a subtle shift towards a **locative** understanding of the Lord's Table. What I mean is that a number of writers begin to use expressions that refer to the Lord's Table as a **thing**. A thing you either have or you do not have. God gave the Jewish nation the altar. It was a physical thing. It could be assigned to a place. It was locative. They had "it", other nations did not have "it". Some authors refer to the Lord's table as "the Christian altar" (Hebrews 13:10) but we must be careful not to carry with it the locative nature of the Jewish altar.

Other Old Testament **locative expressions** are then used in connection with the Lord's Table such as "they built the altar on its foundation", "the place He will choose" which reinforce the idea that the Lord's Table is a thing, and entity. Then we read more modern expressions among us such as "they do not have the Lord's Table". And "The Lord's table is no longer among them". And "they have removed themselves from the Lord's Table". I suspect that this contains the seed of sectarianism: We have it, they don't. If they want it, they must come to us. But the Lord's Table is no more a "thing" than is the Lord's Supper.

Some would say that the Lord's Table was lost since apostolic times, and recovered in the early 1800's by the early Brethren. Some, like brother R. Brockhaus, are a bit more careful and say that the Lord's Table was "out of sight" since apostolic times. He writes that we cannot say that the Lord's Table **ceased to exist** (notice the locative connotation), for it is possible that remote Christians may have **realised this truth** (this expression is much better). But, he admits, that he finds no record of such believers in Church history.

Some of our teachings on the Lord's Table have lead to the following ways of thinking among some of our assemblies:

- (1) We (our world-wide fellowship of assemblies) have the Lord's Table in our midst. It provides us with a sense of uniqueness which differentiates us from the rest of Christendom.
- (2) As we encounter new groups of believers gathered to the name of the Lord recognising the unity of the one Body, they also are made participants of the Lord's Table. Some would say "the Lord's Table has been extended to include them".
- (3) When an assembly is cut off, or actively or passively ends up on the wrong side of a national division, it is deprived of the Lord's Table. Some would say: they are no lon-

ger an assembly, or the Lord is no longer present (How could He be associated with the wrong side?), or they no longer have the Lord's authority.

- (4) Some consider it possible that a group of believers who do not express formal fellowship with us may have the Lord's Table too, but are prompt to clarify that assemblies who have been excommunicated or have left us, do not classify.

We shall now look at why a particular group of assemblies, however godly or numerous, cannot claim to be the only ones that have the **Lord's Table** here on earth. If you, like many, already agree with this, you may wish to skip the following pages and join again at the heading "A look at 1 Corinthians 10".

WHO HAS THE LORD'S TABLE WHEN WE DIVIDE?

Let us suppose that the Table of the Lord was lost for centuries and then uniquely recovered at the beginning of the 1800's by the early Brethren. Then came the sad days of the first division between the commonly known as Open and Exclusive Brethren in 1848. These two groups distanced themselves. Which group retained the Lord's Table? Could both groups retain the Lord's Table? Could there be two Lord's Tables? It is the teaching of some among us that the Open Brethren continued celebrating the Lord's Supper, but without the Lord's Table (like the Baptists, Anglicans and the other denominations). During the early 1850's, assemblies began to be formed in Germany in a significant way under the able leadership of brothers Carl Brockhaus, Poseck and Darby (this explains why there were virtually no Open Brethren assemblies in Germany until after the Second World War). Perhaps through Darby we could say that the Lord's Table was extended to these German assemblies and other associated assemblies in continental Europe.

But then in 1881 there was another sad international division. One side was led by Darby and his assembly at Park Street, and the moderate side by William Kelly. What happened to the Lord's Table here? Can we divide the Lord's table between the two new groups? Did the biggest group take it? For argument sake, let us suppose that the assemblies that remained associated with Darby retained the Lord's Table. All the assemblies that remained in fellowship with the younger Kelly continued to meet without it. But as you well know, divisions did not stop there. In 1884 and 1885 there were two other divisions as assemblies associated with brothers Grant and Stuart broke away from the Park Street and its associated assemblies. Where did the Lord's Table go here? Which group of assemblies kept it? Again, let us suppose Park Street retained the Lord's Table.

The continental assemblies then became more and more concerned with the narrowing behaviour of the Park Street set of assemblies with which they were still in fellowship. In 1890 they joined Brother Lowe in a new division. Those left were the Raven group of assemblies. The Raven group, which after the Glanton separation in 1908, became the Taylor group of assemblies, strongly claim to be the only ones to have the Lord's Table. To this day, the Taylor group is spread around the world and remain fairly strong numerically. But for this analysis, let us assume that the continental assemblies and those associated with Brother Lowe retained the Lord's Table. I do not wish to tire you with unnecessary detail. But is this really a true Biblical understanding of the meaning of the Lord's Table? It may feel very good to know that we have it and that others don't. But, dear brother, dear sister, do you really sense this as something Divine? There is one other important division which occurred among the Lowe/Continental group in 1910. It is called the Tunbridge Wells division. It is important in its own right, so we shall look closer at it later on.

THE NEED TO TRACE HISTORY

For those who hold this view of the Lord's Table, Brethren history becomes so very important. Because the Lord's Table cannot go with the wrong group, it is important to show that we are on the right side of every significant division. Whatever local saints may do in an assembly that did not side with the Darby group in 1848, it must still be without the Lord's Table. It may be on the other side of the world to Bethesda. Their descendants may never have heard of the Plymouth controversy. They may be godly people who have absolutely nothing in common with Newton's false teachings. Yet, their ancestors were on the wrong side in 1848.

But in time people and assemblies change. In a letter dated 1878, Darby also makes allowance for this: "I have no wish to keep the Bethesda question, not that I judge the evil as less ... but that from the length of time [30 years] many there are mere dissenters, and know nothing of the doctrine; so that they are really in conscience innocent ... If this brother had never had anything to do with Bethesda as such, I should have asked him nothing about it, as happens every day." Letters of JND, Vol. III, page 447. We must live in the present. We should learn to recognise what the Lord is doing today.

THE CATHOLIC-ANGLICAN DILEMMA

Perhaps you have followed a bit of the dialogue between the Anglican Church and the Catholic Church during the last couple of decades. From time to time it hits the British press. The more ritualistic element of the Anglican Church, called the High Church, is very similar to the Catholic Church. Why not join up again? There is good will on both sides, especially so since the Second Vatican Council of the early 1960's. But the negotiations reached a very difficult point. The Pope claims direct historical link with the apostle Peter (who they say is the first Pope). The ordained priestly structure within the Catholic Church depends for its authority and credibility on this continuous historic relationship. For the Anglican Church to join with the Catholic Church, all the Anglican priesthood must admit to have been functioning for years with no real authority and they all must therefore be re-ordained. Here the negotiations got stuck! To admit to years of illegitimacy is too humiliating and painful to admit. How do differing groups of Brethren assemblies reunite?

WHO DIDN'T HAVE THE LORD'S TABLE WHEN WE REUNITE?

On looking back with a cool head, without the presence and pressure of strong and difficult personalities, a number of happy reunions were made possible. In 1921 the Glanton set of assemblies joined the Grant and Stuart assemblies. In 1926 the Lowe/Continental network joined the Kelly set of assemblies. There was a fairly painful reunion in 1953 and happy reunions in 1939 and 1974. It is interesting to discuss the reunion process with some of those who participated in the dialogues leading up to the 1974 reunion. They can be described as generally happy days. As a teenager, I recall a trip with my missionary parents visiting some of these "new" assemblies in the north of England and Scotland. What is discussed in pre-reunion meetings? There is usually some form of confession that the assembly judgement at the root of the division was premature or wrong. There is mutual recognition of weakness and past mistakes. Key doctrines are compared to ensure that neither group has departed seriously. There is an agreement to not make an issue of secondary non vital differences. Where necessary, a working party is set up to consider how to unify hymnbooks. Then the happy united letters and conferences take place. I personally have nothing against these efforts. They are good and positive.

Yet what puzzles me is the absence of clarity on the issue of the Lord's Table. If the Lowe/Continental group and the Kelly group are to unite after being "out of fellowship" with each other for 45 years, which side confesses to having been **without** the Lord's Table for all these years? Which of the two sides brings the Lord's Table to the happy reunion? Of course, after the union we agree that we, together, have the Lord's Table. It is on an equivalent principle that the Catholics and Anglicans have not been able to join. The issue of who of us had the Lord's Table must be ignored when seeking a reunion. Isn't this simply an indication that this "locative" understanding of the Lord's Table is defective?

The threat of being cut off from the Lord's Table if you end up on the wrong side of a division is a very powerful and effective tool to press acceptance. But when it comes to reunions, it becomes a definite stumbling block.

THE TUNBRIDGE WELLS (TW) BRETHREN

Tunbridge Wells is a town south of London. There was an assembly there belonging to the Lowe/Continental group. The division which centred round this assembly is of unique interest. Please bear with a bit more history. The reason for it will become evident at the end.

During the early 1900's there was a brother from the TW assembly who travelled somewhat and his teaching ministry was appreciated. But in TW itself, his teaching was considered unprofitable. The end result was that the teaching brother was put out of fellowship by TW. Many saints were aware that there were a couple of difficult brothers at TW, and considered the whole affair to be basically a clash of personalities. What to do? After talks and meetings, the saints at TW would not budge. During 1910 the assemblies in the English speaking world were forced to take sides. Most who knew the local characters involved, sided against the judgement of TW. A delegation of continental brethren arrived to investigate the matter, and they also distanced themselves from the TW judgement. Leading brethren in North American assemblies acted in line with agreed protocol to automatically accept assembly judgements. What was the result? **Some** of the assemblies in England and continental Europe and **most** assemblies in North America accepted the TW decision. History books refer to these as Tunbridge Wells Brethren. A number of assemblies remained confused. They didn't agree with the expulsion of the teaching brother by TW, but neither could they bring themselves to ignore the assembly judgement. They became reluctant members of the TW group. My father's grandfather was one among these.

Some happy developments occurred during the second half of the 1930's. A number of the difficult brothers at the centre of the controversy died, and meaningful dialogue again became possible. Mutual confessions were made and in 1939 fellowship was re-established. Letters were circulated to inform leading brethren world wide. Most TW assemblies in England and Continental Europe rejoined the Lowe/Continental brethren. Today there are only a handful of TW assemblies struggling for survival in England. My grandfather rejoined at this stage. My grandfather's youngest brother still belongs to one of these TW assemblies in east London. There are very few left on Continental Europe. But in North America the situation is very different.

On receiving the reports of the 1939 reunion, leading TW brothers in North America did not accept them. In their mind, there was incomplete repentance by those assemblies who had not accepted the TW judgement in 1910. What the North American TW brethren

wanted to read was a confession stating “we were wrong in not submitting automatically to the judgement of the assembly in Tunbridge Wells back in 1910”. But they didn’t get this. So these leaders chose **not** to circulate the British reconciliation letters among North American assemblies. The TW assemblies remained separate and strong across North America (an ex-TW brother reckons that in 1939 there were about 5.000 saints in 100 TW assemblies in North America).

TWO PARALLEL WORLD FELLOWSHIPS

Now here comes the interesting bit: Since 1939 there exists on earth a large fellowship of assemblies with identical doctrine to ourselves, who claim, like us, to have the Lord’s Table, who claim to represent the Body of Christ on earth ... but who will not have anything to do with us. During 1988 my wife and I lived a year in Toronto, Canada. We lived in the basement of an elderly TW couple. Why, I asked, is your TW group of assemblies not in fellowship with our group of assemblies? “Because”, he replied, “you belong to a group of assemblies that rejected an assembly judgement in 1910 and have not yet acknowledged and confessed this.” We stand accused of denying the Unity of the Body of Christ. My dear reader, this parallel world fellowship is a historic reality. They have their conferences and meetings like we do. The ex-TW brother estimates that by 1990 the TW saints in North America grew to be about 10.000 in number, with a significant missionary work in India, Peru, Mexico and the Caribbean. Like us, they also have their questionable assembly judgements, they also divide. Many families left them in the early 1970’s when the old, respected and much loved missionary brother Willis (Hong Kong) was put out by a questionable assembly judgement. Their largest division was in 1990, when about one third of their North American brethren left. It is sad, yet they and we practise the same assembly principles.

A SERIOUS PROPOSITION

During the 1900’s, I think it is evident that two schools of thought have been held simultaneously by different brethren within our assemblies. Some have held to the automatic acceptance of assembly judgements (as do the TWs), and others only seem to feel bound if the assembly decision has evidence of being a Scriptural one. Decisions, for example, where a brother is not received or put out of fellowship for having a TV are politely ignored in assemblies in other regions. They avoid confrontation on the issue. It is only when a significant defective judgement is made (as in putting out of fellowship an appreciated teaching brother, with no clear Scriptural basis – as in 1910) and insisted on, that the two schools of thought clash and can no longer coexist. Some can not bring themselves to reject an assembly judgement. Some can not bring themselves to accept a defective assembly judgement. **Who has changed?**

Perhaps I am being very simplistic, but would it not be more reasonable that those dear saints among us who strongly feel they should accept assembly judgements because they are assembly judgements (even when they know they are questionable) start dialogues to rejoin the TW brethren? We must sincerely admit that our TW brethren have the historic moral high ground on the issue of accepting assembly judgements. Rather than accusing fellow saints of lacking principles, of denying the One Body, of leaving the Old Paths, of becoming open or loose, of being disobedient, would it not be preferable to have an open dialogue without accusations, and recognise that your forefathers took the wrong side of the division back in 1910, and then start dialogues to join the TW group of

assemblies? After all, when it comes to automatic submission or acceptance of assembly decisions, we must admit that the TW brethren have been consistent. We have not.

A LOOK AT 1 CORINTHIANS 10

This is an instructive and interesting chapter. It is the only place in the New Testament where we find the expression “the Lord’s table” (v. 21). The arguments on who has and who does not have the Lord’s table then and today, all hinge on this verse. Of course, what gives the arguments muscle is when you relate this Table to altar in the Old Testament, a physical and unique altar, held exclusively by the Jewish nation. But is that a natural teaching of this chapter?

The first 13 verses make it clear that the Lord is condemning the inconsistency between an outward expression of faith combined with a corrupt life style. Notice the expression “all” in verses 1–4. As Israelites, they “all” enjoyed some blessings. But, we read, that “God was not pleased with “most” of them” (v. 5). Why was He not pleased with “most”? Four reasons follow: some were idolaters (v. 6, 7), some were sexually immoral (v. 8), some tested the Lord (v. 9) and some grumbled. God dislikes these things. We should also avoid them.

Then in verses 14 to 22, the apostle retakes and elaborates on the first problem: Idolatry and its association with demons. This was a particularly hot topic at Corinth. The apostle had already devoted a whole chapter (8) to the theme of idols and food sacrificed to idols. Here he shows that it is incongruous and inconsistent for a Christian to participate of the Lord’s things (the cup and the bread) and also to choose to participate in idolatry and demon’s things. It is a call, using the example of the Israelites, to show that the Lord is definitely NOT pleased if we knowingly participate with His things and demon’s things. This cannot continue. As the history of Israel shows, this “arouses the Lord to jealousy” (v. 22).

In the rest of the chapter (vs. 23–33), the apostle elaborates on the freedom God has given believers. Perhaps, knowing how the human heart is bent on legalisms, the Lord inspired the apostle to include some instructions which safeguard normal social interaction between Christians and non-Christians. Perhaps we could identify 3 tables in this text. The table of the Lord, the table of demons, and the table of an unbelieving friend who invites you to lunch (notice that there is not even a hint at the possible existence of a “table of denominations”).

Strangely enough, we are told “Eat everything sold in the market place **without raising questions** of conscience” (v. 25). Again in verse 27 we are told to eat **without asking questions**. Why no questions? Why such looseness? **If the meal itself would link the believer with demons or their table, the believer definitely should ask pointed questions**. If the butcher had a little notice saying “This lamb has been sacrificed to Mammon”, then they should not buy it. If the non-Christian friend offered a nice steak and added “this has been offered in sacrifice”, then “do not eat it” (v. 28). It was not a matter of mystical association or defilement but of not consciously supporting the idol-based economy.

THE EVIL EYE

Here in Colombia, as in many developing countries, demon activity is quite evident. Popular Catholicism here in Latin America is very much linked with superstition, idolatry, fear

and strange demon activity. For many who come to the Lord here, there is a real struggle to distance themselves from their reliance and association with explicit and undercover witchcraft. With their conversion, we encourage the new believer to get rid of strange little black Buddhas and statues of saints which have had a past function in their home. Good luck or protective charms they may have carried around their neck or hidden in their wallet should also go. The struggle between their new faith in Christ and tradition becomes particularly difficult when a child in the family becomes ill, and despite medicine, it continues to be ill. All agree that it is the “evil eye”, and only the local medium doctors can cure it. This is a real test of faith to many. As you can well see, 1 Corinthians 10 is a very useful chapter in helping the believer break with their past. He can no longer participate with the Lord’s things (cup and loaf) **and** demon things. To be in the kingdom of light and meddle in the kingdom of darkness will only arouse the Lord to jealousy.

WHAT IS THE LORD’S TABLE?

If the Table of the Lord is not a piece of wooden furniture, if the Table of the Lord is not a unique possession which our branch of the Brethren has, which we can “extend to include others in it” or “withdraw to exclude others from it”, what then is it?

Some of our writers express the Table of the Lord as the “communion of saints”. They understand it as another metaphor to describe the Body of Christ, or the Church of God. These would then conclude that every believer is a partaker of the Table of the Lord, whether he participates in the breaking of bread or not. A person becomes participator of the Lord’s Table at the moment of conversion. Perhaps. But notice they have referred to the Table of the Lord as a **positional** truth. But the context of 1 Corinthians 10:23 is very practical. The only reference to the Lord’s Table in the New Testament is set in a **behavioural** verse.

TABLE – MEAL – FELLOWSHIP

The metaphors **table** and **meal** are very much associated with friendship, communion, fellowship. The Lord Jesus was criticised because he “ate with sinners” (Matthew 9:11), I presume it was not the content of the meal which was the cause of criticism, but that by sitting at their table and eating with sinners, he was expressing friendship with them. The Pharisees thought he shouldn’t. In Revelation 3:20 the Lord says “I will come to him and eat with him and he with me”. Again, we see a picture of friendship and communion. If we open the door of our lives to the Lord Jesus, we shall “eat with him”. We shall enjoy fellowship with Him. And even in our daily life, much of our times of dialogue and fellowship as a family are during our meal times. We invite friends and saints to share a meal in our home. But the text in 1 Corinthians 10 also makes reference to the bread and the cup. I would submit, for your consideration, that the terms “breaking of bread”, “the Lord’s supper”, “the table of the Lord” are best used interchangeably. They refer to the same symbolic act of remembrance, but each shedding a different light on this event. You cannot have one without the other. In the same way, we cannot talk about being the “House of God” and not the “Bride of Christ”. We cannot say that those Christians form part of the “Body of Christ” and not of the “Church of God”. It is true that we may express one aspect better than another. A Christian alone in prison or who has chosen to be on his own, does not express the “Body of Christ” aspect (the “one-another directives) very well, but by his sincere love for the Lord and his holy living may well express the “Bride of Christ” aspect (purity and faithfulness) very well.

On a given Sunday morning, we may well sing hymns, read Scriptures, enjoy the mental stimulus of following a “line of thought” without real communion with the Lord (and this is easily done!). True fellowship is a spiritual condition of the heart. We may very well remember the Lord as we sing, eat the bread and drink the wine, but in reality our communion or fellowship with the Lord may be very weak. On these occasions, I would not suggest that we didn’t have the Lord’s table. Rather, to be more accurate, I would say that “Table of the Lord” aspect (fellowship aspect) of our remembrance meeting has been weakly expressed. It is very sad when this happens, not evil. This way of looking at the Lord’s Table is in harmony with brother R. Brockhaus’ expression: namely that some Christians in history “**may have realised this truth**”.

IN SHORT ...

In 1 Corinthians 10:20,21, it is clear that when a Christian is tempted to return to some superstitious or demonic practice (seek fellowship with demons), he cannot do so and remain in fellowship with the Lord. By visiting the witch doctor he ceases to be in fellowship with the Lord, and by not being in fellowship with the Lord, he should not try to express this fellowship by eating of the loaf and drinking of the cup. He cannot participate of the Lord’s table.

We have as much monopoly over the Lord’s Table as we have over the Lord himself. If the presence of the Lord is truly among a set of believers, if they are enjoying fellowship in reality with Him as they eat the bread and drink the wine, they are also enjoying the Lord’s table. Our dear believers in the diverse sets of Christian denominations (and non denominations) have available to them the “Breaking of Bread”, the “Lord’s Supper” and also the “Lord’s Table”. If for any reason they allow some to participate who the Lord does not welcome, or if they refuse those who the Lord does welcome, they negate the reality that it is “**the LORD’S ... Supper and Table**”. And this holds for us too.

5. DEFILEMENT & OCCASIONAL FELLOWSHIP

Brother A. E. Booth lived in California, USA. He was born in 1860 and died in 1953. He was a respected Bible teacher among assemblies in Canada, USA, the British Isles and Scandinavian countries. He is the author of the interesting chart “Course of Time from Eternity to Eternity”. While I was on a visit to the USA in 2001, I obtained from the “Believer’s Bookshelf” his booklet entitled “Association with evil: Does it defile?” Before we automatically answer “yes, of course it does”, it would be wise to ask a few questions. For example, what does the New Testament class as evil? If we are not clear on this, we may call evil any saint or assembly that disagrees with us on music style, instruments, prophecy, or fails to submit to all of our assembly judgements. What do we understand by “association”? If we are not clear on this, we may end up sharing in someone’s wicked work (2 John 10) or sharing in the sins of others (1 Timothy 5:22). Or on the other hand, we may wrongly exclude from fellowship acceptable brothers and sisters. We may also find ourselves avoiding normal friendships with non-believers. When does the New Testament consider a person defiled?

On this issue of defilement, assemblies in different language groups have a slightly different focus. Some are happy to use the term defilement and feel comfortable with Booth’s teaching. Others prefer terms such as association, linkage with error, identification with

disobedience, etc. Regardless of this variance in terminology, the thinking process is fairly similar.

Through this section, I would like to draw your attention to 3 things: First, that much of our teaching on defilement by association is based on Old Testament practical instructions given to the nation of Israel to protect them from disease. Second, I wish to show that historically “occasional fellowship” has been common practice among us from early days until recently. And finally, I hope it will become evident, that occasional fellowship contradicts brother Booth’s understanding and teaching on association and defilement. We cannot consistently hold both. We must go with the early brethren teaching OR the Booth type of teaching. This underlies much of our current tension.

IS HE A MURDERER?

It is undeniable that those who encourage or provide support to wicked deeds are also to blame. Old and New Testament alike support this. It is even enshrined in common law. He who consciously lends the gun or hides the murderer will also be found guilty in court. What then is peculiar with our teaching on defilement? We not only sentence the man we think is the murderer and his helpers, but we also sentence their wives and their children, their gardener, their milk man, the teachers of their children, the uncle in Australia, a work colleague in India, and anyone else in the whole wide world who does not publicly agree (or state his position) that “the accused murderer is a murderer”.

Now, when it is clearly evident, beyond reasonable doubt, that he actually killed, we all agree he is a murderer and we all support the sentence. When there is clear evidence that the judgement agrees with reality, then there is no problem.

We have another peculiarity: the accused murderer, his helpers and all those who don’t agree with the judgement are all given the same maximum sentence: excommunication.

Is this really God’s revealed method to keep His Church pure and holy here on earth? I think I am honest when I say I would be willing to teach this and endeavour to practise it, if I was convinced it was firmly based on Scripture. But this issue of association and defilement, as some have been teaching and practising among us, has a number of serious problems.

WHERE DOES THE TEACHING ON DEFILEMENT COME FROM?

Our sad and painful algorithm of excommunicating the culprit, his helpers and all those who don’t agree, relies primarily for its support on Old Testament instructions given to the nation of Israel to protect it from disease. Let’s take a look at 7 of these:

(1) Leprosy: In Leviticus chapters 13 and 14 we find clear instructions to avoid the spread of leprosy among the Israelites. When leprosy was evident in a person, a garment or a house, the treatment was very radical. It had to be. Since leprosy was a killer, any suspicion of it had to be investigated. When in doubt, the Israelite had to be isolated for 7 days. The problem comes when we try to impose these procedures on the New Testament church. It is a big step (which requires strong justification) to conclude that the leper represents a doctrinally or morally bad brother, that the house represents an assembly, and that the 7 days quarantine means believers may be “denied the liberty of public, Christian fellowship, until clear of any suspicion” (Booth page 6). Furthermore, sometimes these forced parallels become somewhat odd. In Leviticus 14:34, for example, we find

that Jehovah himself puts leprosy into a house (not makes leprosy evident in the house, as brother Booth tries to explain). When leprosy means leprosy, this verse is natural. Sometimes God disciplines disobedience with leprosy. Would the Lord discipline an assembly or a New Testament believer by giving him moral or serious doctrinal error?

(2) Running Issue: In Leviticus 15 we read of flux or discharges. Here brother Booth equates the discharge with “evil working in a believer, but of a less serious nature than leprosy.” Then he goes on “1. The man was unclean, 2. Everything that man touched, was unclean, 3. Every person who touched that which the man touched, was unclean. **By this we learn that defilement goes on and on**” (pages 14, 15). His conclusion is correct. Someone who touches a person with a contagious sickness, may not catch it, but is a “risk case”. Those in contact with “risk cases” become “risk cases” themselves. Brother Booth rightly concludes that this chain is endless. In each successive contact, the probability of infection is less, but it is always present. This principle was very evident in England in 2001 with the epidemic of foot and mouth disease among sheep. In desperation, the British government was killing and burning all risk cases it could find! But again, how do we justify the application of these procedures in church life? Given the radical (and strange) impact it has when these procedures are superimposed on the assembly, a very strong justification is required. Of course there are lessons for us to learn from the Old Testament, but it is something completely different to spiritualise and apply these Old Testament health procedures to church life. It is evident to all that these procedures make natural sense and work well in the physical world. But not so when spiritualised and applied to the Church.

LEARNING FROM THE OLD TESTAMENT

There are good books on Biblical exegesis. In the same way that basic grammar is necessary to understand properly another language, there are simple common sense rules that guide us in the proper understanding of Scripture. Words don't come on their own, they form part of grammar. They are arranged in a style of literature. They have an historical context, they may have a prophetic meaning, they may be symbolic, but they always have a natural plain meaning. Language is given for objective communication. If **exege-sis** is a new thing to you, I suggest you invest in a good book on this matter.

We read in Romans 15:4 that “**Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us**, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope”. This, and other verses like it (1 Corinthians 10:6,11), are a strong incentive to search the Old Testament, and to value it. There are teachings in the Old Testament which God wants us to learn today. The delicate matter is what and how to extract from the Old Testament and apply to the Church today. Sometimes the Lord Himself transfers Old Testament teaching and applies it to New Testament Christian life, like Abraham's imputation of righteousness (Romans 4:23) and the need to provide financial support to Christian workers (1 Corinthians 9:9,10). But we must be careful. The Law was not given to the Church but to Israel. The 10 commandments teach us a lot about what God likes and dislikes, but it would be a mistake, like some believers do, to say that the Christian must live by the 10 commandments (1 Timothy 1:9). God tells Noah to build an ark. We are not called to build one. But in the story of Noah we do learn about faith, about obedience, about co-operative family life, about God's justice, His faithfulness, etc. We need not spiritualise the story to learn a lot from it.

What I am saying is that we cannot use verses like Romans 15:4 to have a free hand in extracting patterns from the Old Testament and applying them to the Christian and the Church. I would suggest, that Old Testament stories and teachings (like the New Testament parables), are given to **illustrate** New Testament truth. On their own they are not sufficient to be the base of teaching for us today. Why? Simply because they lend themselves for diverse interpretations. In mathematics we are taught that diagrams and pictures are useful to **illustrate** a mathematical argument, but they never constitute a proof by themselves.

Let me illustrate this using some defective exegesis carried out by other Christians:

(a) Hell: Most Pentecostals here in Colombia teach that you can lose your salvation if you don't live up to the heavenly calling. For many of them, the word fire in Scripture is symbol of judgement and hell. Naturally, when reading the parable of the Vine and the Branches in John 15, they read "If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, and thrown into the fire and burned" (v. 6). "You see?" they say, "If you don't remain, if you don't bear fruit, you will burn, you will be damned. You better look after your salvation." You cannot base teaching on parables. Parables illustrate teaching found elsewhere. We clearly read that "whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and **will not be condemned**" (John 5:24).

(b) Prosperity: In Joshua 1:8 we read that God will make us "prosperous and successful" if we obey him. This teaching is very common today. "Why would God not want his obedient children to prosper?" they ask. "Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever. Just be obedient and claim the promise". That was very true for Israel, but is this teaching supported in the New Testament? Without New Testament support, we can't apply it to the Church. The apostle Paul had his difficult times (Philippians 4:12). There was poverty among some New Testament saints (2 Corinthians 8:2). I see affluence among European believers and poverty among Colombian saints with no evident connection to their degree of spirituality.

(c) Tithing: The very common teaching that Christians must give at least 10 % of their income to the Lord is extracted entirely from the Old Testament. Is it a sin to give 10 %? Of course not. But since it has no backing in the New Testament, we cannot honestly insist on it. In the New Testament we read that we should give sacrificially, proportionally, happily, etc. These we can teach with authority in the Church.

(d) Circumcision: Some compare circumcision with baptism. Both are seen as initial symbols that signify belonging to the people of God. Babies were circumcised. Can we use this to support infant baptism? Surely this argument on its own is not sufficient. Whatever our position on Christian baptism, we must base it on New Testament teaching.

(e) Passover: Many compare the Passover feast with the breaking of bread. I recall a number of years ago, a Colombian brother was insisting that we should have bread without leaven for our Sunday morning remembrance meeting because of this connection. The matter was settled looking at the New Testament (there are 2 Greek words for bread, normal bread and unleavened bread. The gospels use the first term. End of argument).

We need New Testament backing to extract procedures from Israel and apply them to the Church. Romans 15:4 is not specific enough. And by this, we are not undervaluing the Old Testament, we are simply insisting on normal, correct, consistent exegesis.

Let's return now to the teaching on defilement. So far we have looked at (1) leprosy and (2) running issue.

(3) Haggai's Prophecy: In his fourth message (Haggai 2:10–19), Haggai gives the priests a quiz on the law. In the second question he asks "If a person defiled by contact with a dead body touches one of these things, does it become defiled? Yes, the priests replied" (v. 13). Does this mean that a visiting denominational brother will defile the assembly? The lesson of this verse is plainly explained by the Holy Spirit in the following verse. **When there is defilement in our heart, our service and worship are not acceptable to the Lord.** That was true then. It is also true today.

It is interesting to notice that in the New Testament, this defiling process or **spreading** can sometimes work in the opposite direction. In 1 Corinthians 7:14 we read that "the **unbelieving husband is sanctified in the wife**, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified in the brother; since [otherwise] indeed your children are unclean, but now they are holy" (JND).

Another interesting observation is found in Revelation 3:1–4. The assembly in **Sardis** had a good reputation, but it was dead (v. 1). Its works were not complete and the Lord calls on it to repent (v. 3). Yet not all saints in this assembly were defiled. Their presence in the Sardis assembly did not in itself defile them. "Thou hast a few names in Sardis which have not defiled their garments ... they are worthy" (v. 4 JND).

(4) Separation from Gentiles: Moses forbade intermarriage with pagan peoples and interest in idolatry. This was also a major issue for Ezra and Nehemiah. Can we validly use these Scriptures to separate from born again Baptists, Presbyterians and Anglicans? Unlikely. Is there any New Testament truth which may be illustrated by these instructions? Yes, "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers" (2 Corinthians 6:14).

(5) Achan's Sin: We know the story well. It is found in Joshua 7. Achan sinned by taking and hiding some valuables in his tent, against the commands of Jehovah. Did his family know? Maybe. But probably not. From Achan's confession "I have sinned" (v. 20) perhaps we could conclude that he was the main or only culprit. The rest of the Israelite nation was unaware of Achan's sin. But the Lord's verdict was "Israel has sinned" (v. 11). What lesson do we have here for us today? To compare the nation of Israel with the **Church of Christ**, we create serious problems: would one secretly corrupt true believer cause the whole Church of Christ on earth to be under God's judgement? If this were true, the Church on earth would always be under God's judgement. This view can't be supported by the New Testament.

What if we compare the nation of Israel with the **local assembly**, is that better? Would one secretly corrupt believer in your assembly cause your entire local assembly to be under God's judgement? If it is secret, it cannot be judged by the assembly. Even when nasty rumours develop about a brother or sister, the New Testament directive for the Church is that we must pray that 2 or 3 witnesses may be found, and then we can and should act. Then the assembly must clear itself. But until then, the assembly as a whole is not guilty before the Lord.

Oh, someone may suggest, perhaps the nation of Israel represents **our world-wide fellowship of assemblies**. Therefore we must send delegations of brothers round the world to identify the "Achans" and clear the assemblies of evil. Like the apostle Paul did with the sinner at Corinth. But Achan's sin was hidden. It was not evident to anybody. I could write here a nasty list of at least 5 sexually perverted brothers who have been in happy

fellowship in our assemblies for many years while actively practising their perversion (at least one is now in prison and one was killed by his male lover – I went to his funeral). Is the local assembly, our network of assemblies, or the whole Church of God defiled and under God's judgement because of these hidden perverts? Emphatically NO.

What then can we learn from this segment of Israel's history? My dear reader, what is going on in your private personal life? Have you begun to tolerate defiling sexual fantasies in your mind? Are you flirting a bit with someone else's wife? Are you considering seriously that non Christian boyfriend/girlfriend? What do we allow ourselves to watch on television? Are we correct on tax matters? Do we say the real truth, even when it hurts? Do we speak (or write) evil about other saints? Do we harbour bitterness in our heart? From the outside, fellow saints may consider you and me to be valiant soldiers of Jesus Christ. Soldier Achan also risked his life fighting for Jehovah in Jericho and Ai. But service and sacrifice never replace personal purity. What goes on in our minds, our hearts and in our private personal lives does matter. It matters a great deal. We are not islands, we influence those around us. Our degree of spirituality affects our family and our assembly. Your moral laxness affects your judgements. My bitterness deprives those close to me of joy, freshness and creativity. His evil talk (murmurings or letters) cut short a brother's ministry. Many families lost their fathers, many people hurt badly because of Achan's personal private sin. Dear brother and sister, our private life matters. "Behold, thou wilt have truth in the inward parts" (Psalm 51:6 JND). Surely the Old Testament still speaks to the Christian heart today. Correctly applied, it is powerful. And it is powerful because it is the Word of God.

(6) A Dead Body: In Numbers 19 we read of the defilement caused by a dead body. Anyone who touches a dead body is unclean for 7 days, he becomes a potential carrier of disease, a risk case. If a man dies in a tent, the tent and those in it will be unclean for 7 days. Every **thing** that an unclean person touches becomes an unclean **thing** for 7 days. If a person touches an unclean **thing**, he becomes unclean until the evening. He is less of a "risk case". There is a lower probability of him being a disease carrier. Therefore he is only unclean until the evening. All this makes very good sense.

THE TEN TENT STORY

In explaining Numbers 19, brother Booth has an interesting story which has become quite a legend in some quarters (pages 18–20). Suppose a person dies in tent #1. A friend visits the dead man. He is now unclean. He tries to visit tent #2. Those in this tent receive him. It is an "open" tent. Then he tries to visit tent #3 to tent #10. These all refuse him because he is unclean. People in tent #2 refer to tents #3 to #10 as "exclusive" tents. The unclean man complains "But I am not the dead man; and I am as much one of the Lord's people as you are". "We must refuse you" they reply "until the defilement you contracted in tent #1 is removed".

Notice that even if the man that visited tent #1 was unaware that there was a dead body there, he would still be defiled. Those in the other tents who were aware that he had visited, were required to refuse him or become unclean themselves. When there were dead bodies around, I presume it would be very normal and acceptable for any careful mother in a clean tent to ask questions to all visitors to protect the health of her children inside. This is all very true and has its logic to stop the propagation of contagious diseases. These are the best set of rules to avoid the spread of disease from a dead body

to other Israelites. But notice what happens when we impose these procedures on the church.

The tents are said to represent assemblies. To enter the tent is equivalent to breaking bread in the assembly. The dead person in the tent will be a seriously bad Christian in the assembly. Unclean people should not be received in fellowship. Because of the seriously bad Christian in the assembly #1, all in assembly #1 are unclean. If someone from assembly #1 visits assembly #2, all in assembly #2 are defiled. If someone from assembly #2 visits assembly #25, all in that assembly are defiled. And so it goes on and on. If a clean person ventures to break bread in one of the unclean assemblies, he also must be excluded.

Did early brethren teach this? Is this a relatively new teaching? I do not have at hand the books and tools necessary to trace the development of this teaching on defilement. But what I do notice is that this teaching as promoted by brother Booth (and held by many among us), does not allow for the possibility of occasional fellowship.

DID OCCASIONAL FELLOWSHIP DEFILE EARLY BRETHERN?

It is relatively easy to find quotes from Darby, Mackintosh, Kelly and others who are positively happy to receive visitors from denominations and break bread with them. These denominations were known to have doctrinal and moral impurities. If you are one of those who are frustrated by old Brethren quotes, please feel free to skip this section. But I think you will find these quotes interesting, because we Brethren in the last 50 years seem to be afraid to talk as they did. Let's take a quick look at some examples:

How did **Mackintosh** view things? "The celebration of the ordinance of the Lord's Supper should be the distinct expression of the unity of ALL believers, and not merely of the unity of a certain number gathered upon certain principles, which distinguish them from others." "Thoughts on the Lord's Supper" by C. H. M. pages 18, 19.

In 1840, brother **Darby** expressed his goal as follows: "I could not recognise an assembly that does not receive all the children of God, because I know that Christ received them. I see the church in ruins: I follow my conscience according to the light that I have received from the word, but I desire to bear with the weakness or lack of light that I may find in other Christians, and do all that I can to unite those who love the Lord". Letters of JND, Vol. I page 42.

In 1875, 27 years after the 1848 division with the open brethren, **Darby** writes "I remember a case, where one [believer] growing in truth came to help sometimes in the Sunday school, and from the other side of London, and asked the brethren if he might not break bread when there – time even did not allow of him to get back to his Baptist service – and he enjoyed the communion of saints. The brethren allowed him gladly; and if my recollection is right, his name was not given out when he came afterwards. Very soon he was amongst brethren entirely, but his fellowship was as full as when he was not". Letters of JND Vol. II pages 416, 417. Darby and his assembly did not feel defiled by receiving repeatedly a Baptist brother.

Was this in line with **Darby's** teaching? In 1870, five years earlier, I find a letter discussing the breaking of bread. He writes "I may not enforce constant attendance with us only, because he may come with the desire to show unity of spirit, and yet think that his ways are more orderly conscientiously". Letters JND Vol. II pages 129, 130.

In the next volume of **Darby's** letters, we read "I have never changed my views at all. The practice is more difficult because of the growing looseness in doctrines and practice of all around. But if an assembly refused a person known to be a Christian and blameless, because he was not of the assembly, I should not go. I own no membership but of Christ. An assembly composed as such of its members is at once a sect. But the person who brings another is responsible to the assembly, and should mention it; for it is the assembly which is finally responsible, though it may trust the person who introduces another in the particular case". Letters of JND Vol. III pages 182, 183.

It is evident that brother **William Kelly** was very outspoken on this matter. I get the impression he resisted and fought growing narrowness among assemblies most of his life. In "God's Principle of Unity", he writes: "We receive every Christian walking as such, without reference to their connexion with Nationalism or Dissent [denominations] ... They may join us in the worship and the supper of the Lord; they are as free as any of us to help in thanksgiving, prayer, or a word of edification, if so led of God; and this, without stipulation either to leave their old associations or to meet only with us."

In **Kelly's** Lectures on Ephesians, we have "But where a soul confesses Christ really and truly, confesses Him in such a way that **it commends itself to your conscience as divine**, receive him; for God has. He may be Baptist or Paedo-Baptist: never mind, receive him."

Brother **James B. Deck**, (son of the well-known hymn writer James G. Deck) from New Zealand, in his second letter on "Receiving and Rejecting Brethren" dated 16 February 1852 (Reprinted by GBV, Dillenburg, D), apologises for not having sided with the Exclusive Brethren soon enough (page 5). In the last 3 pages (36–38) he explains why he will not receive Open Brethren, but strongly defends why "we receive persons coming from the Church of England and other systems around us". You may agree or disagree with his somewhat novel argument defending the not receiving Open Brethren, but the point I wish to draw your attention to, is that he (a convinced Exclusive brother) received "from the Church of England and other systems around us" **without feeling defiled by their associations**.

Are these selective quotes? Yes they are. We are not sustaining that this is all that CHM, JND and WK wrote on the topic. These are not a random selection of rabbits. They are a selection of brown rabbits (see The Parable of the White Rabbits, page 3).

What these quotes undeniably show, is that these brethren enjoyed the complete freedom to receive (at least occasionally – and more than once) true believers from orthodox Protestant churches, with existing links with these churches, without feeling in any way defiled with the errors and immoral practices held within these church networks. We are conditioned to feel nervous in receiving such (we prefer if they would not come). We are afraid of possible complaints by neighbouring assemblies and visiting heavy-weights. They, however, felt free and happy to receive these visitors! (Don't you envy them?) The origin of the Church of England is very non-spiritual. The King of England replaced the Pope as head of the Anglican Church – the Queen of England is still its head today. The British Monarchy has never been a shining picture of morality. Early brethren knew this very well. Yet there was great joy in receiving visiting Anglican believers. These brethren did NOT function with brother Booth's understanding of "association with evil defiles".

A GROWING NARROWNESS AMONG US

On the whole, Brethren have been fairly radical on rejecting fellow brethren during and after every division. A Tunbridge Wells assembly would feel defiled in receiving one of us. Before the 1939 reunion, a Kelly assembly would feel defiled by receiving a brother from a Glanton assembly. The teachings, as outlined by brother Booth, have been useful in keeping a distance between factions of the Brethren movement, while, for many years, still receiving Baptists, Anglicans and the like. What I hear, from older brothers and sisters on the continent, is that there has been an ever increasing tightening since the Second World War.

Prior to this war, there were virtually no Open Meetings in Germany. Since most of the Assemblies began with brothers Carl Brockhaus, Poseck and Darby in the early 1850's, the work was virtually unaffected by the 1848 division (these 3 brethren worked together to produce the German JND translation of the Bible). The stabilising influence of godly, respected and very central figures such as Carl Brockhaus and later his son Rudolf Brockhaus, helped resolve problems and maintain unity among German assemblies. Less than 10 years after Rudolf's death in 1932, the first large division occurred among German assemblies. Assemblies responded differently to Hitler's pressure to unite in the Bund (BfC). After the war, there were some painful and happy reunions, but not all agreed with the terms of reunion. What used to be one body of assemblies is now three: those who stayed united with other evangelicals in the Bund, those who repented and rejoined the non-Bund brethren, and another sizeable group now called the Free brothers. Since then, we have felt a need to keep these brethren groups apart. Teachings on the lines of brother Booth, became a useful tool.

DOES "OCCASIONAL FELLOWSHIP" DEFILE TODAY?

Since our first division in 1848, we harbour within our assembly principles a strange contradiction: We wish to receive sincere believers from the systems and at the same time reject sincere believers from assemblies who have departed from us (and their descendants). In time, some of the arguments used to exclude "those who have left us", began to be applied to the Baptists, Anglicans, and the like. This, coupled with the popularity of assembly lists, has slowly and firmly led us to the current narrowing situation. Was this inevitable? Did early Brethren place inconsistent "seeds" in their teaching?

Brother Otto Müller, a respected German brother, wrote to a Peruvian brother in 1963 as follows: "For sure, we have no difficulties in receiving occasionally brothers who do not walk with us in the same way, who are visiting, even when in the measure of their intelligence they are not in agreement with us in every doctrinal interpretation." (Letter published in booklet form in Spanish by "Ediciones Bíblicas", Vevey, CH. Translated by me into English). Were German assemblies practising this in 1963? Most, if not all, probably not. Why then did brother Müller write this? Because he was faced with our standard dilemma: **We must SAY that we receive all sincere believers to avoid being classed as just another sect. But in PRACTICE we don't receive all sincere believers (or make it virtually impossible) to avoid defilement by association with the visitor and his ecclesiastical background.**

Depending on local situations, this tension grows. Depending on the inclination of local leaders, assemblies and groups of assemblies, it becomes impossible to sustain the obvious inconsistency and a rupture occurs. Usually a defective assembly judgement is the catalyst. Then follows a shifting. Those assemblies currently associated with the

Dillenburg-Vevey-Paris (Central) assemblies in Europe follow more and more the Booth line of thinking, sending or sponsoring delegations round the world to hunt down and “purge” all possible defiling linkages and associations. They isolate themselves more and more. Other assemblies are slowly relearning to be welcoming and be genuinely happy to receive sincere believers from non-listed assembly backgrounds.

MEET SOME TAYLOR BRETHREN

A few years after reading “A Historical Sketch of the Brethren Movement” by H. A. Ironside, while on a walk near our home in South London, I came across a meeting room of the Taylor Brethren. Their windows are sealed off with black metal slabs to keep out any outside light (this is now typical of their meeting Halls). In 1989, out of curiosity, we tried to visit this assembly, but strangers are not allowed in their hall. They have a very genuine love for our Lord, but have become quite eccentric. After a number of phone calls, they eventually allowed me and my wife to visit them in one of their homes. I recall it clearly. It was a Friday evening at 9 pm. Two middle aged couples were there to meet us. They live in detached houses to avoid defilement by “sharing a roof” with a non believer. One of the men used to work in a bank. He said he would leave the office when the tea lady served the teas and biscuits at the bank’s business meetings, to avoid eating at the same table and expressing fellowship with his non Christian work colleagues. That was unsustainable. He now works for one of their own companies. We spent 2 hours talking. For me it was an eye opening experience. I never thought that genuine reasonable believers could become so strange. On leaving, I proposed praying together. The older of the two brothers kindly replied “Young man, we have prayed for you **before** you arrived, and we shall pray for you **after** you leave. But we can not pray **with** you”. I pointed out that Jesus prayed with the multitudes. That the apostle Paul did too, even with non believers present. He replied that these were “special cases”. Not knowing their protocol, I thanked them for their time, and I extended my hand for a goodbye handshake. I was left with my hand extended. I have never seen them again. I have no doubt at all that we shall meet again in glory. But why so weird? They have accepted a non-Biblical understanding of “association with evil defiles”. And they are paying a high price to live by it.

THE INTERESTING USE OF LEAVEN IN SCRIPTURE

Before we finish this section, there is one other Scriptural image associated with defilement I would like to look at together: Leaven. So far we have looked at (1) leprosy, (2) a running issue, (3) Haggai’s prophecy, (4) separation from gentiles, (5) Achan’s sin and (6) the dead body. Let’s take a look at this final one:

(7) Leaven: This is a particularly interesting one, because leaven (or yeast) carries symbolic meaning in both the Old and New Testaments. In Exodus 12 we find the instructions for celebrating the Passover. “On the first day remove the yeast from your houses” (v. 15). “For seven days no yeast is to be found in your houses. And whoever eats anything with yeast in it must be cut off from the community of Israel” (v. 19). The community of Israel cannot represent the Body of Christ, because no Christian can be “cut off” from this Body. Perhaps it could represent the visible expression of the Church, or more simply, the local assembly. From the New Testament we know that there are clearly situations when a sinning saint should be “put out of your fellowship” NIV or “taken away out of the midst of you” JND (1 Corinthians 5:2). But what exactly does this image of leaven or yeast represent?

Excluding a couple of references to the Feast of Unleavened Bread, I find the term leaven or yeast 13 times in the New Testament:

- **Two times** the Lord Jesus uses “leaven” in a parable, where the kingdom of heaven (of God) is like a woman mixing leaven into a large amount of flour “until it worked all through the dough” (Matthew 13:33, Luke 13:20,21). The Lord Jesus doesn’t explain the parable. But leaven clearly illustrates that something is spreading. Some optimistic commentators associate the dough with the world and say the parable illustrates how the gospel influences the whole world. Perhaps a similar idea to that expressed in “you are the salt of the world”. Others associate the dough with Christendom, and say the parable illustrates the growing corruption within Christendom. In either case, leaven is used to show that something small can quietly influence its surroundings and become something big.
- **Five times** we are warned to “be on guard against leaven”: We are told that the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees was their “teaching” (Matthew 16:6,11,12). In Luke 12:1 we read that the leaven of the Pharisees was “hypocrisy”. Mark 8:15 refers to the “leaven of the Pharisees and that of Herod” but doesn’t explain. Probably leaven is also used here to represent teaching, hypocrisy, and perhaps Herod’s immoral life style (a public disgrace, a corrupting influence in Jewish society).
- **Two times** it is said that “a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough”, repeating the teaching of the parable of Jesus. These are important passages, so let’s look at them in their contexts:

In Galatians 5:9 this warning is given to defend the freedom we have in Christ from the inroads of legalism. Please take your Bible out and read the context, verses 1 to 15. There was a Jewish legalist brother (v. 7, 10) who was insisting that believers should be circumcised (v. 2). The apostle instructs the Galatian saints to “obey the truth” (v. 7) and not submit to desires of this legal brother (v. 3). His pressure, persuasion or “persuasibleness [is] not of him that calls you. A little leaven leavens the whole lump” (v. 8, 9 JND). What then does leaven represent in this passage? It could represent the pressure from the false teacher (v. 8), it could represent his bad teaching (v. 7), or it could represent the bad teacher himself (v. 10). The spreading of the bad teaching is probably the dominant thought.

This is no **mystical defilement** (I don’t like this term), neither is it **imputed defilement** nor **positional defilement**. It is not defilement by being in the same list of assemblies as an assembly with legalism, looseness or bad teaching (heaven doesn’t read our lists). No! Leaven here speaks of the spreading effect of bad teachings by bad teachers. Before the warnings about leaven, the apostle shows us with a real life situation (Galatians 2:1–14) how “doctrinal leaven” really works. The apostle **Peter** enjoyed his legitimate freedom in Christ to eat with Gentiles. This freedom of conscience did not come easy. The Lord had to give Peter three visions (Acts 10) to convince him that it was OK to visit and eat with Gentiles. But then certain brethren from the “circumcision group” arrived. These were friends of **James**, a key brother in Jerusalem (Acts 15:13). How did Peter feel? (imagine yourself in Peter’s shoes). Such was the pressure felt by Peter by the presence of these visiting brethren, that even our fearless and forward looking apostle “was afraid” of these men. To please them, Peter “began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles” (v. 12). The legalist leaven imported from Jerusalem had now begun to work in Galatia. Then we read “The other Jews joined him in

his hypocrisy, so that even **Barnabas** was led astray” (v. 13). This is the working of leaven.

The leaven of bad teaching the apostle wished to correct in Galatia happened to be legalism propagated by the circumcision group. But it illustrates the propagation of any unsound teaching, be it legalism or looseness, anything that will encourage us to “not act in line with the truth of the gospel” (v. 14). Like the apostle Paul, we must also confront and “oppose” bad teachers, their teaching and those who live it (v. 6, 14).

In 1 Corinthians 5:6, the warning “a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough” is given to alert the assembly of the real corrupting effect of tolerating the immoral sexual behaviour in one of its members.

- **The last 4 times** leaven is referred to are in 1 Corinthians 5:7,8. To get the flow of the apostolic thought, please read verses 1 to 12 a couple of times, and perhaps in different translations. Here the interesting connection is made between expelling the immoral brother at Corinth and clearing out the leaven before the Passover Festival.

The meaning of leaven in 1 Corinthians 5 is given in verse 8: “malice and wickedness”. This is contrasted with “the bread without leaven, that is “bread of sincerity and truth”. This leaven of malice and wickedness works inside and outside the church (v. 12). God, in sovereignty, deals with those “outside”. We, as believers, should deal with those “inside” (v. 12, 13).

On a **personal basis** we are told not to associate (mix) with any who calls himself a believer, but continues to be immoral, greedy, idolater, slanderer, drunkard or a swindler (v. 11). Our happy social interaction with believers with these sad qualities (even after they have already been judged by the assembly) blurs the proper distinction between good and bad, holiness and sin. We personally get used to a lower morality, and happy association with the immoral believer also tends to lower standards and expectations among those in our assembly. This is the working of “moral leaven” in our heart and in our assembly. This social distancing from the immoral may also be used of the Lord to awaken the conscience of this carnal brother. Maybe he thinks he is a believer, he calls himself one, but isn’t one! He needs to awake!

In having social interactions with immoral non-Christians, this lowering of moral standards is less likely to occur, since we (and our brethren) know we are essentially and by nature different (v. 9, 10). But even here, care is needed. Before finishing this letter, the apostle reminds them that “Bad company corrupts good character” 1 Corinthians 15:33.

Collectively, the assembly is also called to act to stop moral decadence “inside”. If a brother or sister insists in living in immorality, or is unrepentant of past moral wickedness, the assembly must act and “put out of your fellowship the man who did this” (v. 2), and “expel the wicked man from among you” (v. 13). This instruction is a solemn but necessary last resort to halt moral internal decadence. In the same way as the Jewish family got rid of the leaven prior to celebration the Passover Feast, an assembly should get rid of “malice and wickedness” in its midst. Then the Lord’s things can really be enjoyed together without malice and wickedness, and with sincerity and truth (v. 8).

A FINAL THOUGHT ON DEALING WITH LEAVEN IN THE CHURCH

How should we deal with leaven? In the Passover narrative, the Jewish family would clear the house and all leaven would go. When considering the New Testament passages, we notice that there seems to be a difference in the treatment of moral and doctrinal leaven. There is no symmetry.

Moral leaven: (1 Corinthians 5) Paul here writes “Expel the wicked man”. This directive equates very nicely the Jewish family cleaning its house of leaven. Notice that it is in the context of “moral leaven” that the apostle mentions the Passover Feast (1 Corinthians 5). The Passover is not mentioned in Galatians when “doctrinal leaven” is addressed.

Doctrinal leaven: (Galatians 2 and 5) Here the apostle identifies a culprit but does not write “Expel the wicked man”. Instead, he carefully warns the Galatian believers not to let themselves be circumcised (5:3), to resist the persuasive teachers (5:8), to not change their view (5:10). He warns them that this legal doctrine, if accepted, would infect the assemblies like leaven (5:9). He warns that the “one who is throwing you into confusion” (probably the leading teacher) “will pay the penalty, whoever he may be” (5:10). The apostle refers to these believers of the “circumcision group” as “agitators” (5:12), and in his frustration, he even wished they would “cut themselves off” or “mutilate themselves” or “emasculate themselves” (5:12) – (could the thought here be that they should no longer be able to reproduce?). But why doesn’t the apostle call on the Galatian believers to “expel” these bad teachers? I am unsure as to the full significance of this, but it is very interesting.

We notice the same in Galatians chapter 2. The brothers from the circumcision group came presumably from Jerusalem (from James, v. 12). This doctrinal leaven was already present in Jerusalem. Now a question: Were the assemblies in Galatia defiled in any way by the presence and practice of this doctrinal leaven in the assembly in Jerusalem? Did the saints in Galatia become defiled by the presence of these circumcision group ambassadors visiting the Galatian assemblies? Or did Peter, Barnabas and the other Jews become defiled by this “doctrinal leaven” when they “joined him in his hypocrisy” and were “led astray” (v.13)?

Under no circumstances do I wish to minimise the importance of standing for true Biblical doctrine. Truth remains truth. We are still called to reject those who come and “do not bring this teaching – the teaching of Christ” (2 John 9,10). We are still called to “contend for the faith that was once entrusted to the saints” (Jude 3). The apostle Paul exposed his life to defend revealed truth. What I suggest we should explore more carefully is the apostle’s framework for dealing with doctrinal differences among believers within assemblies. The apostle called to expel the immoral brother at Corinth (were there no bad doctrines at Corinth?), but evidently did not always call to expel all who held doctrinal leaven. Could we accuse the apostle Paul of being **neutral** in confronting doctrinal leaven? Unlikely.

The old apostle John was no longer welcome by one sad assembly (3 John 9). Diotrephes had become the chief brother and perhaps felt a bit threatened by godly old John. He spoke evil of John. He refused to receive Christian visitors. He would expel those who disagreed with him. And what does the apostle recommend? Does the apostle call for the assembly to “expel” Diotrephes? “If I come” writes the apostle, “I will call attention to what he is doing” (v. 10). In the mean time, dear friend, “do not imitate what is evil but what is good”. The apostles seem to have a lovely and Godly way of handling difficult situations. I wish we could see more of this today.

6. THE PRINCIPLE OF RECOGNITION

In this section I wish to highlight a simple yet powerful general divine pattern, a delicate process which is evident in the Old and New Testaments, and also in Church history. I refer to it as the **Spiritual Principle of Recognition**. You may call it whatever you will, but its underlying truth is central to living in harmony with the Lord, be it personally or collectively, be it in the past, our present or in the future. It is a timeless principle.

Underlying this **Spiritual Principle of Recognition** is the fact that God is Sovereign, that He has a will for our lives personally and collectively. He desires to reveal at least part of that will – the bit we need, when we need it. He desires to guide. This principle also rests on the premise that we Christians must live in dependence, daily dependence on Him. We are called to seek and **recognise** that Divine will, and act and live in harmony with it. “Do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is” (Ephesians 5:17). But isn’t this all a bit subjective?

IS RECOGNITION TOO SUBJECTIVE?

When the will of the Lord is clearly stated in Scripture, we could say His will is objective. But many decisions in life, perhaps most, are not so objective in nature. Should I accept that job? Should I marry that girl? Should we receive that brother? Am I being called to be a missionary? Should I visit that assembly? Should we baptise that lady? After urging us to “understand what the Lord’s will is”, the apostle then provides an important requisite: “be filled with the Holy Spirit” (Ephesians 5:18). We cannot find a verse of Scripture to determine the outcome of every decision or to directly answer every question. The Christian experience is a life of faith, of apparent risk, of dependence. Only to this extent the **Spiritual Principle of Recognition** can be considered subjective.

This principle is so important that the apostle writes to the Colossian saints: “since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and **asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding**” (Colossians 1:9).

RECOGNITION AND FRUITS

The process of recognition is not mechanical, but neither is it disconnected from observable reality. “Watch out for false prophets,” Jesus warned, “they come in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves”. How are we to recognise these wolves? We are told “by their fruit you will **recognise** them”. Some may claim to “prophesy in your name”, drive our demons and perform miracles. But neither the claim of acting in Christ’s name nor the supernatural events in themselves are sufficient. We are called to look at the fruit of their life and ministry (Matthew 7:15–23). A few chapters later it is repeated: “a tree is **recognised** by its fruit” (12:33). In time, fruit will become evident to all. Referring to those bad teachers who oppose the truth, the apostle writes: “they will not get very far because ... their folly **will be clear to everyone**” (2 Timothy 3:9). Let’s look at this recognition process in practice:

RECOGNITION BY THE JEWS

Much of the will of the Lord for the behaviour of the nation of Israel was given in laws, commandments and precepts. Yet even here, we still observe situations where dependence and recognition were necessary. For example, Samuel as a boy had to learn to **recognise** the voice of the Lord (1 Samuel 3) – there were no sets of rules he could use to determine if the Lord was speaking or not. In fact all true prophets were required to **recognise** the voice of Jehovah. The Lord had chosen David to be the new king for Israel. Jesse showed Samuel his strong and promising sons. But it was for Samuel to **recognise** the Lord's choice (1 Samuel 16). Did the inhabitants of Niniveh really repent? Jonah, in a carnal state, failed to **recognise** what the Lord was doing. Although the people of Israel had been given the prophecies concerning Christ's birth and life, yet they were not "spiritual" enough to **recognise** Him. The blind nation of Israel rejected Christ because they "did not **recognise** the time of God's coming" (Luke 19:44). The people of Jerusalem "did not **recognise** Jesus" and condemned him (Acts 13:27). Spiritual recognition is more than reacting to objective descriptions. It makes use of objective reality but inevitably requires spiritual sensitivity.

RECOGNITION IN CHURCH HISTORY

Brethren are inclined to give little weight to Church history prior to the 1800's. But there is one clear historic process that concerns us a great deal: the formation of the Canon of Scripture. Many gospels were written (Luke 1:1). Many letters were written to churches, some claiming to be of apostolic origin (2 Thessalonians 3:17). How did we end up with only 27 Books in our New Testament?

You may have heard the argument by the Roman Catholic Church: since it was the Church which collected and selected the New Testament writings and the Church Councils which invested the writings with authority, it is evident that the Church (and its judgments) has the same authority as the writings themselves. Where does this argument go wrong? The early Church never **gave** the Scriptures authority. They simply **recognised** the authority evidently inherent in the writings themselves. They knew that the Church was based on apostolic doctrine; it was their task, as guided by the Holy Spirit, to **recognise** which writings contained this apostolic doctrine. This process was not easy. We know that during the second century, the Syrian, Roman and North African wings of the early church had their differences. There were uncertainties surrounding the book of Revelation, the two letters of Peter, the second and third letters of John, and the books of Hebrews and James. The early saints were cautious in this recognition process. True spiritual recognition may take time. It may need to wait for the next generation. During the third century, the current New Testament canon of Scripture was **recognised** by the great majority of the Christian church.

CAN WE ALWAYS RECOGNISE?

Sometimes our prejudices, preferences and carnality may hinder us from recognising what the Lord is doing. We individually and collectively may "lose connection with the Head" (Colossians 2:19). But sometimes the Lord himself chooses to keep us in the dark for a while. On the way to Emmaus, Jesus himself drew near to the two disciples, "but they were kept from recognising him". Later, the Lord intervened and "their eyes were opened and they recognised him" (Luke 24:16,31). The Lord may choose to hinder or promote recognition. We are not in control of the timing.

RECOGNITION OF TRUE CHRISTIANITY

What was the distinctive badge of true Christians? How were genuine disciples to be recognised? “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another” (John 13:35). How did an unbeliever recognise that “God is really among you”? (1 Corinthians 14:25). It was not because of their dress code or because of the notice board outside their meeting room – though these may be of some help in the recognition process.

RECOGNITION OF GIFTS

There is no doubt that it is the Holy Spirit who gives men and women gifts (1 Corinthians 12:8). But the assembly is to recognise if they are genuine or counterfeit gifts. Is there evidence that they are building up the Church? Are they subject to Scripture? Is the hand of God evident in their labour? The process is similar to when a brother gets up to speak in the assembly. His desire, one would hope, is that he be led by the Holy Spirit. He should be convinced that he has a message from the Lord for His people. But it is evident that this does not always happen. If you ask the rambling brother why he doesn't simply stop and sit down, he will say he feels led of the Lord. And maybe sincerely so. Who are we to judge the brother's motives? But we can and should judge the fruit. If his teaching is not building up the saints in their most holy faith, he is speaking of his own accord. We must recognise true gifts.

RECOGNITION OF LEADERS AND WORKERS

There is no doubt that it is the Holy Spirit who appoints overseers (local leaders) in the assembly (Acts 20:28). He puts the desire in the heart (1 Timothy 3:1). We are given descriptive lists of qualifications to help us identify and **recognise** these elders and deacons (1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1). “But we beg you, brethren, **to know** (the Spanish translation reads “recognise”) those who labour among you, and take the lead among you in [the] Lord” (1 Thessalonians 5:12 JND). In Acts 6, the apostles required some assistance. They called for “seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom” (v. 3). How were these men to be found? They had to be **recognised**. And this was no mechanical process. To select by vote or simply submit to the pushiest men may be damaging to the assembly.

RECOGNITION OF GOD'S WILL FOR MY LIFE

In Scriptures we have evidence of God's general will for our lives, but when it comes to specifics, we are forced to be dependent on the Lord. Should we move to Paris? Should we change our child's school? Should we leave this assembly? Should I leave my job and work full time for the Lord? Should I go skiing or help at a Christian youth camp? How should we spend our income? Should we seek the Lord's guidance in these personal matters? Yes. The recognising process is at times easier than at other times.

RECOGNITION OF GOD'S WORK WITHIN THE ASSEMBLY

A few weeks ago, a new lady in her mid 20's asked to be baptised here in Armenia. Should we baptise her? We first try to **recognise** if she has been born again. To help in this process, here in Colombia we usually run some baptism classes. On confession of belief, Philip baptised Simon the Sorcerer. But what was really in Simon's heart? Was he

believing the miracles or did he have saving faith? On seeing a few more fruits, the apostle Peter's diagnosis was "your heart was not right before God" and "you are full of bitterness and captive to sin" (Acts 8:13,21,23). Had Philip baptised a non-Christian? Difficult to say. Recognition is not always easy. It is possible for us to make mistakes, but this should not paralyse us. Saints in Jerusalem found it difficult to **recognise** what the Lord was doing in Saul's life until Barnabas intervened (Acts 9:27,28). When there is fear or prejudice, the spiritual process of recognition becomes more difficult.

When a believer wishes to form part of the new assembly here in Armenia, we seek to **recognise** what the Lord is doing in the heart of the dear saint. How should we distribute the offering moneys collected in the assembly? We try to **recognise** what the Lord is doing, and support it economically. Is it right to delegate this responsibility to a few saints in other assemblies? It definitely makes life easier!

An example of restoration: A couple of days ago, at 7:30 in the morning, a local brother and myself interviewed a young sister in her late teens. She became relaxed and careless in her Christian walk and ended up in bed with her boyfriend. Her immoral behaviour required discipline of the assembly. This was carried out last year. We have been watching her behaviour. We have talked with her before to encourage the process of restoration. We have talked with the Christian family with whom she lives. It looks like she has returned to the Lord. There are some fruits which suggest positive change. Why did we call this interview? The brother and I were trying to **recognise** what the Lord has been doing in her heart. If the evidence leads us to conclude that she is restored, we shall be very happy to announce this to the assembly. It is not our judgement (though we feel we are acting in the name of the Lord), neither is it our announcement which restores her to fellowship. We recognise the Lord's work in restoration and act accordingly.

RECOGNITION IN COUNSELLING

Seldom does a week go by here without the visit of a saint or new person seeking counselling. We hear long life stories, some quite sad. Is the Lord really working in this person's life? Is he or she only looking for some financial help? Some claim to be tormented by demons. Does he have a physical or a psychological problem? Can it really be a demon? Our earnest prayer is that the Lord would help us **recognise** what He is doing in this person's life.

RECOGNITION OF ASSEMBLY JUDGEMENTS

An assembly may claim to have Christ in their midst as they make a judgement. Similarly, someone may "claim to have fellowship with God". But this "claim" must be compared with "real" fruits. In the event that there is a difference between the "claim" and the "fruits", the "fruits" are stronger than the "claim". We read "If someone claims to have fellowship with God, but walks in darkness, he lies" (1 John 1:6). Does not the same hold for defective assembly judgements?

RECOGNITION OF OTHER ASSEMBLIES

How do we know if another assembly is OK to visit? We put together some regional lists of assemblies and form a national list. Then, put some of these national lists together and form a world-wide list of OK assemblies. Some began to call this a circle of fellowship. Those within are OK. We can now dispense with the need to **recognise** what the Lord is

really doing. Assemblies, like living organisms, are always changing. Even in the event that we could produce a comprehensive world-wide list of OK assemblies which had divine approval, the list would become outdated within minutes. The Lord raises up new assemblies. He closes some. He removes the lampstand or candlestick from others. We must learn to **recognise** the presence of Christ in an assembly.

RECOGNITION IN RECEPTION

When visitors come to our assembly, we are to determine if the Lord would have them participate at the Lord's table with us or not. We are to determine if the Lord would have the visitor minister the Word to us or not. If the visitor arrives with a letter of commendation signed by saints we know and trust, this may speed up the process, but still, the local assembly is responsible for whom it receives. We must resist the pressure to accept some mechanical process, a mechanism that would work even when we are not spiritual. "Receive all" and "receive only from our list of assemblies" does not require from us that we should be filled with the Holy Spirit. Perhaps William Kelly's words are useful here: "Where a soul confesses Christ really and truly, confesses Him in such a way **that it commends itself to your conscience as divine**, receive him; for God has." Lectures on Ephesians, pages 152, 153.

WE MUST ALWAYS FOLLOW

Perhaps you can find some more examples of this recognition process. In every case, it is God who acts according to His sovereign will, and we are called to **recognise** where He acts, and follow. It is God who takes the initiative, we must seek to **recognise** this divine initiative and respond to it. To use an Old Testament illustration, it was the cloud that led the Israelites through the desert, and not the Israelites leading the cloud. It has never been easy to recognise the working and leading of the Spirit of God (John 3:8). Why? Because it has never been easy to be and remain spiritual. We prefer to lean on lists, useful rules and mechanical acceptance of procedures. Perhaps I may invite you to reflect on this Spiritual Principle of Recognition, exploring how you may apply it in your personal and family life and also in your assembly.

7. ANARCHY OR TRUE DEPENDENCY?

Will the Spiritual Principle of Recognition encourage "stand alone" assemblies and lead to general anarchy? Will it lead us to the state described in the book of Judges when "Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit"? (Judges 17:6, 21:25). What we propose here is NOT that everyone does as he sees fit, but that we all follow the Lord more closely. We, especially western Christians, are afraid of uncertainty. We trust the Lord with all our heart, but we love insurance policies, stable investments, and predictability. I would suggest that a life of faith, a normal Christian life, has a great deal of uncertainty. Our destiny is certain, but not so our life. Perhaps that is why we find change so difficult to adjust to. If we change the seating arrangements in our meeting room, if we change our hymn book ... what will change next? Where will all this lead us? We read that "By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going." (Hebrews 11:8). This idea is uncomfortable to our self-governing western mind set. To move without

knowing our final destination requires trust. Faith in Him who leads. If we take dependence and recognition seriously, the Lord may choose to lead us out of our “comfort zone”. Again, it is NOT a matter of each one doing as he sees fit. It is a matter of individually and collectively making ourselves open to be led by the Holy Spirit, not only in selecting Scripture readings and giving out hymns, but in all areas of Christian experience. Perhaps our nervousness to consider change reflects our weak faith in the One who leads. “Without faith it is impossible to please God” (Hebrews 1:6).

ORDER IN THE ASSEMBLY?

An assembly is the house of God and the Lord requires order in His house (1 Timothy 3:15; Colossians 2:5). Collective Christian life within the local assembly is not a “free for all”. We are given 4 features for divine rule:

- (1) Christ: The Lord Jesus Christ himself is pre-eminent and “feeds and cares” for His church (Colossians 1:18; Ephesians 5:29)
- (2) Scripture: The unique authority of God’s word (1 Corinthians 14:37)
- (3) Holy Spirit: Guiding and directing in the assembly (1 Corinthians 14)
- (4) Local leaders: The presence of godly mature men (the Bible uses terms like elders, overseers, shepherds) to be loved and obeyed locally (1 Thessalonians 5:12). These, like parents, can sometimes make mistakes, but their God given authority should be respected.

Is this enough? Do we need regional, national or international supervision? On saying goodbye for the last time to the saints at Ephesus (Acts 20), the apostle Paul called the “elders of the church” (v. 17), encouraged them to “keep watch over yourselves [plural leadership] and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers [the assembly at Ephesus]” (v. 28). On departing, did the apostle Paul commit this dear assembly to the care of a regional labouring brother? No. Did he commit the assembly to the care of neighbouring assemblies? No. The apostle simply said “Now I commit you to **God** and to the **word of his grace**” (v. 32) Was this enough? Would this lead to anarchy? No. Would this eventually lead the assembly at Ephesus to distance itself from other assemblies? The apostle did not think so. Although he could foresee many future problems, outside attacks from “savage wolves” (v. 29) and divisionist attacks from within (v.30), the apostle left in confidence, knowing that if they continued to have **God** and **His Word** in their midst, these would “build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who were sanctified” (v. 32). Is this enough for us today?

ARE “STAND ALONE” ASSEMBLIES OK?

Should assemblies be interdependent? The term dependent carries the concepts of “relying on”, “being accountable to”. We say that a blind man depends on his dog, that an old man depends on his walking stick. In this sense, an assembly depends on the Lord and NOT on other assemblies. Without the dog, the blind man is lost. Without the walking stick, the old man will fall. A spiritual, growing and mature assembly should not depend (lean or rely) on any other assembly. The relationships between assemblies are not based on helpless necessity but on practical benefit. True fellowship. The term dependence is best reserved to describe our personal and collective relationship with Christ himself.

We find little direct teaching or instructions in the New Testament about the relationship between one assembly and another. The teachings of the One Body, as we have already seen, refer directly to the relationship between believers (saints) and not between assemblies (see section 3). But, for our instruction, we do find New Testament patterns emerging as new assemblies were formed. They began to interact with one another, but there is no trace of a confederation or organisation of assemblies in the New Testament. It is here that a list of OK assemblies can become a real trampoline for departure. On the other hand, one cannot claim Scriptural support for a “stand alone” assembly, that behaves as if it were the only representation of the Church of Christ, with no relationship links with other assemblies. New Testament assemblies did express friendship and fellowship one with another.

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN ASSEMBLIES IN SCRIPTURE

The first assembly was in Jerusalem. Due to the persecution that broke out in Jerusalem, Christians were dispersed and new assemblies were established. In Acts 11:19–30 we read of the beginning of the assembly in Antioch. Saints in Jerusalem heard of the new assembly and sent Barnabas to help (v. 22). Barnabas called Paul from Tarsus, and they worked together for a whole year establishing this new assembly (v. 26). There were more visitors from Jerusalem, “some prophets” (v. 27). Then, hearing of the financial needs among saints in Judea (including the assembly in Jerusalem), the saints at Antioch collected a gift and sent it to them. These are the first expressions of inter-assembly relationships. There is no structure. No organisational requirement to visit or help financially. Simply an expression of true fellowship.

From the assembly at Antioch, Paul and Barnabas set off on their missionary journey (Acts 13:2). They visited Antioch in Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe, evangelising, grouping believers and establishing the assembly leadership. They returned then to Antioch and reported to the saints what the Lord had done (Acts 14:21–28). Later they also reported the blessings to the assembly in Jerusalem, and to other saints on their way (15:3–5). There was no formal requirement to do this. Paul and Barnabas were not opening “branches” of the Antioch assembly elsewhere. No. The interest and joy expressed by older assemblies was simply an expression of true fellowship.

The assembly in Jerusalem was the stronghold of the “circumcision group”, also called “the party of the Pharisees” (15:5). Some of these teachers who had left Jerusalem at their own initiative (15:24) were causing problems by teaching: “unless you are circumcised ... you cannot be saved” (15:1) – (By the way, would you class this as error or heresy). Since these teachers came from Jerusalem, a delegation of saints from Antioch visited Jerusalem. It was the responsibility of the apostles and elders in Jerusalem to put their local brethren in order. We could hardly call this a council of churches. The interest was general, since these legalists were causing concern regionally, including the Galatian churches. But the gathering was really more a local assembly meeting with a few concerned guests. The fact that there was much discussion and that even in chapter 16 Paul circumcises Timothy to help his acceptance in visiting Jerusalem, shows that this legalist error had strong roots in Jerusalem. A concluding letter was sent to the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia. Given that the authority of elders is strictly local, it is fair to conclude that the authority to “burden” Gentile saints with “the following requirements” (15:28) was apostolic. We also learn that travelling teachers are accountable to their home assembly. We shouldn’t expect to find more letters of this authoritative type circulating today. We do learn, that if visiting teachers are not profitable, they may be stopped

by the receiving assembly. If they are problematic, they may be referred back to their home assembly. Local leaders are always responsible to exercise “quality control” locally.

What was the basis of inter-assembly fellowship?

- (a) saints in every assembly form part of the same “family of God”,
- (b) there is a common love and commitment to the Lord,
- (c) there is a common interest in the expansion of the Lord’s work – frequently there is co-operation in the work. An older assembly may become a model to another (1 Thessalonians 1:14),
- (d) there is similar respect and submission to Scripture. A similar pattern of teaching was presented and encouraged in all assemblies (1 Corinthians 4:17; 7:17; 11:16; 14:33,34; 16:1), yet it is evident that uniformity in teaching and practice was not a condition for inter-assembly fellowship. The active presence of the “circumcision group” in some assemblies is evidence of this.

How can these bonds of fellowship be expressed?

- (a) by the sending and receiving of gifted men, evangelists (2 Corinthians 8:18) and teachers (Acts 18:27),
- (b) by sending and receiving financial gifts where needed (2 Corinthians 8, 9),
- (c) by sending and receiving letters of commendation, expressing confidence and greetings,
- (d) by happy visitation and reception of travelling saints,
- (e) by sending and receiving information for prayer and encouragement,
- (f) by helping each other through shared conferences, camps, retreats.

MODEL #1: THE LAMPSTANDS

In time, the exemplary assembly at Ephesus changed (in time, all assemblies change!). We can read an interesting X-ray letter recorded by the apostle John in Revelation 2:1–7. Outwardly the assembly at Ephesus looked good. It remained an active hard working assembly. It remained a morally and doctrinally correct assembly, not tolerating wicked men and testing false teachers (v. 2). For the name of Christ, local saints had even endured hardships. Yet deep inside the assembly, the Lord detected something critically wrong: “You have forsaken your first love” (v. 4). Then follow another six X-ray letters to other assemblies in Asia Minor.

The Lord describes these 7 assemblies as 7 golden lampstands (1:20). These were not like the lampstand in the tabernacle, with one base and a main stock and six branches. No, these looked like 7 self standing independent lampstands. But we read that between these 7 lampstands walked someone “like a son of man” (1:13). What united these lampstands was **not** an administrative “common base”, like the tribes of Israel. These 7 churches had a common centre, the presence of Christ himself. These churches were secure. Christ himself “held the seven stars in his right hand” (2:1). The **Lord Jesus Christ in their midst** was the only link that kept the assemblies together. There is no connection between one lampstand and another except through Christ in their midst.

MODEL #2: THE HUB AND SPOKES

To visualise this, imagine a bicycle wheel with spokes, with each spoke attached firmly to the hub, yet with no tire or wheel around it. The hub is Christ. The spokes are assemblies. The spokes remain related to each other through the hub. Only through the hub. As Christ walked between the lampstands, his eyes “like blazing fire” detected in each assembly things that needed improvement. The Spirit’s teaching was for all the churches (2:7), but one assembly was not blamed for another assembly’s failure. If the assembly in Pergamos held those who held the teaching of the Nicolaitans (2:15), the other assemblies were not positionally defiled by this, neither were they held accountable. Each assembly had its own accounting to do with Christ himself.

But we humans distrust the hub. We fear it is not strong enough to keep the spokes together. We fear that other non-spokes may incorrectly attach themselves to the hub. We endlessly try to put a tire around the outside, joining one assembly with another to form a closer, stronger, more visible, more practical unity. Some use a denominational structure, a statement of faith, a name. Some use formal or informal listings of OK assemblies. We can even use common hymnbooks and shared history to create an extra bonding. Dear brother, dear sister, isn’t the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ himself a strong enough bond? But some may ask, what if we don’t have lists and names, how then can we know which is the true lampstand in a specific place? Thankfully the Lord has not called anyone to travel round the world to do such judging and prepare such listings. You and I, as individual Christians, are called to live lives in conformity with the Word of God, and, where possible, recognise and form part of an assembly which also seeks to adjust itself to the Word of God – a place where the presence of God is really evident.

MODEL #3: CONCENTRIC CIRCLES

Is the term circle of fellowship a biblical expression? No, it is a relatively new one. H. A. Ironside and others credit F. W. Grant with its invention. Brother Booth belonged to the Grant set of assemblies in North America. In Scripture, we do find expressions like “within” and “without” (1 Corinthians 5:12,13 JND) and these best refer to the responsibility boundaries of a local assembly. Local saints must know who they should obey, and leaders must know who form part of the flock that is under their care (Hebrews 13:17; 1 Peter 5:2). But the idea of a circle of fellowship is now frequently used to refer to an exclusive network of assemblies. Assemblies are either “within” or “without”. Some have used this term to create something that looks like a non-denomination denomination, a closed network of assemblies within the Body of Christ. Given this danger, we can well understand why some saints among us reject the term circle of fellowship.

May I propose that, if we use the term **circle of fellowship** like we use the term **circle of friends**, it can still be a practical and useful concept.

As a family we moved to Armenia just over a year ago. We are meeting new people daily, at the children’s school, at the Christian bookshop, at the supermarket, neighbours, etc. Our “circle of friends” is slowly growing. Perhaps we could say that we have **a number of concentric circles of friends**. Technically nearly everyone of the 300.000 inhabitants of Armenia is a potential friend, but not all are. Most we have never met. Some we don’t want as friends. We have an inner circle of friends, those we trust most. Those we are happy for our children to visit and stay the night. Those with whom we would feel free to share a personal problem. There is another circle of less close friends. With these our children currently cannot spend the night. Our conversations would probably be less

personal. There is another circle of friends, those neighbours we greet, some parents we chat to a bit outside the children's school, the man at the post office. Individuals slowly move to closer circles as confidence grows, and move to outer circles if for some reason confidence wanes.

Could we understand the relationship between assemblies in a similar way? There is **an inner circle of fellowship** of very similar assemblies. These have a shared history with a long standing degree of trust among them. A letter of commendation from one of these assemblies would be very adequate to receive a saint and, if led of the Lord, allow him to minister. Yet, the Church of Christ is larger. We could consider another somewhat **larger circle of fellowship**. With a letter from one of these, the receiving assembly would perhaps like to have a short chat before it received the person at the Lord's table. It may consider it inappropriate for the visitor to minister the Word until further confidence has developed. An even **wider circle of fellowship** may represent those with whom the assembly would wish to hold one or more in-depth conversations prior to receiving the saint. An assembly could move to a **closer circle of fellowship** as confidence grows. If it becomes notorious that an assembly is shifting to anti-Biblical practice or becoming lax, it will shift to a more **distant circle of fellowship**, reflecting a loss in confidence. In essence, this is how early Brethren assemblies began to relate to each other. It was a dynamic process of growing in confidence and recognising what the Lord was doing. We read of saints willing to receive from some assembly but not willing to visit that assembly themselves. This suggests degrees of confidence. To be able to recognise what the Lord is doing, we must be free from the cobwebs of personal preferences, man-made traditions and the fear of men. We must be spiritual ourselves.

ARE WE PROMOTING "OPEN" PRINCIPLES?

Historically, whenever a saint questioned an assembly judgement, he was labelled open or independent. Some spoke so of Kelly in 1881. Brother F. W. Grant was also branded open by some in America, when in his old age he reflected on "our mistakes" in a paper titled "The Relation of Assemblies to Assemblies". Whenever we Brethren disagree and divide, one side is labelled open, loose, independent or something worse. By doing this, we put these saints in a box, we label them. By doing this, we protect ourselves from having to rethink and perhaps change. Does the Spiritual Principle of Recognition, as presented in this paper, promote loose open principles?

IF ...

If by open we mean that practising homosexuals, adulterers, fornicators, Satanists and their supporters may participate at the Lord's table with us, the answer is NO. Godly consciences within assemblies everywhere would be able to **recognise** false Christianity.

If by open we mean that we must receive in our assembly every Christian who wants to break bread with us (because he is a Christian), the answer is NO. Being a Christian is a necessary but not a sufficient condition. The receiving assembly must **recognise** if the believer is in the right condition to be received.

If by open we mean that an assembly may "stand alone" and need not take other saints and assemblies into account, then again it is NO. We must **recognise** and sometimes contribute towards what the Lord is doing elsewhere.

If by open we mean that we do not act in the light of the One Body of Christ (in principle and practice), again I say NO. We must **recognise** and love every true member of the One Body of Christ. We need every member. We try to encourage and work with each member, as far as a godly conscience allows.

If by open we mean that we should treat all gatherings of saints as “the same thing”, clearly it is NO. It is evident that some assemblies are more spiritual than others. If we are to visit we must seek to **recognise** its true spiritual condition.

If by open we mean that we ignore decisions (and letters of commendation) made by other assemblies, again I say NO. Godly saints in any assembly will **recognise** godly decisions arrived at by others. These may be made by individuals, families or assemblies. Godly decisions are as binding as God’s will, because they are the same in essence.

BUT IF ...

If by open we mean that we seek to be open to the Lord’s guidance personally and collectively, the answer is a big YES. To live the Spiritual Principle of Recognition we must choose to let the Lord really be LORD, in principle and in practice.

If by open we mean that we reject the concept of international collective responsibility, the answer is YES. We are only responsible where we are in a position to really practise spiritual recognition. Suppose you have never been to Managua. When you travel to Managua, and you are in fellowship with the Lord, He will guide you to true Christian fellowship there. You will **recognise** it when you live it. If a person comes from Managua to your assembly, it is for you locally to **recognise** if there is evidence of saving faith and consistent Christian walk. A letter from a trusted assembly may help this process, but still local recognition is necessary. Our responsibility before the Lord is personal and collective within our home assembly. This includes the responsibility for where we visit and who we receive. Proper spiritual recognition can never lead to looseness or anarchy.

The Spiritual Principle of Recognition allows us to live, move and work in harmony with Christ. The Brethren during the 1820’s and 1830’s displayed this degree of collective spirituality because history shows that they practised this principle of spiritual recognition. But as the years went by, some among them tried to formalise things. The dynamics of God given life can be suffocated by formality. Slowly the spiritual principle was replaced by mechanics and procedures. What I have tried to do here is present for your prayerful consideration (and action) a Biblical principle. If some call it open, or romantic or charismatic or mystic, so what! The question is: Is it a Scriptural principle? Under the Spirit’s guidance, judge for yourself.

8. POLITICS, BITTERNESS & PARALYSIS

Why do these assembly tensions and divisions cause us such pain? Why do we have so many sleepless nights? Why so many harsh accusative letters? Many feel genuinely hurt. It worries me to notice growing bitterness among dear saints. It becomes evident in the tone of voice. In the unnecessary harsh language in letters. Not only does this bitter attitude rob our families and assemblies of joy, but it spreads. Some find it ever so difficult to enjoy fellowship with saints without majoring on assembly problems. **Bitter souls are not**

clean and useful vessels, regardless of doctrinal correctness. If we are to “see the Lord” and enjoy His presence in reality, we must deal with this serious problem.

The divine directive remains: “Pursue peace with all, and holiness, without which no one shall **see the Lord**: watching lest [there be] any one who lacks the grace of God; lest any root of **bitterness** springing up trouble [you], and many be **defiled** by it” (Hebrews 12:14,15 JND).

After giving some Bible teaching in an assembly in Holland earlier this year, a sister came with tears in her eyes, and asked: “What can I do? I feel very hurt by the brethren. They have been very unjust. I feel resentment and bitterness. My bitterness is affecting my family life, my husband and children. What can I do?” To such I write this section. Some dear saints are bitter and don’t seem to know it. Perhaps they see themselves as justice fighters, truth defenders and think their hot feelings are righteous indignation. Wake up dear saint, “**man’s wrath** does not work God’s righteousness” (James 1:20 JND). It never has, it never will.

There are good Christian books on the market dealing with anger, bitterness and forgiveness. You may wish to get your hands on one or two of them. Briefly I wish to highlight a possible contributing factor to our particular form of Brethren bitterness.

SOME SAD WORDS FROM WILLIAM KELLY

While looking through an old suitcase in my sister’s attic in London last December, I came across a little booklet entitled “Christian Unity and Fellowship” (Printed many years ago by C. A. Hammond Trust Bible Depot, London, UK). It “contains the slightly abridged Notes of a Lecture delivered in 1882 by W. Kelly” (page 1). That was the year after the great world-wide division which resulted in Kelly and Darby being out of fellowship with each other for the rest of their earthly lives. These men used to be good, close friends. We can imagine how Kelly must have felt at this time. If you allow me, I shall take three little quotes here, not to discuss the main teachings of his paper, but simply to observe the **human element** evident during assembly divisions.

Quote #1: (pages 5 and 6) Kelly refers to inconsistent and arbitrary application of rules. He complained about the “system of rules which exclude saints as godly as themselves who cannot accept these rules. Here we have a sect. Their decrees are not the commandments of the Lord, yet they become practically as authoritative as His word, or (as is usual) yet more so. What is it for men to **pretend** that they have no human rules, when they introduce some unheard of conditions of fellowship, **here rigidly, there loosely, according to varying policy or the caprice of their rulers** for those who come within their range?” (pages 5, 6). A British brother recently defended this “caprice” by referring to it as “priestly discretion”. We have a nice biblical word for everything!

Quote #2: (page 10) Kelly on brethren pressure tactics: “Thus the direct tendency is to coerce and demoralise; for what is sought is not conviction on ground of Scripture, but, where there is no conviction, a blindfold subjection, a bare and often reluctant and unhappy acquiescence, an appearance of fellowship which is no longer living but dead. For the Spirit we have received is assuredly a spirit, not of fear, but of power and love and a sound mind; and in no way does He endorse what is thus formal in character, under human pressure or influence.”

Quote #3: (page 10) Kelly on the resulting lowering of moral calibre: “The consequence is terrible: a premium to the more vaulting and turbulent spirits, who now more than ever would “hold the reins”; the comparative retirement, from their just and grace-given place, of those who care not to rule save in the fear of the Lord and by His word; **the destruction of moral principle** in such (and they are very many) as seek to silence their disapproval of the movement as a whole and in detail, either by attachment to leaders, or in holding to the greater number, which they fondly call unity.”

Why read these quotes? Because they were spoken 120 years ago, yet they could easily describe our situation today. Don't you think so? We are still playing the same painful game. Or to use brother G. V. Wigram's words, we are still “blowing ecclesiastical bubbles” and “playing church”. I don't know about you, but I find this very depressing!

WE NEED TO BE REALISTIC

Because we think we are the best doctrinally, we also have very high “Christian character” expectations of our leaders and of each other. Part of our pain is that our expectations are unrealistic. And disillusion hurts. Exaggerated criticisms, religious politics and a degree of unrighteousness have characterised every division among us Brethren. This is “common to man's nature” (1 Corinthians 10:13 JND). Even in the beautiful early church in apostolic days, we read: “If you keep on biting and devouring each other (hurting others with our mouth), watch out or you will be destroyed by each other” (Galatians 5:15). My dear brother and sister, we live in a fallen world. The sad reality is that you and I and our spiritual leaders retain our sinful nature. Sometimes we hurt others badly.

IDENTIFY THE TRUE ENEMY

We must not forget that complicated legalistic brother who forced that unrighteous decision, or the worldly brother who works at lowering the spiritual tone of your assembly, neither of them are the real problem. “Our struggle is not against flesh and blood (people), but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 6:12). If this is true, we should turn our attention and frustration away from personalities and become much more aware of the true spiritual battle taking place today. If Satan managed to use the apostle Peter (Matthew 16:23), could he not sometimes use you or me? Could he not use some of our leading brethren? Like the apostle Paul in Galatians 2 and 5, we must strongly resist both encroaching legalism and looseness, but with spiritual weapons and in a godly way.

WHY IS THE PAIN SO ACUTE?

The apostle was an enthusiastic promoter and lover of the assembly, yet he never said “for to me to live is the assembly”. The passion of his life was Christ himself (Philippians 1:21). We Brethren have been very committed to our assemblies. We have invested much of our time and resources in the assembly. We have happily sacrificed a great deal to promote the cause of the assembly. I fear that for many of us, we have become **dependent** on our assembly. We need it for our sense of security. We need our assembly for our sense of identity. We need our assembly for our social life. We need our assembly for our sense of self worth. Without realising it, we have turned our assembly into a cistern that cannot hold water. But we still thirst. We need the cistern. The thought that some may try to remove us from the cistern or that our cistern may break, brings unbear-

able pain. Why such disproportionate pain? Perhaps it is because we “have forsaken” Christ, “the spring of living water” (Jeremiah 2:13). Could it be that our excessive frustration reflects our lack of closeness to the Lord himself? In our experience, have we learnt to find satisfaction and **completeness** (Colossians 2:10 JND) in Christ alone?

PARALYSIS

So you have stopped helping in the Sunday school. You feel hurt and cut up and now you seldom participate in conferences and assembly meetings. You have resigned from the young people’s camp committee. You feel you have lost respect and you no longer share your Biblical insights. Your local leaders no longer inspire you. You don’t really trust anyone. The joy and enthusiasm you once had is gone. You press on but you no longer desire to give your best. Why such paralysis? What made you want to help and sacrifice in the past? Were you striving for recognition among fellow saints? ... And now you feel these fellow saints aren’t worth the effort? Dear brother, dear sister, it is your loving Chief Shepherd you should be serving. He hasn’t cut you off. He hasn’t given up on you. He hasn’t let you down. He never will. He understands the pain of rejection and disappointment. Remember that He alone sees your heart and your service and will give the “crown of glory that will never fade away” (1 Peter 5:4). His searching yet tender question is for us too: “Lovest thou **me**?” ... and only if our answer is “yes Lord”, are we given the privilege to “Feed **my** lambs” (John 20:15–18).

TIMES OF PAIN CAN BE TIMES OF GROWTH

Our dear Lord is an expert in bringing good out of bad. Personally, I feel that the Lord has been using these last 2 years of assembly tensions, pressure and uncertainty for my spiritual growth. My wife and I say that we work for the Lord and depend on Him alone. Why then do we have sleepless nights when we receive from brethren abroad a “choose us or else ...” letter? Are we really working for the Lord or for the expansion of a Brethren empire? Does my thirst for significance find satisfaction in “my Christian work” or in communion with Christ himself? These searching and refining questions are forced on us by difficult circumstances. It is painful, yet it is very healthy. What are you learning through your testing times? Are you gaining new insights into human nature? Are you becoming more aware of your own sinful and deceitful heart? Is the Lord weaning you away from men and leaders and drawing you closer to Himself? Is that new closeness to the Lord helping you put away the fear of men? A harvest of “righteousness and peace” is promised to those who are “exercised” (JND) or “trained” by adverse conditions (Hebrews 12:11). Let’s not just grit our teeth and blame others. Let’s use adversity to deepen and to grow.

Recently I read: “True spiritual depth frees us to be spontaneous in the midst of sadness”.

A CALL TO LOCAL SHEPHERDS

On this issue of bitterness and paralysis, Acts 20:28 is also applicable: “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers”. After searching, confessing and freeing our own hearts, let’s visit and help our fellow saints who are bound by resentment and bitterness. These dear saints need your help. In Christ they may find and enjoy real freedom. They need not end their days in bitterness, cynicism and defeat.

“Wherefore lift up the hands that hang down, and the failing knees; and make straight paths for your feet, that that which is lame be not turned aside; but that rather it may be healed. Pursue peace with all, and holiness, without which no one shall see the Lord” (Hebrews 12:12–14 JND). Dear brother, dear sister, if the Lord has awakened you through the current trials, if you now drink more deeply into that fountain of living waters, if there is a growing God-given joy and freedom in your heart, help others find it.

9. PRIORITIES & CONCLUSION

We have considered our history of recurring divisions. A few happy reunions followed by more painful division. This has generated weakness and a steady world-wide decline among us. We have considered possible causes, ranging from lack of instruction to pride, the flesh, irrational fear of change, excessive influence of personalities, etc. Although each of these has had its effect, we have proposed that the understanding of “assembly principles” as held by some among us has deviated from the Scriptural pattern. Among these sad errors we considered the view that assembly judgements are universally binding (whether right or wrong). We also showed that a wrong understanding of the One Body of Christ leads to an un-Biblical network of assemblies, a system. We explored the problems with a locative (a thing we have) understanding of the Lord’s table and its resulting sectarian consequences. Then we looked at the Jewish notion of defilement, and why it cannot be applied directly to the New Testament Church. We showed that historically, Brethren have been happy to practise careful occasional fellowship without fear of positional defilement. Finally we explored the spiritual principle of recognition, and proposed that it forms the basis for living in harmony with the mind of Christ, individually and collectively.

WHERE SHOULD WE GO FROM HERE?

If the Lord has used this paper to open your eyes (or confirm your suspicions) in some areas, may I encourage you to further study the matter before the Lord. Discuss it with fellow saints. Until the Lord gives you conviction on these matters, you should not act. But once the Lord grants you to recognise some of these things as being a true reflection of Scripture, we then must act on them. We must feel it in our veins, not that these are open, free, exclusive or closed principles, but that they are BIBLICAL principles.

If your assembly has stopped practising the spiritual principle of recognition, we must educate it. To have a spiritual and healthy assembly, we need spiritual brothers and spiritual sisters. We must teach and motivate true daily dependence on the Lord, at a personal level, and then at an assembly level. Without a conviction that the Lord is in this, an assembly will be paralysed by fear. Fear of criticism. Fear of being deleted from a list.

Probably some saints and assemblies will prefer to continue in the recently narrowed path. They wish to pursue the application of the Levitical understanding of defilement on the Church and to accept as binding all assembly judgements. This is their choice, and we must respect it. But I would heartily urge these dear saints to be historically consistent and join the Tunbridge Wells Brethren group, rather than pressure the rest of the reluctant saints and assemblies down this ever narrowing path.

As we grow in genuine dependence on the Lord, our fear of censure will mellow. As we relearn to practise the principle of spiritual recognition collectively within our assembly, we shall experience a new joy and freshness. We shall then begin to learn how to relate healthily and constructively with other assemblies. We shall no longer be moved by fear, feeling we are accountable to other assemblies. We shall no longer have that urge to impose our understanding and preferences on other assemblies. Assemblies will begin to relate to one another in a constructive and healthy manner, in a true New Testament manner.

This, I honestly believe, is an important part of the light that the LORD was pleased to give the early Brethren. This is a significant part of our true spiritual heritage. Furthermore, the sincere practice of spiritual recognition is now, as it was then, an attraction and an inspiration to all the people of God. The choice is now ours. Shall we remain passive and continue to live in denial? Or are we willing to pay the price to recapture and practise this part of our God-given spiritual heritage.

A JOYFUL HEART

Perhaps the Lord has used this paper to highlight coldness or some bitterness in your own heart. May I encourage you to leave for later the many assembly problems and give urgent priority to your personal restoration. Only true communion with Christ can soothe with joy the hurting soul. "Be not grieved, for the joy of Jehovah is your strength" (Nehemiah 8:10 JND). This joy warms our heart, strengthens our faith, inspires our vision and motivates persistent sacrificial service.

"For I, Jehovah, thy God, hold thy right hand,
saying unto thee, Fear not; I will help thee"

Isaiah 41:13 (JND)