

57<sup>TH</sup> ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF THE GOSPEL STANDARD TRUST  
HELD AT COLNBROOK CHAPEL ON 20 MAY 2023

Address given by Dr **Matthew** J Hyde on  
The Church

Thank you, Mr Chairman, and dear friends. The subject, this afternoon, has weighed upon me with some weight now for some time. I do not want to spend time speaking about office-bearers, ordinances, church discipline – but I want more fundamentally to come to the question: What is the church?

We often fail when it comes to office-bearers, ordinances and discipline, because we are wrong at the root. The root is corrupt, and therefore it brings forth corrupt fruit. We need to get back to the root, this afternoon.

Perhaps we are the losers for not using, amongst our churches, the Apostles' Creed. That which is repeated in our national church every Lord's Day, and in many other churches around the world. It contains those profound words:

"I believe in the Holy Ghost, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints."

I put the question to you, this afternoon: Do you believe in the Holy Ghost, the holy catholic church, the communion of the saints? It is easy to say that we do. It is easy to repeat those words. But do our actions, and do our churches convey that we actually believe in the holy catholic church, and the communion of the saints?

To keep my thoughts in order, this afternoon, I want to bring us back to the word, '*The Church*'. What does it mean?

1. Firstly, to speak of the English word, '*The church*' and its root.
2. Then secondly, to notice the word that is used in scripture for, '*The church*'.

And upon those two things, to hang all that I desire to lay before you this afternoon.

1. *The English word – 'church'.*

Every time we speak of, '*The church*', what are we saying? Where does the word come from? If you look the word up in the dictionary and trace it back to its roots, you will find that it comes from the Greek word ('kuriakos', κυριακός) which simply means, 'The Lord's'. It is *his* possession. Every time, therefore, we speak of the church, we are talking about the Lord's property. God's portion. That which belongs to Jesus Christ, and to no one else.

Do we have a right sense of what that means – '*The church*'? It means that we are confessing that we are God's – that we are Jesus Christ's. And that is what the Word of God says: "And ye are Christ's; and

Christ is God's" (1 Corinthians 3:23). "For all things are yours" ... "all are yours; And ye are Christ's; and Christ is God's." That is the meaning of the word, 'church'.

Although we find the Greek word in scripture from which the word church is derived, it is never used in Scripture to speak of the church. It is used concerning the Lord's Table. It is *his* table. It is used concerning the Lord's Day – it is *his* day. Do we have a real sense of that fact, when we come to the Lord's Table, as a church, that we approach to *his* table – not to man's table – not to the pastor's table – not to the deacon's table – not even to the church's table – it is *his* table, the Lord's table. And as we are gathered together as a church – we are not a church that belongs to men. We should not be followers of men. We should not be conformed to what man thinks, not even your pastor. But the church is the Lord's. It is his possession.

And that is the fundamental point that we want to come to, this afternoon: the church is the possession of Jesus Christ. Therefore, every time we speak of the church – every time you may say that "I am a member of *the* church" – every time we may speak about our churches – to remind us of whose we are, and whom we serve (Acts 27:23). Because, if we have that first and foremost in our minds, first and foremost in our hearts, then I believe many other things will follow on and fall into their correct place. "... Ye are not your own" says the Apostle, "... ye are bought with a price" (1 Corinthians 6:20). That is what the word, 'The church' means – "... ye are not your own" ... "For ye are bought with a price".

Fundamentally, we do not *choose* to become members of the church. We may speak about applying for church membership, and it is right that all things within the church are done decently and in order, and in that sense, it is right that an application is made to the church. But ultimately, that is not how we are *made* members of this church. Jesus said, "Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit" (John 15:16). That is how church members are made. That choice of God – electing love in eternity past, as he separated *his* church to himself. He said, "... they shall be mine" (Malachi 3:17) – they "... are mine" (John 17:9). And as Jesus Christ took that portion for himself, as he came into this world for them, and suffered, bled and died for them – and as the Holy Spirit now constrains them by his grace, as he draws them and brings them into that church, feelingly and knowingly within their soul's experience, he enables them to say, "I am not my own. I am bought with a price".

The world do not want this! We see it in society, that they do not want to belong to anything that has control over them. They want some control. And how often it is in the church – the emphasis is put on democracy – "I want a say in the church!" – "I want to be able to have some control!" But, friends, has grace brought you to that place where you are enabled, by grace and grace alone, to fall into the hands of the Living God? It is no longer what *you* want. It is, "What wilt thou have me to do?" And I often remind my people at home, that is the voice of grace speaking there. The first sound of grace in the heart of the Apostle Paul, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" (Acts 9:6) He realised he was no longer his own. He was bought with a price. He had been brought into that church by grace. He was the Lord's. He was no longer a free man, in that sense. He says he was born a free citizen of the Roman Empire – and he was. But when it came to the things of grace, he was *not* a free man. He was a soul in Christ. He was bought with a price. He was not his own. Therefore, his cry was, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?".

Now we just want to bring forth three practical points from the meaning of the word, 'church':

i) If it means, 'The Lord's **portion**', it reminds us that it is not man's name that is at stake when it comes to the church. It is Jesus Christ's. We are his portion. We belong to him. Therefore, if we walk

unworthily – if there is trouble in the church because of us – the dishonour is not on our name, but on Jesus Christ. Just as children, if they disobey and if they are unruly, they bring dishonour on their parents. So, if we as members of the church of Christ are found erring, if we are found dividing the body, if we are the cause of dispeace, if we fail as a church to rightly exercise discipline, if we fail to walk according to the Word of God – it is not your name and my name that is at stake, but the name of Jesus Christ!

How great is the honour of the church! How great is his glory! Do we tremble when it comes to the church? A realisation of what the church is – it is the glory of Jesus Christ. It is Jesus's name that is at stake in *all* matters concerning the church! I believe if we rightly get a sense of that, will it not make us walk carefully, humbly with our God, and in the fear of the Lord? The Apostle says, "For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's." We are his church. We are his possession – "therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit" and in *everything* we do, as members of that church. Not just when we come together for worship. church membership is not just something that concerns our assembling together on the Lord's Days. It is every moment of our lives. O to live to the honour and the glory of our Head, Jesus Christ, who has bought us with a price!

ii) *If the church is Christ's possession, it is not the church that sets the standards. It is not man that sets the rules – but Jesus Christ.* We have already said that grace in the Apostle Paul brought him to say, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" Preaching recently on Naaman, I was very struck in that account how Naaman begins with, "Behold, I thought ..." (2 Kings 5:11) But as grace worked in his heart, Naaman had to lose *his* thoughts, and he had to become submissive to the will of God. That is what grace does – and grace alone!

But it is a searching question in my pastorate – it is a searching question in my life, as a church member – how often has it been, "I thought..." and "I think..." – what I think is best – pragmatism! Or tradition – what has always been done. But it is not tradition that sets the standards. It is not the church Fathers that set the standards. It is Jesus Christ, who owns the church, who has purchased the church with his own blood. "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?"

Is this the voice that is heard at your church meetings: "Lord, what wilt thou have us to do?" "What is the Lord's will here?" It concerns the way that we worship. Those of us who are the Lord's servants, it concerns the way we preach. It concerns the way we live, as members of that church. Everything should be brought back to the Word of God. That is the standard. That is the standard that God has given us in *his* church – that we should know how to live, and how to walk before him as perfect.

It is a solemn thing, the spirit we find in the world today, as though the Word of God no longer speaks to us. "Times have changed!" "The Word of God is old!" – It is the spirit of the world. The spirit of the world has got into so many churches. Friends, has it come in amongst us? – It says, "... therefore, we need something more than the Word of God. We need our own reason. We need to make up our own minds about these things!" No! The church is Christ's. It is not man that sets the standard, but the Head of the Church. O to be seeking our standard at the hand of the Head of the Church, and at him alone – in his Word.

iii) *But then, friends, what comfort! What a mercy it is – we belong to him!* So often it is in life, that where there is responsibility there is also comfort given with it – in equal quantity. We belong to him! He will keep! He will support! And he will, at last, glorify! None of the righteous shall ever be lost. "... no man is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand" (John 10:29).

None shall pluck thee

From the Strength of Israel's hands.

(J. Kent, *Gadsby's Hymns* 766)

No! Goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our life: and we will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever (Psalm 23:6).

Does that word ever administer comfort to you when you feel your insufficiency, your felt unworthiness to be a member of the church? But that word conveys this: you are bought with a price. "Precious in the sight of the LORD ..." (Psalms 116:15). Bound up in that prayer, "Father, I will that they also, whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am" (John 17:24).

I keep having to go back to it, but when I was first diagnosed with cancer, the opening question of the Heidelberg Catechism was made such a blessing to me:

Q1. What is thy only comfort in life and in death?

A. That I with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong unto my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ; who, with his precious blood, hath fully satisfied for all my sins, and delivered me from all the power of the devil; and so preserves me that without the will of my heavenly Father, not a hair can fall from my head. Yea, that all things must be subservient to my salvation, and therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me sincerely willing and ready henceforth to live unto him.

That is true, friends, it is the *only* comfort in life and death! "Ye are not your own." "Ye are bought with a price." "And ye are Christ's; and Christ is God's." Therefore, all things are yours. Not a hair can fall to the ground. Nothing can come to pass by chance in the church, and in the life of the members of his church – he holds them in his hands. They are his. Eternally his. And that is a comfort.

We cannot have the comfort without the responsibility. We must be seeking to live to his honour and his glory. But what a comfort to uphold us. As the weight of what it means to be a church member may sometimes seem to crush us – "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" "Lord, how can I go and preach?" "How can I walk out this path that thou hast placed me in, in the church?" But here is the comfort: We are his! We are bought with a price! He will give grace sufficient. He will uphold. And he has promised, at last to bring us to glory, to give a place to us on his throne, and a crown upon our head. "And they shall be mine, saith the LORD of hosts, in that day when I make up my jewels" (Malachi 3:17). Who does he speak of? His church. "And they shall be mine". There is the word, "church" – "they shall be mine". The church – his jewels. Jewels in his crown. A diadem in the hand of our God (Isaiah 62:3). What a comfort!

This is the fullness of what the church confesses when it says, "I believe in the holy catholic church". The one true church. The church invisible. The church in every place, and in every generation from the beginning of the world even until now. That number which no man can number saved – that "great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues" (Revelation 7:9). That is what the word "catholic" there means. It does not speak of the Roman Catholic church, but it speaks of the one true church which is universal, in every place and in every age – holy!

The church is holy! As Paul writes so beautifully there, in exhorting husbands to love their wives: "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; *but that it should be holy and without blemish*" (Ephesians 5:25).

We, the church militant, are a work in progress. That is the end of the work of Christ in his church – “holy and without blemish”. “We believe in the holy catholic church”. What is it saying?

- We believe that God, in eternity past, has elected a number which no man can number to be his portion. “This people have I formed for myself; they shall shew forth my praise” (Isaiah 43:21).
- We are confessing that Jesus Christ came into this world to purchase them, and to redeem them by his own precious blood.
- We are confessing that the Holy Spirit regenerates them and keeps them. “Who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (1 Peter 1:5).
- And we are confessing that at last we shall be brought forth “holy and without blemish”.

“We believe in the holy catholic church.”

Do we believe in the holy catholic church? If we do, then we must come back to those three points:

- i) Are we mindful of the fact that the glory of the church is not man’s, but it is the glory of God?
- ii) Are we remembering that it is not man that sets the standards, but God?
- iii) Are we resting alone upon the comfort that that truth brings?

That at last – “... every knee should bow ... and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father”. (Philippians 2:10)

## 2. *The word that is used in scripture for, ‘The church’.*

But then, friends, we want to move on to take another viewpoint of the church. We want to come to the word the scripture does use almost universally in the New Testament, and that is the word, ‘ekklēsia’ (ἐκκλησία) which we find has come across into English in the word, ‘Ecclesiastical’ – the things that pertain to the church. But in the Greek, that word could be literally summed up as ‘Out gathered’. That is what the word means – out gathered – gathered out of. It is translated in the Authorised Version 115 times as ‘church’. But three times it is translated as, ‘assembling’. And that, perhaps, is nearest to the way the Greek literature uses it. That word means, ‘an assembly’ – ‘a gathering together’. That is what the word, ‘church’, as we find it in the New Testament, means. Those who the Lord has brought together. Those who he has drawn out of this world. His portion. He has come into this world, as the hymn says,

From heaven he came and sought us

(S. J. Stone, “*The Church’s One Foundation*”)

From heaven he came to die and to save that church. And that is the work of Jesus Christ in the church, as prosecuted by his Executor, the Holy Spirit, to seek and save the lost. He, “came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (Luke 5:32). To seek and save the lost. To gather them to himself, that where he is, there they might be in eternity to come. And that is, really, the meaning that is conveyed in scripture in the New Testament by the word, ‘church’ – the out gathered. Those who are gathered to Jesus.

I do not want, this afternoon, to force the meaning of the word, but I want to just base my remarks on that. I am not speaking as a linguist, I am going beyond the scope of language. I want to come to what

the Holy Scriptures say about the church, but to hang it upon the meaning of the church – the out gathered.

i) *The calling out*. Firstly, this speaks of this calling out – out gathering. We do not bring ourselves into the church. We have to be drawn. We have to be gathered out of. We speak about a “call by grace”. That is what the church wants to hear when it receives a new member. “How were you called by grace?” What is it asking? What is the evidence in your life that you have been out gathered, and that you have been brought into this church, that you have been gathered by the operations of the Holy Spirit – called by Jesus Christ? As he says to a soul, in grace, “Arise and follow me” – “Leave all and follow me” – “... come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you” (2 Corinthians 6:17).

This is the whole work of grace in the church. It speaks of the whole work of sanctification. The whole work of grace in the life of the believer is this gathering out of – churching. We speak about churching people – about disciplining them – about disciplining them. And that is the instruction that is given to the church in the great commission: “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost” (Matthew 28:19). But they are not the end product when they are baptized. I fear sometimes we forget that. They are not the end product! Many wrote to me when I was baptized, “It is only the beginning.” Friends, *it is only the beginning!* Jesus Christ continues, “Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you” (v20) – that is the life of a church member.

We need to be churching. We need to be disciplined. We need to be drawn more and more away from self, and more and more away from this world – out gathered. It is a lifetime process, until at last we hear that voice from heaven, “Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away” (Song of Solomon 2:13). “Arise, leave this world for the last time. Leave the body of sin and death to come away.” And at last to be out gathered into that glorious church triumphant in that resurrection day, “... when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality” (1 Corinthians 15:54) and although “... it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him” (1 John 3:2). The whole of the life of the Lord’s people is churching – is out gathering – it is drawing us out and separating us.

Have you got that evidence, this afternoon, that you are a member of this church, because you feel the *need* of this out gathering? And because you can look at your life, and you can look back and say, “While I am not what I *would* be – I am not what I once *was!*” There has been some *drawing* work. There has been some *gathering* work. There has been some *separating* work. There has been some *sifting*. And you need more of it! And you will need it. You will feel your need of it, even in the hour and article of death. But O to believe that in death we will leave this world forever, for that place where we shall ...

... never, never sin;  
There, from the rivers of his grace,  
Drink endless pleasures in.

(I. Watts, *Gadsby's Hymns* 770)

This ‘calling out’ speaks of sanctification. And that is the work which we have already quoted in Ephesians, that Paul speaks of – to sanctify them. That is the work of Jesus Christ in his church.

Now, we want to give a few practical lessons from this:

The church should be visibly separated from the world. Not by walls. We do gather in the place where we are appointed to gather together. But that is not the separation that is spoken of here. It is to be

separated in our life and witness. We need to remember that today! The world clings hard to us. I do not say that it clings harder to us than it has done in the past. David said, "My soul cleaveth unto the dust: quicken thou me" (Psalm 119:25). He felt the need of this churching work. But, friends, there *should* be that separation.

Can we tell church members from the world? Are we separated, walking worthy of this calling of being a church member? Do people know by our life and witness, our glorifying of God in our body and spirit, that we are bought with a price, we are not our own, but that we are truly separated members of his church? It is a searching question! Can I put the question to you, this afternoon, do you *want* to show you are separated?

That is the point of the ordinance of baptism – the Lord's supper – as the church is separated from the world, visibly! We need the separation in our life. But has it brought a desire in your life that you might show that separation, by taking up your cross, despising the shame, and going the way that Jesus has gone? That is the way the church is visibly separated. The visible church is separated by the water of baptism. And O the separation that speaks of! Life and death! You know, they are two things that cannot be mixed – life and death! You cannot mix life and death. We speak about people being 'half dead'. But you cannot be half dead! You are either alive or you are dead. You cannot mix those two things. That is the separation that baptism speaks of. And that is the separation which Christ makes his church – He separates them. And what he separates, is eternally separated. Do we desire that that separation might be seen – that it might be seen clearly? Do we desire that we might be numbered amongst the Lord's people – the 'called out', the 'separated' – and numbered with Jesus Christ?

Then we are also taught in the New Testament that this is the end of the ministry. If you asked, "What is the purpose of the ministry in the church?" The Apostle Paul tells us, the purpose of the ministry is separation. He tells us in Ephesians chapter 4, that Jesus Christ, having "ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men" ... "he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers". Why? "For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ: From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted" ... "maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love."

It speaks of the work of Jesus Christ in his church – to separate us – to unite us in one. That is the work of the ministry. There are those of us who have to preach the gospel, and we have to prove that this is not always obtained in the ways that we think it. Carnal reason says, "Well, I will separate by preaching the law. I will separate by preaching standards." But what is it that separates us? Jesus Christ and him crucified. It is there, as Isaac Watts puts it:

Then I am dead to all the globe,  
And all the globe is dead to me.

(*"When I survey the wondrous cross"*)

It is a sight of Jesus Christ and him crucified, that separates, and makes us willing to leave all and to follow him. That is the preaching we need in the church. "But we preach Christ crucified" (1 Corinthians 1:23). And where that is the preaching, we will find the church *is* separated. The church is sanctified. Those who are brought to rest alone upon Jesus Christ. O that the ministry amongst us might be of that sanctifying kind, and might be of that separating kind – the preaching of *Jesus only!*

If you ever find a book that belonged to Francis Covell, you will not find his signature in the front of it, but you will find the couplet of the hymn:

None but Jesus,  
Can do helpless sinners good.

(J. Hart, *"Come, ye sinners, poor and wretched"*)

Every book he owned he wrote that in the front of it. Those of us who have to labour tomorrow in the Lord's Word, how we need to be reminded of that constantly: "None but Jesus, can do helpless sinners good". O that we may be enabled to preach him better.

As Charles Wesley puts it:

Happy, if with my latest breath  
I may but gasp His Name,  
preach Him to all, and cry in death,  
"Behold, behold the Lamb!"

(*"Jesus, the Name high over all"*)

ii) *The gathering.* We want to come to a second aspect of this. We have spoken of the word for the church meaning 'calling out', but this 'calling out' is calling to a focal point. It is gathering together. It is uniting together. It is bringing to Jesus. And that is where we find the New Testament translating this word as 'assembly'. The assembling of the Lord's people together. It is the work of grace. As we read of it in the Psalms: "God setteth the solitary in families" (68:6). That is a description of what grace does. How it makes the church. He, "setteth the solitary in families". He calls his people to himself. He says, "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

Where is Jesus today on this earth? He is in the hearts of his people. "Christ liveth in me" (Galatians 2:20) says the Apostle Paul. Christ who dwells in us. Christ formed in us. "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27).

This is an evidence that we have been called out, when we find a drawing to the Lord's people. Why do we find a drawing to the Lord's people? What is it that unites the Lord's people together? It is Christ in us. It is the deep answering to deep. Where Christ is found in one, we find there is a knitting together, a drawing together. The Lord's people are united because we are drawn to Christ. And, as we see Christ in one another, as we are brought to own that Christ is in them – we find union with them. We walk together in love. Do you know that drawing to the Lord's people? Is it your great concern:

With them numbered may I be,  
Now and in eternity?

(J. Humphreys, *"Blessed are the sons of God"*)

Is it not one of the earliest signs of grace? Dear Mr Fearing, in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, didn't feel that he had much to say, but he liked good conversation. What was it that drew him? Christ. Christ, in the conversation. Christ, in the hearts of his people. And he desired that union and communion with Christ. Therefore, he must be where Christ is – seeking that union with his people.

Christ is found in the midst of the church. "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:20). A great deep! But the Lord has promised that when his people gather together he will be with them. God never leaves his people and he is everywhere – we do not deny, this afternoon, the omnipresence of God. But his special presence is promised to the gathering together of his people. Gathering together, today, in the church is at a low ebb. How many 'private Christians' you come across. People who are willing to live on their own, and not gather with the Lord's people. They listen in to services all over the place. They have lost this gathering. It must



bring the more searching question: Have they got Christ? Are they really being gathered? Where Christ is formed in us, I believe we will know that gathering. We will know that desire to be numbered among the Lord's people – to be found amongst them. Grace is a wonderful thing!

I would not speak to the condemnation of any, this afternoon, but it often struck me that sometimes it seems to be the weakest, the frailest, and the most elderly that push on out to the services to be gathered with the Lord's people. And what is it that pushes them to come to the Lord's house? Grace! They want to be where the Lord's people are. They want to be where Jesus Christ is found. Friends, if we know more of that:

Give me Christ, or else I die

(W. Hammond, *Gadsby's Hymns* 737)

– will it not cause us to force through all to be found where Jesus is? O that we knew, more often, "The Master is come, and calleth for thee" (John 11:28). He has come. Do you desire to be where he is found? Draw us, the spouse says, "... we will run after thee" (Song of Solomon 1:4). That is an experience known by the church. We have to leave all and follow him, to be found where Jesus is.

Therefore, the church involves gathering. It involves the gathering together. That is the basis of the local church – the basis of our independent churches – where the Lord gathers his people together, to be found together regularly. And his presence in the midst of them! Gathering is essential to the church. If we cease gathering, we cease to be a church – we cease to be a local church.

And that brings a searching question: What is required, to be a church? I mention it with diffidence, this afternoon. I know they were better days when Mr Popham made these statements, but if you search through the Gospel Standard during Mr Popham's editorship, I believe you will find on two occasions he said there was a minimum number of members required for a church. I think I am right in saying, that he said there were six, because church discipline is essential. And if you follow the pattern for church discipline, in Matthew chapter 18, you find you need the accused; you need the accuser; you need a witness; you need a church to hear them (which must be at least two members in order to come to a decision); and he said, you need an under-shepherd or an elder set over them to announce the decision of the church.

Many of our churches come below that. Many of them teeter on the brink of that. Is it a burden to us? How easily we are brought down. We get used to declining numbers. But, friends, does it exercise us? The doctrine of the church – does it bring us to long that we might see the Lord yet working to gather in, to join, to add to our numbers, that we might be found a true church to his honour and his glory. I say it in love, that these things might exercise the causes of truth here, this afternoon. And especially those churches which are well blessed – to remember in prayer the little churches, and to pray that the Lord will be building them up, that he would yet be prospering his gospel to that end, the out gathering – the in gathering – of precious souls.

iii) **The uniting.** But when there is a gathering together, Jesus Christ unites the church. He is the Head and we are the body. That speaks of union – total union. If you have a medical disorder where one limb begins acting against the rest of your body, or your brain becomes disordered from your body – the signals are broken – it leads to confusion in the body. The body begins to fail. So it is in the church. We are branches of the same Vine. Where Jesus gathers his people together, he gathers them together as one. He makes them one. One heart. One mind. One voice. "... the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3).

Do you prize the unity of the church? Where will it bring you? Trembling lest *you* should be the jarring note in the church meeting. Trembling lest *you* should be the cause of disunity. Friends, what a high bar there should be for breaking the unity of the church! I do not feel we understand this today. If you want to read more about it (it is not an easy read) but James Durham, the Scottish Puritan, wrote 'The Dying Man's Testament to the church of Scotland', a book on the sin of schism. That is something we do not hear much mentioned today from the pulpit. Something which Mr Popham mentions in his sermons, and Mr John Gosden, but not many since – the sin of schism. It is gone, and what do we find? There is schism in the body. church members count it lightly to divide over matters, and to have differences of opinion in the church. But, "My brethren, these things ought not so to be" (James 3:10). Divisions over the colour of carpet, or colour of paint which solemnly get out of hand and become things which divide the church! Divisions over personalities. Divisions because of a lack of love in the body. These are things which should not divide the church. They break the unity!

They cast dishonour on thy Lord,  
And contradict his gracious word.

(J. Newton, *Gadsby's Hymns* 961)

What should you risk the unity of the body for? I am not saying, this afternoon, that we should be as some preach, "We should all be love, and lovers of peace, and therefore we just give up. We do not make a stand, we just let everything go. We let the majority always have the say!" But, I am certain of this, you will only risk dividing the church over *matters of truth*! And then it will be with fear and trembling! The unity of the body is *so* precious! We do not prize it until the devil gets in and breaks that unity. Are you mourning, this afternoon, over the breaking of the unity? "My brethren, these things ought not so to be".

What a mercy the Head of the Church is able to unite, and able to bring back. He is able to make all of one heart, one mind and one voice. And what a beautiful thing it is when the Lord does. "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! It is like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron's beard: that went down to the skirts of his garments; As the dew of Hermon" ... "even life for evermore" (Psalm 133). He unites the church. Is the unity of the church a great concern to us?

iv) *The fellowship*. But then, friends, when we are united in the church, it will lead to fellowship with one another. The Apostles' Creed puts those things together.

"I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church," and "the communion of saints,"

They cannot be divided. The church *is* and *rests upon* the communion of the saints. The church is not a preaching station. It is not just about preaching. We have those who seem to think that the pastoral office is just about preaching. Not about shepherding! They do not want visiting. They do not want the church having anything to do with their lives. They think they just come on the Lord's Day and listen to the preaching, and that is what the church is about! No! It is *every* moment of our lives. Being a member of the church is about twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week – every day of our life. We should be living as members of the church, united together as one. It is not a school. It is a body – a living body. The body of Christ.

And that comes back to this: it is about communication. The Apostle says, "... to communicate forget not" (Hebrews 13:16). That is not just about the pulpit communicating with the pew. It is about the pew communicating with the pulpit, and the pew communicating with one another. Not just drifting in and out of services. The church is not just about service times. It is about every day of your life, if you are a member of that church.

Do you pray for the church? Do you pray for one another in the church? Do you exhort one another? Do you pray for one another when problems arise? I found myself saying to somebody recently, who was pouring out a problem about a church member, and I said, "Can I ask you, when did you last pray for them?" You know, friends, they went silent! If it had been me, I cannot cast any stones, because I fear I would have had to go silent too! The church should be found praying for one another, exhorting one another.

So often the problems get out of hand. People sit on their problems for a long time, until matters come to a head, and great trouble divides the church. Why? Because they did not exhort one another. A member saw the beginnings of the problem. They saw a member starting to err, in its very beginning, and they kept silent and failed to pray for them. And now the matter has grown, and it has become a great thing and it is dividing the church. Where is the sin? I venture, that, at least in equal measure, the sin is with the church member who did not pray. The sin is with the church member who saw the beginning of the slide and did not exhort, and did not provoke to good works.

This is what the church is called to: to communicate with one another, and to communicate to the throne of grace. To walk together in love and bear one another's burdens. What grace it needs! "And who is sufficient for these things?" (2 Corinthians 2:16) The highest calling you can ever have is to be a member of the church! Who is sufficient? What a mercy the Head of the Church gives grace sufficient to walk worthy – "worthy of this calling" (2 Thessalonians 1:1). Love to one another will breed faithfulness. "Then they that feared the LORD spake often one to another" (They walked together in love.) "... And they shall be mine, saith the LORD of hosts, in that day when I make up my jewels (Malachi 3:16). In your church, is there that walking together in love, and that unity? (I do not cast any stones, this afternoon. I must examine my own church.)

We live in altered days. I think I could probably draw a line around Galeed in Brighton where most of the early congregation lived. Certainly, the seven first deacons, you could have almost thrown a stone from the chapel to each one of their houses. They lived together as a community. They were the butcher; the baker; the candlestick maker. They tripped in and out of one another's shops and houses. You read their diaries – they spent time together. They visited one another. They talked together. They didn't just turn up ten minutes before the service and sit in silence in the pews, and then disappear straight afterwards not knowing what was going on in one another's lives, and not knowing what burdens they were bearing, and not knowing what sins they were falling into. They walked together. Modern technology has a lot to answer for, undoubtedly. I can remember my Grandmother speaking of walking to chapel as a child among the Lord's people. The conversation those children heard, as they walked behind their parents on the way to the House of God! The union and communion – it is gone!

But is this the reason why the church is found in such a low place? Does it concern us? Is it something we need to ask that the Lord would restore? The barriers! How many barriers there are! Time; busyness of life; family; distance from the House of God. All these things call into question the way we live today. There were those in the past who believed that they should be able to walk from where they lived to the House of God. That was why, undoubtedly, in Sussex, you could go through village after village where there used to be a chapel. When I used to drive from Maidstone preaching, around Lamberhurst, there was Pell Green; Shovers Green; Broad Oak ... one after another, almost every village you drove through, there was a chapel. They lived as a community. They lived together. They prayed over one another. They exhorted one another. They were to the honour and the glory of God. God had gathered them into such a place. Today, what a difference! What a scattering! Where is the community in the church? What a solemn state we are in! O that the Lord would return.

v) *The naming*. But then, friends, if you look up that word, 'ekklēsia' in the Greek Lexicon, you will find one other meaning which I wish to come to. That is, 'to give a name to'. The Lord gathers his people to himself. He gathers his church, and he gives a name to us. And what a name he gives us! "Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name" ... And as some of the Commentators tell us, the name that he has called us by is that: ... "thou art mine" (Isaiah 43:1).

That is the name that he calls the church: 'The church'. He claims it as his portion: "Thou art mine". What a gathering together. A desire to be numbered among that people, to be gathered together – "Thou art mine". He puts the Holy Ghost within us. We become the temple of the Holy Ghost (1 Corinthians 6:19). It is a high privilege.

Unworthy dwelling! glorious guest!

(A. Steele, *Gadsby's Hymns* 1078)

We will always be surprised at the work of grace in us, when we rightly have a sense of it. "And ye are Christ's; and Christ is God's". "For all things are yours". It comes back to the same comfort. Where would we be without this comfort? All our failings as a church. All our backslidings. The separation. The sin. The worldliness. But nothing can separate us from Christ. That is where our hope, this afternoon, must be. The only comfort in life and in death – you are not your own, but Jesus owns us. "I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine." That is the glory of the church. That is the hope of the church.

Are you a member of the church, this afternoon? Do you prize church membership? The glory of grace – that he should have put his name upon you, and said, "Thou art mine". Are there any here that are asking, and seeking earnestly at the throne of grace, that this privilege might be yours? Asking him to put you among the children? Friends, you may feel that it is an impossibility. God echoes it: "How shall I put thee among the children ...?" (Jeremiah 3:19). It is not upon the grounds of *our* desert. It is not upon the grounds of *our* worthiness. It is not upon the grounds of what *we* can do. No! It is all upon the grounds of *his* free grace. "And the grace of our Lord was exceeding abundant with faith and love which is in Christ Jesus. This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief" (1 Timothy 1:14).

The description given to the church in the Word of God: "This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them" (Luke 15:2). "... a friend of publicans and sinners" (Luke 7:34). "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:32). It is to such that he gives this glorious title, "Thou art mine". It is such that he takes to be his jewels – to be his peculiar people – to be his special treasure – to be his church – his crown in glory! O to be numbered among them!

Do we believe, this afternoon, in the holy catholic church? Flowing from that, do we believe in the communion of the saints? Do we know anything of this gathering out? And of the gathering together? You see, friends, this is so counter-cultural. We often speak in our churches about worldliness. And how do we assess worldliness? Whether you have got a television, or go to the cinema, what newspaper you read, and all those kinds of things. But you know, the spirit of the world today is 'individualism'. It is the big 'I'. It is what pride encourages. To express yourself – and not care what other people think. That is the spirit of the world. And that spirit has crept into the church of Christ. It is the spirit of worldliness within the church. It has broken the communion of the church. We no longer care for one another. We no longer walk together. We are disjointed. When it comes to church meetings, it is "What I want!" – "What I think is best!" The big 'I' keeps creeping in. It is the spirit of the world. O that the Lord might be sanctifying us. Washing us. Purifying us to himself. Taking away

that spirit from within his church that he might be uniting us together as one. That we should be found of one heart, one mind and one voice, walking together in love.

### 3. **Denominationalism.**

Now, in closing, I just want to come to, what we may call, 'denominationalism'. We must be clear, that scripture knows nothing of denominations. But I fall so easily into using that word. Mr Popham, in common with many past leaders in our churches, asserted very clearly that we are not a denomination, but then promptly used the word to describe the association of our churches together! I believe in independent churches. It is the doctrine that we have been speaking of. God gathering his people together in a locality. Drawing them together for fellowship and communion with one another, and the Lord. But all the while the church has that broader meaning, "God's portion" – "The holy catholic church" – it will mean we cannot be true separatists. We cannot exist as a lone entity – a single church. There will be that concern over other churches – other gatherings of the Lord's people. There will be that desire to walk together in love. And that is what our Baptist forebears so beautifully put in the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith. And if I may say, one weakness, which is often not spoken about, in the Gospel Standard Articles, is that there is no article on the church. (You hear people say that there is no article on providence and no article on creation, but you rarely hear anyone say that there is no article on the church.) But the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith says:

"As each church, and all the members of it, are bound to pray continually for the good and prosperity of all the churches of Christ in all places, and upon all occasions, to further it, everyone within the bounds of their places and callings, in the exercise of their gifts and graces. So the churches when planted by the providence of God, so as they may enjoy opportunity and advantage for it, ought to hold communion among themselves for their peace, increase of love, and mutual edification.

In cases of difficulties or differences, either in point of doctrine or administration, wherein either the churches in general are concerned, or any one church in their peace, union and edification, or any member or members of any one church are injured in or by any proceedings, in censures not agreeable to truth and order, it is according to the mind of Christ, that many churches holding communion together, do by their messengers meet to consider and give their advice in or about the matter in difference, to be reported to all the churches concerned.

Howbeit these messengers assembled are not entrusted by any church power properly so called, or with any jurisdiction over the churches themselves, to exercise any censures either over any churches or persons, or to impose their determination on the churches or officers."

And I believe that if you spoke to those who hold office amongst us, as churches, and to those who originated the Gospel Standard Trust, and the Gospel Standard Societies, they would have told you that this was what they were seeking to walk out in the churches. It is a blessed thing!

I remember reading, as a student, the 1902 Cunningham Lectures on the 'Church and the Ministry in the Early Centuries', given by Thomas M. Lindsay, and the one thing that struck me when I got to the end was: this describes the Gospel Standard churches! Independent churches, but walking together in love. United concerning the care for the poor. That is a New Testament principle – independent churches, but they held collections for the poor of Jerusalem. The Gospel Standard Societies – the walking together of the churches in love to provide for the poor of the churches. That where one church is rich, that provision might be equalled out to the churches that have little to give. And, as they

walk together in love, to help one another in practical ways. The council at Jerusalem – as the independent churches came together, to help one another in questions that were difficult, to seek the mind of the Spirit, and to search the scriptures together. Is that not how our churches have walked in the better days in the past? O that we might be convinced of that scriptural principle again, and found walking together in love.

These two principles: we must hold to the local church, the local gathering, the gathered out, the gathered together in the local place – but we must also hold to the doctrine of the holy catholic church – one church – in all places, in all ages. And therefore, whilst we fiercely maintain our independency, as independent churches, we should walk together in love. We must support one another, provoke one another to good works, and rebuke one another faithfully.

O that we might see more of these things in our churches.

Return, O holy Dove! return,  
Sweet messenger of rest!

And that we may truly be enabled to say:

I hate the sins that made thee mourn,  
And drove thee from my breast.

(W. Cowper, *Gadsby's Hymns* 958)