



The Gospel Church

By

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THE GOSPEL CHURCH

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1. Its Constitution

In coming to a consideration of the constituents and order of a gospel church, let us distinctly observe the caution of an old divine, "Church order is not a lifeless machine to be moved and disposed by external rules without the Holy Spirit." Love of one blessed Saviour and Redeemer, submission under one sovereign Lord, acknowledged indebtedness to the God of all grace, gratitude to the blessed Holy Spirit, the only Quickener of dead sinners into eternal life, the only infallible Teacher and Comforter of the ignorant and the miserable – love to the triune Jehovah, begotten of His own love shed abroad in the heart – love, "the bond of perfectness," uniting true believers to each other and to their Lord, is the vital spring of all communion in the church (1 Thess. 3. 6-13; Col. 3. 14).

Although the enjoyment of fellowship in a "common salvation" does not depend upon organization, but upon the spiritual relationship living members of Christ have with each other, yet to assist the exercise of that fellowship and thus increase it, the blessed Head of the church has in gracious authority, wisdom and goodness, given regulations for her public worship and corporate life, witness, and communion, attaching many gracious promises to the due observance of this His appointed order. "There am I in the midst of you," is indeed a wonderful word. "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved." "As oft as ye eat this bread and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till He come." "Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world." "The gates of hell shall not prevail against it [His church]." "If ye love Me, keep My commandments, and I will pray the Father, and He shall give you another Comforter, that He may abide with you for ever."

What powerful encouragements to loving obedience are these and the many similar, rich, divine, gracious promises, directions and declarations! And what assemblies on earth can be compared with those where "Jesus holds His court"? If the Levitical dispensation demanded exact observance

of its multiplicity of ritual, shall we who under the gospel are blessed with the graciously simple, though solemnly significant, ordinances of Christ, be tardy in taking up His mild outward yoke? Do we, with some “chief rulers” who believed on Him, love the praise of men more than the praise of God, that we should not confess our faith in Christ’s name? See John 12. 42, 43.

We venture to submit that a gospel church depends for its conformation and order upon the same authority as for its institution. Did the existence of a visible church-state stand upon human authority in whole or in part, its constitution and order might warrantably be in part regulated by human convenience and determined by human wisdom. Such an institution would, however, lack spirituality, permanence, glory and use; it would neither be for the soul profit of man nor for the glory of God. Erroneous ideas of indiscriminate church organization have probably been productive of either presumption or neglect in many instances; this also is a fruitful root of superstition.

But if a gospel church-state rests entirely upon divine authority, the cause of its existence being the direct sanction of the Word of God, then its form of constitution must be founded upon, and can be ascertained from, an authority no less. Who but He who determined to have a visible church in the world, and who alone could produce its constituent material, possesses the prerogative of determining its form and government, with the laws of entering in and going out thereof? (Ezek. 43. 11, 12).

Recognition of this principle, and a consideration of the gracious divine purpose, use and end of gospel churches, is requisite to correct the prevailing disregard of church order observable on all hands. True, consideration should be given to those who, tender in the fear of God’s great name, tremble lest by observing outward things in religion, the comfort of inward peace and communion might be broken – lest formality should displace secret spiritual worship – lest a life of public profession being embarked upon, some foul fall (as witnessed in others) should reproach that Name held so holy and so dear. But a heart-felt persuasion of the fact that the dear Lord Jesus Himself did personally ordain an outward visible church-state for His own glory on the earth and the benefit of His humble followers, will go far in their hearts who love Him to dispel effectually any misgivings as to the propriety (not to say the necessity) of observing His order, and may be a corrective of neglect by awakening in the hearts of the Lord’s living family a serious consideration

as to their privilege and duty herein. And whereas a sense of weakness and liability to fall may properly occasion prayer for upholding grace, it is no excuse for disobedience. A better frame of spirit in obedience can hardly be found than, “Hold up my goings in Thy paths, that my footsteps slip not” (Psa. 17. 5).

Possibly one reason why comparatively few of the Lord’s people are found uniting together in scriptural church order may be that the ministry has largely failed to appreciate and set out before the people the importance, utility, glory, and the divine origin of a gospel church. We probably have insufficiently observed Christ’s word, “Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you” (Matt. 28. 20). Tremblingly we venture to make this submission, without in any sense preferring it before the painfully evident fact that the gospel, as to its efficacious power, is today largely withdrawn – the cause of all decays. One solemnly feels to need grace to “search and try” one’s own ways, and to turn again to the Lord, so that, if His gracious and merciful will, whatever provokes the blessed Spirit to withhold His unctuous power from the ministry, may be purged, and reviving grace bestowed. See Eph. 4. 30.

The distinction, albeit the connection, between the whole body of Christ – His complete invisible church, the complement of the elect, the “whole family in heaven and earth,” – and the manifested church on earth, must be observed. It is obvious that the latter can never embrace the completeness of the former nor partake of its perfection, since many who belong to Christ’s body never become members of visible churches, while some who join themselves to a local church have (alas!) no place in the true church of Christ, are not among the “living in Jerusalem.” Those who are foolish enough to be looking for perfection in Christ’s disciples (where it can never be found), may find in this imperfection and limitation of the gospel church-state, an excuse for neglect, in some cases for antagonism – an excuse which is at best very lame, and which it is feared often conceals a proud heart alienated from God’s right ways and truth.

Foremost in the inseparable connection between the perfect church of Christ and visible churches, thus distinguished, is the living Headship of Christ. In all things He is destined to have the pre-eminence (Col. 1. 18). Christ is not more truly the living eternal Head of the whole mystical church than He is the Head of the gospel church-state, and of every

individual gospel church on earth. For a church, as to its spiritual existence, ceases *to be*, when the Lord of life and glory departs from it, as its Head of influence and order. All activity within a professing church, not in strict accord with Christ's Word and not influenced by His Spirit, being not of faith, is a fruitful source of superstition, formality, innovation, and disorder: and death win mark the whole.

The connection and the distinction named are illustrated in that wonderful epistle of Paul to the Ephesians, where we read of the "church which is Christ's body, the fulness of Him that filleth all in all." Of this body Christ is "given to be the Head." So the whole church, comprising Jew and Gentile believers, with no distinction of nature or time, is said to be "reconciled unto God in one body by the cross." Again, we read of the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named." Also, "Even as the Lord nourisheth the church, for we are members of His body, of His flesh, and of His bones" (Eph. 1. 22, 23; 2. 13, 16; 3. 15; 5. 29, 30). In these passages, one indivisible, complete church appears to be indicated. But in chapter 2, Paul seems to distinguish the individual church of Ephesus: "In whom *ye are builded together* for an habitation of God through the Spirit."

The Epistle to the Colossians, while pointing out the Headship of Christ over the universal church (1. 18), specifies the *order* and stedfast faith of that particular church (2. 5). The cohesion and the distinction between the various churches of apostolic days is shown in Colossians 4. 16, where the apostle directs an interchange of their epistle with that of Laodicea.

The Headship of Christ with regard to public church order is again denoted in Eph. 4. 4-6: "One Lord (or Head), one faith, one baptism"; not baptismal regeneration, which does not exist in Scripture; nor the baptism of the Spirit – so essential – already named in verse 4; nor infant baptism, which cannot be an act of faith, and has no scriptural warrant; but one baptism to be observed as the sign of discipleship and the path of entrance into a gospel church – the baptism of believers on a profession of their faith.

A gospel church is, therefore, not *any* gathering of professors, nor even of believers, but the uniting together by mutual agreement, under the direction of the Spirit, of a number of penitent sinners, believers, similarly blessed, making an open profession of faith in and loving subjection to one Lord and Master, holding the same doctrines, and

regularly assembling together for public worship and the observance of the ordinances of Christ's institution – the ministry of the Word, baptism by immersion of every person admitted to membership, and the Lord's Supper. The object is :

i. Mutual edification in the most holy faith of the gospel, through communion in the Spirit of truth and love.

ii. A witness-bearing before the world to the truth, by union in love with one another, and separation from the world and its evils and errors: "Blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world; holding forth the Word of Life"; "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father which is in heaven" (Phil. 2. 15, 16; Matt. 5. 16). See also John 17. 16, 21-23; 1 John 2. 15; 4. 5, 6; 2 John 10, 11; 1 Peter 4. 4, 5; John 15. 19; 13. 35, etc.

The "seven golden candlesticks" of Revelation 1, which "are the seven churches," and Christ's presence in the midst of them as "One like unto the Son of man, clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about the paps with a golden girdle. His head and His hairs were white like wool, as white as snow; and His eyes as a flame of fire; and His feet like unto fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace; and His voice as the sound of many waters. Having in His right band seven stars; and out of His mouth went a sharp two-edged sword: and His countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength," and before whom John fell as dead – is a solemn representation of the sanctity of the gospel church state on earth.

Necessary for organic completeness, and definitely prescribed by the Lord, is the call and appointment from among themselves of officers for the ministry of the Word, the administration of the ordinances, the ordering of church discipline and regulating of the church polity according to such rules as may be mutually agreed on, according to the Scriptures. The question of the minimum number of members competent to form a church is (alas!) a very practical one today; it being rare to find in anyone locality more than a very few persons who give evidence of saving grace, and who being blessed with some gracious assurance of salvation are constrained by redeeming love to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh to fulfil the lusts thereof" (Rom. 13. 14), being humbly desirous of "walking in the ordinances of the Lord blameless" (Luke 1. 6).

Here perhaps it may not be improper to state our judgment concerning the “two or three” with whom as gathered together in His name, Christ so condescendingly promises to be present (Matt. 18. 20). Some have contended that this proves that so few a number as three, or even two, form a gospel church. Tertullian is said to have held that view. We desire tenderly to remember with affectionate consideration each individual child of God (to be the least of whom one would account an unspeakable mercy and honour), and to regard the smallest congregations of such humble souls who meet together in the Lord’s great and holy name; but practically considered and from the context of Matthew 18, it appears that Christ there referred more particularly to “two or three” of the members of a church gathered together for prayer over a supposed case of discipline in which it is assumed that the exhortation of the offender first by the offended brother, then by two or three other members of the church, and lastly by the whole church in that place convened for the purpose, had been unsuccessful in recovering the offender. Some have suggested against this interpretation on the ground that in all probability there was at that time no existing organized gospel church. To which it might be replied, Could not the infinitely wise and gracious Lord Jesus anticipate the formation of such a church to be composed of the disciples who had companied with the twelve since the baptism of John? Taking this supposed case, then, as a practical guide, it will be readily seen that for that procedure there would be required not less than, say, ten persons. And it is generally admitted that since Christ, as Head of His church, has given officers and prescribed church order and discipline in His visible churches, wherever it is His design to light and maintain a “candlestick” in a given locality, there will be a concurrence of His providence in gathering together a sufficient number of believers for the proper regulation of the worship and the business of the church. So that when the members dwindle to a number ineffectual to function as a church, there is solemn warning that the Lord may be about to remove His “candlestick” from that place – a sore judgment indeed, to avert which may the Holy Spirit make such a warning effectual to stir up wrestling prayer in the hearts of His afflicted people, thus threatened. See Rev. 2. 5.

Nor does this persuasion imply that the sovereign Lord of all is so confined to means and outward order that He cannot dispense with both, and bless Individuals irrespective of them (as indeed has often been the

case), when and where and how He will. But there is no instance in Holy Scripture, nor do we believe there has ever been in experience, of the blessing of God resting upon the *neglect* of the means of grace when provided and available. Rather, many favoured souls have attested the truth of the Scripture, “In keeping His commandments is great reward” (Psa. 19. 11; Jas. 1. 25). Divine approbation and the “answer of a good conscience” are not small favours.

It appears that the church at Ephesus had a very small beginning – twelve persons; at least, twelve *men* (Acts 19. 7). And if Lydia and her household, with the jailor and his household formed the nucleus of the Philippian church, as seems a fair inference (Acts 16) – and both grew into flourishing churches, remaining for more than a century – the Scripture caution may be applicable in this connection, “Who hath despised the day of small things?” (Zech. 4. 10).

Before leaving the consideration of the constitution of a gospel church (the question of officers and ordinances we propose to notice later), we might say that not only should persons admitted be such as bear an exemplary character and give clear evidence of being the subjects of saving grace, but also it is most needful that they should have attained at least in some degree to the knowledge of Christ and His great salvation, be possessed of a well-founded hope in the mercy of God, so as to be able humbly to say, “Come and hear, all ye that fear God, and I will declare what He hath done for my soul” (Psa. 66. 16). The sacred refreshing experienced and the union formed at such times by the relation of the Lord’s inward work in the soul, are cherished as among the very choicest ingredients of church life on earth. The good Lord in infinite mercy revive His work, and renew our days as of old!

It must ever be borne in mind that joining a gospel church is rather the beginning of public discipleship than an ultimate goal. Membership entails serious responsibilities as well as sacred privileges. There is required mutual concern and watchfulness, admonishing one another, provoking to love and good works, praying one for another, mutual confessing and forgiving faults; with practical assistance and sympathy in times of trouble, need and sorrow. Members who disregard these and other responsibilities, and who resent the insistence on them by others fail to sustain their membership properly; and therein manifest want of understanding in the true nature of church life, and in some cases, what is

more serious, lack of love. “Brethren, by love serve one another.” “Who is sufficient for these things?”

2. The Ordinances

The ordinances prescribed by Christ to be observed in the churches are (i) Baptism, and (ii) the communion of the body and the blood of the Lord, called the Lord’s Supper.

One of the greatest mysteries in practical religious life is the fact that many of the Lord’s own people have never believed in nor obeyed the ordinance which we as Strict Baptists consider essential to church membership – Believers’ Baptism. Perplexed as we may be over this mystery, and glad as we are to own and receive into *spiritual* fellowship several non-baptist believers, yet our rule of practice *in the churches* must be maintained inviolate, seeing it is derived from Holy Scripture. The example of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself (O wondrous condescension in God’s own Son!), the practice of the apostles, and the commission they received from their Lord and Master, are proofs sufficient that baptism as a divinely-given sign of discipleship is incumbent upon all who would be admitted to church membership and have thereby access to the solemn communion of the Lord’s Supper.

The manner of its administration among us (by immersion) is undoubtedly the manner of the apostles and of the ministers of the early churches, a profession of faith and a humble relation before the church of gracious experience preceding baptism. In Acts chapter 2 the three thousand who “gladly received the apostles’ word” (presumably making known that they had been so favoured) were thereupon baptized; after which it is said, “The Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.” “And they continued stedfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in *breaking of bread*, and in prayers.”

It is not evident that in the days of the apostles any persons were admitted to the church or received the Lord’s Supper unbaptized. The order of their commission: (i) “teach all nations” (ii) “baptizing them” (iii) “teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you”; and the divine promise: “Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world,” must ever be sufficient guidance and encouragement for the humble, loyal minister of Christ in this important matter.