

The Local Assembly – Some Positional Truths

1 Corinthians 3 and 12:27

We begin by noting an expression which occurs some 27 times in this epistle. It is the expression **ye are** - found 6 times in chapter three.¹ In some cases it is associated with the **spiritual condition** or *testimony* of the Corinthian assembly, for example – “*ye are yet carnal*” and “*ye are puffed up.*” In other cases it is associated with the **spiritual position** of the Corinthian assembly – what we know as *positional truth*. That is, truth that relates to the place or standing of an assembly in Christ before God.

The lesson from this corrective chapter and many like it in Scripture is that an assembly’s testimony must be judged in the light of its ordained place before God. *God* has determined what an assembly is. The local assembly after all is God’s assembly – His house (1Tim 3:15). Paul reminded the Corinthians of this explicitly in the opening addresses in his epistles to the Corinthians – “the church of God which is at Corinth” (1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 1:1).² The divine principle then is that an assembly in its testimony and conduct must act in accordance with God’s view of what an assembly is – the place to which Christ has brought it in the sight of God. And, that place is vitally associated with the assembly’s divinely ordained purpose. We are obliged to search God’s Word to ascertain what that place and purpose is.³ In all this we have a divine corporate *relationship* established with God, which bestows upon us a wonderful *corporate privilege* and a solemn *corporate responsibility* – all of which became shrouded and sullied by the wisdom of the world which was brought in at Corinth.

In the passages referred to above we have five aspects of what an assembly is in God’s sight and, we stress, they remain in place irrespective of time and the evolving ideas of man. Furthermore, they remain despite spiritual failure.⁴ It was indeed *because* of their spiritual failure that Paul through the Spirit of God reminds the Corinthian assembly that “ye are”:

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| 1. | God’s husbandry (3:9) | its <i>cultivation</i> |
| 2. | God’s building (3:9) | its <i>construction</i> |
| 3. | temple of God (3:16) | its <i>communion</i> |
| 4. | Christ’s (3:23) | its <i>confession</i> |
| 5. | body of Christ (12:27) | its <i>constitution</i> |

Ye are God’s husbandry

The local church at Corinth is God’s husbandry – meaning it is God’s tillage or His **cultivation**. We note the order in these verses. Paul planted and Apollos watered – but God gave the increase. The increase is of God because the cultivation is His work and His alone. This is a vital aspect of the local testimony. Before planting and watering by His appointed servants can take place, the field must be cultivated – and this is God’s sole prerogative. God chooses and cultivates a field for His testimony. It is as true today as it was in the OT. It is said concerning God’s redeemed earthly people, Israel, “There shall be a place which the LORD your God shall choose to cause His name to dwell there” (Deut 12:11). We have it today in regard to the local church comprising God’s redeemed heavenly people. It is God through His Spirit that chooses and cultivates a field for His testimony – His name. This truth was noted to Paul’s opening words to Corinth. “Unto the church of God

¹ It is not the collective “we are” which refers to the Church which is the Body of Christ. The expression “ye are” focuses on the local assembly.

² The expression “the church of God at Corinth,” means that the local church at Corinth was one of many “churches of God.” In 1 Cor 15:9, “the Church of God” as given by the context, refers to the Body of Christ; “For I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God [i.e., Christians everywhere].

³ We note here the same divine intent in regard to the tabernacle of the OT. It was “God’s house” and He determined its place and purpose.

⁴ A more detailed biblical account as to what constitutes a “church of God” is given in the article *Denominationalism – Is Christ Divided*, J W de SILVA 2009 [www.ribbonofblue.net]. It will explain why the assembly at Corinth was still a “church of God” despite its poor spiritual condition.

which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours" (1 Cor 1:2). And, when God chooses and cultivates a field He sends His servants to plant and to water. We learn from Acts 16 that both the choosing of the *field* and the *timing* of its cultivation belong to the Lord. Paul and his brethren were forbidden to preach the word in Asia (at that time) and were beckoned in a vision by a man from Macedonia to serve there.

Whatever esteem we have for those who planted and watered aforetime – as we surely do, an assembly must acknowledge in testimony that the honours belong to the Husbandman. It is the Husbandman that cultivates the field and "giveth the increase;" and that "neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth and that "he that planteth and he that watereth are one."

Ye are God's building

Paul now reminds the Corinthian assembly that they are not only God's cultivation but His **construction** – meaning that it is God who determines the pattern or *design* of the assembly. We refer of course not to a physical structure but a corporate spiritual construction comprising believers - living stones. The testimony must be in accordance with that corporate pattern. It was God who determined for His earthly people Israel, the physical pattern of the tabernacle of old – a building through its design was to serve His glory, not the glory of man. In that day it was the Ark of the Covenant that took centre place. The Ark was the reference for every divinely ordained spiritual principle and practice. Not Moses now, but another divinely commissioned wise master-builder – the apostle Paul laid the foundation, which is Christ who is typified by the Ark. The pattern of the local assembly must have Christ as its Centre. We see this in regard to rule. The local assembly is to be under the spiritual care of the under-shepherds – the elders, who have a direct responsibility to Christ who is the Chief Shepherd (1 Pet 5:4). In regard to its spiritual exercise, the believers in fellowship within an assembly are priests, who exercise their priesthood in the light of Christ's priesthood, the Great High Priest. The silence of the women and their head-covering along with the uncovered heads of the men bear testimony to the headship of Christ – who is the Head of the church.

It is here Paul brings in an explicit warning. "Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is" (v 13). The gold, it may be suggested, refers to the assembly's testimony relating to the divine and personal glories of the Man Christ Jesus; the silver would speak of the assembly's testimony to His redemptive glories – as the One who tasted death for every man; the precious stones would speak of the assembly's testimony to His glories in regard to His work for us as our Great High Priest and Advocate – the word "precious" meaning that which is bought at a high price.

The assembly at Corinth was building according to the wisdom and ways of the world. It was not here a matter of false doctrine, but of wood, hay and stubble – works that are of no value and do not edify – things of the flesh and the world. To keep up with the world is to be out of step with God! God's spiritual design for the local assembly is timeless – because He knows the end from the beginning. So Paul gives an exhortation and an encouragement to take care how we build. Our building into the assembly must be according to God's design, for there is a reward which we know will be bestowed at the judgment seat of Christ. The person whose works are as wood, hay and stubble like Lot of old shall be saved as of fire, but his works will be burned.

Ye are temple of God

It is "temple of God" and not "the temple of God."⁵ The word temple is *naos* – the inner sanctuary, the holiest of all wherein God came down to dwell in the OT. In that earlier economy God dwelt and communed with Israel from between the cherubim above the mercy seat. What a great privilege was bestowed upon the people of Israel. They were known as the people whose God dwelt and communed with them between the

⁵ Refer to the section on "body of Christ" below. Once Paul has established this truth he can *then* use the expression "the temple of God" as a general truth (v 17).

cherubims. But Israel is not, was not and will never be the temple of God. This blessing is reserved for the local church – for God now dwells in temples not made with hands. What abounding grace! On the one hand Paul says of the Corinthians – “not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble” (1 Cor 1:26). Yet, here is the marvellous honour bestowed upon the lowliest among men to which they, as the redeemed of Christ, must aspire in their corporate testimony - “ye are the temple of God.”

The more we come to appreciate this inestimable blessing, the greater our responsibility in bearing testimony to it. It is a testimony that is marked by a pervading reverence, where tribute is paid to the abiding truth that “**holiness** becometh the house of the Lord.” Recall Jacob at Bethel who found the house of God to be a “terrible place” – meaning a place in which he feared, should he be irreverent in his words or ways. And so Paul gives a solemn warning in verse 17. “If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy [corrupt]; for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are.” This principle of holiness is seen in the Lord overturning the tables and expelling the merchandisers who had made the house of God a den of thieves.

The thought here is of the holiness of the local assembly – God’s sanctuary. It is not here simply a matter of “moral piety,” but of **doctrinal purity**. Holiness within the sanctuary of God is a doctrinal matter, the reason being that doctrine defines holiness. The sons of Aaron through strange doctrine introduced strange fire before the Lord and defiled the sanctuary. Judgment fell upon them. Paul warns, that if any man defile the temple God [by bringing in false doctrine] God will destroy him. The sense here is to corrupt him as wine is corrupted when it is corked – rendered useless.

Ye are Christ’s

The glorious thought here is that the local assembly is owned by Christ – the One who purchased it. It is not owned by an organisation attributed to man. The local assembly in its testimony is to own allegiance to Christ and Christ alone. Sadly, the increasing testimony of many within the professing Church is to be known first as Baptists, Methodists, Anglicans and even Brethren. And such was the mindset of some at Corinth, for some said “I am of Paul!; and I of Apollos!; and I of Cephas! Another has well penned:

“Just think of heaven where divine unity reigns,
A gathering for parties, sects and names?
Ah! No! ‘twould dim the glory of that place,
‘Twould throw a cloud o’er every sacred face.
One name alone the heavenly hosts adore,
Nor is there space or room in heaven for more.
Jesus is there – His name alone is sung.
His blessed name – the theme of every tongue.
Jesus is there – no other name they know,
Why then should we hear of other names below?”

Ye are body of Christ

Paul does not say to the Corinthian assembly that “ye are *the* body of Christ,” because this would mean that they were the only local church and thereby encourage *exclusivism*. Nor does he say to the Corinthian assembly that “ye are *a* body of Christ.” This would mean that they were one of a number of “bodies” which would give rise to *denominationalism* and feed their divisive appetite – “I am of Paul; Apollos etc. The local assembly testimony must avoid both. The assembly is to testify to the truth of the **constitution** of the church - “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.” It was so for the first man and the old creation, for Adam said “this is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man” (Gen 2:23). It is true of the Second Man and the new creation. Hence, the assembly ought to testify to the truth that as saints of God we are members of *the* Body of Christ who are in fellowship locally (in this case at Corinth) owning Christ as Head.

Why these truths in testimony?

There is a lesson in asking why these particular truths concerning the local testimony are brought before the *Corinthian* assembly. For instance, we do not find them brought before the assembly at Ephesus. Ephesus at that time was spiritually robust and Paul sees them as *risen* in Christ and seated *in* Him in heaven. He can speak of their acceptance in the Beloved; of their spiritual blessings in Christ in heavenly places; of the grand

truth of the Church as the Bride of Christ; of the one new man in Christ. They, like the children of Israel under Joshua were redeemed. They had in type passed over the Red Sea into the wilderness. This is what redemption does – it makes the world a wilderness to the redeemed. They then crossed the river Jordan and were at Gilgal where the reproach of Egypt was rolled away. And, on the morrow they ate of the old corn of the land. It was the food for warfare, and so we get in Ephesians Christ “who led captivity captive,” and the practical advice to put on the whole armour of God. “For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places” (Eph 6).

Not so the Corinthians! They were redeemed indeed but spiritually they were in the wilderness. They could not eat of the old corn of the land which speaks of Christ *risen* and *gone up*. Rather, they had to feed on wilderness food – the manna – Christ *come down*. And so Paul brings before them Christ *come down* - our Passover “sacrificed for us,” and exhorts them to “keep the feast”, the feast of life with “the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth” (1 Cor 5:7,8). It follows that he determined to know nothing among them “save Jesus Christ and Him crucified.”

In Israel of old, the Ark contained in testimony the golden pot of manna and Aaron’s rod that budded. The first speaks of the food for the wilderness; the second speaks of food for warfare. Here then is the spiritual diet for the local assembly (and indeed every believer). We are to feed daily on the manna – on the glories of Christ come down as the living Bread from heaven, and, with circumcised hearts feeding on the old corn of the land – the harvested glories of a risen Christ gone up to heaven from whence we look for the Saviour.