

Stand Firm & Press On

**Cultivating a healthy, dynamic
and biblical relationship
between assemblies**

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FOREWORD TO ENGLISH EDITION

Fellowship among Christians is usually warm and stimulating, yet it is not always easy. How do hedgehogs keep warm during winter? If they get too close, they hurt each other. If they separate, they may freeze to death. Individually, as Christians, we sometimes face a similar dilemma. Collectively, as Christian assemblies, the choices may be even more complex. How should one assembly relate to other assemblies? I have become convinced that no Christian relationship, be it inter-personal or inter-assembly, can be healthy and edifying unless it is rooted and fed by the **grace of God**. Without a real experience of the grace of God, relationships become tools to force “my convictions” and to satisfy “my needs” - by manipulating others.

This paper was written in Spanish in response to a specific need among some assemblies here in Colombia. It was published in book form in June 2005. Since then, it has also circulated freely via internet. Judging by the reactions received from Spanish-speaking saints outside Colombia, it seems that it is of interest to a wider circle of believers. In December 2005, a French translation was made available. This also circulates freely on the internet. Some asked: “what about an English translation?” At last, here it is! What contribution could it make? It addresses some serious concerns in a simple (not simplistic) way. It is doctrinal, and yet very practical. It suggests a positive and workable way forward on inter-assembly relationships based on:

- (1) The apostolic teaching on the church, as found in the New Testament.
- (2) Patterns of inter-assembly dynamics recorded in Acts and the Epistles.
- (3) Examples of how the apostles dealt with a number of serious disorders among the early assemblies.

This translation follows very closely the original Spanish version (that is what translations are supposed to do!), but where I felt that adding a few more words would eliminate a possible ambiguity, I have done so.

Scripture quotations in the Spanish edition were taken from: “Versión Reina Valera 1960.” In this English translation, I have normally quoted from the New International Version (British edition). Sometimes I have quoted from Darby’s translation (DBY) when it was closer to the meaning of the Spanish version.

Before I wish you “happy reading,” perhaps I could thank Ian Mears (UK), Ray Irons (NZ) and Jaap Fijnvandraat jr. (NL) for their helpful contributions to this translation project. Their kind support is much appreciated. This does not imply that they agree with everything I have written here. They can speak for themselves! As author, and now as translator, I continue to take full responsibility for its content.

The prophet Nathan used the story of a rich man and a poor man to make King David aware of his own deficiency (2 Samuel 12). It is sometimes easier to be objective and open to learn while considering foreign problems. What you are about to read, is the fruit of a painful division between some lovely Christians here in Colombia. A deviant understanding of a doctrine can cause serious consequences. I do pray that the Lord may use some of these pages to stimulate you to take a fresh look at Scriptures and your own particular situation - that we may become active agents in stimulating healthy, dynamic and biblical inter-assembly relationships.

Philip Nunn
Armenia, Colombia
August 2006

FOREWORD TO SPANISH EDITION

During these last two or three years, a very sad situation has developed between some believers and some assemblies here in Colombia, assemblies that identify their meeting rooms with “Centro Bíblico” (Bible Centre), “Casa Evangélica” (Evangelical House), “Gracia y Verdad” (Grace and Truth) or simply “Reuniones Cristianas” (Christian Meetings). This process of separation that is taking place is painful for all involved. Different letters, accusations and apparently contradictory reports have contributed to the confusion. But the Lord’s promise remains: “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him” (Romans 8:28). I am personally convinced that the Lord is using these difficult times to move us away from dependence on men and on our human organization of assemblies (Jeremiah 17:5-10) and teach us to depend more on the Lord Himself as Head of the church.

I have felt led, and I believe that this leading is from the Lord, to write this paper in order to encourage a deeper study in the Holy Scriptures, especially on some themes that have generated controversy among the Brethren. My dear brother, my dear sister, we should not follow personalities (1 Corinthians 1:11-12). We must develop firm **biblical convictions**, and must learn to live these convictions with grace and without fear of possible criticism (2 Timothy 3:10-17).

Confusion breeds insecurity and fear, and fear paralyzes. Even the apostle Peter “began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group” (Galatians 2:11-13). As we understand the principles of God’s Word and as we walk day by day in communion with the Lord Jesus, we shall experience the joy and shall find the strength to **stand firm** against worldly pressures, popular trends and also against religious systems with their written and unwritten rules (Galatians 1:10; Ephesians 6:6). Even more, if the hand of the Lord is with us (Acts 11:21), we shall be able to **press on** and progress amid diverse difficulties (Acts 20:28-32; 2 Timothy 4:5; 1 Peter 5:8-10). From its very beginning, the church has had to grow within the context of attacks, internal tensions and difficulties. Christ has not changed neither has His purpose changed: “I will build my church” (Matthew 16:18). Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, may we **stand firm and press on!**

My thanks go to those brothers who gave their suggestions and corrections to the various drafts of this paper. With happiness and gratitude I continue to receive the observations from readers like you. This is not a “final product.” I present it as a contribution to the study process, very conscious both that “When words are many, sin is not absent” and that “in the multitude of counsellors there is safety” (Proverbs 10:19; 11:14 DBY). You may send me your thoughts to the address of **Ediciones Manatíal** in Colombia. We all want to grow - daily allowing the Word of God to mould our thinking and way of life.

It is my prayer that these thoughts may be used by the Lord to revive discouraged believers, to guide confused believers, to inspire new believers, to strengthen active believers, and to alert those saints in congregations that have not experienced these painful events.

Philip Nunn
Armenia, Colombia
June 2005

STRUCTURE AND ATTITUDE

This paper is divided in three parts.

Section A contains some personal details followed by a rough sketch of historical events that help understand how certain teachings and procedures have worked in the past. It is important to understand the current situation in Colombia within its worldwide historical context.

Section B is more doctrinal. We explore four important questions that have caused serious disagreements among the Brethren. I hope that every brother and sister will be able to study and benefit from these two sections.

Section C contains a collection of short studies that support and supplement the themes addressed in Section B. These studies may be considered a little deeper. They may be especially useful to those believers who teach the Word of God, but I expect they will also be a blessing to every brother and sister who desires to dig deeper.

May the Lord allow us to have something of the **nobility** and the **seriousness** of the believers at Berea, who received “the word with all readiness of mind, **daily searching the scriptures** if these things were so” (Acts 17:11 DBY). May I encourage you, dear reader, to take this opportunity to make a serious effort to deepen your understanding of these matters, spurred on by the words of Peter and Jude: “Always be **prepared** to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:15), and “exhorting *you* to **contend** earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints” (Judas 3 DBY).

But let us remember that to “be prepared” does not mean “arm yourselves with verses to win arguments,” and that “contend earnestly for the faith” does not justify the practice of distorting what others have said or written, neither speaking evil of those with whom we disagree. “For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does” (2 Corinthians 10: 3). Studies, exchanges and debates among believers with different perspectives can be very edifying, but it is very important that love and respect prevail (Romans 15:14). In heaven we shall spend an eternity with those saints with whom we have disagreements. Let us be careful, brothers and sisters, not to embitter the atmosphere before we get there! [Translator’s note: this last sentence is a Latin-American light-hearted motivational comment and should not be considered as loaded with doctrinal significance!].

“But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed... do not be frightened.

But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.

But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously... may be ashamed of their slander.”

1 Peter 3:14-17.

“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again... You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love... So I say, live by the Spirit... But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law.”

Galatians 5:1, 13, 16, 18.

“Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ... that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel, without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you.”

Philippians 1:27-28.

CONTENTS

Section A: Events in their historic context

- A1. Some personal notes
- A2. Origin of the Brethren
- A3. Deviations of the Brethren
- A4. How do assemblies divide?
- A5. What should we do in Colombia?

Section B: Clarity on doctrinal matters

- B1. What type of relation should exist between assemblies?
- B2. How far do assembly decisions reach?
- B3. Who can break bread?
- B4. How should we protect the integrity of an assembly?
- Conclusion

Section C: Notes, studies and outlines

- C1. Learning from the Old Testament
- C2. Leaven contaminates
- C3. What is the Lord's Table?
- C4. What is and what isn't the Body of Christ?
- C5. Binding decisions in heaven
- C6. Independent, interdependent or integrated
- C7. Love, Unity, Holiness and Separation
- C8. Procedures of grace in dealing with irregularities
 - 1. CORINTH - A Carnal Assembly
 - 2. CRETE - Deficient Assemblies
 - 3. ANTIOCH, SYRIA AND CILICIA - Attacked Assemblies
 - 4. GALATIA – Contaminated Assemblies
 - 5. JERUSALEM - An Assembly with Legalisms
 - 6. GAIUS AND DIOTREPES - An Independent Assembly
 - 7. ASIA - Assemblies with Bad Doctrines

SECTION A

Events in their historic context

A1. Some personal notes

My parents, Peter and Annemarie Nunn, arrived in Colombia in 1968. From the beginning, their vision has been to share the gospel of salvation with adults, young people and children; to help them grow in their faith and encourage them to meet together and form Christian assemblies. What kind of assemblies? - assemblies that resemble as much as possible those assemblies described in the New Testament: brothers and sisters who in simplicity gather around the Lord Jesus Christ, using the Bible as the only source of authority.

After living one year in Cali and two years in Ibagué, they moved to Pereira to be able to provide more intensive support to the work of the Lord that was developing in that region (North of the Cauca valley and in the coffee plantation area). My brothers and sisters Andrew, John, Wendy and Chela, and I gave our lives to the Lord Jesus. During those years in Pereira, we were all baptised and began to express fellowship with the saints in that assembly. Helping our parents, we learned to serve our Lord and Saviour in camp work, Vacation Bible Schools for children, youth meetings, evangelistic meetings using Christian films, and other events.

In passing, here is a practical lesson: Parents that sacrificially serve the Lord and involve their children in such work protect them from many dangers. In the Scriptures we find inspirational examples like that of “the household of Stephanas... they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints” (1 Corinthians 16:15). Could it be that Noah built that great ark alone? I suspect that he formed a working team with his three sons (Genesis 6 and 7). As we share the Lord’s call with our children and involve them, where possible, in the Lord’s work, we encourage the next generation. We also protect them from being absorbed by this perverse world system.

A2. Origin of the Brethren

After finishing high school in 1979, I travelled to London, England, to continue with university studies. The change was rough, as Colombian saints who have recently travelled to Europe well know. I noticed that the assemblies in Europe were quite different from those that we knew in Colombia. Some of the differences were caused by traditions and cultural preferences; other differences were doctrinal. My greatest surprise was to discover that we formed part of a group of assemblies that were called “the Brethren.” I learnt that this movement called the Brethren began between 1820 and 1830, when many believers in different countries felt called by the Lord to leave their denominations and their man-made religious structures to gather in simplicity around the Lord Jesus Christ (Matthew 18:20). Since they did not desire to

form a new denomination, they were given the neutral name of Brethren. Reading this cheered me up, realising that we shared that common vision to form New Testament style assemblies.

During those 13 years in Europe, I finished my studies, started working as a statistician, got married, and served the Lord among some assemblies in London. In 1992 I returned to Colombia. Some of those “little strange things” I observed among the assemblies of the Brethren frustrated me; others I learned to live with, and others I discovered later on. In 2001, when the winds of division were blowing strong among assemblies in Europe, I returned with my family to London for one year. Much of this year was devoted to study and travelling - attending seven conferences and visiting some 50 assemblies spread across seven countries. I read several books on the history of the Brethren and enjoyed conversations with many dear brothers and sisters, listening to their concerns about the state of the assemblies. I can now affirm with certainty that the current course of the Brethren assemblies has definitely moved away from its original vision – and seriously so!

A3. Deviations of the Brethren

Sadly, we have moved away from the simple biblical model. Let us consider some very worrying developments:

(1) New hierarchy: During the early days of the Brethren movement, the fellowship and interaction among assemblies was usually sweet and constructive. Bible teachers wrote their books and arranged visiting tours in different regions and countries, teaching the Word and giving advice. Little by little, some of these teachers, some of them without being aware of it, began to exercise an authority **over** a circle of assemblies. With a genuine desire to obey instructions like “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Ephesians 5:21), saints and assemblies began to accept the advice given by these brothers, not so much because they were convinced of its biblical base, but out of a desire to avoid problems. In time, advice took the character of instructions. Many, afraid of being excluded and trying to avoid confrontation, gave in to pressures of strong-willed brothers. Even in Colombia, where the work of the Lord among assemblies is not very old, we can notice how this informal hierarchy takes shape. The situation on what is called the “mission field” is even more complex because of pressures that can be exerted through the handling of moneys coming from abroad.

With a true desire to follow apostolic instructions to be of one mind (1 Corinthians 1:10), many assemblies moved away from their initial simple dependence on the Lord in taking decisions, and turned their eyes towards other assemblies: What do other assemblies do? What do the other assemblies allow? Some keen assemblies, and some not so willing, began to respond to an informal national and international leadership. These “more important brothers” encouraged a degree of unity or uniformity by exercising pressure, by “helping” assemblies to take the right decisions, and by signing letters on behalf of one or more assemblies. It is very easy to fall into this error. We should all be on our guard (1 Corinthians 10:12). Although some would

not admit it, this behaviour gave origin to an informal hierarchy that exercised authority over assemblies and its local leadership.

(2) New denomination: With the noble desire to foment fellowship among believers in the many new assemblies, some compiled and distributed lists of assemblies with their addresses and meeting times. Quite naturally, regional lists were put together to form national lists. When these national lists were united, they formed an international directory. Now, if these lists are used to encourage visitation between assemblies known to be sound in doctrine and practice, this would be excellent! But sadly some began to use these lists to define an exclusive circle of fellowship; that is, they would only receive visitors from assemblies whose address was on these lists - on the assumption that the listed assemblies were the only assemblies sound in doctrine and practice. With the honourable desire to protect the integrity of the assemblies, some brothers developed and promoted a doctrine known to some as "positional defilement," based on the contamination laws given by God to the nation of Israel in the Old Testament. This new teaching encouraged the sectarian practice of a "closed communion." Although the Brethren never wanted to create a new denomination, some of the networks of assemblies behave very much like a denomination; even more, some demonstrate behavioural patterns of a sect.

(3) New doctrines: When the Bible does not give clear and direct instructions on some matter. Bible teachers usually suggest a scriptural application or make a reasonable recommendation. At conferences or at "elder's retreats" we may reach agreements. The great danger is that in time, these "recommendations" and "agreements" become "established customs" and the next easy step is that they will be treated as doctrines (Colossians 2:20-23). The same happened with the Pharisees and scribes: "their teachings are but rules taught by men. You... are holding on to the traditions of men" (Mark 7:7-8). Doctrines of men can be very good teachings, but they will always be "doctrines of men". What differentiates the doctrine of God from the doctrine of men is its origin. If the doctrine, teaching or procedure is outlined clearly in Scripture, it is a doctrine of God. Otherwise it is a doctrine of man. Only the doctrine of God has authority over all the assemblies.

(4) New authority: Some brothers began to teach that every decision taken by an assembly in the name of Christ is bound in heaven, and therefore all assemblies in the world must automatically accept it. We can find Brethren writings that teach that the assembly actions carried out in the name of Christ are "authoritative and obligatory" on all assemblies. Any assembly that does not submit at first request is classified as rebellious or independent, and unless it soon agrees, it is eliminated from the list of assemblies. But no brother and no assembly has autonomous authority. That is, elders and assemblies exercise divine authority **only** while they are subject to the Word of God (Galatians 2:5). In the Brethren history books, we can find some sad examples of strange or doubtful assembly decisions that, when they tried to impose them on all the assemblies, led to division. We will study the issue of "assembly decisions" later on.

(5) New divisions: In early days, many Christians rejected the numerous denominational divisions among the people of God and gathered simply as believers in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. But since 1848, the Brethren movement has

been weakened and debilitated by repeated division. Every time there is a serious local disagreement, we turn it into a national or even international problem. Every division is vigorously justified with doctrinal arguments, but, in the majority of the cases, it is very evident that the real reason is the flesh, the lack of grace, inflexibility, impatience, personal interests and power struggles between brothers of influence (James 3:16). It is for a good reason that the Scripture says, "What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?" (James 4:1). The New Testament assemblies also had their disorders. There were serious differences among assemblies of Jewish and Gentile origin. The apostolic answer to these problems was not to recommend division. With love and patience they sought to correct and "straighten out" that which was deficient (Titus 1:5).

A4. How do assemblies divide?

Many new brothers have never experienced, nor even seen, the division of an assembly. It is instructive to understand the dynamics of a division. In section B we shall study the doctrines involved. Let us first consider how Satan manages to divide a congregation and how this division spreads to other assemblies. Just as every fire begins with a spark, so every division requires an "event," something that causes deep offence or serious discomfort. This "event" can be doctrinal. For example, a brother can preach something incorrect, or there can be a disagreement on how to deal with a case of discipline in the assembly. Sometimes the "event" can be a violation of a local custom. For example some in the assembly want to praise the Lord using musical instruments, other consider this incorrect. Some brothers preach without using a tie, others feel offended. Sometimes the "event" is simply a carnal conflict between two people or two families in the assembly.

Division of one assembly

In order to justify a local division, the "event" must be explained as a serious doctrinal error, something that is incompatible with the holiness of God. Soon words like iniquity and perverse are used. To strengthen the justification, sad events of the past are brought to light - any family or personal imprudence that may lend support to the division. At this stage, believers behave very much like politicians on the election trail! Many brothers and sisters do not understand the arguments and simply affirm "I am with brother Frank" and "I support brother Smith" (1 Corinthians 1:12). Soon some will take disciplinary action against the others, or some will simply leave the assembly. If the resulting groups are sufficiently large, two assemblies will be formed. Let us look at an example from our history that I read some years ago:

What caused the death of the horse? Many years ago in the south of England, one brother sold a horse to another brother. After about two weeks, the horse died. The brother who bought the horse was convinced that the animal was sick when he bought it, and that the seller knew this. The brother who bought the horse complained to the brother who sold it to him, and matters got worse. The buyer accused the seller of being a liar and a deceiver. The seller accused the buyer of being a slanderer. The families of these two brothers took sides in the matter, and soon the assembly was divided and **two assemblies** were formed: one assembly in fellowship with the seller protesting against the immoral behaviour of the buyer, and

the other assembly in fellowship with the buyer protesting against the immoral behaviour of the seller. Both assemblies, applying 1 Corinthians 5, “**passed judgment** on the one who did this” (v.3) and then **put out of their fellowship** the man who did this (v.2). Saints in both assemblies now felt satisfied because they could celebrate the Lord’s Supper, “not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth” (v.8).

Dear brother, dear sister, notice how easy it is to divide an assembly. If we are not careful, you and I can also be used by the wicked one to promote divisions on matters such as dress code, where and when to use musical instruments, whether we can clap when we sing, how to deal with a divorced believer, how to run training programs, how to administer assembly discipline, when and how to restore a repentant believer, etc. We can now understand why the apostle Paul, before pleading with the Ephesians saints to “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace”, first pleaded with them to “Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love” (Ephesians 4:1-3).

Division of many assemblies

The division process we have described unfortunately also occurs in a variety of Christian congregations. But among the Brethren something strange usually happens after the local division has taken place. One of the resulting assemblies writes a letter to other assemblies in the region or country informing them of their “disciplinary action” against those who formed the other assembly. They consider that this “disciplinary action” is bound in heaven and therefore it has universal authority and its acceptance must be immediate and obligatory by all assemblies. At this stage, the validity of the “event” that caused the division is not important - it no longer matters what caused the death of the horse. Assemblies nationally and sometimes internationally are now judged and divided on whether they submit or not to the “disciplinary action.” Those who submit (even though they may consider the disciplinary action unjustifiable) call themselves “faithful” and those who don’t submit are accused of “denying the unity of the Body of Christ” and are called “rebellious,” “free,” “open” or “independent,” and are excluded from their “circle of fellowship.” Is this the Scriptural way to resolve disagreements? I do not believe so!

After a division among Brethren, each resulting group is identified by the name of the assembly that made the doubtful decision, or by the name of one of their influential brothers. Today, throughout the world, there exist a variety of networks of assemblies, some of open (or free) inclination and some of exclusive (or closed) inclination. What adds to the confusion is that some of the groups of assemblies that are called “open” behave in a very exclusive way, and some groups of assemblies that are called “exclusive” can be very liberal. In the 1960’s, the Census Office of the United States of America made use of ten distinct classifications of Brethren networks in the US. This classification shows that at that time in North America, the government identified ten Brethren groups, each sufficiently large, sufficiently different and sufficiently separate. Since 1960, there have been some interesting reconciliations involving some of these groups but there have also been new large-scale divisions.

A5. What should we do in Colombia?

The group of assemblies with whom we have expressed fellowship for many years is one of the various networks with exclusive tendencies identified as the Kelly-Lowe-Continental-Glanton or KLCG Brethren. This name reflects the fact that this group was the union of several groups of assemblies that had separated in the past at different points in time and for different reasons. The last reunion or reconciliation occurred in 1974 with the set of Glanton assemblies.

Personally, I have never considered myself part of the KLCG Brethren. I consider myself a Christian. I have never promoted the KLCG Brethren, neither inside nor outside Colombia. Neither do I sense a desire to belong to “another group.” We encourage the formation of assemblies following the simple pattern we find in the New Testament. Is that not good enough? Is it necessary to belong to one of the several networks of Brethren assemblies? As believers, we **belong** to the Lord Jesus Christ and **belong** to a unique group called the “household of faith” (Galatians 6:10 DBY), “God’s house” (1 Timothy 3:15 DBY) or the “body of Christ” (1 Corinthians 12:12-27).

Through the years, the numerous divisions among assemblies have weakened the Brethren movement. The many meetings, letters, confrontations, rumours and suspicions, wear down the enthusiasm and discredit the leadership within their congregations. Seeking to make decisions by **unanimity** (a system where a proposal is rejected if a single brother opposes it), makes it very difficult to agree on and implement necessary changes. This decision system allows for an assembly to be controlled by one or two stubborn brothers. These structural difficulties together with what some call “spiritual pride,” have contributed to the stagnation in most assemblies across Europe and North America. Although Brethren families are generally very healthy, very few new people join their assemblies. The last 50 years are marked by a decline in the number of assemblies. Many assembly meeting-rooms have closed, and this trend continues.

Faced with this serious concern, brothers and sisters abroad, especially the young people and the younger families, have become tired of these Brethren controversies or have concluded that their assembly has no viable future – and have left the Brethren assemblies.

What is happening abroad?

During the last ten years, the group of KLCG assemblies is dividing again. In recent years, in Colombia, we have been feeling the pressure to take sides in this division. Which was the “event” that initiated the division on this occasion? The situation has been complex, because assemblies in different countries have had different reasons to divide.

- (1) Some assemblies are changing, some in a good direction and some in a bad direction. This has caused serious concern among some other assemblies.

- (2) On the other hand, some brothers and assemblies have exercised excessive pressure to “close” the circle of fellowship in order to protect the assemblies from changes.
- (3) Other assemblies continue without changes, but have chosen not to sign letters and not to pronounce judgements over situations in other assemblies. In time, these assemblies are called “neutral” and are also excluded, accused of “tolerating evil”

The various rumours, exaggerations and slander have complicated matters.

What should we do in Colombia?

What options do we have? We can ignore the situation. We can divide among ourselves in line with our preferences or what we consider is most advantageous to us. We can bow our heads and submit to the external pressures. We can convince ourselves that we have always had all the truth and reject any type of change. But what is the Lord’s way for us in this confusing situation? Let us follow the psalmist’s advice: “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path” (Psalm 119:105). Let us look carefully **in the Word of God** for direction.

SECTION B

Clarity on doctrinal matters

Now I invite you to look carefully at four important questions that play a role in almost all divisions among the Brethren. The themes of disagreement that usually divide the Brethren assemblies are not related to the basis of our salvation, neither to the Person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ. We all accept the “sound doctrine” that the God revealed in Scripture in a Trinity, that salvation is by grace, that once saved we are always saved, that baptism is not necessary for salvation, that it is important to break bread regularly, etc. The large divisions among the Brethren are usually caused by disagreements about procedures within and between assemblies. If our desire is to embrace and practice the original doctrine “walking in truth, as we have received commandment from the Father” (2 John 4 DBY), we cannot simply try to remember how the assemblies in Colombia functioned 20 or 40 years ago. Neither is it a matter of studying the origins of the Brethren movement of some 180 years ago. Our current duty is to carefully study the New Testament to learn from it how the assemblies functioned about 2000 years ago. That is the original doctrine.

B1. What type of relation should exist between assemblies?

Summary: *An assembly should not exist in isolation or independent from other assemblies. The relationships between assemblies are channels through which God desires to send blessings. We should look for practical ways to help and strengthen one another, recognizing that each assembly is individually responsible before God for what happens in her midst.*

Our objective here is to understand, in the light of Scripture, how one assembly should relate to other assemblies. Does an assembly depend on other assemblies? Can one assembly act on behalf of another assembly? Does God consider an assembly responsible for a disorder in another assembly? **Where in the Bible** can we find teaching on the nature of inter-assembly relationships? Let us consider the different possible sources:

Source #1: The Old Testament

The advent of Jesus Christ, the Messiah, was widely prophesied in the Old Testament. But the formation and operation of church of Jesus Christ was not prophesied in the Old Testament. The church began on the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descended (Acts 2) and it is described as a “mystery” revealed in the New Testament (Ephesians 3:1-7). For this very reason, it is not correct to use instructions given to the nation of Israel and apply them to the church. The 12 tribes of Israel do not represent the assemblies. The laws about contamination and defilement were not given to instruct the church on how to administer “assembly discipline”. The **nation of Israel** and **church of Jesus Christ** are very different

entities in God's plans and administration. If we don't clearly differentiate them, we shall encounter serious problems of interpretation. Some of these problems and errors are explored in **Section C1**.

But we know that "**All Scripture** is God-breathed and is useful..." (2 Timothy 3:16). As Christians we should study and feed our souls also upon the Old Testament, "For as many things as have been written before have been written for our instruction" (Romans 15:4 DBY). From the Old Testament we have learned a great deal of what we know about the nature and character of God, moral principles, the seriousness of sin, the necessity of a blood sacrifice for sin, the nature and character of man, the creation of the world, the angelical world, and much more. But since the church is a "mystery," the church is something totally new revealed to the apostles in the New Testament, we must study this New Testament if we want to discover God's design for how an assembly should function and how one assembly should relate to another assembly.

Source #2: Figures or images of the Church

It is difficult to find direct teaching in the New Testament about the relationship between assemblies. God, in His wisdom, has chosen to use images, figures or illustrations to teach us much of what we know about the church. Let's briefly consider some of them: The **Bride of Christ** (this image speaks of purity, unique love, faithfulness and our destiny with Christ), the **Family of God** (this image speaks of our relationship with the Father and brotherly love among believers), the **House of God** (this image speaks of order, authority and the building process) and a **Flock** (this image speaks of the Shepherd's care). These images provide rich teaching about the nature of the church in its entirety and our responsibility as individuals - but these images do not provide light on how one assembly should relate to another assembly.

Another image of the church, a very interesting one and very much used in the New Testament, is that of the **Body of Christ**. Some believe that a grouping of assemblies should work together as a body, or that they should function together as representing the Body of Christ on earth. But if we look carefully at the Scriptures, we shall notice that the Body of Christ is not the collection of some assemblies, neither is it the collection of all the assemblies. **The Body of Christ is the collection of all believers as individuals**. Each saint, as a person, as a member of the Body, should be subject to Jesus Christ as Head. The image of the church as a Body teaches us how **believers** should relate one to another but doesn't teach us how the **assemblies** should relate one to another. **Section C4** contains a more detailed study on the Body of Christ.

Collective responsibility?

In the book of Revelation we find another image of the church: A **Cluster of Seven Lamps** (1:20). This is the only image of the church that clearly teaches something about the relationship between assemblies. We are explicitly told that "the seven lamps are seven assemblies" (1:20 DBY). In Revelation chapter two we learn that each golden lamp represented the collective testimony of an assembly or local church. Each assembly was responsible for maintaining its own testimony. The

brothers and sisters in the assembly at Ephesus were active but they had forsaken their first love. Jesus Christ exhorts this assembly to “repent, and do the first works: but if not, I am coming to thee, and I will remove thy lamp out of its place, except thou shalt repent” (2:5 DBY). It is clear that the Lord Jesus did not consider the assemblies in Smyrna and Pergamum responsible for the disorder in Ephesus. This image of the Cluster of Seven Lamps teaches us that each assembly is responsible to the Lord for what happens within her. No assembly is blamed for a defect in another assembly.

Administrative unity?

The image of the Cluster of Seven Lamps contains more teaching. Observe that this group of seven golden lamps is very different to the golden lamp used in the tabernacle. The lampstand or candlestick of the tabernacle also had seven lights, but it was built on a single base with seven arms (Exodus 37:17-24). It formed one physical unit. The lampstand in the tabernacle could be considered a figure of the unity of the people of Israel. This nation had one common administrative base. They functioned as a block. But the assemblies are represented by seven lamps that did not have a common base. What the assemblies had in common was Christ walking between them: “in the midst of the *seven* lamps *one* like *the* Son of man” (1:13 DBY). The presence of the Lord Jesus was the only factor that united these assemblies. If one tuning fork is used to tune 100 guitars, we shall find that each guitar will be in harmony with each one of the others. Similarly, if there are 100 assemblies, and each is subject to the headship of Christ who is among them, we shall discover that these assemblies will also be in harmony one with another. It was the person of Christ and not a degree of uniformity that united assemblies in the New Testament.

Source #3: Examples of dynamic relations between assemblies

In searching for teaching on how one assembly should relate to other assemblies, we have observed that such teaching cannot be found in the Old Testament. We have looked at the limited teaching supplied by the New Testament images which are used to describe the church. One other source of information is to consider the practical historical examples of inter-assembly dynamics. The Lord has preserved some useful examples of such interaction in the book of Acts and in the epistles. As the primitive church grew, new assemblies were formed, and we can observe with great interest how these assemblies began to relate one to another. **The Biblical evidence makes it undoubtedly clear that an assembly should not live and develop in isolation from other assemblies.** Quite the opposite! The only example in Scripture of an isolated independent assembly is that where Diotrephes dominated - and that was a defective assembly. The apostle John encourages us not to imitate this bad example (3 John 9-11).

As we observe the relationships between assemblies in the New Testament, we shall notice that the fellowship between believers from different assemblies was not something formal, but a dynamic relationship of life, something lived, a shared experience among brothers, sisters and assemblies. We shall notice that the relationship of one assembly to another assembly is not based on weakness but on practical mutual benefits. **The relations between assemblies are channels (imagine large pipes joining assemblies) through which God desires to send**

many blessings. Let us look at how these channels functioned in the New Testament.

One assembly helps in the formation of another assembly

The first assembly was the one at Jerusalem. Due to persecution, many believers dispersed and formed new assemblies in other parts. In Acts 11:19-30 we read of the early days of the assembly in Antioch. Brothers from the assembly at Jerusalem heard that something good was happening in Antioch and sent Barnabas to help and cooperate with the Lord's work there. Barnabas called Saul and together they worked for one year helping establish this new assembly. Later we read of economic hardship among the saints in Jerusalem and Judea. The assembly at Antioch now helps by sending gifts to Jerusalem. These are the first signs of dynamics between assemblies. Let us notice that there is no structure, there is no organisational necessity. These are simple and genuine expressions of brotherly love - real fellowship moved by the Holy Spirit. Here in Colombia we have had the joy of experiencing this: In 1997, when a small work began here in the city of Armenia, brothers and sisters from the assemblies at La Paila, Zarzal and Pereira visited and helped in the work until the new assembly was able to function alone. The assemblies at Bonafont, Florencia and Quinchía worked together helping in the formation of the assembly at Supía.

One assembly sponsors missionaries

In Acts 13:2 we read that Paul and Barnabas leave Antioch to evangelise, to gather believers together and to encourage the formation of new assemblies. Their vision was not to open branches of the Antioch assembly. They formed new assemblies, each with its own team of elders who were responsible to promote the local well-being (Acts 14:23). When Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch, they gave a report of what the Lord had done in other cities. The assembly at Antioch does not try to exercise authority; neither does it try to impose itself on these new assemblies. They do not refer to them as "our mission field" or "our assemblies" as if this new work of the Lord belonged to the assembly at Antioch. Here in Colombia, the assemblies at Manizales and El Playón begun in this way. Assemblies abroad have financed missionaries in Colombia for many years. Today we also rejoice in seeing Colombian missionary brothers being used by the Lord to start new work in different parts of the country.

Visits

The apostles and gifted brothers like Apollos visited and taught in different assemblies (Acts 18:22-27; 2 Corinthians 8:18). Teaching brothers and evangelists are gifts God has given for the benefit of the whole church. Every brother should have one assembly as his base, and should contribute seriously in that place. It is not healthy for anyone to spend all his time travelling and visiting without building up some Christian work locally. But we notice that occasional visits can be used by the Lord to enrich the spiritual life of the assemblies. Sometimes I hear the complaints by brothers and sisters from assemblies that receive very few visitors. They say that "the other assemblies have abandoned us!" Is this a valid complaint? I do not think so. Every assembly should grow and mature and learn to stand on its own feet. Visits are not a duty. They are not an obligation. They are a blessing. If your assembly desires to receive visitors, you should not remain passive. Be creative. Take the initiative.

Organise a mini-conference. Propose an evangelistic effort. Arrange a series of Bible studies... and invite brothers and sisters from other assemblies.

Hospitality

In the New Testament we notice that believers opened their homes offering hospitality to visiting brothers and sisters (Romans 16:1-2; Philippians 2:28-29; 3 John 5-6). So important was this feature, that “hospitable” was included in the list of requirements to be a bishop or overseer (1 Timothy 3:1-2). Some saints opened their homes for Christian meetings. Many assemblies began in houses (Colossians 4:15; Philemon 2). Assemblies that practice hospitality encourage visitors to feel welcome and at home – such visitors will want to return to that assembly. Here in Colombia, the practice of hospitality is very evident among those believers who live in farms - in the valleys of rivers Magdalena and Cauca, and in the Coffee plantation area. They give us all a good example of warm and generous hearts.

Letters and shared writings

Reading carefully, we notice that different writings circulated among assemblies. Some, like gospel accounts and apostolic letters, were circulated to correct, to instruct and to encourage the saints. These common writings and the process of moving them between assemblies encouraged bonds between such assemblies. Personal reference letters that recommended visiting teachers, thank-you letters, personal greetings and messages of encouragement also strengthened these relationships (Luke 1:1; 1 Corinthians 16:3; Galatians 1:1-3; Colossians 4:10-16; 2 Peter 3:1; 3 John 12).

Why use letters of recommendation? Basically to recommend a believer that sets off on a trip. If the assembly that receives the letter recognises the signatures and trusts them, they receive the visitor with joy. With so many thieves, beggars and swindlers travelling around in Colombia, we should encourage the use of these letters. But let us remember that an assembly is not a Public Notary office. If we decide not receive anybody who comes without such a letter, we have gone beyond Scripture which says that “some” need a letter of recommendation (2 Corinthians 3:1). In the event that there is no letter, a brief telephone call will clarify things. If two local believers can recommend the visitor verbally, that should be sufficient. When you visit a town where you are not known and have forgotten to take your letter of recommendation, do not avoid the assembly. Before you arrive, phone one of the elders and explain your situation or arrive at least some 15 minutes before the meeting to have time to talk and explain. These are just steps of normal courtesy.

To whom can we give a letter? A reference letter should be given to every person who asks for one. If the person is a believer with a good testimony and he expresses fellowship regularly in the assembly, the letter will make that clear and will request other assemblies to receive this believer in the Lord “in a way worthy of the saints” (Romans 16:1-2). But in other cases we can also write a letter. Some years ago, a “seeker” or Christian sympathiser (the son of a sister) asked for a letter because he was emigrating to Spain. We gave him a letter. This letter said that this young man visited our assembly and was in the process of seeking the Lord. We invited Christians in Spain to welcome this young man and continue to help him find salvation in Jesus Christ. The young man departed happily with his letter,

encouraged to seek the company of believers in Spain. Last year a believer moved to Armenia. He arrived at our assembly with a letter from his previous assembly. The letter said that this believer was “under church discipline” and described in a prudent way what had happened. They asked us to help in the restoration process. These letters are a real help in pastoral care and promote good relationships between assemblies.

Pray one for another

Brothers and sisters in the early church had large hearts that would embrace a wider circle than their local assembly. We notice that they exchanged information to be able to pray for each other (Colossians 4:7-9). In Colombia, for many years now, we circulate a small monthly magazine called “El Boletín” (the Bulletin). It is encouraging to read the reports and notes of encouragement sent by different assemblies. This exchange of information is part of this fellowship between assemblies. But let us never forget that the work of the Lord is much more extensive than what is reported in “El Boletín”. If we keep our eyes and ears open we shall become aware of many things the Lord is doing on this planet. We can then pray and intercede for all.

Material help

We notice that when saints in an assembly became aware of serious material needs in other assemblies, they collected and sent gifts to help and support (Acts 11:29-30; 2 Corinthians 8 and 9). God delights to see wide and generous hearts like His own. In Colombia we have seen united efforts between several assemblies, for example, jointly paying the rent of a meeting room for the new assembly in Anserma and the recent construction of a chapel for the assembly in Dosquebradas.

Logistics

There are certain events which are organised by believers from several assemblies that are very positive and constructive. We can have leading brother’s retreats (regional, national or international) to study the Word together and seek guidance on matters of mutual concern (Acts 15). We can have spiritual retreats for sisters, like those organised by sisters in Bucaramanga and Popayán. We can have marriage retreats, camps for children and young people, evangelistic campaigns, conferences for edification, longer training programmes and much more. Many of these events are the initiative of concerned saints from one or more assemblies - but they are frequently used by the Lord for the blessing of brothers and sisters in many assemblies.

B2. How far do assembly decisions reach?

Summary: *An assembly exercises legitimate authority while it is subject to the Holy Scriptures. Every decision taken by an assembly which is clearly supported by the Word of God should be accepted by all Christians and by every assembly. When an assembly decision does not have biblical backing, it simply does not have authority. When clarity is lacking, it is best to investigate. When peace is lacking, it is best to wait.*

In the same way as some differences can exist between good families, differences can also exist between good assemblies. Some of these differences may be seen between assemblies in the mountain areas and assemblies in the cities. Cultural differences between regions and differences in temperament of leading brothers affect the atmosphere and the judgements made by an assembly. Between countries the contrasts are even greater. Observing this reality, some questions come to mind: How do decisions and judgements made by one assembly affect other assemblies? For example, in some assemblies a believer is excluded from fellowship if he has a television in the house, or for not wearing a tie, or because the sister wears feminine trousers. Should these assembly decisions be binding on all assemblies? In some Brethren assemblies they baptise their babies, some accept the Catholic baptism as a valid baptism, some consider that to smoke or not to smoke is a personal matter. Should these judgements be binding on all assemblies? When two or more assemblies pronounce contradictory judgements, which of these judgements should the others submit to? Should we simply ignore some assembly judgements? This is the theme before us. As we start, we must first explore what are the responsibilities and what authority do assemblies have.

1. Authority and its limits

All human authority has its limits. The Colombian National Army has authority to move throughout all Colombia. But it has its limits: the Colombian army cannot set up road checks in other countries like Venezuela or Argentine. The Lord has given my wife and I authority over our four children. We decide in what school they study, at what time they should return home and with whom they can play. But this authority does not allow us to interfere in the decisions of other families. My brother Andrew and wife Marianne also have four children. If my wife and I become concerned about something in my brother's family, we can converse with them, advise them and pray for them. But the authority the Lord has given us does not extend to allow us to interfere in the internal decisions of their family. The situation is similar among assemblies.

God is the only One with unlimited authority

Christ is the only Head of the church. "And he is the head of the body, the church" (Colossians 1:18). Each assembly should learn to look collectively to the Lord Jesus and to seek His directions. The apostles of the Lord, like Paul and John, were given an authority above that of the local leadership (Acts 14:23; 3 John 10). But these men were given by God at the beginning to set the foundation (Ephesians 2:20). It would be incorrect for Christian workers or missionaries today to assume such

authority. For all assemblies in the world today, the only authority above their local team of elders is the Lord Jesus Himself.

The assembly has limited authority

The Lord Jesus, as maximum authority, has delegated His authority to a team of mature brothers in the local assembly. Their authority is strictly local. These brothers are referred to as bishops, overseers, leaders, shepherds, elders [English KJV translates “leaders” as “them that have the rule over you”] (Philippians 1:1; Hebrews 13:7, 17, 24). The Holy Spirit selects these men (Acts 20:28) and the congregation simply recognises them and stands behind them as they observe their personal and family life, their spiritual qualities and their work (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13). These men of God shepherd the congregation and take care of it, “not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock” (1 Peter 5:3). Good shepherds do not force their biblical understanding on the conscience of the assembly. They seek to guide the assembly and convince the believers that the proposed line of action agrees with the Word of God. These elders do not work in order to give account to a missionary, neither to a full time worker, neither to another assembly, neither to a national committee, neither to a foreign committee that financially helps in the work. The elders are accountable to Christ for the care of “God's flock that is under your care” (1 Peter 5:2; Hebrews 13:17).

2. Responsibility and its limits

There are several references in the Scriptures that make clear that an assembly should make judgments and determinations. An assembly should act with authority when a problem persists between individuals (Matthew 18:15-20) and when a brother or sister persist in immoral behaviour (1 Corinthians 5:1-13). It should also act with authority where a local brother or visitor teaches unsound doctrine or desires to promote division (Romans 16:17). Normally, the elders will study and investigate the case and then propose a way forward to the assembly. The ideal situation is that the whole assembly will support the proposed decision. For this to happen, it is important to explain carefully any point that causes controversy, and to have **patience** with one another. Observe that a necessary quality for a brother to be recognized as an elder or bishop is that “he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it” (Titus 1:9). [Translator’s note: the Spanish translation, like the English KJV, uses “convince” instead of “refute.”] The assembly is not a dictatorship of a few, but neither is it a democracy.

All legitimate authority has its limits. A citizen should obey the laws of **his** country; a worker should follow the orders **his** boss, a student should obey the instructions of **his** teacher. The government from Colombia has no authority in Spain. A senior boss in the TEXACO oil company has no authority over the employees of NESTLE. A teacher has no authority over the pupils of another school. As Christians, we live under several authorities. We should know them and respect them.

(a) The authority of God is the base of all legitimate authority. All legitimate authority is derived from God and therefore should be respected (Romans 13:1-2; Titus 3:1; 1 Peter 2:13; Jude 8). The leadership of your assembly can make a mistake. With a humble attitude, respect and patience, internal problems can be corrected and put in

line with the Word of God. Dear elder or leading brother, let us be careful with a personal pride that doesn't allow others to correct us. If we acknowledge we have made a mistake, we do not lose authority before the congregation. In fact it has the opposite effect. Our actions will teach the congregation that we must all bow to the truth and authority of the Word of God. Directives should only be rejected when they conflict directly the clear teachings of Scripture: "Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God" (Acts 4:19 and 5:29).

(b) The authority of elders is local. Each assembly has its own team of leaders or elders (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). Brothers and sisters should respect their local leadership. Within this local setting, "obey your leaders, and be submissive; for they watch over your souls as those that shall give account" (Hebrews 13:17 DBY). If the matter is serious in nature, and if after much prayer and dialogue the leadership does not clarify or rectify the situation, it may become necessary to leave that assembly (2 Timothy 2:20; Revelation 3:4).

But it is not correct for an elder to interfere in the decisions of another assembly. Fraternal love will encourage visitation, Bible based advice, and much prayer for the well-being of the other assembly. But no assembly has been given authority over another assembly. We must face the reality that some judgements will be correct in one location but not correct in another location. Elders should **not** run around trying to make their assembly judgements hold throughout the world. If we are the mistaken ones, we shall give account of this to the Lord. If they are the mistaken ones, they shall give account of this to the Lord. Local leaders have a clear responsibility: "shepherd the flock of God which *is* among you" (1 Peter 5:2 DBY). They shall give account to God for that flock (Hebrews 13:17).

(c) The Bible is basis of authority. This point is very important. Christian leaders should always be governed by the Word of God. As long as elders act in harmony with the Scriptures, their decisions will be backed by Divine authority. Consider, for example, how the brothers in Acts 15 only reached a unanimous decision after they were aware of having the backing of Scripture. The apostle Paul, in his letters to the Romans, the Corinthians and the Galatians, continually quotes Scriptures to support his teachings.

Take a **traffic warden** for example. He acts with authority as long as he operates within the law (the legitimate Transport Code). The Ministry of Transport delegates some of its authority to the warden and fully backs up all the warden's actions as long as he acts within the law. If the warden attempts to issue a fine for reasons not specified in the law, he will encounter serious problems, because he would be acting without the backing of the Ministry of Transport. A few months ago I returned from Pereira to Armenia when my jeep was stopped at a military checkpoint. The young soldier looked at my documents and he told me that my driving license was not valid to drive a vehicle between cities. Respectfully I pointed to him that for more than 10 years I had used that licence to drive anywhere in Colombia. Very soon he allowed me to continue on my way. If the soldier had issued a fine, the Ministry of Transport would have annulled it. In a similar way, elders exercise their duties with genuine authority as long as they act in line with the Word of God.

3. Accepting and rejecting judgements made by others

Some teach that an assembly judgement carried out in the name of the Lord is binding and obligatory on all assemblies. They feel that the authority of Christ is denied if an assembly does not submit immediately to the judgement. On what do they base this doctrine? Matthew 18:18 reads: "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" (DBY). Such teachers think that when an assembly makes a judgement here on earth, its judgement is immediately bound in heaven, and that for that reason all the assemblies on the face of the earth should immediately submit to it - until the assembly that "binds" considers it appropriate "to loosen" that judgement. The Catholic Church also believes it can "bind" its judgements in heaven. This doctrine is false. No assembly, no council of churches, and no Pope can "bind" its mistakes in heaven. The only judgements that are bound in heaven are those judgements that are in harmony with the will of God Father. This teaching is explored in more detail in the **Section C5**.

What is an assembly judgement?

The expression "assembly decision" or "assembly judgement" is not a biblical term. The term can be used, but the problem lies in that its meaning varies among those who use it. Many use it to describe a serious decision taken in the name of an assembly, be it biblical or not, taken by one brother, several brothers or the complete assembly. Diotrephes, for example, controlled the decisions of his assembly (3 John 9-10). In his first letter to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul encourages "the church of God in Corinth" (1:2) to exclude from the assembly a brother that lived in fornication. How would the church at Corinth reach that decision? Paul explains that they should gather together "in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ (ye and my spirit being gathered together, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ)" (5:4 DBY).

When an assembly decides to excommunicate, restore or receive a new brother or sister, **two** conditions should be met: (1) that their action has the clear backing of the Word of God. Now this is more than finding a few verses to justify a decision (even the devil knows how to do that!); and (2) that the Lord Jesus is present in the assembly when the decision is being taken. The presence of the Lord in the assembly is not guaranteed because we are the correct type of Brethren. Only if Christ is present, that is to say, if He presides over and directs the meeting and the assembly is subject to Him, can we be sure that the decision is fair (because only Christ knows all the facts and the motives) and that it is in agreement with the will of the Father in heaven.

An order or a recommendation?

What should be our attitude as we encounter decisions made by other assemblies? Is it true that an assembly decision has universal authority and that all the assemblies in the world are obliged to accept to it? Should an assembly submit to odd or suspicious decisions made by other assemblies? If we are to act biblically, we should distinguish clearly between what is **obligatory** and what is **wise or prudent**, between what is **required** and that which is **recommended** as profitable; between a **Biblical Principle** and an **Administrative Practice**.

Some saints, based on Scriptures such as: "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Ephesians 5:21), maintain that accepting the determination of another assembly is **mandatory**. But notice that this instruction is given in the context of personal, family and work relationships. We are also told, "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men" (1 Peter 2:13). Scriptures like these encourage us to treat legitimate authority with respect, as God-given. In the event that one of these authorities enters in conflict with God's authority, the apostolic advice is, "We must obey God rather than men!" (Acts 4:19; 5:29).

Reject a defective decision and not the assembly that made it

A number of years ago, a young man, from an assembly in this region of Colombia, visited another assembly for a few days while on vacation. In his home assembly, the young man participated regularly at the Lord's Supper and his testimony was good. But while on holiday, his behaviour among the young sisters of this assembly was such that it caused serious concern among several elders. On Sunday, the young man presented his letter of recommendation, but the leading brothers felt led of the Lord to set aside the letter and asked him not to break bread. They felt that to receive him would lend public support to his bad behaviour. They were concerned about the youth in their assembly. Did they act correctly? I believe they did. Sometimes a sister may arrive with her letter of commendation but very badly dressed (without modesty, decency and propriety, 1 Timothy 2:9). A letter of recommendation does not oblige the other assembly to receive the visitor - it doesn't guarantee reception. Of course, normally the believer would be received on the basis of the recommendation, but there are situations when an assembly has valid reasons to reject a recommendation made by another assembly. But rejection of the recommendation is not necessarily the rejection or a disapproval of the assembly which sent the letter. The conscience of the assembly which receives should be respected.

Paul and circumcision

When some promoted circumcision as a requirement, as a demand, as something obligatory (Acts 15:1), the apostle Paul publicly rejected it with all his energy and with all the weight of his apostolic authority. He would not "give in to them for a moment" (Galatians 2:5). A short while later, wanting to take Timothy along with him on a journey "he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek" (Acts 16:3). Why did Paul circumcise Timothy after fighting so many battles against the necessity of circumcision? Was the apostle a man of two faces? Obviously not! Paul did not circumcise Timothy out of necessity. He was not compelled to do so (Galatians 2:3). He circumcised him as an expression of God's grace, to enhance the possibilities to evangelise among the Jews (1 Corinthians 9:19-23). The apostle Paul made a difference between that which was **obligatory** and that which was **wise or prudent**; between that which was **required** and that which was **commendable** as profitable; between a **Biblical Principle** and an **Administrative Practice**. We should hold this difference clearly in mind as we encounter decisions made by other assemblies.

Biblical Principle - This is an obligation

A **Biblical Principle** which we can never give up is that God is **Sovereign** (Acts 4:24; Revelation 1:5), that all His ways are **true** and **just** (Daniel 4:37; Revelation 15:3) and consequently, mistaken assembly decisions can **never** be bound in

heaven. I am sure that God the Father does not accept, does not support, and does not recognise erroneous assembly judgements. Not even initially. And if heaven does not accept the judgement, there is no biblical base to judge, to condemn, and much less “to exclude” assemblies that follow heaven in not accepting the judgement. It doesn't matter if the assembly is a large one, it doesn't matter if the assembly acts with sincerity: if their judgement does not agree with the Father's will, it is not bound in heaven, not temporarily, not for a few days, not for one second! This is a **Biblical Principle** and here we must stand firm.

Administrative Practice - This is a recommendation

Now let's consider an **Administrative Practice**. Are we saying that every believer can do whatever seems right to him, according to his own personal understanding of the Word of God? No. Normally judgements made by an assembly are biblical and because they are biblical they are respected. But there are those odd occasions when it is very evident that a decision is influenced by personal interests or without a clear Scriptural support. For example, could other assemblies receive those believers which were expelled by the assembly of Diotrephes? (3 Juan 9-12). Most probably yes! Let us consider a more recent example.

An experience in Armenia

Last year, a sister began attending our assembly meetings here in Armenia. After about 2 or 3 months she asked if she could break bread with us. Together with another brother we visited the sister twice in her home to listen to her spiritual pilgrimage and to explain the privileges and responsibilities of expressing fellowship in the assembly. We asked her if she could bring a letter of recommendation from her previous denominational congregation where she had been for more than 25 years. The pastor told her that he didn't provide such letters but sent us his phone number. I called him and explained the situation. He spoke very well of the sister, and recommended her without reservations. The following week we recommend her to be received by the assembly.

Let us suppose now that the pastor of that congregation had told me that she was under church discipline because she was a drunkard, an adulteress, or a gossip, or had unresolved interpersonal conflicts. We would have acted incorrectly if we had received her like this. Although we have some significant doctrinal differences with that denominational congregation, their judgement to exclude her would have biblical support and therefore we should submit to their decision. But if the pastor had told me that she is under church discipline because “she didn't bring her complete tithes and offerings” or because “she was absent three consecutive Sundays,” this decision would not have found clear backing in Scripture. In such a situation the assembly in Armenia would not be required to submit to that decision.

What to do with questionable decisions?

A serious problem is that biblical teachings can be applied incorrectly. For example, using the text “Expel the wicked man from among you” (1 Corinthians 5:13) we can justify as very biblical almost any excommunication. But the question is whether that particular brother is really “wicked” - and that is not explicitly stated in the Bible. That is why an assembly should study very carefully the facts and circumstances and, what is even more difficult, consider the motives.

Most of the decisions taken by an assembly affect only the believers in that assembly, but some local decisions can have wider consequences. A **doubtful decision** is a decision taken by one assembly that directly affects and causes concern among believers in another assembly - their consciences do not feel at peace in accepting that decision (Colossians 3:15). In these cases, it can be **advisable, prudent, advantageous, opportune, wise or profitable** to accept temporarily the decision while clarification is sought on the matter. This is a **recommendation**. How can we tell if the Lord was really among them when they took that decision which we consider doubtful? That clarity does not usually come immediately. Therefore it may be **prudent** to accept initially the decision while seeking clarification, until the peace of the Lord is felt over the matter (1 Corinthians 14:33).

Pastoral considerations

It is always damaging to discredit the parents in front of their children, even when the parents have acted unwisely. Similarly, it is harmful to discredit elders in front of their congregation, even when they have acted unwisely. Every believer with the heart of a shepherd knows all too well how harmful it is to encourage rebellion and insubordination to local authority. This is another consideration.

But if an assembly (or a group of brothers) refuses to correct a faulty decision, other assemblies are not obliged to abide by it. Since a wrong judgement is not bound in heaven, the assemblies cannot be forced to accept or support it. The Holy Spirit, which dwells in the church, will guide each assembly in knowing how and when it should reject or ignore the faulty decision. Let us remember that to reject a wrong assembly judgement is not a denial of the unity of the Body of Christ. Neither is it a rejection of the assembly that took the faulty judgement.

B3. Who can break bread?

Summary: *Neither an open nor a closed fellowship is in harmony with the Word of God. It is quite natural for an assembly to have a directory listing some assemblies that have its full confidence. Visitors recommended from these assemblies would normally be received without discussion. Occasionally a Christian may visit from an unknown congregation. The assembly should interview such a believer and seek the Lord's guidance as to what to do. This is a guarded fellowship.*

The breaking of bread is a symbolic act in which we remember and worship Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour. "Do this... in remembrance of me. For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Corinthians 11:24-26). The **cup** represents the Lord's shed blood. The **bread** represents His body in two aspects: the physical body of Jesus which he sacrificed for us (1 Corinthians 11:24) and the symbolic body of Jesus, made up of all true Christians (1 Corinthians 10:17). Who can break bread? Clearly it is an event only for Christians. Each assembly should develop a procedure which ensures that non-Christians do not participate. Are there other requisites apart from being a Christian? Yes! Let's look at them.

Is baptism required in order to break bread?

The Lord Jesus introduced two symbolic acts: baptism and the Lord's Supper. Both are important and should be administered carefully, with dignity, and conscious of the spiritual reality they represent. Normally every believer is baptised **and** breaks bread. The Bible does not forbid a non-baptised believer from breaking bread, but I would suggest that it is natural for a Christian to be baptised first. Consider the following three reasons:

- (1) This order is logical: with baptism we show that we have believed, and then, while we break bread, we express our gratitude to the Lord.
- (2) Biblical examples: the biblical examples show that new believers were baptised and then they would break bread (Acts 2:41-42).
- (3) Pastoral experience: if a believer wants to break bread but he does not want to be baptised, you may ask him: "Why don't you want to be baptised?" If there is something hindering his baptism, it is probable that that the same "something" will also hinder him from breaking bread.

Normal conditions for participation

The Lord's severe actions described in 1 Corinthians 11:29-32 teach us that every assembly should take great care in how they break bread and who they allow to participate. This act of pastoral care protects both the assembly and the person who desires to participate. When describing this careful process, we frequently refer to three strainers or filters:

(1) The moral filter: There was a brother that formed part of the assembly at Corinth and was living in fornication. The apostolic instruction was "put out of your fellowship the man who did this" (1 Corinthians 5:1-5). Here we learn that every assembly has the responsibility to encourage and ensure that each believer lives a morally correct life - morally upright, not according to our preferences but in the light of the Word of God (1 Corinthians 5:11-12). The assembly at Thessalonica had some disorderly Christians. "We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busybodies." The apostolic instructions are: "In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us" (2 Thessalonians 3:6-12). The Christian's lifestyle is important.

(2) The doctrinal filter: The apostle John teaches that we should not receive the one that "runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ" (2 John 9-11), that is, each participant should have clear biblical convictions as to the Person and work of Christ. We should emphatically reject those who "pervert the gospel of Christ" by teaching a "**different gospel**" (Galatians 1:6-9). We are called to turn away from **wickedness**, to cleanse ourselves, and to "pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart" (2 Timothy 2:16-23).

To promote a "different gospel" is a very serious doctrinal deviation. Any teaching or practice that may be called "wickedness" is also a very serious corruption. Given our desire to walk in God's truth, should we separate from every Christian with whom we

disagree? At what point should we separate? How should we separate? We shall explore how the apostles and the New Testament assemblies understood and practised these two “filters” in the **Sections B4, C7 and C8**.

(3) The personal filter: We should encourage each believer to examine himself before participating. “A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup” (1 Corinthians 11:28-29). If we have an unresolved personal sin (bitterness against a sister, or we have offended a brother), we should first seek to be reconciled to our sister or brother and then offer our worship (Matthew 5:22-24).

Administering the first two filters is the assembly’s responsibility. Here is a word of caution: some assemblies think that the problems always come from outside. But carnality, pride, hypocrisy and looseness can easily spring from our own hearts. To **express fellowship with Christ** as we participate at the Lord’s Supper, we must **be in fellowship with Christ**. And for this, we must walk in the light (2 Corinthians 6:14; 1 John 1:6-7). This is why the Lord has given us this third filter. Fellow believers cannot see our heart. The administration of this third filter is our personal responsibility.

If an assembly promotes and practises these filters in dependence on the Lord, it will be clear to them that many true children of God should not be allowed to break bread. But let us never forget that we celebrate the Lord’s Supper and not the Assembly’s Supper. “Wherefore receive ye one another, according as the Christ also has received you to *the* glory of God” (Romans 15:7 DBY). We should receive all those whom the Lord wants there and we should exclude all those the Lord doesn’t want there. No more, no less.

Regular identification with an assembly

Having lived more than 20 years in Colombia, I notice that the Latin temperament is often quite impulsive, inclined towards free participation. Unknown visitors quite easily express themselves in our meetings and some even contradict us in our assembly Bible readings. There is a significant movement of curious believers between congregations. When a new believer or a local believer desires to identify regularly with an assembly or join the assembly fellowship (that is, he wants to be part of that assembly, to contribute in it and benefit from the pastoral care of its elders), it is recommendable that for a reasonable length of time he does not partake of the emblems. He will have time to observe the assembly functioning. He will have time to ask questions and express his concerns. Trust will grow as the assembly and the person will get to know each other better. It is strongly recommended that the believer should be visited in his home to discuss the state of his spiritual life, to explain the responsibilities and the privileges of expressing fellowship in the assembly. Then, if the elders feel free before the Lord, they will recommend the believer before the assembly, because it is the assembly who receives. Depending on the local situation, each assembly must develop a healthy, careful and flexible procedure to receive new believers into assembly fellowship, avoiding unnecessary delays and complications. After they are received, these new believers will be under the responsibility and pastoral care of the elders of that assembly.

Receiving visiting believers from other cities

The careful way of receiving believers to assembly fellowship is what R. K. Campbell calls a **guarded communion**. He writes: "Would not it be proper and Scriptural to say that the communion of believers at the Lord's Table is not to be an open communion, nor a closed communion, but a **guarded communion**? It is not to be open to just anybody, nor closed to any who do not belong to "us", so to say – a sectarian communion, but it is for all those who are known believers and walking in truth and holiness" (Book titled "Church of the Living God," chapter 3, section G1).

The general situation is that brothers and sisters that visit us from other cities, come from assemblies that we know well. Brother R. K. Campbell refers to these as "us." If in a particular situation the Lord guides the assembly to receive at the Lord's Supper a visiting believer who is not one of "us", the assembly that receives does not identify or endorse everything that takes place in the congregation of the visiting believer. The meaning of "positional defilement" and how "leaven" works is addressed in **Sections C1 and C2**.

We read of moral and doctrinal disorders in the assemblies at Thyatira and Sardis. Yet within each of these assemblies, the Lord identifies and upholds a few saints who "have not this doctrine" and "which have not defiled their garments" (Revelation 2:24; 3:4 DBY). The guarded communion consists in seeking the Lord's guidance to recognise these saints and receive them when they come our way. When an assembly receives a saint from the assembly at Thyatira or from Sardis, it is not opening its doors to receive **everyone** who would arrive from one of these assemblies.

It is easy to practice a **closed communion** (or closed fellowship) – the only requirement is to have an up-to-date list of recommended assemblies, and if a visitor does not come from one of these, he is not received. It is even easier to practice an **open communion** (or open fellowship) - in which every visitor who "feels free" can participate. The **guarded communion** (or guarded fellowship) is the most difficult to practice, because it requires dependence on the Lord and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to be carefully aware of those who arrive, those who leave, and those that are always there; and to interview the believers in those special situations that occasionally arise. To carry this out with due responsibility, spiritual maturity is required (true dependence on the Lord and sensitivity to the direction of the Holy Spirit), and also trust between saints. It is worth making clear that if a brother is received at the Lord's Supper this does not automatically give him the freedom to teach and minister the Word. Every assembly must protect its pulpit. To participate in ministry, additional conditions are required. We shall study them in **Section B4**.

Seeking the Lord's leading

When the Lord's instructions are clear, we should act on them. But when we meet new situations or are faced with difficult decisions, we should humble ourselves and seek the Lord's direction. We have an example of believers in Jerusalem seeking the Lord's guidance over a difficult matter. In conclusion they wrote "It seemed good **to the Holy Spirit** and to us..." (Acts 15:28). **Somehow the Holy Spirit made His will felt in that situation**. The assembly in Antioch also faced a new decision. "And as they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, **the Holy Spirit said**, separate me now

Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them” (Acts 13:2 DBY). In some way, the Holy Spirit makes His will felt to assemblies and to individuals, be it to approve or to forbid (Acts 16:6-7). In order to experience this we should not grieve neither quench the Spirit. The Holy Spirit must be given freedom to operate. Even in the Old Testament, we notice how Moses looked for the Lord’s guidance when faced with special cases. There were concerns about some that wanted to participate in the Passover. “Moses answered them, ‘Wait until I find out what the LORD commands concerning you’” (Numbers 9:8). Orphan women claimed some land and Moses was not sure what to do. We read that “Moses brought their case before the LORD, and the LORD said to him...” (Numbers 27:5-6). To acknowledge Christ as head of His church is more than a truth we believe. It should be a reality we try to live.

Illustration of a guarded fellowship

As a family we live here in Armenia in a **residential compound**. The compound, which consists of some 50 houses, has a wall around it and at the entrance gate there is an armed guard. The guard knows my wife and my children and he allows them to enter without difficulty. He also has a list of our friends. When these arrive he also allows them to enter without difficulty. The guard keeps out the beggars, door-to-door salespersons, curious persons, and thieves. The objective is to have a safe and healthy place for our families. When a stranger arrives at the entrance and asks to see me, the guard calls me on the internal phone system and asks me if I want to see this person. Since it is **my** house, it is **I** (and not the guard) who determines who can enter and who can’t enter. This is the way a **guarded communion** should function. Brothers and sisters who come recommended by assemblies we know and trust are easily and happily received. Non-Christians, “curious” believers, “ecclesiastical tourists” and the like are not received. But when an obviously serious special case comes before us, we have the obligation to seek the Lord’s guidance for this particular situation.

In our residential compound, sometimes the internal telephone is damaged for a day or two. This damage causes serious problems because, while it is damaged, all visitors that are not on the list are rejected. In our illustration, the telephone represents our communication with the Lord. If believers in the assembly are in conflict or for some other reason they are not in communion with Christ (the Head), they won’t be able to listen to His voice. When an assembly is not in a condition to discern the Lord’s guidance, it has two options: (1) It may choose to practice an **open communion** where everybody who feels free can participate - this would not be correct, or (2) It may choose to practice a **closed communion** where any visitor that does not come from an assembly in our “list of assemblies” it is rejected - this would be sectarian.

If we do not practice dependence on the Lord in our daily life, it will be difficult to depend on the Lord collectively as an assembly. If the Spirit does not have freedom among us, if we live an atmosphere of fear - fear of making mistakes, fear of being criticised by full-time-workers, missionaries or other assemblies - this fear will ensure that we will depend exclusively on lists and mechanical procedures. To practice a guarded communion, true dependence on the Lord is indispensable.

In conclusion, in the same way as we should be careful not to baptise unbelievers, so we should be careful not to receive at the Lord's Supper those the Lord would not approve of. We may sometimes make mistakes, but we should not let this fear of making a mistake quench our passion to function collectively in dependence on the Lord.

B4. How should we protect the integrity of an assembly?

Summary: *Each assembly is responsible before God to protect itself. Every assembly should promote healthy growth among its saints. Every assembly should implement biblical discipline and diligently seek to restore those who have fallen. Leading brothers, or elders, are responsible to protect the assembly from those who do not edify, from those who teach bad doctrine and from those who promote division. These people must be resisted "face to face" when they arrive at the assembly.*

The church is something very close to the heart of God. For this reason Christian congregations are constantly under attack. Satan always tries to damage that which God cherishes. In the New Testament the Lord has given clear instructions as well as practical examples of how to protect the integrity of an assembly.

Six lessons based on Acts 20:20-30

When saying his last goodbye to the leadership of the assembly at Ephesus, the apostle Paul warns them: "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers (or bishops)... I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them" (Acts 20:28-30). In this short inspired portion of Scripture we find at least six clear teachings:

- (1) The elders (or bishops) are not volunteers neither are they self-appointed. It is the Holy Spirit who turns these men into elders for the benefit of each assembly. Every believer, and especially every elder, should never forget this.
- (2) One of the key responsibilities delegated by the Lord to the elders is to protect "the flock."
- (3) Since the responsibility of elders is local, the portion of the flock that they should protect is local: their assembly.
- (4) The assembly should be protected from internal problems.
- (5) The assembly should be protected from external attacks.
- (6) Each elder should look after his own life and that of his fellow elders.

Some dangers can cause harm to the leadership of any assembly: Either laziness, materialism and doctrinal looseness; or pride, legalism and a desire to control the flock. Another common danger to assembly leadership is the urge to manage, or interfere, in the decisions of other assemblies. Some leaders, like "**managers**," seem to feel that their assembly is too small and seek wider power and influence. Others, because they love the Lord and greatly value the church of God, feel responsible for

what happens in other assemblies. These are like “**grandmothers**” that love their grandchildren so much that they interfere in their upbringing and discredit their parents in the process! Overseers or elders, like parents, have been given a well defined local responsibility, and they should focus their energies on the task before them (1 Peter 5:1-4).

Protecting the assembly from internal problems

Every assembly, like every family, has its difficult moments. As the problems come to surface, we must look for solutions. We should not ignore difficulties. Among the requisites to be an elder we read “He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?)” (1 Timothy 3:4-5). The qualities needed to lead well in the assembly are learnt in the home. One of the skills the elder needs is to encourage order, obedience and discipline within a healthy atmosphere. For this to be possible, be it at home or in the assembly, we must avoid extremes. On one hand, frequent reproof, scolding, constant correction, negative remarks and punishments discourage and lead to a heavy atmosphere. On the other hand, carelessness, looseness and lack of order will lead to disunity and worldliness.

Elders that regularly visit the homes of the saints, that make themselves available to give biblical advice, that teach the Word of God in a clear and practical way, they protect their assemblies from many internal problems. This process should be led by the elders or overseers, but every believer who is “full of goodness” and “complete in knowledge” can co-operate in this shepherding process (Romans 15:14). But assemblies also have complicated saints of liberal or legalistic inclination. Some have the bad habit of criticising everything, speaking badly of fellow believers and sowing discord in the assembly. This is not new. In the Scriptures we are given procedures to protect the assembly from the damage such people can cause. For example, we are told to “admonish the disorderly” (1 Thessalonians 5:14 DBY). We are told to distance ourselves from those who persist in going the wrong way: “we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us...If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother” (2 Thessalonians 3:6-15). In some public and very serious cases, we are told such should be “rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning” (1 Timothy 5:20).

He scored a goal against us! A few years ago, we had contact with a very dynamic “brother” in the city of Cartago. He had gathered together family members and neighbours in his home, and invited us to teach the Word to them. This “brother” had visited most of the Christian congregations in Cartago and he spoke badly of them all; “but with you” he told us, “I have found the sound doctrine I have been looking for.” We had not yet received him into fellowship, but helped him and supported the meetings in his home. After investing energy and resources assisting him during several months, one day he simply disappeared! With him we lost some chairs, Bibles and a fair amount of literature that we had entrusted to him. He was a swindler! He scored a goal against us! When a believer comes who has been involved in a number of Christian congregations, politely ask for some references.

Even if he does not bring or they don't want to give him a recommendation letter, seek some background information: briefly visit or call any believer who knows him. Knowing a little of his history will make it easier to know how to help him. This cautious process will also protect the integrity of your assembly. Even in New Testament days, sometimes "false brothers" infiltrated the ranks (Galatians 2:4) and "savage wolves" came in among the assembly (Acts 20:29). Sometimes we may still make mistakes. But if we politely and carefully seek some references, fewer goals will be scored against us!

Division promoters, heretics and those that don't edify

Every brother who teaches the Word can occasionally make a mistake. This should not alarm us. On the contrary, this should motivate us to listen with more attention. "Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said" (1 Corinthians 14:29). Apollos was a powerful preacher. "He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures." But he had some doctrinal errors. With genuine love, a Christian couple "invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately" (Acts 18:24-26). Here is a beautiful example of how mistakes and errors can be corrected. There are three types of people who usually want access to the pulpit but should not be allowed to teach.

(a) Those that don't edify the assembly: Some brothers think that because they are "males" they have a right to preach in the assembly. The Scriptural rule is straightforward: "Let all things be done to edification" (1 Corinthians 14:3, 5, 12, 26 DBY). "We speak before God in Christ; and all things, beloved, for your building up" (2 Corinthians 12:19 DBY). The elders should hinder any participation in the assembly that does not build up the saints (1 Timothy 1:3-4). A brother can be a good Christian, with a good heart, but when he speaks in the assembly his thoughts are not understood. If this feature persists, he should be offered help in communication skills, or if teaching is evidently not his gift, he should look for a different area of service. Some would say that such a brother should be put under "discipline of silence." Personally I do not see this situation as a case for "church discipline." Every assembly needs a mechanism to protect itself from speakers that do not edify. How do we know if a speaker is being used by the Holy Spirit? Simply ask: is the assembly being built up?

(b) Those that teach bad doctrine: It is normal that some differences of understanding may exist between believers (Philippians 3:16). We are all still learning. But if a brother persists in promoting a strange teaching or a deviated doctrine, he should not be allowed to participate in the ministry of the Word. If the doctrinal error is fundamental, such brother should be excluded from the assembly (2 John 9). Even in Paul's days, there were "many rebellious people, mere talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision group. They must be silenced, because they are ruining whole households..." (Titus 1:10-11).

(c) Those that promote division: We have clear instructions for cases where a brother or a sister persists in sowing division in the assembly: "Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him" (Titus 3:10). Also "I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have

learned. Keep away from them” (Romans 16:17). It is not correct to let these brothers continue using the pulpit to promote their divisive agenda. If they are visiting the homes of saints to gain support for their division, the elders should inform and alert the assembly. The assembly should turn away from such. And this is something that is done locally if and when a case presents itself.

Protecting the assembly from external attacks

The procedures to protect an assembly from internal troublemakers can also be applied to believers that visit from other assemblies. The elders will give account to God for what they allow in their assembly. That is why they should not relax or be intimidated when their assembly is visited by a missionary, a full-time-worker, a brother with high academic studies or travelling in an expensive car. Some brothers travel and visit assemblies and are used by the Lord for blessing and edification. We should encourage these (3 John 5-8). But others travel and visit assemblies to introduce their doctrinal errors or to foment a party spirit and divisions. We should firmly reject such (Galatians 2:11-13; 4:17). How is this done? If a brother arrives at your assembly and he is known to teach a bad doctrine or to cause division, the elders of the assembly should call him aside and inform him that he must not teach in their assembly. In this way they will protect the integrity of their assembly.

The apostles have left us instructions both in their teaching and in their way of living and dealing with situations (Acts 20:18-20; 2 Timothy 3:10). The problem of undesirable visitors also occurred among assemblies in the New Testament. The apostle Paul resisted those brothers which arrived from Judea teaching strange doctrines (Galatians 2). The apostle John recommends that “If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him” (2 John 10). Some assemblies were dominated by brothers with strong and controlling characters like Diotrephes. Should the other assemblies exclude Diotrephes? Did the apostles go around with letters collecting signatures to exclude that assembly? The apostle John simply says: “Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil but what is good” (3 John 9-12). How did the apostles react to the serious disorders in the assembly at Corinth and the deficiencies in the assemblies in Crete? What did the apostles recommend when faced with the very strong tension between Christians of Jewish and Gentile backgrounds? **Nowhere do we find the apostles encouraging an assembly to take formal position against problems in another assembly. Nowhere do we find the apostles encouraging a division among assemblies, neither did they exclude some assemblies in order to protect the sound doctrine.** Could it be that the apostles remained “neutral” while facing disorder? Clearly not! The apostles suffered because of these disorders. They wrote letters to the people involved and to the assemblies directly affected, attempting to correct these matters “face to face.” In **Section C8** shall study some of these situations in more detail.

Beware of the rapist! If there is evidence that Mr Gonzalo is a child rapist, my wife and I, as leaders of our home, will guard the front door of our house to ensure that he will not enter. If you have a home, it is your responsibility to protect your home against possible damages such a person may cause. As brothers and as friends we can call each other to say “beware! Mr Gonzalo is passing by!” We can activate the communal alarm system if Mr Gonzalo comes into our neighbourhood. But the

parents of each family are responsible to protect their own front door. If we allow Mr Gonzalo into our home and he causes harm, you may feel sorry for us, but it is my family that suffers the damage. The relationship dynamics are similar among assemblies. Like families, assemblies can exchange information, advice, co-operate and support each other. But the elders, locally, are responsible to take action and reject anything that is harmful to the wellbeing of their assembly.

Christ, as Head of his church, is responsible of taking care of the **church in its totality**. The elders have been given the job to take care “the flock of God which *is* among you,” that is, the **church in their locality** (1 Peter 5:2). Therefore we are not called to investigate, judge and emit pronouncements on problematic brothers who live in Argentina or in Japan (although, if you are visiting Japan, you may feel free to express carefully your concerns). But if one of these people or doctrines arrives at the door of our assembly, we must act, with kindness, but also with firmness.

Conclusion

In the New Testament we find evidence of large and deeply felt differences between believers, especially between assemblies of Jewish and Gentile backgrounds. But with **love, correction** and **patience** they would help one another and bear with one another (Romans 14, Colossians 3:12-14).

Good families have their differences. Similarly, good assemblies have their differences. This does not mean that the differences are not important. Each brother, each sister and each assembly should study the Word and develop its own convictions before the Lord. There are certain freedoms that should be respected by each assembly. These freedoms can include cultural differences, diverse ways of singing, evangelising, teaching and making disciples. Let us remember that it is Christ who builds His church. We are convinced that the good work that God has begun in each believer and in each assembly, He “will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 1:6). While the Lord is busy perfecting us, we should also be patient with others. The apostle Paul explains: “All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained” (Philippians 3:15-16).

May the Lord help us, each one of us, to develop healthy relationships between fellow saints in our own assembly, and where possible, may we also help maintain and strengthen healthy, dynamic and biblical relationships with other Christian assemblies.

“Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm.
Let nothing move you.
Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord,
because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.”
1 Corinthians 15:58.

SECTION C

Notes, Studies and Outlines

This section contains a collection of short studies that complement and support some themes touched on in Section B. These studies may be considered a little deeper. They have been written for those who **teach** the Word of God - but should also benefit any brother or sister who desires to dig deeper. If you are short of time, I would recommend you focus your study on Sections C7 and C8.

C1: Learning from the Old Testament

We happily affirm with the apostle Paul that “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16). Both the Old Testament and the New Testament are inspired by the Holy Spirit. “For 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” (Romans 15:4). The Old Testament also instructs and strengthens the faith of Christians today. These verses, together with some others, encourage us to read, meditate on and study the New and the Old Testaments – finding food for our souls in both. The objective of this section is to correct some common errors in the way the Old Testament is applied today.

Israel and the church are two different entities

Every serious student of the Holy Scriptures soon discovers a marked difference between the Old and the New Testaments. The **people of Israel** are central in the Old Testament, and the **church of Jesus Christ** is central in the New Testament. Israel and the church are both called “the people of God,” but God deals with them in a very different way. Some use the terms “dispensations” or “economies” to refer to these different ways in which God deals with man. The nation of Israel is an earthly people. The church is a celestial people. To belong to Israel, you must be born a Jew. To belong to the church, you must be born again. The **Law**, its rules, symbols and procedures prevailed within the nation of Israel. **Grace** prevails within the church. We notice that some teachings are given by God to Israel and not to the church. Other teachings are given to the church and not to Israel. The Bible student who does not differentiate clearly between Israel and the church will arrive at some strange and even eccentric conclusions – affecting the way he lives and his understanding of prophecy. Let us look at some common mistakes:

(a) Prosperity: Some, using Scriptures like Deuteronomy 8:7-18, teach that every believer who is obedient will be blessed with material prosperity. Notice that the promise of material prosperity was given to the people of Israel and not to the church. The obedient Christian is blessed by God, but the blessing can be material or spiritual. It is evident that the apostle Paul and many other Christians experienced periods of economic hardship (Philippians 4:12; 2 Corinthians 8:2). Was the Lord

Jesus obedient to the Father? Yes, of course! Was Christ economically prosperous? Obviously not!

(b) Circumcision: In the early decades of the Christian church, large numbers of Jewish Christians tried to promote the practice of circumcision within the church (Acts 15:1; 21:20-21). But the apostle Paul and others strongly resisted this practice, because the symbolic act of circumcision (and many other rituals) was not given to the church but to the people of Israel.

(c) The tithe: Many Christian leaders today insist that Christians are required to give 10% of their income to the church. On what do they base this teaching? It is based on the laws given by God to the people of Israel in the Old Testament. They use verses like Malachi 3:8-10. The New Testament teaches that every Christian should give to the Lord, happily, regularly, proportionally, sacrificially, generously and privately. But the tithe, as law, as an obligation, was given to Israel and not to the church.

The church is a mystery

The **gospel** of salvation through Jesus Christ was something that God “promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures” (Romans 1:2). But the formation of the **church** of Jesus Christ was not revealed beforehand by God in the Old Testament.

On teaching about the church, the apostle Paul says that it was a “mystery made known to me by revelation... which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets.” If we want to form assemblies according to God's design, it is extremely important to understand that the church is a “mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God” and that “This is a profound mystery... about Christ and the church” (Ephesians 3:3-9; 5:32). In the Old Testament we find very important teachings on the nature of God, morality, holiness, the necessity of shed blood for forgiveness, prophecy and many other matters. It also contains biographies of men of God. These stories and situations may **illustrate** aspects of the Christian life and the functioning of the church. **But only in the New Testament do we find God's design for the assembly.** It is not correct to take procedures or instructions given to the people of Israel and to apply them to the church. Everything the church needs to function according to the God's plan can be found in the New Testament. And praise God, everything we need is there! Nothing is missing!

Adapting Jewish procedures to the church

It is interesting to notice how Christians, through the ages, have adapted and introduced Jewish customs into the church. For example, some groups make a difference between Christians “in the priesthood” and the rest of the Christians which are referred to as “the laity.” Some of these “priests” have special clothes to differentiate them, as was the case in Israel. But in the church every believer is a priest (Revelation 1:5-6). Very frequently, the pyramidal authority structure used within the nation of Israel (Exodus 18:14-24) is adopted within Christian churches and denominations. The beautiful simplicity of gathering around our Lord Jesus Christ is replaced with Jewish-style “ceremonies.” Some use holy or consecrated water,

resembling the practice in Israel (Numbers 19). Some groups of Christians set aside Saturday and avoid eating “impure” animals. Other Christians apply some of the Jewish Sabbath restrictions to Sunday - the Lord’s Day. The assembly or local church can meet in any location (in early days, Christians met in homes), but some Christians build their chapels imitating the “Jewish temple,” with its luxuries, its “altar” and its special places.

Many Christians, including the Brethren, reject these Jewish adaptations. But, in a subtle way, some Jewish teachings, procedures or events can be adapted and introduced into assembly life. To illustrate this, let us now consider two Old Testament laws and one Old Testament situation that, when adapted and applied to the church of Christ, encourage a behaviour which is neither taught nor practised in the New Testament.

(a) Positional defilement: In the books of Leviticus and Numbers we find several procedures given to the people of Israel while they lived in tents. These are practical instructions designed to protect the health of the nation. These methods limited the spread of illness by restricting the movement of infected and possibly infected people. Some, mistakenly, try to apply some of these procedures to the church of Christ.

Let us consider the instructions given in **Numbers 19** that deal with possible sickness, contamination or defilement caused by a dead body. “This is the law that applies when a person dies in a tent: Anyone who enters the tent and anyone who is in it will be unclean for seven days” (v.14). At the end of the seven days, everyone in the tent was cleansed (v. 18). A serious warning was given to ensure that everyone would take these instructions seriously: “if a person who is unclean does not purify himself, he must be cut off from the community, because he has defiled the sanctuary of the LORD” (v.20). If a person walked out of a contaminated, unclean or defiled tent and touched another person or entered another tent, that person or tent would also be contaminated, unclean or defiled. If these contaminated people visited other tents, these would also become contaminated. In short, “anything that an unclean person touches becomes unclean” (v.22). Those that work in environmental agencies will recognise that these God given instructions are natural and very effective to hinder the spreading of a potential epidemic. The Old Testament contains important teachings for the Christian (1 Corinthians 9:8-10), but when we seek applications for the church today, we should ensure that these applications have clear and firm backing in the New Testament.

Let us now look at what happens when we adapt and try to apply this protective procedure to the church. A tent is viewed as an **assembly**. The dead body is compared with a **doctrinal error**. Touching or visiting is equated with **breaking bread**. A believer becomes defiled or unclean by **breaking bread** with others that are considered defiled or unclean. Defiled or unclean people and their tents (assemblies) must be isolated, that is, cut off or **excommunicated**.

The procedure, if applied directly to the church, would mean: If a brother has a doctrinal error and his local assembly does not “clean itself” of this error, that assembly is defiled and must be excluded. If a believer visits that assembly and

breaks bread in that assembly, he is automatically defiled and must be excluded. If the visitor returns to his assembly of origin and breaks bread there, that assembly becomes defiled and must be excluded. If a sister from an assembly that has been excluded visits another assembly, and this assembly allows her to break bread, that assembly also becomes defiled and must be excluded. It makes no difference if the saint who travels doesn't understand, doesn't support or doesn't even know the "doctrinal error". The fact that they took part of the Lord's Supper ensures that they are defiled and therefore need to be excluded.

Some refer to this strange and manipulative teaching as the "**doctrine of the positional defilement.**" Among the Brethren I observe that "the dead body" is usually the "rejection of some assembly decision." Then, applying the mechanism described above, the excommunications spread in chain reaction, through assemblies, regions and countries. It is true that the New Testament teaches that every Christian and every assembly should clean itself of practical defilement. We shall explore this in greater detail when studying "leaven" in **Section C2.**

It is important to notice that those assemblies that teach and practice the doctrine of positional defilement cannot practice a **guarded communion.** They cannot because if they receive a visiting brother from another congregation, they feel that they associate or will identify totally with **everything** that is practised in that congregation.

(b) The law of the leper: In Scripture, leprosy is considered a very contagious illness. For this reason, the Lord gave the people of Israel some strict instructions to protect them from an epidemic (Leviticus 13 and 14). In several parts of the Bible, leprosy may be correctly used as a picture of sin. But it is quite a different matter to attempt to use these Jewish procedures to administer "church discipline." Some points the Law of the Leper may be used to **illustrate** a disciplinary process within an assembly, but we must turn to the New Testament to learn how to protect an assembly, how to deal with a brother that may have sinned, and how to restore a brother who has sinned.

In **Section B4** we have already considered how we should protect an assembly from internal and external attacks. In **Section C8** we shall look at some serious problems in the early church and how the apostles, guided by the Holy Spirit, dealt with these matters. It is very evident that the teaching of positional defilement was not practised by the apostles and finds no support in the New Testament.

(c) Achan's sin: It is very true that if we help hide another person's sin, we partake or participate in that sin. We shall also be guilty before the Lord. In Joshua 7 we read the story of Achan's sin. It is very interesting. When sent to destroy Jericho, the Lord God told the people, "But in any wise keep from the accursed thing, lest ye make *yourselves* accursed in taking of the accursed thing, and make the camp of Israel a curse, and trouble it" (Joshua 6:18 DBY). Achan disobeyed the Lord taking gold and good clothes and hiding them under his tent. How did God respond? In line with what He had warned in Joshua 6:18. God judged **all** the people of Israel. "Israel hath sinned, and they have also transgressed my covenant which I commanded them" (7:11 DBY), and "the anger of Jehovah was kindled against the children of Israel" (7:1

DBY). Notice that at this point, the children of Israel still did not know that Achan had sinned.

Let us observe what happens when we try to adapt and apply this episode to the church. The 12 tribes of Israel are compared with **all the assemblies**, the gold and the nice clothes with a **sin**, and Achan with a **brother** in an assembly that has sinned. Notice that a number of serious inconsistencies surface: How can an assembly judge a sin that is hidden and is not known? Even if some in the assembly suspect that a brother has sinned, two or three witness are needed before the assembly can judge (2 Corinthians 13:1; 1 Timothy 5:19). Will God judge all the assemblies of the world because of a hidden sin in the life of one brother? Clearly not! The New Testament doesn't support this idea. The New Testament clearly teaches that an assembly goes wrong if it does not judge a sin when it becomes evident in its midst. This teaching for the church is clearly shown in **1 Corinthians 5**.

In the New Testament we find a similar situation to that of Achan: the sin of **Ananias and Sapphira** (Acts 5). We read that God seriously judged the guilty couple but did not judge the whole church. Even more, God did not judge Sapphira for her husband's sin. She fell dead when she lied herself (v.8). God did not blame the whole assembly for the sin of Ananias and Sapphira. It is clearly not correct to apply Achan's situation to a single assembly, neither to the church of Christ in general.

In conclusion, the church of Christ is not an equivalent to the nation of Israel, and an assembly is not an equivalent to one of one of its 12 tribes. The church is a mystery, something totally new. **All teaching and procedures to be used in the church today, should be clearly taught in the New Testament.**

C2: Leaven contaminates

The New Testament uses yeast or leaven in a figurative way to represent two types of wickedness: (1) **moral leaven** typifies hypocrisy, slander, adultery, etc. (Mark 8:15, Luke 12:1; 1 Corinthians 5), and (2) **doctrinal leaven** stands for bad teaching or bad doctrine (Matthew 16:6, 11-12; Galatians 5). Then we are exhorted to take care because "a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough" (1 Corinthians 5:6 and Galatians 5:9). Yeast or leaven does not describe positional defilement. It expresses a practical defilement that no assembly should ignore. Notice that leaven works through the whole batch of dough in which it is hidden (Matthew 13:33).

How does moral leaven work?

Let us consider some examples of how moral leaven works. If a young Christian in the assembly begins a romantic relationship with a non-Christian and the assembly simply ignores this, soon there will be more unequally yoked courtships in the assembly (2 Corinthians 6:14). A proud or sectarian attitude among some brothers little by little generates a proud and sectarian assembly. If an elder hides the immoral activity of another brother, leadership will lose its moral authority and soon there will be an epidemic of immorality in the assembly. If we don't help the brother who gossips and slanders, soon the assembly will be alive with damaging comments. You

and I have seen this happen and we know this is how moral leaven works. This is something very practical.

How does doctrinal leaven work?

By comparing Galatians chapters 2 and 5, we learn how doctrinal leaven works. There were some brothers from the Judean assemblies who taught that all Christians should be circumcised. This was sad, and it worried the apostle Paul. Notice that the **presence** of these defective teachers in the assemblies of Judea did not contaminate the assembly of Antioch neither the assemblies of Galatia. Soon these teachers from Judea arrived at Antioch and then moved to Galatia. What happened? **Peter** was afraid of these brethren and thus changed his behaviour. Then **other Jews** followed Peter's bad example, "so that by their hypocrisy even **Barnabas** was led astray" (Galatians 2:13). Here we can clearly see how doctrinal leaven works in an assembly. The teachers from Judea brought a bad doctrine. Fearing these, Peter changed his behaviour. Then "other Jews" participated in this hypocrisy or dissimulation. Then Barnabas followed. How does doctrinal leaven work? An erroneous teaching is **accepted**. It is either believed, or agreed, or acted on, be it out of fear or out of respect for those who teach it, or simply to avoid confrontations. In this way the assembly becomes contaminated. This is a very practical defilement and not positional defilement.

How does the apostle seek to remedy this situation? Does he write letters and state his position against the assemblies of Judea? No. The apostolic model is to resist the doctrinal leaven "face to face" when it arises in the assembly. Evidently, the brothers in Galatia resisted the bad doctrine of these Judean teachers and were not contaminated by their doctrinal leaven. The assemblies at Corinth and Rome, far away from this situation, were not positionally defiled by these bad teachers from Judea. To read a book which has some doctrinal errors doesn't contaminate me if I examine it carefully and I only retain what is good. But if I accept the errors, then it does contaminate me. And if I teach those errors, I may contaminate others.

C3: What is the Lord's Table?

The New Testament uses three terms to describe the memorial of our Lord's death: A simple term is the **breaking of bread** (Acts 2:42; 20:7), which calls to mind one of the two symbolic elements. The expression the **Lord's Supper** (1 Corinthians 11:20) reminds us that it is a symbolic meal and that, at least at the beginning, it took place in the evening. The third expression, the **Lord's Table** (1 Corinthians 10:21), is used only once in the New Testament. It is mentioned in contrast with the "table of demons."

Our duty as Bible students is to, with the help of the Holy Spirit, search and extract the precise meaning of its words, expressions and verses. To do this properly, we compare Scripture with Scripture. When a word or an expression occurs only a few times, it may be more difficult to be certain as to its true meaning. A latent and serious danger is to inject a meaning into a word or into an expression - a meaning that is not present in its context. We know, for example, how many errors circulate under biblical terms such as the "unction" or "anointing" or the "baptism of the Holy

Spirit.” The expressions “Lord’s table” and “table of demons” are used **only once** in the New Testament (1 Corinthians 10:21). For this reason we should be very careful not to load these terms with ideas that are not clearly present in the text.

Two uses of the word “table”

The Bible uses the word “table” in a literal and in a figurative way. The night that the Lord was betrayed, “Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table” and they celebrated the Lord’s Supper for the first time (Luke 22:14). Here the word table is used in a literal sense. It refers to the piece of dining room furniture on which they placed the elements of the Passover. But in 1 Corinthians 10:21 the word table is used in a figurative way. Here, the “Lord’s table” does not refer to the physical piece of furniture on which we place the bread and the cup. We have before us an important question: what does this expression “the Lord’s table” mean?

A sectarian interpretation

Some teachers from among the Brethren associate “the Lord’s table” with the “altar” that was given to the nation of Israel. This encourages the thought that “the Lord’s table” is a “thing.” Some “have it” and others don’t “have it.” Some of these teachers then begin to believe that their network or circle of assemblies is the only group of believers that “have it.” Others believe that it is impossible for a group of believers who have some distinguishing name or form part of a denominational structure to “have it.” Others, when their assembly goes through a division (or when they separate from others), claim that they are the ones that have the Lord’s Table and that the others don’t “have it,” and will not “have it” until they come back and unite with “us.” It is clear that we Christians are called to withdraw from iniquity or wickedness (2 Timothy 2:19), but some saints are prone to call iniquity anything that does not fit in with their understanding of Scripture. My observation is that some among the Brethren have converted the simple and beautiful teaching of the Lord’s Table into a tool to promote their sectarian thoughts and practices, which dishonour the Lord.

The “table of demons”

The context of 1 Corinthians 10:21 makes it very clear that if a believer wants to enjoy true fellowship with Christ, while participating in this symbolic meal, he should completely reject dark, satanic and demonic things. For the Corinthian Christians of pagan backgrounds, this was a common and a serious problem. It continues to be a serious problem today, especially noticeable among Christians with a Catholic-pagan background, like here in Latin America and also in Africa. In the first letter to the Corinthians, the apostle is systematically addressing a variety of questions and disorders associated with the Corinthian assembly. For example, in chapter 1 he deals with divisions. In chapters 2, 3, 4 and 9 he defends himself against critics. In chapters 5 and 6 he corrects some immoral behaviour and discourages lawsuits between believers. In chapter 7 he corrects some misunderstandings on marriage. In the Corinthian assembly, some believers had problems with idolatry and food sacrificed to idols. These Christians found it difficult to distance themselves from their old pagan customs. This is the context that explains the apostle’s clear and strong expressions in chapters 8 and 10. “Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry... I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord

and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons" (10:14, 20-21).

Years later, when the Lord Jesus Christ ("who has the sharp, double edged sword" and "whose eyes are like blazing fire") examined the assemblies at **Pergamum** and **Thyatira**, He makes reference to "eating food sacrificed to idols" and He urges repentance (Revelation 2:12-22). Today, like in those days, there are Christians who are still emotionally attached to strange occult practices. From time to time they turn to special cleansing waters (which claim spiritual powers), horoscopes, rabbit's feet, they visit witch-doctors, fortune tellers (using tea leaves or tobacco smoke) and similar things. Sadly this weakness is still evident among some Christians today. My dear brother and my dear sister, the Lord's call to repent is also addressed to you and me: "Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth" (Revelation 2:16). These practices belong to the kingdom of darkness and "arouse the Lord's jealousy" (1 Corinthians 10:20-22). It is not correct to refer to all the mistaken practices of other Christian congregations as the "table of demons;" and even less correct to affirm that Christians that don't meet with "us" have the "table of demons."

The Table and the Altar

The Tabernacle had two altars: the **altar of incense** that today speaks to us of worship, and the **altar of burnt offering**. The altar of burnt offering was unique and belonged to the nation of Israel. This altar, together with the sacrifice and the priest who offered the sacrifice, are symbolic representations of **Christ** and His work on the cross. Christ offered Himself (Hebrews 9:14, 26).

In Malachi chapter one, we find a reference to incense: "in every place incense shall be offered unto my name, and a pure oblation" (v.11, DBY). God's complaint in this chapter is that the priests brought and offered sick animals. Malachi makes this clear: "Cursed is the cheat who has an acceptable male in his flock and vows to give it, but then sacrifices a blemished animal to the Lord" (v.14). They had the altar and the sacrifice in low esteem (vs. 7-8, 12-13). But Christ, our perfect Lamb, has already been sacrificed and has been accepted. "We have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Hebrews 10:10). It is Roman Catholic theology that associates the Lord's Supper with the altar of burnt offering, trying to repeat the Lord's sacrifice in every Mass. It is evident that the altar of burnt offering and the sacrifice of animals speak of **Christ** and not directly of our regular celebration of the Lord's Supper or His Table. Hebrews 13:10 should be understood in this context. Today we offer spiritual sacrifices of worship in gratitude for a completed work (1 Peter 2: 5, 9; Hebrews 13:15). The Israelites were reprovved because they thought that "the LORD's table is contemptible" (Malachi 1:7). I suggest this reproof has its parallel today for those who despise or reject **Christ** and His work of redemption.

What then is the Lord's Table?

A table speaks to us of sharing a meal, of communion, of relationship, of friendship. The Lord's Table, therefore, speaks to us of communion with the Lord. It is not something tangible that we can "have." Neither is it something that we can "see." Perhaps we could describe the Lord's Table as the atmosphere, the spiritual

temperature or the “microclimate” that we collectively experience with Christ. The presence of anything that displeases the Lord obviously limits the fullness of this experience. Bitterness, disputes, lack of forgiveness, rebellion, pride, disobedience, etc., obstruct or interrupt fellowship. One Sunday we may break bread together as assembly and collectively enjoy true communion with Christ. That Sunday we experienced and enjoyed the Lord’s Table. But it is possible that some believers who participated were distracted, or had un-confessed sin in their life. Such believers took part of the emblems but did not enjoy communion with Christ, that is to say, they had a weak experience of the Lord’s Table – if they had it at all. After an internal assembly conflict, it is possible to proceed and partake of the emblems, sing the hymns, read the Bible – but the Holy Spirit has remained grieved. True communion with Christ, if it ever occurred during that meeting, was very weak. In a Sunday like that, perhaps we could say that they took part of the Lord’s Supper, but did not experience the Lord’s Table. True communion with Christ was missing. Some would say that they didn’t even celebrate the Lord’s Supper. They only ate bread and drank from a cup. But we should be cautious in judging other assemblies. Only the Lord sees the hearts. It is evident that no group of believers can have possession of this Table. Believers that in reality experience communion (with Christ and with one-another) as they partake of the emblems discerning the body and the blood of Christ, such believers celebrate the Lord’s Supper and experience the Lord’s Table.

C4: What is and what isn’t the Body of Christ?

The image of the church as “the body of Christ” is very rich and interesting. The use of this image varies a little between contexts, and this should be noticed in order to avoid strange conclusions. For example, in Ephesians 5 we learn that “Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour” (v.23). But the same apostle teaches in 1 Corinthians 12 that a believer can be an eye, an ear or the sense of smell - that is to say, a believer can be a part of the head (v.17, 21). The apostle is using the image of a body in two different ways, and this is not unusual. In Ephesians 5 the key teaching is that Christ, as head, should direct each member of the body. In 1 Corinthians 12 the key teaching is that all the members are different and each is necessary for the body to function well.

What is the Body of Christ?

The image of the church as the Body of Christ highlights some beautiful teachings. For example, it illustrates teamwork among believers, the diversity of the members (God has made us all different), that each member is necessary, that we should care one for another, that there is only one true church (Christ only has one body), and much more.

But what exactly is the Body of Christ? Who are included in this Body and who are excluded? When believers have differences and divide, some affirm that they are dividing the Body of Christ. Is it possible to divide the Body of Christ? When believers in one assembly refuse to be bound by a decision taken by another assembly, some say that they are denying the unity of the Body of Christ. Is this assertion correct? Others say an assembly must receive all the members of Body of Christ. Is this true? Clearly it is important to understand what the Bible teaches about the Body of Christ.

What I wish to show here, is that the Body of Christ **is not** the collection of a particular set of assemblies, neither is it the collection of all the assemblies in the world. The Body of Christ **is** made up of every true child of God. The Body of Christ is a collection of **people** and not a collection of **assemblies**. Once this distinction is clear, we shall show why this distinction is so important. We shall explore these thoughts in four steps:

1. The Body of Christ is not the sum of assemblies

If the Body of Christ were the sum of all the assemblies in the world, then, if we could gather together all people in all the assemblies we would have the complete Body of Christ alive today. But there are members of the Body of Christ that do not form part of any assembly. In 1 Corinthians 5, for example, we read of an immoral believer who was correctly excluded from the communion of his assembly. This immoral believer was **excluded** from all assemblies but was still **included** in the Body of Christ. So, the Body of Christ cannot be the sum of all the assemblies.

Furthermore, an assembly can mistakenly include an unbeliever in its midst. Such a person would form part of an assembly but not part of the Body of Christ.

We conclude that the Body of Christ is made up of all the true Christians. The Body of Christ includes the Christians that for some reason do not form part of an assembly, and excludes those that may form part of an assembly but have not been born again.

2. The Body of Christ is made up of individual saints

Let us now look at some biblical references. Please notice that in each case, the body is described as a group of people and not as a group of assemblies.

Romans 12:5. "So in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others." The "we" here refers to saints and not to assemblies.

Romans 12:6. "We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith." These gifts are given to saints, as individuals.

1 Corinthians 10:17. "Because we, *being* many, are one loaf, one body; for we all partake of that one loaf." When using "we," "many" and "we all," the apostle is focussing on believers as individuals. The "one loaf, one body" speaks of the sum of these individuals and not the sum of assemblies.

1 Corinthians 12:13. "For we were all baptised by one Spirit into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free..." Believers are baptised as individuals. Assemblies are not baptised.

1 Corinthians 12:27. "Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it." The "you" refers to believers and not to assemblies.

Ephesians 4:14-16. "Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching... Instead, speaking the

truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work." These "infants" are people and not assemblies. They form part of the Body of Christ as individuals, each individual having a particular "work."

Ephesians 4:25. "Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbour, for we are all members of one body." The "each of you" refers to believers as individuals, not assemblies.

Ephesians 5:29, 30. "After all, no-one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church. For we are members of his body." Christ sustains and cares for each believer, whether the believer forms part of an assembly or not. So the "members of his body" are saints and not assemblies.

3. Some differences between the Body and an assembly

The body image is used to teach us about the relationship between all true believers (some refer to this group as the Universal Church) and also the relationship between believers in a local church or assembly. The total church is the Body of Christ. An assembly, as a local expression of the church, displays some body functions. In the universal and the local sense, each member (believer) should be dependent on Christ as Head. In each case, the members need and help each other. Let us now observe some important differences between the Body of Christ (the Universal Church) and an assembly.

(a) How we enter: To enter the Body of Christ, we only need to be saved or born again. To enter and form part of an assembly, we must be received by an assembly (Romans 14:1; 15:7; 16:2; Acts 2:41-42).

(b) Its nature: The Body of Christ is a spiritual entity and its associated doctrine is positional, while the assembly is a physical and geographical entity made up of people who interact with each other, and the teachings associated with it are practical (Ephesians 1:22-23; 1 Corinthians 1:1-2).

(c) Male-Female distinction: In the Body of Christ [among all those who are in Christ Jesus] there is "neither male nor female" (Galatians 3:28), but in the assembly, there is a well-marked difference between male and female (1 Corinthians 11:1-16; 14:34; 1 Timothy 2:12-15).

(d) Unity: There is perfect unity in the Body of Christ (Ephesians 4:3-4). Nobody can divide the Body of Christ. But in an assembly there can be jealousy and quarrelling (1 Corinthians 3:3), and divisions (1 Corinthians 1:10, 11:18).

(e) Infiltration: The Body of Christ is made up only of the genuine children of God (1 Corinthians 12:13), but the assembly may be infiltrated by "savage wolves" (Acts 20:29), and people who may prove not to be genuine believers (1 John 2:19; Matthew 7:23).

(f) 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).

We conclude that the **assembly** or local church is not a miniature of the **Body of Christ**. These are two related but different concepts.

4. Some practical consequences

Understanding that the Body of Christ is made up of believers (that is, it is the aggregate of saints and not the aggregate of assemblies), will help us to behave in a biblical way:

(a) It protects us against an Open Communion: Because the Body of Christ and the assembly are two different entities, membership of the Body of Christ is not in itself a sufficient condition for being received into a local assembly.

(b) It protects us against “unisex”: Knowing that the Body of Christ and the assembly are two different entities, helps us understand that there is no difference between males and females in the Body of Christ, but that males and females do have different roles within the assembly.

(c) It protects us from the urge to inspect and control other assemblies: The Body of Christ is a world-wide entity and Christ, as Head of the Body, is responsible to look after it. An assembly is local entity and the elders have the responsibility (and delegated authority) to look after it.

(d) It protects against human pressures: If one or several assemblies, in obedience to Lord, reject a decision which they consider conflicting with Scripture, they are **not** denying the unity of the Body of Christ. What they are denying is the existence of a regional, national or international human authority above Christ and the Word of God. Equally, if an assembly **biblically** decides a matter and other assemblies don't submit to their decision, such assemblies are not denying the unity of Body of Christ. Such assemblies are simply mistaken. The Lord, in His good time, will make them feel their mistake (their sin) and move them to repentance.

In conclusion, the image of the church of God as the Body of Christ contains some very special teachings. As each member of a body is directed by the head, so each believer should be subject to the Lord Jesus Christ in his personal and assembly life. The image of the body also helps us to accept and to appreciate the particular features of each brother and sister, helping us to relate to one another in a positive and constructive way. What the image of the Body of Christ does not teach us is how one assembly should relate to another assembly.

C5: Binding decisions in heaven

When somebody starts a new job in a school, a hospital, a company, a farm or at the police, he needs a clear understanding of what are his responsibilities and what authority he has. We may then ask what authority does an assembly or local church have? Central to this question, is the interpretation of **Matthew 18:18-20**.

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" (DBY).

v.19: "Again I say to 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" (DBY).

v.20: "For where two or three are gathered together unto my name, there am I in the midst of them" (DBY).

What does it mean to bind in heaven?

When "something" is bound in heaven, it is understood that God the Father (who lives in heaven) approves and endorses that "something." God the Father sees and only approves that which is just and true (Lamentations 3:35-36). Everything that God the Father endorses and approves is of binding or compulsory character on all Christians.

Does Matthew 18:18 mean that an assembly can "bind in the heaven" all its decisions - or only those decisions that are in harmony with the will of the Father? For example, some of among the Brethren support the interpretation offered by H. L. Heykoop in his book "The Assembly of God." He teaches that all assemblies must accept, submit to, and be bound by every assembly decision taken in the name of Christ.

He writes: "**The question is not whether the decision is wise and agrees with what the Father desires... Could heaven refuse a decision that has been made in the Name of the Son of God? Certainly not!**" (Pages 25-27. Published by GBV, Germany). This interpretation is **not** correct. We shall never be able to bind on the Father that which He does not agree with. The Sovereign God of the Bible cannot be manipulated by any human, neither by any assembly. Never! Not for an instant!

We should, therefore, study Matthew 18:18-20 with great care. It is helpful to look at two other similar references in the New Testament:

Matthew 16:18-19. "... you are Peter... I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be (or have been) bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be (or have been) loosed in heaven."

John 20:20-23. "... The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord... he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven'."

Through the centuries, much has been written about these verses. The Roman Catholic Church, for example, uses Matthew 16:19 to give the Pope authority “to bind in heaven” his determinations; it uses Matthew 18:18-20 to give its church Councils authority to “bind in heaven” its decisions, and uses John 20:23 to give Roman Catholic priests authority to forgive sins. These are incorrect interpretations. What we shall see is that we on the earth can never impose something on heaven. Our calling or duty is to seek the will of our Father in heaven and to humbly act in conformity with it. “Let thy kingdom come, let **thy will** be done **as** in heaven **so** upon the earth” (Mathew 6:10 DBY).

The earth should act in harmony with heaven

Let us notice that the three references that we are looking at (Matthew 16, Matthew 18 and John 20) address three themes in which there should be harmony between us on earth and the Father in heaven. These are: (a) forgiveness of sins, (b) prayers and (c) decisions.

(a) Forgiveness of sins: (John 20:23). If a human declares a sinner forgiven which God has not forgiven, the sinner remains without God’s forgiveness. Forgiveness is received when God forgives. We on earth should seek to recognise and then declare what God does. When a difference arises between us on “earth” and God the Father in “heaven,” the heaven always wins and the earth always loses. Always!

(b) Prayers: (Matthew 18:19). Some Pentecostal saints believe that if two Christians agree and pray using the name of Christ, God **must** give them what they have asked for. This interpretation is not correct. In John 14:13-14 we read that “I will do whatever you ask in my name...You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.” But we know that the Father is not promising to give us all that we ask for, be it good or bad. To ask in the name of Christ is to ask according to the will of Christ. Later, the same apostle John clarifies: “This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything **according to his will**, he hears” (1 John 5:14).

(c) Decisions: (Matthew 18:18). When an assembly convinces itself that it can impose its decisions on the Father in heaven, it is making a mistake. The mistake is similar to that which the Roman Catholic church makes on forgiveness and some Pentecostals on prayer. The determinations, decisions, excommunications and restorations carried out by an assembly are only “bound in heaven” if they are in conformity with the will of the Father who is in heaven.

The fact that we meet together in the name of Jesus and then ask for something mentioning, using or invoking the name of the Son of God will never force the Father to act. God the Father can never endorse our assembly decisions if they do not agree with His will. When we use the name of Christ with authority in matters that the Father does not support, we are simply using His name in an empty way - without His backing. To truly act in the name of Christ, our decision must conform to the Father’s will. It would be healthy for those who use lightly the name of the Lord to meditate on Exodus 20:7.

The unique authority of the Word of God

When we say that all Christians should accept and submit to all **Scriptural** assembly decisions, we are protecting a fundamental doctrine, that the Holy Scriptures are the **only** source of authority binding on all Christians and on all Christian assemblies. If we accept that an assembly has the authority “to bind” its decisions on all the assemblies, even if she moves away from the Word of God, we will be accepting **two** sources of authority: that of the Holy Scriptures and that of an assembly. The Roman Catholic Church has always taught that there are **two** sources of authority: the Holy Scriptures and Mother Church. The Protestant reformation, which took place some 500 years ago, emphatically rejected this teaching. We should continue to reject it. **No assembly has authority in itself. An assembly exercises authority only while it acts in harmony with the Word of God.**

C6: Independent, Interdependent or Integrated

When the Church is compared to a body, we learn that believers, as members of that body, are all different and that they need each other. “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don't need you!’ And the head cannot say to the feet, ‘I don't need you!’” (1 Corinthians 12:21). We see here a degree of interdependence between body members. The finger, to function properly, needs the hand, and the hand needs the arm, and the arm the shoulder, etc. Brothers and sisters who form part of an assembly live this experience of interdependence in a practical way. God gives gifts to the church, such as teachers and evangelists. Assemblies should make good use of such gifts, by using their books, inviting them to workshops, conferences and evangelistic campaigns.

Does one assembly depend on another?

We say that an old man leans or depends on his walking-stick and that a blind man depends on his guide. In this way, an assembly should depend exclusively on Christ and not on any other assembly. Without the walking-stick, the old man falls. Without his guide, the blind man gets lost. A newly formed assembly can depend temporarily on the support of other assemblies; but this transitional dependence should be overcome. The Bible does not teach that one assembly depends on another assembly. A spiritual, mature and growing assembly does not depend on any other assembly.

Useful lessons from Church history

The biblical pattern of assembly life that the Lord has designed is beautiful and simple. All that is needed can be found in the Word of God. We are not required to study the history of different groups of Christians, neither are we required to take part in their varied disputes and divisions. In fact, we are advised against meddling in other people's quarrels (Proverbs 26:17; 1 Peter 4:15). The study of modern Christian history may help us to be more realistic by opening our eyes to what Christians are able to do. We may be motivated and inspired by the lives of some men of God (1 Thessalonians 1:6-7). We may be warned against repeating some painful mistakes (Galatians 1:6-7). The church of Jesus Christ began some 2000 years ago (not 200 years ago). The history of the church of Jesus Christ over these

last 2000 years is the history of our family. It is good to know something of it, but this knowledge is not indispensable.

The sufficiency of God and His Word

In the farewell speech to the leaders of the assembly at Ephesus, the apostle Paul exhorts them, "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard!" Then he adds, "Now I commit you to **God** and to the **word** of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified" (Acts 20:28-32). When saying goodbye to these saints for last time, Paul does **not** commend them to the care or supervision of another apostle, or another missionary, or a full time worker. Neither does he entrust them to a larger or an older assembly, or to a particular network of assemblies. The apostle Paul considered that the assembly at Ephesus was mature. He commends them to **God** and the **Word**. When the assembly began in Antioch, Barnabas, Paul and others moved there to help them. When dealing with a new assembly, regular visits of neighbouring assemblies may be very convenient. But the goal is that every assembly should mature.

If we have the **Word of God** and the **Holy Spirit** has true freedom among us, we have everything we need to find and live the biblical pattern of assembly life. The assembly at Ephesus did not depend on any other assembly. In this sense, it was not **interdependent**. Neither was the assembly at Ephesus **independent**. It had constructive relationships with other assemblies. Perhaps we could say, from the evidence we have, that a New Testament type assembly should be **integrated** with other assemblies (recall **Section B1**). If **God** and the **Word** were sufficient for the assembly at Ephesus, we can be sure that they will still be sufficient for every true Christian assembly today.

C7: Love, Unity, Holiness and Separation

The apostle John, as an old man, was very happy to see the new generation of Christians "walking in the truth, just as the Father commanded us" (2 John 4). There is only one truth: God's truth. God's desire is that you and I live that truth. When we explore the Scriptures seeking direction on how we should relate with other Christians, we find two seemingly contradictory truths, two seemingly opposite roads. Some Scriptures point in the direction of **unity and love**; other Scriptures point in the direction of **holiness and separation**. Which of these two roads should we take? Socially inclined believers and those of cheerful temperament usually prefer the road of love and unity. Orderly believers with a perfectionist inclination usually prefer the road of holiness and separation. Are these really two different roads? Impossible! The Lord has only one way. How then can we reconcile and live such Scriptures?

For our instruction, God allowed and recorded in Scriptures a number of very serious problems in the church - both moral and doctrinal. As we read how the Holy Spirit guided the apostles to handle these problems, we will better understand how we are

to express this balance between unity and love on the one hand and holiness and separation on the other. In **Section C8** we will look at seven such cases. Because you and I naturally lean in one or the other of the two directions, before we move on to consider these case studies, I suggest you allow the Lord to press on your heart the real tension inherent in the following set of Scriptures:

Instructions promoting love and unity

Jesus Christ: “Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one... that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:11, 21).

Apostle Paul: “May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 15:5-6). “I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought” (1 Corinthians 1:10). “Finally, brothers, good-bye. Aim for perfection, listen to my appeal, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you” (2 Corinthians 13:11). “Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:2-3). “...then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose” (Philippians 2:2).

Apostle Peter: “Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble. Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing”. “Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 3:8-9; 4:8).

Apostle John: “... so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ...Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth... Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God” (1 John 1:3; 3:18; 4:7).

Instructions promoting holiness and separation

The Old Testament contains a number of references that show how much God values holiness: the seraphs in the presence of God called to each other “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty” (Isaiah 6:3). It is with good reason that the Psalmist would sing “Holiness adorns your house for endless days, oh Lord” (93:5) and “Worship the Lord in the splendour of his holiness” (96:9). But what is holiness?

HOLINESS: Secular dictionaries define “holy” as something “especially pure, without stain, perfect.” But in the Scriptures, the word “holy” has a different meaning. The Scriptural meaning of “holiness” is not in the first place a “separation from what is bad” but “**a consecration, a dedication for a special purpose.**” Now this dedication requires a “**separation from any distraction**”, and this distraction may be something “good” or something “bad.”

The Scriptural meaning of “holiness” will become clearer as we consider how the word is used in the Old Testament.

- Aaron had “holy garments” (Exodus 31:10, DBY), that is to say, he had some garments that he only wore when exercising priestly functions.
- The priest usually ate in his house, but some things he could only eat in “a holy place” (Leviticus 6:26), that is to say, in a specially designated area.
- We read in Leviticus 27:21 that when a field is released in Jubilee, “it will become holy, like a field devoted to the LORD; it will become the property of the priests.” This field would then have a special function, different from the other fields.
- The “holy water” (Numbers 5:17) was not a reference to filtered or boiled water. It was water separated for a special function.
- Some of the things offered by the people of Israel are described as “holy for the priest” (Numbers 6:20, DBY), meaning that these things now belonged to the priest.
- Nehemiah described a day as “This day is holy to Jehovah your God” (Nehemiah 8:9, DBY). The idea was that the day was dedicated to God in a special way.

Frequently Christians are called “saints” and “holy brothers” (Romans 15:25; Hebrews 3:1). [Translator’s note: In Greek, “saint” and “holy” are the same word. In Spanish they are also the same.] Christian assemblies are described as “churches of the saints” [churches of the holy ones] (1 Corinthians 14:33). As Christians, we are “called to be holy” (1 Corinthians 1:2). To be holy is not so much “perfection in behaviour” but living a life separated unto the Lord, that is, devoted to the Lord. This devotion requires a throwing off of “everything that hinders (*good things that distract*) and the sin (*bad things*) that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus...” (Hebrews 12:1-2 words in italics added).

Separation and practical holiness are also encouraged in the New Testament:

Apostle Paul: “But now I am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat” (1 Corinthians 5:11). “Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you” (2 Corinthians 6:17). “Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness... If a man cleanses himself from the latter, he will be an instrument for noble purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work” (2 Timothy 2: 19-21).

The author of Hebrews: “Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no-one will see the Lord” (Hebrews 12:14).

Apostle Peter: “Be holy in all you do, for it is written: ‘Be holy, because I am holy’... turn from evil and do good” (1 Peter 1:15-16; 3:11).

Apostle John: “If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him” (2 John 10).

These, and other similar verses, convey a very high calling. But the sad reality is that among God’s people we find Christians who are carnal, legalistic, materialistic, complicated, egocentric, lazy, dominant, obstinate, lovers of controversy, gossipers, slanderers, driven by personal complexes, those who invent their own version of Christianity, and many more. In all of us, sin is still present (Romans 7:17-21). From time to time, you and I also cause some difficulties to others. Given we are all complicated and inclined to sin, how does God expect believers to live in beautiful harmony? “Shall two walk together except they be agreed?” (Amos 3:3, DBY). And when we don’t agree, what can we do? **Divide** to avoid identifying with those we consider incorrect? **Ignore** those we consider wrong or evil? Be flexible, **tolerant** and forbearing with all?

Some proposals

In facing this practical dilemma, let’s look at some proposed solutions:

Ecumenism: Doctrinal disagreements cause many divisions among Christians. Therefore many believers suggest that to reach unity, we must de-emphasise or discard doctrine. These promote doctrinal tolerance and stress the importance of showing **love**. They organise large united meetings in parks and stadiums, and encourage joint projects among Christians who may hold conflicting doctrines. These Christians are concerned with the external and visible unity of the Church. Is this the route to unity outlined and practiced by the apostles? I don’t think so.

Isolation: Some believers suggest that holiness is achieved through separation and isolation. If a Christian observes something in his congregation that is in conflict with Scripture, he is encouraged to separate from that congregation. The Christians who separate from their congregations searching for holiness and doctrinal purity will eventually meet up and unite. It is thought that this process will achieve the desired holiness and unity. But, they will simply form another grouping that, in time, will also divide. Is this the route to unity outlined and practised by the apostles? I don’t think so.

GRACE - The indispensable factor

How can a “holy, holy, holy” God use us with all our sad defects? When God saved us, He made us “holy,” that is, He set us apart for a particular purpose. Day by day He is sanctifying us, that is, He is separating us from everything that doesn't agree with that purpose. But until our last day, we shall still have sad defects and deviations. How does God manage to combine His holiness and His love? This is only possible because of **God’s grace**.

Grace is a gift. It is a gift that no one ever deserves. The grace of God is what distinguishes Christianity from all the other religions.

- How could a holy God “work miracles” among the assemblies of Galatia when they were “biting and devouring each other” and “provoking and envying each other”? (Galatians 3:5; 5:15, 26) - only because of the grace of God.

- How could a holy God receive true worship from an assembly like that at Corinth that had so many serious problems? - only because of the grace of God.
- Why do we see true conversions and undeniable evidence of God's blessing among Christian groups that hold some serious doctrinal errors? - only because of the grace of God.
- How is it possible that a holy God can use inconsistent and mediocre Christians like you and me? - only because of the grace of God.
- How does God expect us to combine His instructions on love and unity with those of holiness and separation? – this will only be possible if we resort to the grace of God.

We are saved by the grace of God (Ephesians 2:8-9). We must “continue in the grace of God” (Acts 13:43). We are called to grow in the grace (2 Peter 3:18). The grace of God should be evident in our way of speaking (Colossians 4:6). The apostle Paul devoted his life to build, to correct and to encourage good relations between assemblies. Paul's usual greeting was “Grace and peace to you from God” – and this was not simply a decorative nicety. He well knew that without grace there can be no genuine peace. **In order to express love and unity without neglecting holiness and separation we must know and practice the beautiful GRACE of God.** [But before we can ever administer grace, we need a personal conscious experience of the grace of God. If you have never felt a desperate need for God's grace, you probably still haven't experienced it].

The grace of God expresses itself in many ways. The body of Christ is built up when each believer happily administers “God's grace in its various forms” (1 Peter 4:10). Some Christians do not understand what grace is. Some feel more secure administering laws, rules, customs, agreements and mechanical procedures. It is possible to fall away from grace (Galatians 5:4). On the other extreme, there are those who “change the grace of God into a licence for immorality” (Jude 4). The last words in the Bible are: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ *be* with all the saints” (Revelation 22:21 DBY). **Genuine biblical Christianity needs grace to function.** It is not optional. Grace is indispensable. We shall now look at some examples of how the apostles administered the grace of God in difficult situations.

C8. Procedures of grace in dealing with irregularities

While the New Testament church was growing and being blessed by the Lord, it was experiencing internal tensions generated by different customs, personality conflicts, disagreements over the handling of money, incorrect excommunications, sexual immorality, physical violence and a variety of serious doctrinal errors. The Holy Spirit considered it appropriate to register in Scripture a variety of difficult situations lived by the early church together with an outline of how the apostles handled them. Why? These uncomfortable events teach us to be realistic. They also illustrate for us how the church of Christ should administer the **grace of God** in moments of crisis. Let us consider seven of such situations.

1. CORINTH - A Carnal Assembly

Some teachers from the Charismatic Movement give the impression that the assembly at Corinth, with their diverse spiritual gifts, is a model assembly. But when reading the apostle Paul's letters to this assembly, we notice an alarming number of disorders. They were internally polarised, there was conflict, gossip, some didn't accept Paul's authority, others were indifferent over internal moral failure, some believers were taking others to court, and there was controversy over eating meat sacrificed to idols. There were disorders in the administration of the Lord's Supper. Some women didn't cover the head, others didn't keep silent. There was disorder in their use of spiritual gifts, disorder in their use of prophecy and speaking in tongues. Some promoted an incorrect view of the resurrection, etc. It is frightening to think of an assembly in such a mess. How should love, unity, holiness and separation be administered in such a situation?

If the Scriptural procedure were to "excommunicate" assemblies, the assembly at Corinth would be an obvious candidate. But how does the grace of God act in this difficult situation? We read that God intervened and judged some people directly (1 Corinthians 11:30). How can the Lord God work in the middle of such a disorderly assembly? It is evident that at Corinth God continued to bless and work miracles even while the disorder persisted. There is no doubt that God doesn't like disorder. His Holy Spirit is active awakening consciences, motivating repentance and reviving a desire to live a holy life. How can we explain the fact that a holy, holy, holy God worked in an assembly like that at Corinth? This is impossible to understand without grasping the reality of the grace of God.

The apostle Paul is hurt by the carnality he observes at Corinth. Paul tells them openly "I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly" (1 Corinthians 3:1), yet he does not recommend division. He does not recommend that other assemblies reject the saints who came from Corinth. He does not recommend that this assembly should be excluded to avoid defilement. He does not encourage saints in other assemblies to sign letters, neither does he invite them to "take a clear position" against Corinth. But neither is the apostle indifferent. What does the apostle do? He writes to the Corinthians several long letters helping them understand their disorders. He encourages them and pleads with them to correct what is wrong. He could not fit everything he wanted to say in his letters, so he adds "and when I come I will give further directions" (1 Corinthians 11:34). The apostle corrects and he waits. **Correction and patience.** More correction and more patience. In the second letter Paul mentions some positive results of earlier corrections (2 Corinthians 7:8-11). Then he continued to correct and continued to wait. This is how the grace of God was applied to this difficult situation.

2. CRETE - Deficient Assemblies

Crete is an island in the Mediterranean Sea. Some inhabitants of this island were present at the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was poured out (Acts 2:11). The apostle Paul together with Titus worked on this island evangelising and establishing assemblies in every town. For some reason, Paul had to leave Crete and left Titus on the island. Paul then writes to him: "The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town" (Titus 1:5).

[Translator's note: "unfinished" is also translated "unordered" DBY, "wanting" KJV, "defective" RSV]. Here we find faulty, incomplete or imperfect assemblies. Being realistic, we must admit that every assembly has its imperfections. What was the particular deficiency among the assemblies in Crete? The verse quoted suggests that these assemblies were deficient in leadership. This was a serious shortfall, especially within a culture whose dominant features are described as "liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons" (1:12). Within the assemblies in Crete there were "rebellious people, mere talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision group," that is to say, these assemblies had saints with serious character deficiencies and doctrinal deviations (1:10). How would the grace of God have us act in such a situation? Leave the island? Isolate the assemblies of the island until they show themselves clean on these matters? How does the grace of God deal with this disorder?

In this case, the apostle Paul delegated his apostolic authority to Titus so that he would do three things:

- (1) Organise the leadership in each assembly (1:5).
- (2) Silence those who wanted to participate but did not build up the assembly (1:11).
- (3) Rebuke disorderly believers - liars, evil wild beasts and lazy gluttons – "so that they will be sound in the faith" (1:13).

Paul's letter to Titus is full of advice and practical teachings to help Titus and others correct the deficiencies they would find among assemblies in Crete. **Teach, correct and be patient.** Locally they should silence those who should not speak. This is the way the grace of God was applied in this situation.

3. ANTIOCH, SYRIA AND CILICIA - Attacked Assemblies

The assemblies in the regions of Syria and Cilicia possibly began with the evangelistic work of the apostle Paul (Galatians 1:21). The assembly at Antioch began when believers from Cyprus and Cyrene arrived there and shared the gospel with the Greeks. "The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord" (Acts 11:21). Then Barnabas arrived from Jerusalem. When he came, he found a new and enthusiastic assembly made up mainly of Gentile believers. "He saw the evidence of the grace of God; he was glad and encouraged them." Barnabas brought Paul and together they "taught great numbers of people" during one year (Acts 11:20-26). As is the case in every assembly, the one at Antioch also had its share of problems. One day, this assembly was seriously attacked by brothers who came from another assembly. They began to teach an erroneous doctrine in Antioch. They said "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved" (Acts 15:1). How does the grace of God respond to this serious doctrinal attack?

Local responsible brothers made use of their local authority to prevent these Judean teachers from continuing to cause harm. "This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question" (Acts 15:2). It was the responsibility of the apostles and elders of Jerusalem to call to order the Jerusalem based brothers. After the debate in Acts 15,

they sent an apostolic letter directed “To the Gentile believers (*not to the Christians of Jewish background*) in **Antioch, Syria and Cilicia**” (v.23 words in italics added). The letter is then taken to the city of Antioch and the regions of Syria and Cilicia, the three places where the Judaist teachers were causing problems (v.30, 41). But let us notice a very interesting detail: Paul wanted to take Timothy with him on the journey to deliver the letter to Syria and Cilicia, “so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area” (Acts 16:3). Why did Paul circumcise Timothy after he had gone through such an effort to abolish the necessity of circumcision? Was the apostle a double faced man? Definitely not! Paul did not circumcise Timothy out of **necessity** neither out of **obligation** (Galatians 2:3). I believe that Paul circumcised Timothy as an expression of the grace of God, so that Timothy's ministry in that region could be acceptable to all. This agrees with the strategy described by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23.

Several useful conclusions may be derived from the above:

- (1) If the ministry of a visiting brother is not considered profitable, local brethren should stop him. Local leaders (elders) are always responsible before God to exercise local quality control.
- (2) We can also learn that a full-time labouring brother who visits other assemblies should have one assembly as his base. Every brother and every sister should be under the pastoral care of one assembly.
- (3) Visiting teachers should be prudent and not impose their customs and preferences on other assemblies. On the contrary, if they wish to be a blessing, they should deny themselves, and exercise respect and self control.
- (4) Finally, we observe that the grace of God makes it possible for assemblies to integrate and interact in a constructive manner while felt differences still remain. They did not consider that these differences justified division. For many years, assemblies of Gentile origin and assemblies of Jewish origin retained some significant and strongly felt differences.

Before moving on to another situation, let us take note that the meeting in Jerusalem described in Acts 15 (which some refer to as an Apostolic Council) was unique: there were apostles present, and they came together to solve a specific problem that threatened to divide the churches. This unique meeting cannot be used as a justification to invest with general authority groups such as a “council of churches” or “national elder’s retreats.” Agreements reached or decisions taken in such meetings can not be imposed on all the assemblies.

4. GALATIA – Contaminated Assemblies

Almost everything we know about the assemblies in the region of Galatia is learnt from Paul’s letter to the Galatians. Galatia is first mentioned in Acts 16:6. Peter addresses his first epistle “To God’s elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia...” (1 Peter 1:1). It is probable that Paul was the founder of the assemblies in Galatia. He wrote that “it was because of an illness that I first

preached the gospel to you” (Galatians 4:13-15). At first there was great satisfaction and abundant joy and freedom in Christ. But this joy was soon lost. Some “false brothers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves” (Galatians 2:4). This legalistic doctrine that had caused problems in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia had arrived and contaminated the assemblies of Galatia. The contamination began with some men that came from Jerusalem (the assembly where James was an influential brother) and was now influencing many Jewish Christians. How does the grace of God act when confronting doctrinal leaven?

Paul identifies and highlights the doctrinal error of these teachers and encourages the brethren in Galatia to reject it. “Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery” (Galatians 5:1). He warns them that if they remain passive, more brothers and sisters will be dragged away by this bad doctrine. “A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough” (Galatians 5:9). As to the apostle Paul himself, he tells us that he “**did not give in to them for a moment**” (Galatians 2:4, 5). He explains that “when Peter came to Antioch, **I opposed him to his face**, because he was clearly in the wrong. Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he begun to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those of the circumcision group” (Galatians 2:11-14). Take notice that the grace of God can act with great firmness. God’s “grace” also has teeth - but it doesn't bite in any odd way.

Let us now observe what Paul **did not** do as he faced this doctrinal leaven: Did he draft a letter and go around collecting signatures from other assemblies? He did not. Did he encourage all the other assemblies to write letters and pronounce themselves on this matter? He did not. Did he accuse the assemblies that kept silent of being “neutral” and of tolerating this bad doctrine? He did not. How did the grace of God work in this situation? What can we learn? That each assembly, seriously, firmly and with decency, must resist “face to face” the problems when they arrive at its door. This is a local responsibility.

5. JERUSALEM - An Assembly with Legalisms

Jerusalem has been a special city for the Jews for many years. Even after the inauguration of the church age in Acts 2, we notice a continued attachment to Jerusalem and to the temple. For example, Peter and John went up to the temple to pray; many in neighbouring towns brought their sick to Jerusalem to be healed by the apostles (Acts 3:1; 5:16). The Jews, who converted to the Christian faith, accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Salvador, but it was difficult for them to set aside the custom of circumcision and some other Jewish traditions. The Apostolic Council described in Acts 15 confirmed that the circumcision was not necessary for salvation, and that Jewish customs should not be imposed on the Gentile Christians. But the letter signed by the apostles, elders and brothers did **not** attempt to correct this behaviour among Jewish Christians. Among the saints in the assembly at Jerusalem, some Jewish rituals continued, not as a basis for salvation, but as a national custom (Acts 16:3). Cultural and religious customs and traditions are slow to change.

In Acts 21 we read of Paul’s last visit to Jerusalem. He was welcomed warmly. Paul then met with James and the elders of the assembly at Jerusalem “and reported in

detail what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. When they heard this, they praised God” and immediately they changed the subject (vs. 17-20). Thousands of Jews had believed, but “all of them are zealous for the law” (v. 20). The fact that Gentile Christians were not circumcised was no longer a problem (v.25). The accusation against Paul was that “you teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or to live according to our customs” (v. 21).

Paul followed the advice of James and the elders, and carried out a Jewish ritual (v. 23-24). Personally, I don't completely understand the apostle's behaviour in this situation. Even Paul's visit to Jerusalem puzzles me (v.4). Some commentators defend what Paul did in Jerusalem; others suggest he went too far to appease the Jews.

Leaving aside what the apostle did in Jerusalem, what is very evident is that the assembly at Jerusalem had a great number of Jewish Christians who remained bound to legalisms. That is, many of them were still “zealous for the law” (v. 20), thinking that the Christian should live “in obedience to the law” (v. 24). Moved by force of custom, lack of conviction or by fear, the leadership of the assembly at Jerusalem chose not to correct this doctrinal error. The truth, the correct doctrine, is taught with clarity by the apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans: “my brothers, you also died to the law through the body of Christ” (7:4). “What, then? Shall we sin because we are not under the law but under the grace? By no means!” (6:15). In his letter to the Galatians, the apostle is even more explicit: “Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all... You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace” (5:2-4). The Christian assembly at Jerusalem definitely had a very serious problem. How does the grace of God respond to such a complicated situation?

How did other assemblies react to this obvious disorder in Jerusalem? The apostle Paul could have encouraged other assemblies, especially those of Gentile origin, to make a pronouncement, to “declare their position” firmly against the doctrinal error evident in the assembly at Jerusalem. But he doesn't do this. He could have rejected saints from Jerusalem as “lepers” or “defiled” and could have excluded them from a “circle” of other assemblies. But he didn't do this. It is evident that other assemblies were not considered contaminated by the presence of these deviant practices in Jerusalem. But if brothers from Jerusalem visited other assemblies and tried to promote their errors, these brothers would be firmly rejected when they arrived. What is the grace of God teaching us by the apostolic handling of this situation? I believe that it is giving us a clear example of how to resist "doctrinal leaven" when it is evident in **another assembly**.

As mentioned above, Paul corrects this doctrinal error in his letter to the church at Rome and in his letter to the churches in Galatia. The grace of God did not abandon the church in Jerusalem to its error. In the letter to the Hebrews, the Lord urges all Jewish Christians to let go of the rituals of the Jewish law: “Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings. It is good for our hearts to be strengthened by grace, not by ceremonial foods, which are of no value to those who eat them. We have an

altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat... Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore" (Hebrews 13:9-13).

6. GAIUS AND DIOTREPHESES - An Independent Assembly

This assembly had a dominant leading brother called DiotrepheSES who controlled the assembly. To maintain his personal control over the assembly, he tried to isolate it from other assemblies. He prohibited certain visits, and those who would not submit to him were expelled from the assembly. "I wrote to the church, but DiotrepheSES, who loves to be first, will have nothing to do with us. So if I come, I will call attention to what he is doing, gossiping maliciously about us. Not satisfied with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers. He also stops those who want to do so and puts them out of the church. Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil but what is good. Anyone who does what is good is from God. Anyone who does what is evil has not seen God" (3 John 9-11). How did the grace of God act in this uncomfortable situation?

Take notice of what the apostle John does and what he doesn't do. He writes two letters, firstly to the church where the irregularity is taking place (v.9) and then to Gaius, a brother who is directly affected by the irregularity (v.1, 11). The apostle does not write letters to all the assemblies, but writes only to those who are directly involved. Besides writing letters, the apostle John wanted to visit them to discuss the matters face to face (v.10).

Although the situation in this assembly was so serious that even the apostle John would not be received (v.9), the apostle does not recommend that this assembly should be "cut-off". Neither does he say that brothers and sisters who were being expelled by DiotrepheSES should not be received by other assemblies. He calmly encourages Gaius not to "imitate what is evil but what is good" (v.11). Then he gives a strong backing to Demetrius (v. 12), a brother who most probably had been discredited by DiotrepheSES. We read similar instructions in the book of Romans: "Hate what is evil; cling to what is good" (12:9) and "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (12:21).

7. ASIA - Assemblies with Bad Doctrines

After the disagreement with Barnabas (Acts 15:39), the apostle Paul (together with Silas and Timothy) travelled close to Asia but did not preach there, "having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia" (Acts 16:6). On another trip, Paul visited Asia and begun to teach in the city of Ephesus. "This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord" (Acts 19:10). Some of Paul's critics complained "this fellow Paul has convinced and led astray large numbers of people here in Ephesus and in practically the whole province of Asia" (Acts 19:26). In the province of Asia, an assembly was established at Ephesus and in at least another six towns. The last epistle Paul writes before his death is his second letter to Timothy. We read some sad news in this letter: "You know that everyone in the province of Asia has deserted me" (2 Timothy 1:15). Although this distancing occurred between the apostle Paul and these churches, the Lord did not abandon Paul (2 Timothy 4:17) neither did He abandon the churches in Asia. About 30 years later, the Lord inspires the apostle

John to write an individual letter to each of the seven churches in Asia (Revelation 2 and 3). At this later date, what was the spiritual condition in these assemblies?

Each one of these seven assemblies is compared with a candlestick, and Jesus Christ walks among them analysing the spiritual condition of each one. Revelation 2 and 3 contains seven divine “x-rays,” one of each assembly. These seven letters were not based on what the apostle John had seen or on reports he had received. They represent an analysis by Christ Himself. These x-rays teach us how Christ, the Head of the church, viewed these different assemblies. When Christ looks at the assemblies, He distinguishes between an assembly that is hard working and patient and an assembly that is “lukewarm – neither hot nor cold.” He distinguishes between assemblies that test those who claim to be apostles or those that cannot tolerate evil, and those other assemblies that retain evil doctrines or tolerate fornication. How does the grace of God deal with assemblies with diverse disorders like these?

It is clear that each assembly should judge the bad things that become evident within it. Jesus Christ, with “eyes like blazing fire” (1:14; 2:18) examines our motives, our actions, and our words. But notice that no assembly was judged by the Lord for a disorder that was not their own. Each assembly received the Lord’s commendation and rebuke based on what was happening locally. Where Christ saw something deficient, He urged repentance. In the case of Ephesus, He warned them that “If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place” (2:5). When an assembly persists in following a wrong path, Christ does not call on the other assemblies to unite and “cut it off.” In this sad situation, Christ Himself acts to remove the lampstand (or candlestick) from its place. When Christ does this, that assembly stops being a light and a testimony for Christ before the world. When this happens, it will be recognisable and evident to any spiritual mind. The practice of “formally” excluding, or the teaching that nearby assemblies are responsible before God to “declare it out” of a circle of fellowship, does not find support in the Holy Scriptures.

Day of Ruin

Some use the expression “day of ruin” to describe the current state of the church, a state of decadence that began at the end of the apostolic age. The expression “day of ruin” cannot be found in my concordance, but that is not a problem. [Translator’s note: The expression “día de ruina” does not exist in the Spanish Bible. But “day of ruin” appears once in Darby’s English translation, in Zephaniah 1:15]. The problem arises when some think that because they are living in what they call a “day of ruin,” they feel justified in discarding some of the teachings and apostolic examples we have explored in the New Testament.

The **New Political Constitution of Colombia** (1991) has 380 articles. The Constitution exists to protect the citizen's rights and to provide a legal framework so that Colombia may function as a Republic. In moments of crisis, the Colombian government may declare the country in a “State of Emergency.” Under these conditions, the President of the Republic, the army and the police acquire special powers. A number of citizen’s rights and freedoms described in the Constitution are temporarily suspended. This arrangement exists to help the government fight drug trafficking and terrorism. In a similar way, I feel that some Christian teachers want to

declare the church of Christ in a “day of ruin” to justify the setting aside some teachings, operative models and apostolic examples that are clearly seen in the New Testament.

It is very evident that the church of Christ is living in confusing times. Many people call themselves “Christian” without conversion. Many congregations, denominations, sects and groupings like to carry the name “Christian.” But the fact that we live in difficult times does not give us authority to discard biblical models. Apostolic instructions and apostolic procedures registered in the Word of God are not a set of “perfect ideals” to be practised only during the first 10 or 100 years of the church. The apostles have left us their instructions both in their teaching and in the way they acted (Acts 20:18-20; 2 Timothy 3:10). Christ designed His church to work in a fallen world like ours, with imperfect Christians like you and me. The Church order has been designed to function until the Rapture. Even with our imperfections, Christ continues to build His church. If we want to experience healthy, dynamic and biblical relationships between assemblies, we must take to heart the procedural models, examples and practical expressions of the grace of God.

“I entreat you therefore, **be my imitators.**
For this reason I have sent to you Timotheus,
who is my beloved and faithful child in *the* Lord,
who shall put you in mind of **my ways as they are in Christ,**
according as I teach everywhere in every assembly.”
1 Corinthians 4:16-17 DBY

“The **grace** of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers. Amen.”
Galatians 6:18