

The Walk of Saints according to the Spirit

"Endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit." — Eph. 4: 3.

"Let every one that nameth the name of the Lord, depart from iniquity." — 2 Timothy 2: 17.

Our present subject is to examine and ascertain, in some measure, from Scripture what our path is at the present time, and our responsibility in connection with the Holy Spirit's presence on earth, as members of the body of Christ, formed by His presence and baptism. May the blessed Lord guide us, as those who would say, "show me now thy way," and "Give me grace to walk therein."

First of all, then, we must examine the testimonies of Scripture as to the state of ruin into which the professing church has fallen, and in which we ourselves are involved. God permitted the roots and germs of all this state to come out in the apostolic days, so that He might give us the testimony of His word as to it all, and mark a path for His own in the scene of confusion which exists around us. We cannot escape from it to go outside; nor, at the same time, does God force us to abide in a path where the conscience is outraged, and the word of God discarded, and practices are found which have no warrant from Him. He gives us a plain path, where we may obey His voice, and have the joy of His presence with us in our course while here.

It is striking and instructive to see that the Epistle from which we have cited our text for this evening's lecture, was not written in a day when everything was in order, when the church of God was walking, in the first freshness of power and blessing, with Christ. If this was the case when it was written, we might have admired it, and thought of its perfection and beauty in days gone by; but we should have found no practical value in it for our own path in days of weakness and failure and ruin.

We see the wisdom of our God in giving us its teaching just when the days were darkest in apostolic times; when, as we read in Philippians (written at the same moment), "all were seeking their own, and not the things of Jesus Christ;" when "many walked," of whom the Apostle had told them before, and had now to tell them even weeping, that they were "enemies of the cross of Christ; whose end was destruction, whose god was their belly, who mind earthly things." Such were the days when "Ephesians" was written: the aged Apostle was in prison himself, and cut off from the work which he loved; all was rushing onward to ruin. It was then the time for God to bring forth by his means the most full and blessed unfolding ever given of the church of God. It was written in a day of ruin, as faith's provision for a day of ruin, until we all would come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God to full-grown

men — into the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, that we might no more be "babes," etc. (Eph. 4: 13, 14.)

The gradual, but sure, decay had begun at once in the early church. Tares were sown amongst the wheat, and false persons were introduced from without, as Simon the sorcerer (Acts 8); the enemy, too, had begun to sow evil and discord within. (See Acts 5, 6.) This state of things is largely recognized in the various Epistles. In Corinthians the wisdom of men and sectarianism were springing up, and moral evil had been allowed (chap, 5), and doctrinal evil was spreading fast. (1 Cor. 15.)

The law had been introduced in Galatia; asceticism and philosophy had been added to the law in Colosse. There was Judaism and ceremonies on all sides (Hebrews), and the presence of the Spirit forgotten. All this may be seen largely in the Epistles. But when we come to Paul's Second Epistle to Timothy, these things were there, and recognized as current, and all those of Asia had turned away from Paul, though not yet, perhaps, from Christ. It is then that the Holy Spirit in the Apostle forecasts the state of the "last days," which was then coming in. "In the last days perilous times would be there," and the state of nominal Christians would become like that of the heathen, as described in Romans 1: 29-31, compared with 2 Timothy 3: 2-5, with the difference of "a form of godliness," or "piety," while they "denied the power thereof." From such the servant should "turn away."

This, then, was the state of the professing church which had been established on earth as the "pillar and ground of the truth." (2 Tim. 3: 15.) It was now the sphere where error and evil existed unchallenged.

We must now ask, What are God's principles, when the sphere set up by Him at any time in the earth became corrupted as this before us ? We may even see that these principles were His before evil entered the scene, and were the true principles, unchanged by any circumstances, which ensues. They were "separation" and "largeness" — separation to God because He is holy; largeness of heart because He is gracious! We see this in paradise before man fell. He planted a garden in Eden, and separated it from the rest of the scene, for the man to dwell in, and dress it and keep it; yet from it flowed four rivers, to carry its blessings to the four quarters of the earth.

When the world was judged, and again peopled, and divided into nations at Babel, God called a man out of it, separating him to Himself, because He was holy; yet, because He was gracious, He promised that "in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed." So also in Israel; He brought them out of Egypt, that He might dwell among them, and His word was, "Thou shalt be holy with the Lord thy God." (Deut. 17.) Yet they were to be the center from which blessing should flow forth to the nations, who might there learn that He was God. "In Judah God was known; his name

was great in Israel." In the church of God, too, the saints were not of the world, even as He was not of the world; yet the desire He expressed was, "that they all might be one, that the world may believe." (John 18.) These instances show us the principles that should guide His own.

We see this illustrated in the day when Israel corrupted themselves, and, under Aaron, made the golden calf. Moses had gone up, to receive the law, to the top of Mount Sinai, when the people revolted against God, and returned to idolatry, out of which they had been redeemed. Moses came down with the tables of the law in his hands, and saw the calf and the dancing; but, with the blessed intelligence of one who was in spirit with God, he acts in a moment in a way that saves the honor of Jehovah, and spares the people. Had he kept the tables of the law outside the camp unbroken, he would have compromised the authority of the Lord. And had he entered the camp with them, the people would have to be cut off. So he broke the tables before the mount!

He then returns to God, after the tribe of Levi had executed the discipline of God upon their brethren, earning their place as the priestly tribe. (Ex. 32.) Moses then prayed to the Lord to spare the people, or to blot him out of the book He had written. Nay, said the Lord, "Him that sinneth will I blot out of my book." Moses then returns to the desert, and while he waited to see what the Lord would do, and the people stripped themselves of their ornaments before the mount, Moses "took the tent, and pitched it outside the camp, afar off from the camp, and called it the tabernacle of the congregation. And it came to pass that every one which sought the Lord went out unto the tabernacle of the congregation, which was without the camp."

Here was the most glorious moment of all his history. The moment when he so apprehended God, and His holy nature, that, without even a command from Him, he does that which was suited to Him; and the cloudy pillar, emblem of His presence, came down, and spoke to Moses, as a man speaks with his friend! Here was separation to God, yet largeness of heart for His people, and for their true blessing.

We might trace through Scripture many instances of this kind, which show us that separation to Him is the true path for His own, when that which He had set up in blessing had corrupted its way in the earth. We see it in Israel separated from Egypt: Moses separating from Israel at the moment cited. The Nazarite Samson, separated from Israel, when they were under the domination of the Philistines. David's men separated to him in his days of rejection. Jeremiah's directions to separate himself from the people to the Lord (Jer. 15), that he might be God's mouth, to separate the precious from the vile. So the "mark" to be set upon them who sighed and cried for the abominations in Jerusalem. (Ezek. 9.)

The Baptist separating the repentant remnant to Christ. The church separated from the nation at Pentecost. Paul separating the disciples from the others. (Acts 19.) The directions, "Come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord," etc. (2 Cor. 6.) But when we turn to the Second Epistle to Timothy, we find this principle applied to our path in the simplest and most striking manner. The aged Apostle turned to his own son in the faith, with his heart burdened with the sin in which the people of God now were involved; yet bright in the freshness of the courage needed to lift one above it all, and give the sense that God was above all the evil around.

It is often the case that the soul gets under the power and sense of the evil to such a degree, that it becomes occupied with it, thus losing sight of God. This is a wrong state to drift into, and never will give power to surmount the evil in anywise. Grappling with the evils in the world, or the so-called Christian world, is not our path. But while persuaded of their existence and power, the heart can turn to God, and find Him and His ways superior to the evil; and we are called to separate ourselves to Him.

This character of things occupies the greater part of the Epistle. The Spirit of God recognizes that there is no ecclesiastical recovery for the church of God, as a whole, to be looked for; while there always is individual recovery by the truth. He had been treating of the false teaching of Hymenaeus and Philetus, and such like, when he adds, "Nevertheless, the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his. And let every one that nameth the name of the Lord depart from iniquity." How refreshing to think that no amount of corruption had destroyed that sure foundation of God! There stood the everlasting truths, which never altered, though the house of God had enlarged itself to what he likens to "a great house," with "vessels of gold and silver, of wood and of earth, some to dishonour," yet scattered abroad by the devices of men, and by the craft of the enemy, within that sphere were those who were Christ's.

"The Lord knoweth them that are his," said one inscription of the seal of God! The eye of man could not single them out, nor even the eye of faith discern them. They may be like the seven thousand who had not bowed to the image of Baal in Elijah's day, whom the prophet had never discovered. Still, God knew them; they might be as the godly ones in the day when Israel's heart was as hard as an adamant-stone, when Ezekiel prophesied in vain; they were known of Him who knows all hearts, and He called to the executors of judgment in Jerusalem — "Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and set a mark upon the foreheads of the men that sigh, and that cry for all the abominations that be done in the midst thereof," before judgment which would not permit of pity, fell on the rest. (Ezek. 9: 4.) God knew those in that day, those who were His; and He knows them now, as our passage in 2 Timothy 2: 19 testifies. This is the privilege of all who belong to Him.

But now he turns to the reverse of the seal, and reads the second inscription: "Let every one that nameth the name of the Lord depart from iniquity." Here, then, is the way I may see those hidden ones of the Lord; they must be separate from evil to Him. Simple yet comprehensive step! Let the evil be moral, doctrinal, intellectual, or religious, the path is the same — to "depart from iniquity" is the responsibility of the saint who names the name of the Lord. Vessels of honour and of dishonour — precious and vile — may be there. The Hymenaeus and Philetus may have to be condemned, but the true soul must "purge himself from these" that "he may be a vessel unto honour, sanctified (or, separated), and meet for the Master's use."

Let me remark as to that word, "purge." It is found but twice in the original tongue of the New Testament Scriptures. The first place we find is in 1 Corinthians 5: 7: "Purge out the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us." This marked the responsibility of the whole church of God, set up on earth as "an unleavened lump." She was to maintain her place in this, and to "purge out" all that savoured of the old leaven — the evil which was then creeping in at Corinth, as this chapter shows. But she did not, as a whole, do this. She soon became indifferent to the evil, which soon, alas! became her characteristic, and not the holiness due to Christ. Now comes the second use of the word. The individual, finding himself in the midst of "a great house," filled with "vessels to honour and dishonour," was to "purge himself" from such, by standing apart from them, as from all this which dishonoured the Lord, in order to be a vessel unto honour for the Master's use.

But when a soul has taken this step, it might engender a Pharasaic spirit in him, in standing thus apart because of his Lord, and so we have next, "But follow righteousness, faith, love, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart." He would find others who, like himself, had grace given to be separate to the Lord, and he was to walk with such, in holiness of conduct, and a pure heart likewise.

But this separation to the Lord has, so far, only a negative character. But this is the responsibility of the "house of God," now become like "a great house" around him. We want something more, therefore; we require a positive ground of action for our souls in the midst of the scene. Here, then, comes in the never-changing truth of the unity of the body of Christ, of which he is a member. This abides here on earth in the midst of Christendom. It is within that sphere that the Holy Spirit maintains, in unbroken unity, the body of Christ.

Granted that outwardly it is broken to fragments to our vision, and the members of that body are scattered in every section of the professing church; granted, too, that it is utterly impossible to restore it to its original

state, that no skill or power can ever set it right again — all this is quite true; but then I am ever responsible to set myself to rights, before everything, with God. I am a member of Christ, and separate from evil; well, I am not the only one whom God has called so to act for Him, because He is holy. I find others also; we meet as His members to worship the Father, to remember our Lord; but it is as members of Christ, and as acting in the truth of that body of which we are members — we can be together — and on no other ground! (I mean no other ground according to God.) We are thus in a breadth of truth which embraces every member of Christ on the face of the earth!

This is "endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." We can neither keep, nor break, the unity of the body — that is kept by the Spirit Himself intact, spite of every failure of man. But we are called to "endeavour to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

What, then, is this unity? It is the power and principle by which the saints are enabled to walk together in their proper relations in the body, and as members of Christ. It may involve my separation from one member because he is attached in practice, or religiously, to that which will not stand the test of the word of God. It may call me to walk with another who is walking in godliness and in its truth. I may find a true soul who sees the truth up to a certain point, but no farther; I can enjoy with such all that he enjoys in the unity of the Spirit. Suppose fresh light reaches his soul, and he refuses it, then we part! I must never weaken the path I am called to by compromise with him of the truth. All this involves the body of Christ; it is the ground of action, because the Spirit of God maintains it.

This unity, too, excludes individuality most fully. No one can take an isolated place. If he is called to stand alone in some locality because of the word of the Lord, it puts him in communion, and on common ground, all over the world, in other localities, with all who are walking in such a truth. It excludes individuality, too, when together with others; one might be tempted to act in independency of other members of Christ — to take action himself, not in communion with the rest. It throws us outside every system of man, too, but keeps us in that unity which is according to God!

Now here is the divine and positive foundation under our feet for this day of ruin. This is not merely a negative path. It is wide enough for all, because it embraces all in its breadth, whether they are there, or not. It is exclusive of evil from its midst, as known and accepted; to admit it would cause it to cease to be the unity of the Spirit. It is not merely the unity of Christians — which is the effort of the many to effect, often to the refusal of the truth of the body of Christ. How often do we see the effort to be together apart from its truth, merely as believers in the Lord. Men may make many unities, and attach Christ's name to them, and call it the church. God attaches unity to Christ, not Christ to unity! Then it must be

true in nature to Him whose body it is; it must be practically holy and true. (Rev. 3: 7.)

Trial may come in, and the enemy seek to mar this effort of the faithful to act for God. Discipline, too, may have to be resorted to, to keep those thus gathered together true and right. When this is so, the action taken in one place in the Spirit, and in obedience to the word, governs all others, where the people of God elsewhere are thus acting in the truth. The Lord's table being spread, as that in which we own the unity of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 10: 16, 17) is in the midst of those gathered together in the name of Christ. (Matt, 18.) One in communion at it in one part of the world, as with those who are endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit, is in communion with all, wherever they may be found. Once ceasing to be in communion in one place, ceases in all. Thus individuality is impossible, apart from unity; or unity from individuality.

It is only in the church of God, or in its principle, we have both maintained. In popery we see unity, but no individuality; in other sects individuality, but no unity. In the unity of the Spirit we have both, and there only.

Then the cry of others is, "You want us to come to you, and hear the truth; why do you not come to us?" The question is most natural, but the answer is plain: We never can make wrong right by mixing with it; we desire your blessing; we desire that you who are not with us may act on what you are, as members of Christ, by one Spirit, and with us on the only divine platform on earth! You would be the first to blame us, did your conscience bow to the truth, for having weakened or falsified it by mingling with error, in order to win others to be with us. Your title is clear to be at the Lord's table with us, if you are a member of Christ (we assume that you are walking in uprightness of soul before God). We dare not ask other terms than this for your being in your true place. I have heard it has been said by others what we look for more — such as exacting promises that you go to no other gathering of Christians, and the like. This would be unintelligent in us in the strongest way, we would be making more than membership of Christ, and holiness of walk your title to your place.

Your coming to help us to be faithful to the Lord should receive a hearty welcome from us in His name. Let us not suspect any other motive in those who come than our own desire, through grace, to do the same. Often have I seen souls come in all simplicity, who would be scared away had they been placed under a condition; for when they came, they found His presence there, and never left again! A soul finding itself with Christ would not likely seek to wander away again to other paths, even though it may be a pathway of reproach "outside the camp" with Him.

A word now, in conclusion, as to the place of those who are together, in these last days, in the truth. We sometimes hear of being "a testimony." I

ask, To what? And I reply for all, We are a testimony to the present state of the church of God, not what it was once, but what it is. But suppose we are really thus a testimony to its failure, this involves much more than at first sight we would think. We must in such a case be as true in principle and practice as that which has failed! Though but a fragment of the whole, this must be really a true fragment. This will ever keep us lowly in our own eyes, and nothing in the sight of others. As long, therefore, as we are a testimony of this character we shall, by grace, never fail! The Lord alone will be our strength and our stay in days of ruin, and perilous times of the last days.

In the great sphere of the profession of Christianity on earth — the responsible church, or "house of God," where His one Spirit dwells and operates, there is a divine current in which the faithful will be found. In one of the great lakes, or inland seas of Switzerland we find what will illustrate my meaning. One of the great European rivers runs into this inland sea at one extremity, and out at the other; but it is found that the current of the river is traceable all through the vast sheet of water. There are also, as a matter of course, the eddies and the back-water, which is near the current, and the dead water outside its influence. Thus it is in the professing house. There are those to be found in the current of the Spirit within the great professing body; there are others whose position would be near it, though not in the stream, but, as it were, in the eddies which are close at hand. There are others who have turned aside, and been drawn into the back-water, and never seem to recover. Others, too, who are found in the dead-water, out of the reach of the current, or even of its influence.

It becomes, therefore, a very real question for each — "Where am I?" "Am I like a chip or a withered leaf, in the eddies, or in the back-water, or in the stream?" If in the last, we are carried along in that one path, in the freshness and energy of the one Spirit of God, in the truth of that one body of Christ, of which we are living members; faithful to Him who loves us, yet will-less and obedient in His hands, who can use for His own glory, and the blessing of others, the weakest vessel, if in the current of His Spirit, in the truth.