

On the Formation of Churches*

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AIM OF THIS ESSAY

(* Published originally in French, in Switzerland, about 1840. In English it has been entitled, "Reflections on the Ruined Condition of the Church; and on the Efforts making by Churchmen and Dissenters to Restore it to its Primitive Order.")

CIRCUMSTANCES have latterly drawn the attention of many Christians to the question of the competency of believers, in our days, to form organized churches after the model, as they suppose, of the primitive churches, and have led to the inquiry whether the forming of such bodies is at this time agreeable to the will of God. Some respected and beloved brethren insist that the forming and organizing of churches is, according to God's will, the only means of finding blessing in the midst of that confusion which is acknowledged to exist. Others consider that any such attempt is altogether man's effort, and as such, is wanting in the very primary condition of lasting blessing, namely, the condition of entire dependence upon God; although it may be blessed by God up to a certain point on account of the sincerity of purpose and piety of those who take part in it.

The writer of these pages, bound by the strongest ties of affection and of love in Christ to many who belong to bodies assuming the title of *Church of God*, has studiously avoided all collusion of judgment with his brethren on this subject, although he has often conversed with them concerning it. He has done no more than withdraw himself from the things he found among them, when those things appeared to him at variance with God's word, always endeavoring to "keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace," and remembering that word, "If thou take forth the precious from the vile, thou shalt be as my mouth" (Jer. 15), a direction of unspeakable value in the present confusion. His affection is not lessened; his attachment is neither interrupted nor impaired.

Two considerations especially constrain the writer to declare what to him appears the instruction of the Scriptures on this head: duty to the Lord (and the welfare of His Church is the highest of all considerations); and love to brethren—a love which must be guided by faithfulness to the Lord. He writes these pages because the project of making churches is one of the hindrances in the way of the accomplishment of what all desire, namely, the union of the saints in one body: first, because those who have attempted it, having gone beyond the power given them by the Spirit, the flesh has been fostered in them; and, secondly, because those who were wearied with the evil of national systems, thinking themselves under a necessity of choosing between such evil and that which meets their view as dissenting congregations, often remain where they are in despair of anything better. In the actual condition of things it would be an extravagance to affirm that these churches can realize the desired union; but I will not press that lest I should pain some of my readers. I shall rather endeavor to put in the foreground the points on which we are agreed, points which will at the same time assist us to form a right judgment on certain systems standing around us—systems which, if themselves incapable of yielding the good result desired by many brethren, leave the partisans of each, as their only consolation and excuse, the thought that others can do no more than themselves towards realizing the object in view.

THE LORD'S PURPOSE IN THE GATHERING OF THE SAINTS ON EARTH

It is the desire of our hearts, and as we believe God's will under this dispensation, that all the children of God should be gathered together as such, and, consequently, as *not of the world*. The Lord hath given

Himself " not for that (the Jewish) nation only, but that he should gather together in *one* the children of God which are scattered abroad." This gathering together in one was then the immediate object on earth of Christ's death. The salvation of the elect was as certain before His advent, though accomplished by it, as afterward. The Jewish dispensation which preceded His coming into the world had for its object, not to gather the church upon earth, but to exhibit the government of God by means of an elect nation. At this time the Lord's purpose is to *gather* as well as to *save*, to realize unity, not merely in the heavens, where the purposes of God shall surely be accomplished, but here upon earth, by one Spirit sent down from heaven. By one Spirit we are all baptized into one body. This is undeniably the truth concerning the church as it is set before us in the word. Men may go about proving that hypocrites and evil men had crept into the church, but there is no resisting the inference that there was a church into which they had crept. The gathering together of all the children of God in one body is plainly according to the mind of God in the word.

NATIONAL SYSTEMS AND THEIR RELATION TO THE GATHERING OF BELIEVERS

As to systems called national, the existence of them cannot be traced higher than the period of the Reformation. The very idea seems not to have found entrance anterior to that period. The only thing in the least analogous-the privileges of the Gallic= Church, and the practice of voting by nations in certain general councils-are so widely different, that they cannot be considered to call for any discussion. Nationalism- in other words, the dividing of the church into bodies- consisting of such and such a nation, is a novelty, not above three centuries old, although many dear children of God are found dwelling in it. The Reformation did not directly touch the question of the true character of God's church. It did nothing directly tending to restore it to its primitive estate. It did what was more important: it brought out the truth of God as to the great doctrine by which souls are saved, with much more clearness, and with far mightier effect than the modern revival. But it did not reestablish the church in its primitive powers. On the contrary, it placed it in general under subjection to the state, in order to free it from subjection to the Pope; because it regarded the papal authority as dangerous, and looked upon all the subjects of a country as Christians.

To escape from this anomaly, believers have sought to shelter themselves under the distinction between a visible and an invisible church. But I read in Scripture, " Ye are the light of the world." Of what use is an invisible light? " A city set on an hill cannot be hid." To say that the true church has been reduced to the condition of being invisible is at once to decide the question, and to affirm that the church has entirely lost its original and essential standing, and departed from the purpose of God, and from the constitution it received from Him; for God did not light a candle that He might put it under a bushel, but that He might put it upon a candlestick to give light to them that are in the house. If it has become invisible it has ceased to answer the purpose for which it was formed. Such, upon its own showing, is the present condition of Christianity.

POSITION OF DISSENT RELATIVELY TO THE GATHERING OF BELIEVERS

We are (may I not say it?) agreed that the gathering together in one all the children of God is according to God's will as expressed in His word. But I ask, before I go farther, Can any one believe that the dissenting congregations, such as we see them in this or any other country, have attained to this end, or are at all likely to attain to it?

This truth of the gathering together of God's children is in Scripture seen realized in various localities, and in each central locality the Christians resident therein composed but one body: Scripture is perfectly clear on that head. It has indeed been objected that such union is impossible, but no evidence is produced from God's word in support of the assertion. It is said, How could it possibly be in London or in Paris?

Now the thing was practicable at Jerusalem, where there were more than five thousand believers: and even though meeting in private houses and upper rooms, Christians were nevertheless but one body, under the guidance of one Spirit, with one rule of government, and in one communion, and were so acknowledged. Thus, at Corinth, or elsewhere, a letter addressed to the church of God would have found its way to a known body. I go farther, and say, that it is plainly our duty to desire pastors and teachers to take the care of such congregations, and that God did raise up such in the church as we see it in the word.

Having fully recognized these weighty truths; namely (1) the union of all the children of God; (2) the union of all the children of God in each locality; having, moreover, acknowledged that they are so seen in the word of God-the question might seem to be settled. But here we pause.

It is indeed undeniable that this state of things, appearing in God's word (for it is a *fact*, not a theory), has *ceased* to exist, and the question to be solved is no other than this: How ought the Christian to judge and act when a condition of things set before us in the word no longer exists? You will say, he is to restore it. Your answer is itself one proof of the evil. It supposes that there is power in ourselves. I would say, Listen to the word and obey it, as it applies to such a state of declension. Your answer takes for granted two things: firstly, that it is according to the will of God to reestablish the economy or dispensation on its original footing after it has failed; and secondly, that *you* are both able and authorized to restore it. Is this scriptural ground to take?

Suppose a case: God made man upright-God gave His law to man. Every Christian will allow that sin is an evil, and that it is our duty not to commit sin. Suppose that one convinced of this truth should set about fulfilling the law and being upright, and in that way pleasing God. You will at once exclaim, he is self-righteous and trusting in his own strength, and does not understand God's word. A return from existing evil unto that which God at the first set up, is therefore not always a proof that we have understood His word and will. Nevertheless, we shall rightly and truly judge that what He did at the first set up was good, and that we have departed from it.

Apply this to the church. We all acknowledge (for to such only am I writing) that God established churches; we confess that Christians (in a word, the church generally) have sadly departed from this original settlement by God, and are guilty therein. To undertake to reestablish it all on its first footing is (at any rate, it may be) an effect of the working of that very spirit which leads one to seek to set up again his own righteousness when it has been lost.

Before I can accede to your pretensions, I must see, not only that the church was such in the beginning, but, moreover, that it is according to God's will that it be restored to its primitive glory, now that man's sin has tarnished and departed from that glory; and, furthermore, that a voluntary union of "two or three" or two or three and twenty, or several such bodies, are each of them entitled, in any locality, to take the name of the church of God, when that church originally was an assemblage of *all* believers in any given locality. You must, moreover, make it clear to me, if you assume such a place, that you have so succeeded by the gift and power of God in gathering together believers, that you can rightfully treat those who refuse to answer to your call as schismatics, self-condemned, and strangers to God's church.

And let me here dwell on a most important consideration, which they who are bent on making churches have overlooked. They have had their thoughts so fully engaged in their churches that they have almost lost sight of the church. According to Scripture the whole sum of the churches here on earth* compose the *church*, at least the church on earth; and the church in any given place was no other than the regular association together of whatever formed part of the entire body of the church, that is to say, of *the complete body of Christ here on earth*; and he who was not a member of the church in the place in which he dwelt, was no member of Christ's church at all; and he who says that I am not a member of God's

church at Rolle** has no right to acknowledge me as being any member of God's church at all. There was no idea of any such distinction between the little churches of God in any given place, and the church as a whole. Each one was of some church, if one existed where he was, and thus in the church, but no one imagined himself to be in the church if he was separated from the church in the place he lived in. The practice of making churches has alone led to the separation of the two things, and almost obliterated the idea of God's church, by making partial voluntary churches in different places.***

(* Or, rather, the Christians of whom they consist.)

**The principal champion of the dissenting churches, an excellent man, was there.)

***Lardonism and some bodies of analogous character alone maintain a consistent course in this respect, and are consequently completely in error. By a happy inconsequence in those who are now forming little churches of God in different places, they nevertheless consider believers who do not form part of them as being in the fullest sense of God's church.)

I return to the case of the person already supposed. Let us now suppose that his conscience has been touched and received life through the Spirit of God, what will be the effect? In the first place it will be to make him acknowledge his ruined state in consequence of sin, and the absence of all resource in any innocence or righteousness of his own. The next result will be a feeling of entire dependence on God, and submission of heart to the judgment of God on such a state. Apply this to the church and the whole dispensation. Whilst men slept, the enemy has sown tares. The church is in a state of ruin, immersed and buried in the world-invisible, if you will have it so; whilst it ought to hold forth, as a candlestick, the light of God. If the professing body is not in this state of ruin, then I ask our dissenting brethren. Why have you left it? If it be, then confess this ruin-this apostasy-this departure from its primitive standing. Alas! the fact is too evident.

Abraham may receive menservants and maidservants, oxen, camels, and asses; but his *spouse* is in the house of Pharaoh.

How, then, will the Spirit work? What will be the acting of such an one's faith? To acknowledge the ruin; to have it present to his conscience, and to be humbled in consequence. And shall we, who are guilty of this state of things, pretend we have only to set about and remedy it? No; the attempt would but prove that we are not humbled thereby. Let us rather search in all humility what God says to us in His word of such a condition of things; and let us not, like foolish children who have broken a precious vase, attempt to join together its broken fragments, and to set it up in hopes to hide the damage from the notice of others.

IN THE FALLEN CONDITION OF THE PRESENT DISPENSATION, CAN MAN RESTORE IT?

I press this argument on those who are endeavoring to organize churches. If real churches exist, such persons are not called on to make them. If, as they say, they did exist at the beginning but have ceased to exist, in that case the dispensation is in ruins, and in a condition of entire departure from its original standing. They are undertaking in consequence thereof to set it up again. This attempt is what they have to justify; otherwise the attempt is without anything to warrant it. It will be objected that the church cannot fail, and that God has given to it a promise that the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I acknowledge it, if we understand by that promise that the salvation of the elect is secure, that the glory of the church in the resurrection will triumph over Satan, and that. God will secure the maintenance of the confession of

Jesus in the earth till the church be taken away. That, however, is not the question. The salvation of the elect was equally secured before there was a gathered church. On the other hand, if it is intended to affirm that the present dispensation cannot fail, it is a great and pernicious error so to say: indeed, if such be the truth, why have you separated yourselves from the state in which it was? If the economy or dispensation of God in the gathering of the church on earth still subsists according to its original standing, how is it that you are making new churches? It is a point upon which Popery alone is consistent with itself.

But what says the word? That apostasy is to set in before the judgment; that in the last days perilous times shall come; that there shall be a form of godliness without the power. It adds, " from such turn away." And the thought that the dispensation of the church cannot fall away is treated of in Rom. 2 as a fatal presumption, which leads the Gentile Church to its ruin. The Holy Ghost passes condemnation on those who have that thought, as being wise in their own eyes, and teaches us, on the contrary, that God would act towards the present dispensation as He did towards the previous one; that if it continued in the goodness of God, this goodness would be continued to it, otherwise the dispensation would be cut off. Thus the word reveals the cutting off, and not the restoration of the dispensation, in case it should not continue faithful. And to go about remaking the church and the churches on the footing on which they stood at first, is to acknowledge the fact of existing failure without submitting ourselves to the witness of God, as to His purposes in reference to such a state of ruin. It is to act according to our own thoughts, and to rely on our own strength, for the accomplishment of our project-and what has been the result?

The question before us is not whether such churches existed at a period when the word of God was written; but whether, after they have, by reason of man's sin, ceased to exist, and believers have been scattered (and these are facts, the truth of which is admitted), those who have undertaken the apostolic office of reestablishing them on their original footing, and in so doing, to set up again the entire dispensation, have really apprehended the divine will, and are endued with power to accomplish the task they have taken upon themselves-questions which are widely distinct. I cannot think that any, even the most zealous of those persons, who, with a desire of which I willingly acknowledge the sincerity, have sought to again set up the fallen dispensation (and David was sincere in his desire to build the temple, although it was not God's will that he should do so), are in a condition to be able to do it, or that they have the right to impose upon my faith, as God's church, the little edifices that they have set up. And yet I am very far from thinking that there have not been churches in time past, when God sent His apostles to settle them; and in my opinion, *he* who is unable to discern the difference between the state in which the church was in those days and its present condition, has no very clear judgment in the things of God.

IF THE DISPENSATION CANNOT BE RESTORED, WHAT REMAINS TO BE DONE

It will be said that the word and the Spirit still remain in the church: most true. Blessed be God for it: this it is which is the whole ground of my confidence. What the church wants, is to learn to lean upon this. It is on that account that I am inquiring what the word and the Spirit say of the state of the fallen church, instead of arrogating to myself a competency to realize that which the Spirit has spoken of the first condition of the church. What I complain of is, that the thoughts of men have been followed, and that which the Spirit has recorded as having existed in the primitive church has been imitated, instead of searching for what the word and the Spirit have declared concerning our present condition. The same word, the same Spirit, which, speaking by Isaiah, told the inhabitants of Jerusalem to be still, and that God would preserve them from the Assyrian, said, by the mouth of Jeremiah, that he who should go forth to the Chaldeans should be saved alive. Faith and obedience in the one case was nothing less than presumption and disobedience in the other. Some will say this tends to confuse simple minds. Obedience to the word in humility of mind never confuses. I add, that those who are bent on restoring the whole

church ought to be well instructed in the word, and to abstain from doing anything under the pretext of simplicity. The lowliness that feels aright the real condition of the church, preserves us from pretensions, that impel to an activity which is unauthorized by the word. The truth is, that the Scriptures, even those already quoted, prove that the condition of the dispensation at its close will be just the reverse of what it was at its opening. And the text quoted from the Romans (chap. 1 r: 22) is decisive on this point, that God would cut off the dispensation instead of restoring it, if it continued not in the goodness of God.

The passage-" My Spirit remaineth among you-fear ye not," contains a most sure and precious principle. The presence of the Holy Spirit is the keystone of all our hopes. But this cheering prophecy of Haggai did not lead Nehemiah, who was faithful to God, when Israel returned from the captivity, to set about fulfilling the task assigned to Moses, who was faithful in all his house at the commencement of that dispensation. No, he confesses, in the plainest and most affecting language, the fallen condition of Israel, and that they were " in great distress." We see him doing all that the word authorized him to do, in the circumstances in which he stood; but never did he set about making an ark of the covenant as Moses had done, and because Moses had made one-nor imitate the Shechinah, which God only could make, nor the Urim and Thummim, nor put in order the genealogies while the Urim and Thummim were wanting. But we are told in the word that he had blessing such as had not been " since the days of Joshua "; because he was faithful to God in the circumstances in which he stood, without assuming to make anew that which Moses had made, and Israel's sin had destroyed. If he had done that, it would have been an act of human presumption and not of obedience. Obedience, and not the imitation of the apostles, is our duty in such circumstances. It is far more humbling; but, at least, it is more lowly and safe; and that is all I ask or desire, that the church should be *more* humble. To rest satisfied with existing evils, as if we could do nothing, is not obedience; but neither is it obedience to imitate the actions of the apostles. The sense of the presence of the Holy Spirit delivers us at the same time from the evil thought of being obliged to continue in that which is evil, and from the pretension to do more than the Holy Spirit is at the same time doing-or from regarding either the one or the other of these states as a state of true order.

I shall be asked-Would you then have our arms hang down, and ourselves to do nothing until we have apostles? By no means. I only doubt whether it be God's will that you should do what the apostles did; and I say that God has left for faithful Christians directions sufficient for the state of things in which the church now is. To follow those directions is more truly to obey, than if we should set about imitating the apostles; and the Spirit of God is ever with us to strengthen us in this way of true obedience.

DIRECTIONS GIVEN BY THE HOLY SPIRIT FOR THE PRESENT CONDITION OF THINGS

The Spirit of God, foreseeing all that would happen in the church, has, in the word, given warnings, and at the same time, the needful assistance. If He tells us, that in the last days perilous times shall come, and if He pictures to us the men of that time, He adds, " from such turn away." If He says, " Be not unequally yoked with unbelievers " (2 Cor. 6:14), and this warning is one of all ages; if He says that we are all " one body," and therefore partake of one bread; and, notwithstanding, I find no such union of the saints, He tells me at the same time, that there, where two or three are gathered together in the name of the Lord Jesus, He is in their midst. But His directions are even more precise than this. I have for comfort in all times, that the Lord knows them that are His, but for my own direction, that he that names the name of Christ should depart from iniquity: where I find this established, I must leave it. But there is more; I learn that in a great house, such as the professing church is become, there are vessels to dishonor, and that if a man purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel made to honor, fit for the master's use. And the man of God is exhorted to follow righteousness, faith, charity, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart.

Those who have been endeavoring to form churches seem, though meaning well, to have entirely forgotten our need of *power* as well as of *direction*. When we are told that all the directions for the churches are for all times and places, I venture to ask if they are for times and places in which churches do not exist? and we are brought back to the inquiry-If the dispensation is in ruins, who is to make the churches? Again, I would ask, is the direction given by the apostle, as to the use of the gift of the tongues for our own times? Doubtless, if that gift exists; but that condition is assuredly a most material modification of your rule, and the very turning point of the discussion between us.

DOES THE WORD OF GOD Authorize THE NAMING PRESIDENTS AND PASTORS?

Those who cling so fondly to the practice of making and settling of churches, quote the Epistles to Timothy and to Titus, with most undoubting confidence, as serving for guidance to the churches in all ages; whilst they were really never addressed to any church whatever. It may be observed that the quotations from God's word on matters most bearing on those who are engaged in settling churches, such as the choosing of elders, deacons, etc., must be derived from these epistles alone-and most remarkable it is, that those companions of the apostle who possessed his confidence, were left in the *churches*, or else sent to them *when* already existing, in order to select such elders, when the apostle had not done it-a clear proof that the apostle could not confer upon the churches the power of choosing their elders, even when churches he himself had formed' were still in existence; and notwithstanding, we hear all this adduced as instructions for the churches in after times. Official nomination is an assumption of apostolic authority, and contrary to the order and principles on which it took place then. Nor has this left the saints without resource when God graciously works. Pastors, and doctors, and evangelists are gifts which have their places in the unity of the body, and have their just exercise wherever God has graciously given them; and in 1 Cor. 16:15-16, I find the Holy Ghost directing submission to all who in devotedness of heart have given themselves to true labor in the Lord. So 1 Thess. 5:12, and Heb. 13:17, teach the same godly submission to those who labor, and thus take the lead in the work of the Lord.

THE CHILDREN OF GOD HAVE NOTHING TO DO BUT TO MEET *TOGETHER* IN THE NAME OF *THE LORD*)

With what design then am I writing? Is it that Christians should do nothing? No! I have written from a desire that there should be less presumption and more diffidence in what we undertake to do: and that we should feel more deeply the ruined condition to which we have reduced the Church.

If you say to me, 'I have separated myself from the evil that my conscience disapproves, that which is at variance with the word '-it is well. If you urge that God's word requires the saints to be one and united; that it tells us that, there where two or three are gathered together, Jesus is in the midst of them, and that therefore you " assemble yourselves " together, I say again, it is well. But if you go on to tell me that you have organized a church, or combined together with others to do so; that you have chosen a president or a pastor, and that, having done this, you are now a church, or the *Church of God* of the place you inhabit-I put this question- My dear friends, who has commissioned you to do all this? Even according to your principle of imitation (although to imitate power is an absurdity: and the kingdom of God is " in power "), where do you find all this in the word? I see no trace of the churches having elected presidents or pastors.

You say that for the sake of order it must be so. My answer is, I cannot get off the ground of the word-" He that gathereth not *with me* scattereth." To say that it is necessary that it should be so, is to reason after the manner of men. Your order, being constituted by the will of man, will soon be seen to be disorder in the sight of God. If there are but two or three met together in the name of Jesus, He will be there. If God raises up pastors from amongst you, or sends them among you, it is well; it is a blessing. But ever since the day when the Holy Spirit formed the church, we have no record in the word that the church

has chosen them.

What then, it will be asked, must we do? That which faith ever does-acknowledge our weakness and take the place of dependence upon God. God is sufficient in all ages for His church. It is of the last importance that our faith should hold fast the truth, that whatever the ruin of the church on earth, there is ever in Christ all the grace, and faithfulness, and power needed for the circumstances in which the Church is. He never fails. If you are but "two or three," who have faith for it, meet together: you will find that Christ is with you. Call upon Him. He can raise up whatever is needed for the blessing of the saints; and doubt not He will do so. The blessing will not be ensured to us through a pretension on our part to be something when we are nothing. In how many places has not blessing to the saints been hindered by this choosing of presidents and pastors? In how many places might not the saints have assembled together with joy in the strength of that promise made by Christ to the "two or three," if they had not been scared by this pretended necessity for organization, and by charges of disorder (just as if man was wiser than God), and if their fear of disorder had not persuaded them to continue a state of things which they confess to be wrong? Nor does the constitution of these organized bodies by man hinder the domination of a single individual, or a struggle between several. It tends rather to produce it.

That which the church specially needs is the deep feeling of her ruin and necessity, a feeling which turns for refuge to God-with *confession*, and keeps clear from all known evil- acknowledges the authority of Christ, as He who rules as Son over His own house, and the Spirit of God as the sole power in the church; and by so doing, acknowledges every one whom He sends, according to the gift such a one has received, and that with thanksgiving to Him, who by such gift constitutes such brother a servant of all under the authority of the great Head, the great Shepherd of the sheep. To acknowledge the world to be the church, or to pretend to again set up the church, are two things equally condemned and unauthorized by the word.

If you say, what then is to be done? I rejoin-Why are you ever thinking of *doing* something? To confess the sin which has brought us where we are, to humble ourselves low before the Lord, and, separating from that which we know to be evil, to lean upon Him who is able to do all that is necessary for our blessing, without assuming to do more, ourselves, than the word authorizes us to do-such is the position, humble it is true, but proportionately blessed by God.

A point of the utmost importance, which they who wish to organize churches seem to have altogether lost sight of, is that there is such a thing as POWER, and that the Holy Spirit alone has the *power* to gather and build up the church. They seem to think that, as soon as they have certain passages of scripture, they have nothing to do but to act them out; but under the garb of faithfulness, there is in this a fatal error it consists in leaving aside the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit. We can only act out the word of God by the power of God. But the constituting the church was a direct effect of the *power* of the Holy Ghost. To leave aside that power, and still hold to the pretension of imitating the primitive church in what flowed from that power, is strangely to delude ourselves. Only I must remark that, where a direct act of obedience is concerned, the Christian has not to wait for power: the constant grace of Christ is his power to obey the word. In what precedes, I speak of power to do a divine work in the Church.

I know that those who esteem these little organized associations to be the churches of God, see nothing but mere meetings of men in every other gathering of God's children. There is a very simple answer on this matter. Such brethren have no promise authorizing them to set up again the churches of God when they have fallen, whilst there is a positive promise that, where two. or three are gathered together in the *name of Jesus*, He is in their midst. Thus there is no promise in favor of the system by which men organize churches, whilst there is a promise for that "assembling together" which so many of the

children of God despise.

And what do we see to be the consequence of the pretensions of these bodies? Those who contrast these pretensions with the reality, are disgusted and repelled: while multitudes of them are formed apart from each other, on the various views and opinions of those who formed them; and thus the desired object is hindered, namely, the union of God's children. Here and there the pastor's gifts may produce much effect; or it may happen that all who are Christians may be living in unity, and there will be much joy; but the same thing would have resulted though there should have been no pretension whatever to be the church of God.

CONCLUSIONS

I conclude by a few propositions:

I. The object to be desired is the gathering of all God's children.

The power of the Holy Ghost can alone effect this.

Any number of believers have no need to wait till that power produces the union of all (provided they act in the spirit of unity, which, if carried out, would unite the whole body of Christ), because they have the promise that, where two or three are gathered together in the name of the Lord, He will be in the midst of them, and two or three may act in reliance upon this promise.

The necessity of ordination for the administration of the Supper nowhere appears in the New Testament, and it is clear that it was to break bread that Christians came together on the Lord's Day; Acts 20: 7; 1 Cor. 11:20, 23.

A commission from man to preach the gospel is a thing unknown in the New Testament.

6. The choosing of presidents or pastors by the church is also altogether without warrant in the New Testament. The election of a president is a mere act of man, entirely unauthorized. It is a mere intervention of our willfulness in the concerns of God's church, an action pregnant with evil consequences. The choosing of pastors is an encroachment on the authority of the Holy Ghost, who distributes gifts according to His will. Alas! for him who does not profit by the gift which God grants to another. Where elders were appointed, it was either by the apostles or else by those sent by the apostles to the churches.

If the church is in ruins, God is sufficient even for that state of ruin; God will lead on and guide His children, if they walk in humility and obedience, without setting about a work that God has not called them to.

7. It is clearly the duty of a believer to separate himself from every act that he sees to be not according to the word, though bearing with him who ignorantly does the act; and his duty requires this of him, even though his faithfulness should cause him to stand alone, and though, like Abraham, he should be obliged to go out without knowing whither he goes.

FINAL REMARKS

My design in these few pages has not been to show either the ruined condition of the church, nor yet that the actual dispensation cannot be again set up, but rather to propose a question which is usually entirely misapprehended by those who undertake to organize churches. The ruin of the dispensation has been briefly considered in a tract on the apostasy of the present dispensation; but as a brother, to whom these pages have been read over, felt that this question of the ruin of the dispensation was awakened in his mind and desired to have some proof to satisfy such as were in like manner exercised, I add a few sentences.

1. The parable of the tares of the field is the Lord's judgment on this point-that the evil wrought by Satan in the field where the good seed had been sown should not be remedied, but should continue until

the harvest. Let it be borne in mind that the parable has nothing to do with discipline among God's children, but relates to the question of a remedy for evil brought in by Satan into the dispensation itself " whilst men slept," and to the restoration of the dispensation on its primitive footing. This question is decided summarily and with authority by the Lord in *the negative*, for He tells us that, throughout the duration of the dispensation, no remedy shall be applied to the evil; that the time of harvest, in other words the judgment, should extirpate it, and that until that period the evil should go on. Let us here call to mind that our separation from the evil, and our enjoyment of the presence of Christ with the " two or three," is altogether a different thing from the pretension to set up the dispensation again, now that the evil has come in. The former is at once a duty and a privilege; the latter is the fruit of pride and disregard of the directions of the word.

The 11th chapter of Romans, already quoted, expressly tells us that the present dispensation shall be dealt with like that which went before it, and that, if it continued not in the goodness of God, it should be cut off-not restored.

The second chapter of the second Epistle to the Thessalonians teaches us that the " mystery of iniquity " was already working; that, when an obstacle which then existed should be taken out of the way, that " wicked one " should be revealed; and that the Lord would " consume " him with " the breath of his mouth, and destroy him with the brightness of his coming." Thus the evil which had come in, in the days of the apostles, was to continue and ripen, and manifest itself, and be consumed by the Lord's coming.

The third chapter of the second Epistle to Timothy shows the same thing, that is to say, the ruin of the dispensation, and not its restoration: that in the last days " perilous times should come," that men should be " lovers of their own selves " (and the Spirit adds, " from such turn away "), and that " evil men and seducers " should " wax worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived."

Jude also shows that the evil which had already crept into the church would be the subject of judgment at the Lord's coming. (Compare verses 4 and 14). And this awful truth is confirmed by the analogy of all the ways of God toward men: namely, that man has perverted and corrupted what God has given him for his blessing: and that God has never repaired the evil, but has brought forth something better, after judging the iniquity. And this better thing has been in its turn corrupted, until at last eternal blessing will be brought in. When the dispensation was a positive revelation, as was the case under the law, God gathered a feeble remnant of believers from among those who were unbelieving, and translated them into that new blessing which He has established in place of that which had been corrupt, transplanting the residue of the Jews into the church. In the passage of Rom. 2 the Holy Spirit instructs us that the Lord will in like manner deal with the present dispensation.

The same thing is seen in the Apocalypse. As soon as the " things that are " (that is, the seven churches) are brought to a close, the prophet is carried to heaven, and all that follows has to do, not with anything acknowledged as a church, but with God's providence in the world.

I have done no more than cite a few express passages; but the more we study God's word, the more do we find this solemn truth confirmed. I say, then, do whatever you are enabled to do; but do not pretend to accomplish objects which are altogether beyond what the Lord has given you to do; and do not thus betray the pretensions and the weakness of the flesh. Humility of heart and soul is the sure way not to be found fighting against the truth, for God giveth grace to the humble. And may His name of grace and mercy be forever praised.