

The Church, What Is It?

by John Nelson Darby

The church is Christ's representative on earth, a body formed by the Holy Ghost and connected with Christ, the Head, in heaven.

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 3:2

Topics: "Unity in Christ", "The Nature of the Church"

Description

John Nelson Darby emphasizes the profound nature of the Church as Christ's representative on earth, highlighting its role as an 'epistle of Christ' that reveals God's grace and power. He distinguishes between the Church, the Kingdom, and the salvation of souls, asserting that while the Church is a body united with Christ, the Kingdom represents God's reign and power. Darby discusses the Church's current position, its hope in being united with Christ in heaven, and its calling to be a faithful witness on earth. He stresses the importance of the Church's dependence on Christ for power and guidance, and the necessity of maintaining a constant reference to Him in all its activities. Ultimately, the Church's occupation is to live in communion with Christ, reflecting His nature and purpose in the world.

Transcript

THE CHURCH-WHAT IS IT?

HER POWER, HOPES, CALLING, PRESENT POSITION, AND OCCUPATION

It is a solemn thing when we come to think what the church really is.* It is all blessed when we think of her privileges ; but looking at her as Christ's representative on earth is most solemn-an " epistle of Christ." As the tables of stone represented what God demanded of man, so should the church, and in an equal sense, be in the world the revelation of what God is to man, an exhibition of God's grace and power to man and in man.

* Not, ought to be, but, is ; she ought to be a faithful representative ; but we cannot take the church of God out of this place, let her have got into what condition she may.

When I speak of the " kingdom," it is a different thing.† We there get the display of power and government, not union and fellowship. Even the testimony of the kingdom comes necessarily to be quite a distinct thing. I should distinguish altogether " the gospel of the kingdom " and " the kingdom," from what we are accustomed to call, " the gospel "‡ and " the church." Paul taught the kingdom, and he taught the gospel,

and he taught the church ; but he never taught them as the same thing. §

† It is of great importance to distinguish between the kingdom and the church.

‡ We employ the term " gospel " in a very limited sense, but in the scriptures it is used in a much more general way. For example, the apostle could say that when Timothy came back from them, he brought good tidings (preached the gospel) of the brethren's faith and charity. Again, we read " For unto us was the gospel preached, as well as unto them," Heb. 4 : 3. To them it was the promise of the land. The word is not restricted to the grace now preached, it is simply " good news," and there may be the good news of the kingdom, or the good news of Canaan.

§ He preached the kingdom of God; but it is a very distinct thing that God should set up a reign of power on the earth (take the word " reign " instead of " kingdom," and you will see at once that this is quite distinct from the idea of the " church ") ; that would not necessarily touch the question that Christ was going to have a bride united to Him in glory. And when he speaks of his ministry, he distinguishes his own ministry into a ministry of the gospel, and a ministry of the church.

There is one revelation : God is going to take to Himself His great power, and to reign. There is another truth : there is to be a bride, and body, of the King. Again, certain things setting out the grace of God are necessary for the soul to be saved. These three things* are very plainly quite distinct.

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From the moment Israel was called as a people, God had evidently the thought of having a king.† Man's way of setting about it was quite wrong. Up to the time of Samuel priesthood was morally the regular point of association between the people and God. But. the priests were unfaithful, and then the Lord wrote Ichabod upon all that had been Israel's glory. The link between God and the people was broken. The ark was taken by the Philistines. The priests were slain. He delivered His strength into captivity, and the Philistines were in the mount of God.

† This thought was not fully brought out until David ; but in the days of Moses it was brought out that He would not only have a kingdom, but a king. Moses is called " king in Jeshurun " (Deut. 33 : 5). but he was not their king.

This was the sign given to Saul;‡ 1 Sam. 10. He found people going up to Bethel (v. 3). There were people that had faith in the God of Bethel§ (that is, that God would never leave His unchangeable promise to Jacob). Everything else might be gone ; but God's connection with Israel could not be broken up. This became the resting-place of faith. God could not fail. Secondly, he was to go to the mount of God (v. 5) ; and there was the garrison of the Philistines; the power of the enemies of the Lord in the place where God's altar ought to have been, and thus power against those who were acting in faith. Still Bethel could be visited with a tabret and pipe ; faith could take up the joy that was proper for the people who had Jehovah for their God. There was also the spirit of prophecy given to him (v. 6). But neither of the signs did Saul understand, though clear and instructive to the eye of faith. David was the opposite of this, and was the type of Christ, as King.

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After the king is brought in, there is a change in the position of the priesthood ; it ceases to be the habitual link of connection between the people and God. When Eli is set aside (i Sam. 2 : 35) God says, " I will raise me up a faithful priest ... and he shall walk," not before me, but " before mine anointed for ever." There I get a royal person, another link between God and the people, set up above priesthood.* So that Solomon was quite right in thrusting out Abiathar; i Kings 2 : 27. When Solomon dedicated the temple, and the priests could not stand to minister because the glory of the Lord had filled the house of God, the king praised God and blessed the people.†

* From this time the people's fortunes followed the king.

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At length the King was presented in humiliation in the Person of Christ. John Baptist comes (Matt. 3) and says, " Repent ye ; for the kingdom of heaven is at hand ... he that cometh after me is mightier than I ... whose fan is in his hand ... he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."‡ John is rejected ; and then, after he is cast into prison, Christ takes up the same testimony (Matt. 4). " From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, Repent : for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." " And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all manner of sickness," etc. The power of God was with Him in testimony, and was seen. The disciples, the King having been rejected, are given to know " the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven," which to the multitude are parables , chap. 13. And they have God with them. The apostles were to go on (and they went on) preaching the kingdom.

‡ That is, the King is coming in judgment.

The kingdom is still to be set up, that is, the power of heaven, in the Person of Jesus Christ. He shall take to Him His great power and reign. It will be set up in heaven, for He must go to a far country to receive a kingdom and to return; Luke 19 - I 1, 12. He has gone up on high; but He has not yet been sent back in the power of the kingdom. It will be a " world to come," not merely a state of Judaism, the kingdom of the " Son of man "-not merely the Jews and their Messiah ; Dan. 2, 7. Heaven will be in the highest sense the seat of the kingdom. But it is still the kingdom.

There is another revelation. We are to reign in the kingdom. There are " joint-heirs " ; those who are to " reign with him "; and those who are to " sit on thrones." Yet it is still the kingdom, largely extended, a wider sphere; but I am still traveling in the circuit of the kingdom.

The destruction of Jerusalem was the setting aside of Jerusalem in judicial power ; but still we can preach the kingdom of God. There will be the effect of the actual employment of power in setting things to right. At present it is rather in testimony than in power. The effect of the power of Christ in " the world to come " will be to set aside the power of Satan.* In all this we have only the kingdom. Again, there will be a special testimony to the coming of the kingdom before the close.

* Miracles were " miracles of the world to come " (Heb. 2: 5 ; 6: 5.)

There is another ministry that goes out altogether on another principle. In Paul's ministry I get that which is beyond the reach of dispensations ; I have here what man is (not merely cc sinners of the Gentiles," or Jews). He may prove it as regards the Gentiles in one way, and demonstrate it as regards the Jews in another; but what he proves and demonstrates is this, that man as man is at enmity with God. If we begin

at Jerusalem, we begin with a testimony to Jerusalem.† In Paul's ministry Jews and Gentiles alike are known only as " children of wrath." We get him preaching the gospel‡ to " every creature under heaven."§ But Paul was not simply a minister of the gospel ; he was a minister also of the church " to fulfil [complete] the word of God."

† The testimony in Matthew 28 : 19 goes out without a word about the Jews; Christ had been with the Jews, but the testimony is to go out unto the Gentiles. In Luke 24 : 47 the " beginning at Jerusalem marks the greatest possible grace.

‡ In the common sense of the word.

§ It was not a different gospel, as to the salvation of the soul from that of Peter ; but the testimony was more indiscriminate. I may distinguish in speaking to a man, but I must come to the same point, you are a lost sinner, and God is a holy God, and (Jew or Gentile), if not washed in the blood of Jesus, you must perish.

In order to the completion of the word of God, the doctrine of the church (as taught by him) must be preached, as well as the kingdom.

We read in Colossians i : 12, " Giving thanks unto the Father, which hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light : who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom* of his dear Son ; in whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins ; who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature:† for by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones or dominions, or principalities, or powers : all things were created by him, and for him: and he is before all things, and by him all things consist. And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the first-born from the dead:‡ that in all things he might have the pre-eminence. For it pleased (the Father) that in him should all fulness dwell ; and, having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself; by him, I say, whether they be things in earth or things in heaven. And you,§ that were sometimes alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled, in the body of his flesh through death, to present you holy, and unblamable, and unreprouvable in his sight." And now as to the ministry: "if ye continue in the faith grounded and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel, which ye have heard, and which was preached to every creature which is under heaven; whereof I Paul am made a minister; who now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body's sake, which is the church; whereof I am made a minister, according to the dispensation of God which is given to me for you, to fulfil the word of God," etc.

* There I get the kingdom.

† Besides being the image of God, He is Head over creation; and the reason of that is, that He has created it all.

‡ It is now " Head of the body, the church," as " first-born from the dead."

§ The church. Here (as there was the headship over all things, and the headship of the church, so) we get the reconciliation of all things in purpose, and the present reconciliation through faith, which is the church.

In the testimony about the church, I find (not the kingdom, nor the salvation of individuals, merely ; but) that there is a body for Him who is the Head, associated and connected with Him in His headship over all things. There is a certain special thing which the Lord has reconciled. Paul deduces everything, as to the church, from Christ's headship of the body, and the flowing down from Him of all he has to minister. How is the accomplishment of this? By one Spirit are we all baptised into one body," i Cor. 12 13.

Turn to Ephesians i : 19 : " And what is the exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe, according to the working of his mighty power, which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come; and hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all." In this passage, there is the headship of the body, and He is " Head over all things to the church."

As to the way and power of the unity of the body of saints formed on earth with Christ, the Head, in heaven, it is by the Holy Ghost " sent down from heaven"* making them one body.

* Come down after Christ's ascension, and consequent upon His glorification at the right hand of God, the work of redemption being accomplished.

As a consequence, when Paul speaks of apostles and prophets, he looks at them exclusively in this light† and never as appointed by Christ on earth. He says, " If ye have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God, which is given me to you-ward: how that by revelation he made known unto me the mystery (as I wrote afore in few words, whereby, when ye read, ye may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ), which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit," etc.‡ (Eph- 3 : 2-5). As to the very existence of these holy apostles and prophets : " Wherefore, he said, When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men. (Now that he ascended, what is it but that he also descended first into the lower parts of the earth ? He that descended is the same also that ascended up far above all heavens, that he might fill all things.) And he gave* some apostles ; and some prophets ; and some evangelists ; and some pastors and teachers ; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ," etc. (chap. 4). His thought about apostles is of something that flows from the exalted Head. He knows no man after the flesh.

† As flowing from Christ, the exalted Head in heaven.

‡ Here I get " holy apostles and prophets," and a thing known nothing of until ~ revealed to these apostles and prophets, to whom it was revealed by the Spirit.

* From this height.

By one Spirit baptised into one body, we have the Head and the body united together-the Head at the right hand of God in heaven, united to the members, formed into a body down here on earth by the power of the Holy Ghost. Scripture calls that "the church."†

There is a word in Matthew 16 that is sometimes overlooked. The Lord says there to Peter, " Upon this rock will I build my church." There had been the revelation by the Father to Peter of the Person of Christ as " the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him (on the confession of this), " Blessed art thou,

Simon Bar-jona, for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee. . . . And I also† say unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock will I build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven," etc. Christ is going to build His church ; and besides this He gives the keys to Peter, the keys of the kingdom-a distinct thing from Christ's building His church. The church is that body which the Holy Ghost forms into unity, as connected with, and united to, the Lord Jesus Christ, its Head, sitting at the right hand of the Father in heaven . and that which the Holy Ghost so unites to Him is the only thing§ in Scripture, called " the church -that is specifically such.

† One greatly respects the jealousy of souls having the consciousness of the electing love of God, and His saving every one whom He has called from Adam downward, in being alarmed lest this distinction should affect the foundation of God's electing love, through the blood ; but still it is my duty, as well as my privilege, to understand the position in which God has set me, and to call by the right name what God has called by that name in scripture.

‡ In effect, " I am going to give thee an official place; I am going to say something: My Father has revealed my name to thee, and I am going to give thee an official name! "

§ Local " churches " are not in question here.

It may be added that this is a question which at the present moment is running through almost every country in Europe.* There are endless theories about it ; but this is the question, "What is the church ? " Some say it is "visible," others "invisible", some, that there will be a church by-and-by, but there is none now ; that there is no church on earth (there may be churches), but (when all are assembled in heaven) there will be a church. Now whilst it is perfectly clear that, when Christ leaves the Father's throne to take the church unto Himself, it will form a glorious body in heaven; yet, plainly, whilst sitting at the right hand of God, the only thing He owns as the church is the body down here. Until He rises up from His seat on high, He is working and ordering and acting always (while hid in God) by the Holy Ghost ; and the Holy Ghost is down here. That which He owns as the church is where the Holy Ghost is, until it is united to Himself in glory.

* The thing people are seeking to settle is, What is the church of God ? It may be said to be the question of the day with the saints; and most surely it connects itself with every part of practice.

There is no difficulty if we turn to Scripture. Where did Paul look at the church ? "By one Spirit are we all baptised into one body," where ? On earth, not in heaven. Certainly, gifts of healing, etc., were not in heaven. Nor are the " joints and bands " in heaven. None of its ministries are in heaven. It will be in heaven eventually no doubt, but it is now on earth. This is a great point to get our souls simple and clear upon.

As to her " power." In Scripture it is not the power of the church, but the power that works in us-the power of God working in the church : " Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us,† unto him be glory in the church," etc. The operation of the power of the Lord is necessarily limited by the moral condition of the church (He may bear with it, have patience towards it, but) ; God will never publicly act so as to sanction what He disapproves.‡

† "In us," it is true, but still it is His power.

‡ He sanctions the gospel preached, and there will be a certain measure of power go with the gospel.

And with regard to power in public testimony; whilst the church was no doubt the vessel of it (there was a certain measure of power in the testimony of the kingdom* then, for which you would look in vain now), still it was the power of the Son of man. Where it is merely the saving of a soul, or the ministry of the church, one does not look for the same sort of power. God is sovereign and works as He pleases. The church was a vessel of power, and miracles were a testimony to the power of Christ as the risen Son of man. But when I think of the saving of souls, I look rather for that operation of the Spirit of God through the gospel. And when I look at the church, I look to the Head to supply what its need demands. While the church carried externally the character of Christ before the world, she was chartered with power-the power of Christ. That which Christ is to supply can never fail. Christ, and His power, and His acting in power, can never fail. He must nourish the church withal according to its need. But if God is acting in, and towards, persons, there must be truth in His actings ; He cannot act in the power of grace contrary to the moral condition of the church, any more than He can act towards an individual contrary to his state before Himself.

* The kingdom was there to a certain extent.

We must get our souls down into the consciousness of where we are, before we get the blessing suited to our condition. Where are we ? is the question. He never alters His mind. But the church's responsibility never alters His grace. Christ is exactly what it wants now-otherwise my faith cannot get on-as exactly what we want for the church now, as when in the days of the apostles it was adorned with every kind of miracle. But He will not act in the same way. Christ will never give up His thoughts about the church ; and if we are acting on our thoughts, and He acts on His, He will make sad work with what we have set up. " He that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad." If Christ begins to gather, He will scatter that which is not gathered in the power of unity with Himself. As with a card-house, the first wind of God's Spirit blows it all about. This may be very astonishing, very humbling, still it does not discourage (far from it!) those that look for God's actings. You are sure to get bad roads, when the spring comes, and the frost breaks up. Let the church be what it may, that is, the members of it ; Christ is not altered. Her power is her weakness, her spirit of dependence, in never getting out of the place of constant, simple, unmingled dependence.

The " hope " of the church, as such, is identified with, and founded on, the relationship in which it is placed as united to the Lord Jesus Christ in heaven. It is true she is here as a pilgrim on earth, but, at the same time, she is the bride on earth. United to her Head in heaven, seated in heaven in Him, she waits to be there. The one proper hope of the church has no more to do with the world than Christ has, who is in heaven. She will see things set right in the kingdom, but this is not her hope : her hope, as her actual association, is with the Lord Jesus Christ in heaven, where she knows Him. Where did Paul know Christ ? In the heavenly glory. And Paul knew the church to be one with Christ there.

There may be the change of the body in order to the accomplishment of the glory, but there is nothing as to its own position but sitting in heavenly places with Christ, because it is now sitting in heavenly places in Christ. To be along with Christ is our one hope-" That where I am, there ye may be also." In the first epistle to the Thessalonians, the apostle says, " Then shall we ever be with the Lord " ; and what follows ? Nothing! A great many things may be happening: but the church's hope is to be with Him where He is, and like Him, when she sees Him as He is.

As to the " calling." The heavenly calling, though embraced, does not at all fill up the thought. It does not in itself convey the thought of the church.* We might, as a set of individuals, be called up, and look to be caught up into heaven, and have a heavenly portion as the brethren of Christ, without knowing that we

were the body and bride of Christ. The " hope " of the church is its marriage with the Bridegroom, and that is in heaven; we may come forth from heaven, for the kingdom and the glory, but our place is in heaven, in the unity with Christ as one with Him. We are builded together for the habitation of God through the Spirit ; that is the calling of the church down here.†

* We are constantly confounding in our minds the members of the church and the church itself. A great many things are true of the members that do not involve the church distinctively (that is, as gathered into unity by one Spirit, baptised into one body). I may speak about the various members of a corporation without speaking of the corporation, its rights, etc., as such.

† In Ephesians 4 Paul beseeches " that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called ... endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling," etc.

With regard to the distinction between Peter, Paul, and John, as to the subject of ministry committed to them, Paul develops the dispensation of God ; Peter was a witness of the resurrection of Christ. In Paul, it is not simply resurrection, but union with Christ at the right hand of God; he was converted by hearing Christ (whom he had never seen on earth) telling him that (in persecuting the church) he was persecuting Himself. (Acts 4 : 4, 5.) That was the converting word. In John we get another thing, an abstract statement of what the nature of God is, and consequently what the nature of the children of God - love and righteousness. God is light, and God is love ; and the nature of the children is deduced from the nature of God Himself.

As to " present position and occupation," there is one thing makes a great difference. When the Spirit of God was working in the beginning of the gospel, the testimony had the aspect of power, and produced a sensible and visible result ; there was an ostensible gathering. The central energy had the fulness of the truth, though there might be feebleness at the extremity of the rays. But there is nothing of this sort now. The sheep of God are scattered. The camp has got wrong. The consequence of this is all manner of degrees of knowledge. The very principle of unity has a separative tendency. A man must now settle himself upon the centre of truth. If my soul is not prepared to look to Christ, and to gather with Christ, and to take His judgment, I shall be cast into the uncertain condition of the differing judgment of every saint I meet with in the day's walk. Where Christ is the common object, there will be a coalescing power. I find the church of God in a unity which attaches itself to Christ alone, as the one sole centre.

The " occupation " of the church ought to be constant incessant reference to its Head. If its Head is not its first thought (and that is shewn in thinking of its Head, and filling itself into all the thoughts and mind and affections of its Head), it cannot act for Him. This is its grand occupation. " We will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word." I must get through the crowd of Satan's power, and I must get beyond the crowd to my Head, who is the only source of power. We should seek that kind of communion with the saints which living in spirit with the Head gives. We should get all who hear to join in the cry; Rev. 22. So should the church have its own light, that all that is outside would be shut out. The apostle was living in a world of his own-he was filled with ideas of his own ; but they were God's ideas, and he had power. It is not knowing the scene I have to act in that gives me power (we get no strength from the contemplation of that), but intercourse and living communion with the Head. We should get near enough to Christ to enjoy Him, and to know Him truly, and to gather up all that is like Him. If not separated by affection from the world, we shall be separated by discipline in the world. He will vex our souls to get us separate, if in spirit and in heart we are not separate. " Because thou servedst not Jehovah thy God with

joyfulness, and with gladness of heart ... therefor thou shalt serve thine enemies which Jehovah thy God shall send against thee."

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When I speak of the " kingdom," it is a different thing.† We there get the display of power and government, not union and fellowship. Even the testimony of the kingdom comes necessarily to be quite a distinct thing. I should distinguish altogether " the gospel of the kingdom " and " the kingdom," from what we are accustomed to call, " the gospel "‡ and " the church." Paul taught the kingdom, and he taught the gospel, and he taught the church ; but he never taught them as the same thing. §

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From the moment Israel was called as a people, God had evidently the thought of having a king.† Man's way of setting about it was quite wrong. Up to the time of Samuel priesthood was morally the regular point of association between the people and God. But. the priests were unfaithful, and then the Lord wrote Ichabod upon all that had been Israel's glory. The link between God and the people was broken. The ark was taken by the Philistines. The priests were slain. He delivered His strength into captivity, and the Philistines were in the mount of God.

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* From this time the people's fortunes followed the king.

† As Melchisedek.

At length the King was presented in humiliation in the Person of Christ. John Baptist comes (Matt. 3) and says, " Repent ye ; for the kingdom of heaven is at hand ... he that cometh after me is mightier than I ... whose fan is in his hand ... he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."‡ John is rejected ; and then, after he is cast into prison, Christ takes up the same testimony (Matt. 4). " From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, Repent : for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." " And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all manner of sickness," etc. The power of God was with Him in testimony, and was seen. The disciples, the King having been rejected, are given to know " the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven," which to the multitude are parables , chap. 13. And they have God with them. The apostles were to go on (and they went on) preaching the kingdom.

‡ That is, the King is coming in judgment.

The kingdom is still to be set up, that is, the power of heaven, in the Person of Jesus Christ. He shall take to Him His great power and reign. It will be set up in heaven, for He must go to a far country to receive a kingdom and to return; Luke 19 - I 1, 12. He has gone up on high; but He has not yet been sent back in the power of the kingdom. It will be a " world to come," not merely a state of Judaism, the kingdom of the " Son of man "-not merely the Jews and their Messiah ; Dan. 2, 7. Heaven will be in the highest sense the seat of the kingdom. But it is still the kingdom.

There is another revelation. We are to reign in the kingdom. There are " joint-heirs " ; those who are to " reign with him "; and those who are to " sit on thrones." Yet it is still the kingdom, largely extended, a wider sphere; but I am still traveling in the circuit of the kingdom.

The destruction of Jerusalem was the setting aside of Jerusalem in judicial power ; but still we can preach the kingdom of God. There will be the effect of the actual employment of power in setting things to right. At present it is rather in testimony than in power. The effect of the power of Christ in " the world to come " will be to set aside the power of Satan.* In all this we have only the kingdom. Again, there will be a special testimony to the coming of the kingdom before the close.

* Miracles were " miracles of the world to come " (Heb. 2: 5 ; 6: 5.)

There is another ministry that goes out altogether on another principle. In Paul's ministry I get that which is beyond the reach of dispensations ; I have here what man is (not merely cc sinners of the Gentiles," or Jews). He may prove it as regards the Gentiles in one way, and demonstrate it as regards the Jews in another; but what he proves and demonstrates is this, that man as man is at enmity with God. If we begin at Jerusalem, we begin with a testimony to Jerusalem.† In Paul's ministry Jews and Gentiles alike are known only as " children of wrath." We get him preaching the gospel‡ to " every creature under heaven."§ But Paul was not simply a minister of the gospel ; he was a minister also of the church " to fulfil [complete] the word of God."

† The testimony in Matthew 28 : 19 goes out without a word about the Jews; Christ had been with the Jews, but the testimony is to go out unto the Gentiles. In Luke 24 : 47 the " beginning at Jerusalem marks the greatest possible grace.

‡ In the common sense of the word.

§ It was not a different gospel, as to the salvation of the soul from that of Peter ; but the testimony was more indiscriminate. I may distinguish in speaking to a man, but I must come to the same point, you are a lost sinner, and God is a holy God, and (Jew or Gentile), if not washed in the blood of Jesus, you must perish.

In order to the completion of the word of God, the doctrine of the church (as taught by him) must be preached, as well as the kingdom.

We read in Colossians i : 12, " Giving thanks unto the Father, which hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light : who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom* of his dear Son ; in whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins ; who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature:† for by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones

or dominions, or principalities, or powers : all things were created by him, and for him: and he is before all things, and by him all things consist. And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the first-born from the dead:‡ that in all things he might have the pre-eminence. For it pleased (the Father) that in him should all fulness dwell ; and, having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself; by him, I say, whether they be things in earth or things in heaven. And you,§ that were sometimes alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled, in the body of his flesh through death, to present you holy, and unblamable, and unreprouvable in his sight." And now as to the ministry: "if ye continue in the faith grounded and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel, which ye have heard, and which was preached to every creature which is under heaven; whereof I Paul am made a minister; who now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body's sake, which is the church; whereof I am made a minister, according to the dispensation of God which is given to me for you, to fulfil the word of God," etc.

* There I get the kingdom.

† Besides being the image of God, He is Head over creation; and the reason of that is, that He has created it all.

‡ It is now " Head of the body, the church," as " first-born from the dead."

§ The church. Here (as there was the headship over all things, and the headship of the church, so) we get the reconciliation of all things in purpose, and the present reconciliation through faith, which is the church.

In the testimony about the church, I find (not the kingdom, nor the salvation of individuals, merely ; but) that there is a body for Him who is the Head, associated and connected with Him in His headship over all things. There is a certain special thing which the Lord has reconciled. Paul deduces everything, as to the church, from Christ's headship of the body, and the flowing down from Him of all he has to minister. How is the accomplishment of this? By one Spirit are we all baptised into one body," i Cor. 12 13.

Turn to Ephesians i : 19 : " And what is the exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe, according to the working of his mighty power, which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come; and hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all." In this passage, there is the headship of the body, and He is " Head over all things to the church."

As to the way and power of the unity of the body of saints formed on earth with Christ, the Head, in heaven, it is by the Holy Ghost " sent down from heaven"* making them one body.

* Come down after Christ's ascension, and consequent upon His glorification at the right hand of God, the work of redemption being accomplished.

As a consequence, when Paul speaks of apostles and prophets, he looks at them exclusively in this light† and never as appointed by Christ on earth. He says, " If ye have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God, which is given me to you-ward: how that by revelation he made known unto me the mystery (as I wrote afore in few words, whereby, when ye read, ye may understand my knowledge in the mystery of

Christ), which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit," etc.‡ (Eph- 3 : 2-5). As to the very existence of these holy apostles and prophets : " Wherefore, he said, When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men. (Now that he ascended, what is it but that he also descended first into the lower parts of the earth ? He that descended is the same also that ascended up far above all heavens, that he might fill all things.) And he gave* some apostles ; and some prophets ; and some evangelists ; and some pastors and teachers ; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ," etc. (chap. 4). His thought about apostles is of something that flows from the exalted Head. He knows no man after the flesh.

† As flowing from Christ, the exalted Head in heaven.

‡ Here I get " holy apostles and prophets," and a thing known nothing of until ~ revealed to these apostles and prophets, to whom it was revealed by the Spirit.

* From this height.

By one Spirit baptised into one body, we have the Head and the body united together-the Head at the right hand of God in heaven, united to the members, formed into a body down here on earth by the power of the Holy Ghost. Scripture calls that "the church."†

There is a word in Matthew 16 that is sometimes overlooked. The Lord says there to Peter, " Upon this rock will I build my church." There had been the revelation by the Father to Peter of the Person of Christ as " the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him (on the confession of this), " Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-jona, for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee. . . . And I also‡ say unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock will I build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven," etc. Christ is going to build His church ; and besides this He gives the keys to Peter, the keys of the kingdom-a distinct thing from Christ's building His church. The church is that body which the Holy Ghost forms into unity, as connected with, and united to, the Lord Jesus Christ, its Head, sitting at the right hand of the Father in heaven . and that which the Holy Ghost so unites to Him is the only thing§ in Scripture, called " the church -that is specifically such.

† One greatly respects the jealousy of souls having the consciousness of the electing love of God, and His saving every one whom He has called from Adam downward, in being alarmed lest this distinction should affect the foundation of God's electing love, through the blood ; but still it is my duty, as well as my privilege, to understand the position in which God has set me, and to call by the right name what God has called by that name in scripture.

‡ In effect, " I am going to give thee an official place; I am going to say something: My Father has revealed my name to thee, and I am going to give thee an official name! "

§ Local " churches " are not in question here.

It may be added that this is a question which at the present moment is running through almost every country in Europe.* There are endless theories about it ; but this is the question, "What is the church ? " Some say it is "visible," others "invisible", some, that there will be a church by-and-by, but there is none now ; that there is no church on earth (there may be churches), but (when all are assembled in heaven) there will be a church. Now whilst it is perfectly clear that, when Christ leaves the Father's throne to take

the church unto Himself, it will form a glorious body in heaven; yet, plainly, whilst sitting at the right hand of God, the only thing He owns as the church is the body down here. Until He rises up from His seat on high, He is working and ordering and acting always (while hid in God) by the Holy Ghost ; and the Holy Ghost is down here. That which He owns as the church is where the Holy Ghost is, until it is united to Himself in glory.

* The thing people are seeking to settle is, What is the church of God ? It may be said to be the question of the day with the saints; and most surely it connects itself with every part of practice.

There is no difficulty if we turn to Scripture. Where did Paul look at the church ? "By one Spirit are we all baptised into one body," where ? On earth, not in heaven. Certainly, gifts of healing, etc., were not in heaven. Nor are the " joints and bands " in heaven. None of its ministries are in heaven. It will be in heaven eventually no doubt, but it is now on earth. This is a great point to get our souls simple and clear upon.

As to her " power." In Scripture it is not the power of the church, but the power that works in us-the power of God working in the church : " Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us,† unto him be glory in the church," etc. The operation of the power of the Lord is necessarily limited by the moral condition of the church (He may bear with it, have patience towards it, but) ; God will never publicly act so as to sanction what He disapproves.‡

† "In us," it is true, but still it is His power.

‡ He sanctions the gospel preached, and there will be a certain measure of power go with the gospel.

And with regard to power in public testimony; whilst the church was no doubt the vessel of it (there was a certain measure of power in the testimony of the kingdom* then, for which you would look in vain now), still it was the power of the Son of man. Where it is merely the saving of a soul, or the ministry of the church, one does not look for the same sort of power. God is sovereign and works as He pleases. The church was a vessel of power, and miracles were a testimony to the power of Christ as the risen Son of man. But when I think of the saving of souls, I look rather for that operation of the Spirit of God through the gospel. And when I look at the church, I look to the Head to supply what its need demands. While the church carried externally the character of Christ before the world, she was chartered with power-the power of Christ. That which Christ is to supply can never fail. Christ, and His power, and His acting in power, can never fail. He must nourish the church withal according to its need. But if God is acting in, and towards, persons, there must be truth in His actings ; He cannot act in the power of grace contrary to the moral condition of the church, any more than He can act towards an individual contrary to his state before Himself.

* The kingdom was there to a certain extent.

We must get our souls down into the consciousness of where we are, before we get the blessing suited to our condition. Where are we ? is the question. He never alters His mind. But the church's responsibility never alters His grace. Christ is exactly what it wants now-otherwise my faith cannot get on-as exactly what we want for the church now, as when in the days of the apostles it was adorned with every kind of miracle. But He will not act in the same way. Christ will never give up His thoughts about the church ; and if we are acting on our thoughts, and He acts on His, He will make sad work with what we have set up. " He that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad." If Christ begins to gather, He will scatter that which is

not gathered in the power of unity with Himself. As with a card-house, the first wind of God's Spirit blows it all about. This may be very astonishing, very humbling, still it does not discourage (far from it!) those that look for God's actings. You are sure to get bad roads, when the spring comes, and the frost breaks up. Let the church be what it may, that is, the members of it ; Christ is not altered. Her power is her weakness, her spirit of dependence, in never getting out of the place of constant, simple, unmingled dependence.

The " hope " of the church, as such, is identified with, and founded on, the relationship in which it is placed as united to the Lord Jesus Christ in heaven. It is true she is here as a pilgrim on earth, but, at the same time, she is the bride on earth. United to her Head in heaven, seated in heaven in Him, she waits to be there. The one proper hope of the church has no more to do with the world than Christ has, who is in heaven. She will see things set right in the kingdom, but this is not her hope : her hope, as her actual association, is with the Lord Jesus Christ in heaven, where she knows Him. Where did Paul know Christ ? In the heavenly glory. And Paul knew the church to be one with Christ there.

There may be the change of the body in order to the accomplishment of the glory, but there is nothing as to its own position but sitting in heavenly places with Christ, because it is now sitting in heavenly places in Christ. To be along with Christ is our one hope-" That where I am, there ye may be also." In the first epistle to the Thessalonians, the apostle says, " Then shall we ever be with the Lord " ; and what follows ? Nothing! A great many things may be happening: but the church's hope is to be with Him where He is, and like Him, when she sees Him as He is.

As to the " calling." The heavenly calling, though embraced, does not at all fill up the thought. It does not in itself convey the thought of the church.* We might, as a set of individuals, be called up, and look to be caught up into heaven, and have a heavenly portion as the brethren of Christ, without knowing that we were the body and bride of Christ. The " hope " of the church is its marriage with the Bridegroom, and that is in heaven; we may come forth from heaven, for the kingdom and the glory, but our place is in heaven, in the unity with Christ as one with Him. We are builded together for the habitation of God through the Spirit ; that is the calling of the church down here.†

* We are constantly confounding in our minds the members of the church and the church itself. A great many things are true of the members that do not involve the church distinctively (that is, as gathered into unity by one Spirit, baptised into one body). I may speak about the various members of a corporation without speaking of the corporation, its rights, etc., as such.

† In Ephesians 4 Paul beseeches " that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called ... endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling," etc.

With regard to the distinction between Peter, Paul, and John, as to the subject of ministry committed to them, Paul develops the dispensation of God ; Peter was a witness of the resurrection of Christ. In Paul, it is not simply resurrection, but union with Christ at the right hand of God; he was converted by hearing Christ (whom he had never seen on earth) telling him that (in persecuting the church) he was persecuting Himself. (Acts 4 : 4, 5.) That was the converting word. In John we get another thing, an abstract statement of what the nature of God is, and consequently what the nature of the children of God - love and righteousness. God is light, and God is love ; and the nature of the children is deduced from the nature of God Himself.

As to " present position and occupation," there is one thing makes a great difference. When the Spirit of God was working in the beginning of the gospel, the testimony had the aspect of power, and produced a sensible and visible result ; there was an ostensible gathering. The central energy had the fulness of the truth, though there might be feebleness at the extremity of the rays. But there is nothing of this sort now. The sheep of God are scattered. The camp has got wrong. The consequence of this is all manner of degrees of knowledge. The very principle of unity has a separative tendency. A man must now settle himself upon the centre of truth. If my soul is not prepared to look to Christ, and to gather with Christ, and to take His judgment, I shall be cast into the uncertain condition of the differing judgment of every saint I meet with in the day's walk. Where Christ is the common object, there will be a coalescing power. I find the church of God in a unity which attaches itself to Christ alone, as the one sole centre.

The " occupation " of the church ought to be constant incessant reference to its Head. If its Head is not its first thought (and that is shewn in thinking of its Head, and filling itself into all the thoughts and mind and affections of its Head), it cannot act for Him. This is its grand occupation. " We will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word." I must get through the crowd of Satan's power, and I must get beyond the crowd to my Head, who is the only source of power. We should seek that kind of communion with the saints which living in spirit with the Head gives. We should get all who hear to join in the cry; Rev. 22. So should the church have its own light, that all that is outside would be shut out. The apostle was living in a world of his own-he was filled with ideas of his own ; but they were God's ideas, and he had power. It is not knowing the scene I have to act in that gives me power (we get no strength from the contemplation of that), but intercourse and living communion with the Head. We should get near enough to Christ to enjoy Him, and to know Him truly, and to gather up all that is like Him. If not separated by affection from the world, we shall be separated by discipline in the world. He will vex our souls to get us separate, if in spirit and in heart we are not separate. " Because thou servedst not Jehovah thy God with joyfulness, and with gladness of heart ... therefor thou shalt serve thine enemies which Jehovah thy God shall send against thee."

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