

THE HOUSEHOLD OF FAITH

1 Corinthians 12. —The position of the household of faith in Paul's day was very different from what it is in ours. We find many remarks and exhortations in his letters applicable in those days which have no bearing now. One of the principal differences is, that they were under the ministration of the Spirit, in the persons of qualified men. There were first apostles; secondarily, prophets; thirdly, pastors and teachers. There were helps, governments, men of divers gifts, bestowed by the power of the Spirit for the purpose of regulating the affairs of the communities just emerged from the practices of idolatry, and leading them on to the perfect work of the truth. The machinery at work is briefly described in these words—

“Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are differences of administration, but the same Lord; and there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God who worketh all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal. For to one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom; to another the word of knowledge, by the same Spirit; to another faith, by the same Spirit; to another the gifts of healing, by the same Spirit.”

“*Faith*” in this passage is evidently the faith spoken of elsewhere as the faith that could remove mountains, and not the faith which cometh by hearing. We can see that such faith must be a gift of the Spirit, because it is only by the Spirit that miracles can be performed.

This is not a kind of experience that we know anything of in our day; we have never seen any but perfectly natural manifestations. Ability in any particular branch is the result of natural endowment. It was different in those days; for God confirmed the word of truth by miraculous manifestations. This is Paul's testimony, in these words:

*“How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him; **God also bearing witness both with signs and wonders, and with divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit?**”*

These gifts of the Spirit were signs or tokens that the testimony of the apostles was of God. It was highly necessary that such gifts should be given; for how otherwise could men have received the doctrine of the apostles? The men placed over the ecclesias were men qualified by the Spirit and **appointed by the Spirit**. This appears in Paul's address to the elders of Ephesus:

*“Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, **over which the Holy Spirit hath made you overseers, to feed the Ecclesia of God.**”*

This placed them in a very different position from what we occupy, and necessarily gave them a power to rule, to which no one now can make pretension. A divinely-appointed man had authority to command, and a voice that would be listened to. We have not this advantage, and it is a mistake in our present circumstances to act as if we had. We have no authority; we have no power to do anything but to preach the word, and restrict ourselves to

the company of those who submit to it. These facts do not involve the exercise of authority; but merely of the private prerogative, which appertains to every man, to choose individually what appears to him to be the right course to pursue. All that is done now is voluntary, and according to natural qualification. To a certain extent this rule was observed in apostolic days. The men selected by the Spirit were men of certain previous qualification.

Paul says,

“If a man desire the office of a bishop (overseer), he desireth a good work.”

To desire the office of a bishop, was to desire to have to do with the highest thing it was possible to put a hand to. But Paul guards the way against its usurpation by men who might merely be enamoured of power. He specifies the qualifications with distinctness.

“A bishop must be blameless; the husband of one wife”—a very necessary matter to mention in those days, when polygamy was rife; “vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, given to hospitality, apt to teach; not given to wine, no striker, not greedy of filthy lucre; but patient, not a brawler, not covetous; one that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity (for if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the ecclesia of God?); not a novice, lest being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil.”

These were the qualifications which in the estimation of Paul were necessary before a man could efficiently fill a position of authority in the ecclesia. And although these remarks have no direct bearing upon our time, they indicate principles which we can apply in our circumstances. We have no men who have been nominated or equipped by the Spirit to rule in the sense of being masters; but we must have certain brethren for the performance of certain duties, and in the selecting of these, it is well to keep these qualifications in view.

Then we should do well to take a wider view, and to recognise the principles laid down with regard to bishops, as holding good with regard to every brother of Christ. We must adorn the truth, we must be free from reproach; for what is our position? We are witnesses for God against the wickedness of men—not witnesses for doctrinal truth merely. The truth in this sense is the outside thing, the external shape of the eternal principles of God. There is a principle underlying the purpose of God to set up a kingdom. There is a deep reason for our mortality, which we may overlook in our eagerness to demonstrate our mortality. There are glorious principles at work underneath the scheme of salvation. We have to show the channel through which the principles are brought; but it would be infatuation to overlook the principles themselves.

The love of God, His righteousness, His greatness, His holiness, His authority, our dependence on Him, are essential principles of the truth. While, then, we are witnesses against the impiety and unrighteousness of men, let us see to it that we ourselves are holy and without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation. This is more necessary in proportion as a brother is able to take an active part in the upholding of the testimony. There are necessarily those in the ecclesias who take a more prominent part than others, and there always will be; the work cannot do itself. Where there are none to take it up, the work goes to the wall, and the truth languishes. Therefore, it behoves presiding brethren—and I mention them because they are seen more conspicuously in connection with Christ’s business—to be particularly exemplary and free from blemish and reproach in all things. They ought to be zealous and punctual in their attendance at the meetings; moreover, they ought to be men of

example at home. If a man will not bear examination at home, he is not worth anything abroad, whatever he may appear to be in a public capacity. There must be the gold underneath—not on the surface only; they must be men of integrity and scrupulous honour in everything. It is for them to uphold what is honourable, and to reprobate and avoid everything that is dishonourable. They must not look to the world for their lessons: the world is a liar in this matter.

There are many things the world calls white that are black; and the things that are thoroughly white in the sight of God, they oftentimes call black and foolish. They must be guided by Christ's sentiments in this matter—prominent servants of Christ. For this purpose they must be students of the word. They ought to set an example to all the rest in this as well as other matters; they ought to read continually themselves, and be filled richly with the word of Christ, and not follow a course whose example it would be dangerous to imitate. Not that a greater responsibility rests upon them than the rest: it behoves every man and woman, who has put on the name of Christ, to depart from iniquity and follow after righteousness; for it is certain that all others will be excluded from the kingdom of God. Responsibility attaches to all alike—public or private; but it applies with peculiar force to all who stand before the world to promote the cause of holiness.

The cause of Christ is the cause of honour, of love, of integrity, of justice, of goodness and all excellence. It is the cause of everything that is morally beautiful, and pure-minded, and noble and lofty; and to these things we have to rise. We must attain them, or be left in the valley of death.

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