

The Same Care for One Another

The Real Purpose of a Fraternal Gathering

"The eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of thee"—1 Cor. 12:21

FIRST CORINTHIANS CHAPTER TWELVE

FIRST, let us consider this word "purpose" itself. A purpose is an intelligent plan, methodically carried out to its fulfilment. Purpose involves futurity. The natural world has no futurity—just the brief present of a few troubled years.

There is only one thing that can be truly called a purpose, and that is God's eternal purpose to fill the earth with His glory.

God's declared purpose is to extend and expand His glory. Truly at present all the universe is filled with His glory in the physical and material sense. His glory is everywhere. But it is an inanimate glory. His purpose is to extend His glory spiritually and morally— to extend it through **living creatures of glory**, the "Cherubim of Glory."

The Cherubim of Glory epitomize in symbol God's eternal purpose. They speak to us of God multitudinously manifested in life, activity, knowledge, intelligence, awareness, love, beauty, holiness. God's glory, as He revealed in answer to Moses' plea, "Show me Thy glory," is His character. He purposes to multiply in glorified creatures His goodness, His holiness, His beauty.

There is no purpose in the world of natural, dying mankind. The world—all that are in the world—have nothing that can be truly called a purpose. They have desires, hopes, ambitions, plans, diversions, amusements—but no purpose. Nothing that in a few short years ends in the grave can be truly said to be a purpose.

Only the children of God have a purpose. Their lives alone are purposeful. For them alone the future is bright, and light, and everlasting. All the rest of the world are animals—all outside the divine covenants of promise. Animals have no purpose, no sense of futurity. They live only for the present, for desire, lust, sensation, pleasure—and the end, eternal death.

What is the real purpose of a Fraternal Gathering?

Generally speaking, there is only one purpose to anything—the glory of God (Rev. 4:11) —

"Thou hast created all things, and for Thy pleasure they are, and were created."

"Pleasure" here is not really the right word. The RV and Diaglott have— "Because of Thy will."

This is the only place this word is translated "pleasure." 60 times elsewhere it is translated "will," as in the passages:

"Thy will be done on earth."

"Not my will, but Thine."

All things are created for God's will or purpose, and they have no other purpose than to fulfill that will.

There is only one purpose, but there are different aspects of that purpose. We do different things to forward or accomplish different details of that purpose. All our lives—every activity—is, or should be, devoted to the one and only purpose, the glory of God. So we may say the purpose of a fraternal gathering is the glory of God, and it is well to keep this realization prominently before us.

But a fraternal gathering is a special and specific arrangement. What then is its special purpose, within the general framework of the overall purpose of the glory of God?

I believe the hymns we have sung, and the chapter read, express that purpose—

"As the (natural) body is one, and hath many members . . . so also is Christ."

Jesus says the 2nd greatest commandment, after the love of God, is—

"Thou shalt love thy neighbor AS THYSELF."

The force of the command lies in the "as thyself"—to the same extent; in the same way. Everyone naturally loves themselves. But they have to learn, they have to be taught, to continually expand the sphere of their sympathy and concern and affection.

Natural man is self-centered. **This is death.** Spiritual man sees himself as a small part of an immense divine, purposeful, interworking unity. **This is life.**

God's purpose with us is to expand our consciousness from the narrowness of self to the universality of the spirit. In God's wise providence, for the accomplishing of this purpose in us, the Ecclesia is the unit of operation and manifestation: the Body is One—

"Ye are all One in Christ."

"That they may be One, as Thou, Father, art in me, and I in Thee, that they also may be One in us."

"The glory which Thou gavest me I have given them . . . that they may be perfect in One."

To deepen our consciousness and fulfilment of this "Perfect in One" concept is the real purpose of a Fraternal Gathering.

The meaning of "Ecclesia" has different degrees of extension.

In its narrowest sense, it is the local group with which, and within which, we—in God's wise provision and providence—are working out our salvation.

In a wider, but still present, sense it is the Body of Christ in its current, living constitution—those with whom we are contemporary throughout the world.

In its fullest, most universal sense, the Ecclesia comprises all the Redeemed of all generations—the multitude of glory that no man can number.

From week to week we work and associate within the framework of our own local ecclesia (to some extent extending to neighboring ecclesias), but we must always be vividly conscious of the larger aspect of the Ecclesia of Christ diffused through both past history and present geography.

Paul is our example. He could sincerely and literally write to all throughout the ecclesial world (Eph. 1:16)—

"I cease not to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers."

"Without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers" (Rom. 1:9).

A Fraternal Gathering is to strengthen by personal contact the ecclesial bonds of unity and sympathy and fellowship and understanding.

Paul prayed fervently to be able to see the ecclesia at Rome, that, as he says—

"I may be comforted together with you by the mutual faith of both you and me."

In God's wisdom for our good, the Ecclesia is the unit, not the individual. No man liveth to himself: that is selfishness, stagnation, sterility. The Body is ONE, and hath many members.

The heart of our gradual education from ugly natural ignorance to the living beauty of the Truth is to learn to think and to act unselfishly as part of the Body, and not selfishly as a separate individual, even as regards our own salvation.

The flesh is for itself. Even its goodnesses to others are for its own satisfaction. It is impossible to escape this vicious circle of self-centeredness except by breaking completely out of the flesh into the mind of the Spirit, by constant prayer, and study of the Word, and the help of God.

We must die completely to ourselves, and be born anew into the Body of Christ.

It is God's wise and loving appointment that we develop beauty and spirituality of character by communion with and care for one another. We remember the original Ecclesia in the fresh, unspoiled glory of its first pure enthusiasm—

"The multitude of them that believed were of one heart and one soul.

"Neither said any of them that aught of the things he possessed was his own, but they had ALL THINGS

COMMON" (Acts 4:32).

The word translated "common" is usually rendered "fellowship"—

"They had all things IN FELLOWSHIP."

This alone is true, pure, spiritual fellowship—true unity of heart—true living.

Of course this beautiful picture could not last. It was but a brief glimpse of what man could rise to by the original, unspoiled fire of pure zeal for God; but human nature is too evil, too selfish, too fleshly, too small, too self-centered, for such perfection of heart—such Oneness—to last.

The primitive spiritual glory of the newborn Ecclesia soon faded away, as the flesh flooded back in, but the vision remains as the guide and inspiration of those few in each generation that truly seek the perfection of God—

"They had all things in fellowship . . ."

"The Body is One, and hath many members."

What is the real purpose of a Fraternal Gathering?

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IN this 12th ch. of 1 Cor., Paul is speaking of spiritual gifts. There is no possession or open manifestation of the Spirit today, but the principle remains—

Each member of the Body is given his proper gift—ability—capability for good, for dedicated, lifelong use for the glory of God and welfare of the Body—**and for no other purpose.**

The Truth is not a spare-time hobby; it is a full-time job—and only those who realize this have any hope of making it to the Kingdom of God. Paul instructs Timothy—

"Having food and raiment, be therewith content."

To give this command its full force and meaning, and to lift it from the counsel of mere indolent hoboism, we must tie it in with his command to the Corinthians a little later in this epistle—

"Be **always abounding** in the work of the Lord."

"Always abounding." This is the practical and constructive reason why we must, "having food and raiment"—the bare necessities—"be content": stop, and get on with eternal things, the work of the Lord, the feeding and clothing of the Body of Christ.

To the extent, beyond provision of food and raiment, that we get bogged down in the rubbish of the world that is so soon to pass away—time- and money-and effort-devouring possessions and positions—to that extent we are neglecting the Body, we are hurting the Body, we are robbing the Body of Christ.

"Always abounding in the work of the Lord."

How CAN we, if the world is hanging heavy around our neck?—

"The cares of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lust of other things, choke the Word, that it bringeth forth no fruit."

Clearly, in Corinth, there was unhealthy competition about spiritual gifts. This was falling right back into the selfishness and pride of the flesh, on a higher, more hypocritical, more responsible level.

The gifts were not for present gratification and glorification, but for the selfless service of the Body. From the apparently most exalted to the apparently most menial, all were for the same purpose and all were equally needed.

"The Body is One, and hath many members."

When the disciples, at the last supper, bickered over who should be the greatest, Christ washed their feet. It was a menial task. It took no ability. Anyone could do it. Yet it was a manifestation of the highest 1 degree of spirituality and divine perception.

It was a lesson for all time— not so much of humility (which is simply but the inevitable by-product of wisdom) as of perception, discernment, understanding, unity and love.

What is the real purpose of a Fraternal Gathering?

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There are many lessons in this 1 Cor. 12, as Paul draws the parallel between the human body and the Ecclesia of God. And overshadowing all that he says is the climax we know he is leading to in ch. 13—

"Yet show I unto you a more excellent way."

"By One Spirit are we all baptized into One Body, whether Jew, Gentile, bond or free: and have all been made to drink into One Spirit" (v. 13).

This was the great turning-point in our life: our passing from death to life—from the selfish, ignorant slavery of the flesh to the selfless freedom of the Spirit. John says—

"We know we' have passed from death to life because we love the brethren" (1 John 3:14).

He is saying the same thing as Paul is here: we have made the transition from fleshly individuality to spiritual community. We have ceased to be ourselves, to seek our own desires, to consider our own interests—and we have become absorbed wholly and wholeheartedly into the glory and fellowship and unity and joyful, satisfying service of the Body of Christ—

"We KNOW we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren."

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"For the body is not one member, but many" (14).

The beauty and usefulness and purpose of the human body is in its diversity. A severed foot or hand is a repulsive monstrosity. It is obviously dead and useless—detached, broken off, lost, cast aside, rejected; yea, worse: decaying, corrupting, putrefying.

But a complete, living, healthy body, with all its parts functioning smoothly together, all perfectly coordinated in grace and symmetry and harmony of movement and purpose, all instantly subject to the one Head—is of great attractiveness, and obvious power and usefulness.

No single member can be a body in itself: however accomplished, however skilled, however wise. No one of us can stand alone.

We may, by unavoidable force of circumstances, be confined to lonely isolation, like Paul shut up in prison, but we are still part of the Body; and we must, like Paul, think and live and move and breathe as part of the Body. Those who live for themselves alone, however holily they may strive to live, are monstrosities and abortions. Paul said—

"Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is offended, and I burn not?"

And of Jesus it is recorded—

"Surely he hath borne our grief & carried our sorrows."

"A man of sorrows"—not his own, but the sorrows of all the world—

"Remember them that are bound, as bound with them."

"Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep."

"Could ye not watch with me one hour?"

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"If the foot shall say, Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body—is it therefore not of the body? If the ear shall say, because I am not the eye. . ."

We may be a foot, or a hand, or an eye, or an ear. It is immaterial which we are. It is up to God what He makes us to suit His purpose. He makes us in each case what is needed for the Body in our time and place and circumstance.

The important thing is—we ARE part of the Body; a necessary part. The Body cannot function without us, nor can we function without the Body.

We must live—not for ourselves—but for the Body. We must each do, to the fullest extent of our opportunity and ability, what comes to our hand for the welfare and usefulness of the Body.

Unless every member, from least to greatest, is consciously doing this—stripping off all the rubbish of the world in order to free themselves to do this—then the Body cannot function as the true, spiritual Body of Christ.

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"If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing?"

The beauty and usefulness of the body lies in its diversified unity—the marvelous and harmonious specialization of its infinite multitude of parts and functions—the eye to see, the ear to hear, the foot to walk, the hand to do. . .

Even in the simplest actions of the body, there is an exquisite coordination of many parts, perfected by long use & practice.

So it must be with the Body of Christ. All parts MUST, by use and association and self-submergence to the common purpose, develop a close coordination in the work of the Lord.

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"God hath set the members every one in the body as it hath pleased HIM" (18).

Here again, for "pleased," we have the same word. Literally: "As He hath willed"—that is, according to HIS purpose.

It is a comfort, and a responsibility, to know that it is God Who has put us where we are, and has made us what we are, according to His Own eternal will and purpose. It is a comfort to know we are part of a purpose; that we have in God's sight a useful function for the present, and a glorious prospect for the future.

Most of the world's silly pleasures and indulgences are a running away from cold reality, because they cannot squarely face the inevitable tragedy of the hopeless darkness and futility of the future that confronts them all. Life without God is life without purpose—an empty, crushing, meaningless tragedy of struggle and sorrow.

But all the members of the Body of Christ are appointed by God to a joyful, useful, satisfying work, and a glorious destiny of life and hope—IF they "lose their life"—submerge their separate individuality—into the unity and service of the Body.

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"The eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of thee."

Another deep lesson we must learn, if we are to be a part of the Body of Christ. In the wisdom of God, it is ordained that we all need each other. We may, in our self-sufficient blindness, not realize the need; or in our fleshly pride, refuse to recognize it.

This is indeed sad. It was the condition of the Laodiceans, who had no conception of their true spiritual condition or needs.

We may not be able, in our natural ignorance, to at first realize this need of others, but it is wisdom to take God's word for it, until we grow spiritually into the capacity of realization. Only as living and integral parts of the Body can we be pleasing to Him.

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"Much more those members of the body which seem to be more feeble, are necessary: and those members which we think to be less honorable, on them we bestow more abundant honor."

In the natural body, some parts seem weak and feeble and delicate, some parts seem less attractive and honorable, some parts seem to have no useful function.

We all know how the doctors of the world, in the ignorance of evolutionary self-delusion, from time to time develop a morbid fad for cutting out some part of the body because they do not know its purpose. But God knows why each part is there, and what it is for.

Truly there are times when parts of the body become diseased and corrupt, and have to be removed lest they infect and destroy the body. This is sad, and there is a sad spiritual parallel for this too, and the Body suffers, and is never really the same again.

In our natural body, we cherish and protect our weaker parts; we honor and clothe our uncomely parts. Paul said—

"In lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves."

And in this connection he reminds us—

"Some men's sins are open beforehand, going before unto judgment, and some men they follow after.

"Likewise also the good works of some are manifest beforehand, and they that are otherwise cannot be hid."

All are sinners, and hidden sins of the spirit are worse before God than open sins of the flesh. Bad temper and impatience may be worse in God's sight than bad morals and impurity.

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"For our comely parts have no need, but God hath tempered the body together, having given more abundant honor to that part which lacked" (24).

We are told by Christ that the first shall be last, and the last first. God does not see as man seeth, for God looks upon the heart, we are told—

"Where much is given, much is required."

—and only God knows what is given, and what is therefrom expected. A striving, one-talent member may, unnoticed and unseen, be doing far more for the glory of God than the showy external accomplishments that come so easily and enjoyably to a 5-talent member. The main arena of our labor and our testing is the battle within ourselves, the battle with the flesh.

And many who, in his Name, have prophesied, and cast out devils, and done many wonderful works, have never won, or even faced, the great inner struggle. And to them, in spite of their long catalog of achievement, he will say: "I never knew you."

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"That the members should have the same care for one another: that there be no schism."

This is important. We are naturally drawn to some more than to others, usually for natural or fleshly reasons.

But even if it be for the purest of spiritual reasons, it is dangerous, and must be controlled. There **must** be the "same care" for ALL. The Body is One, and anything, official or unofficial, selfishly thoughtless or intensely well-meaning, that subdivides that Oneness is hurtful to the Body.

We naturally tend to polarize—by natural affinity, by common interest, by age, etc. But this fleshly tendency must be rooted out. There must be the **same care**, the same interest, the same affinity, for all.

And we shall find, in the loving wisdom of God, as we so often marvelously find in submission to His provisions, that this gives a far richer and deeper communion than polarization into groups of common characteristics.

The young have much to learn from the old, and the old from the young. Unity in diversity is the beauty of the Body. The Body is One. In this aspect too the same principle applies—

"The eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of thee."

* * *

"And whether one member suffer, all members suffer with it."

In the natural body this is obviously true. Pain or disease anywhere affects the entire being, and the comfort and activity of every part.

It is not quite so obvious in the spiritual Body, but it is even more true, whether the suffering be misfortune or misconduct. This is the beauty and glory of ecclesial unity.

Sorrow and suffering are not purposeless. Our present lot is not meant to be for mere enjoyment, but a brief period of intense training, development and preparation for eternal, endless joy—

"Our LIGHT affliction . . ."

—says Paul, the lifelong sufferer—

". . . worketh an exceeding and eternal weight of glory."

Individual tribulation worketh patience, and shared tribulation does more—it worketh deeper fellowship and unity—

"God comforteth us in all our tribulation . . ."

—he says at the beginning of 2nd Corinthians—

". . . that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God."

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"Or one member be honored, all the members rejoice with it."

Truly, salvation is in one sense an individual thing. We each at last stand or fall individually before the Judge.

But in another very real and perhaps much deeper sense, it is **not** an individual thing, for no one who seeks to save **himself** will save himself. Only those who have clearly seen themselves—and **made** themselves—harmonious, sympathetic, interwoven, joy-and-sorrow sharing parts of the Body of Christ, will be accepted as parts of that Body.

The flesh looks out for number one, even in matters of salvation, and our unconscious contamination with Western civilization's exaggerated cult of the independence of the individual, deepens this tendency within us.

But the only way to salvation is through complete submission and submersion of self into the Body of Christ—ignoring, forgetting, neglecting, repudiating self in the service of the whole.

It is no accident or coincidence or meaningless rhetoric that we find both Moses and Paul expressing the wish, if possible, of being blotted out from God's purpose for the salvation of their blind and erring kinsmen after the flesh, and we need not be reminded of Christ himself in this connection—

"Wounded for our transgressions, and bruised for our iniquities."

Without this characteristic, they would not have been suitable for God's purpose.

What is the real purpose of a Fraternal Gathering?

It is to manifest our unity; to strengthen, deepen, intensify our communion; to nourish and develop our mutual interest and sympathy and compassion; to beautify, purify, sanctify our fellowship together as the One Body of Christ—all members consciously, and actively, and joyfully, parts of a coordinated unity, knit together in love.

We do not, cannot, stand alone. We are each but a small part of a great and glorious whole, and only as such can we lay hold on the love of God and the joy of the Spirit. This is the will and wisdom of God.

Of ourselves alone we are incomplete, useless, purposeless, monstrous—like a severed limb or a separated organ.

Let us then lay hold thankfully and eagerly upon this opportunity to draw more closely together in the unity of the Spirit that—each forgetting himself in devotion to the whole—we may unitedly, joyfully and approvedly stand before God as the true and glorious Body of Christ.

—G.V.G.
