

lutely necessary in any right course. In the presence of evil, to be in lowliness and self-judgment before God is above all things requisite. In fleshliness we cannot rightly deal with flesh. We must "put on the whole armor of God, that we may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil."

The principle should be plain that we recognize the act of any two or three gathered to the Lord's name as our act, save only if obedience to our Lord Jesus Christ require otherwise. If that act involve unscriptural principles we are bound to refuse it; and if evil can be shown in the act itself, apart from this, remonstrance and protest are called for while they may avail, and only in the last resort can there be rightly a contrary judgment given elsewhere. In this case, separation from evil has necessitated division, and that which necessitates it for ourselves must justify it to our brethren.

Assembly Action

ITS CHARACTER
ITS SPHERE
and
HOW FAR to be RECEIVED

by

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PRINTED
IN
U.S.A.

A. J. ADOLFSON
407 E. Fourth St., Boyertown, Penna.

3c. per copy; 30c. per dozen.

ASSEMBLY ACTION:**Its Character, Its Sphere, and
How Far to be Received.**

The first question that seems needful to ask is, What *is* assembly-action? There is no doubt, or should be none, that the Lord has given to even two or three gathered to His name the power to act in a certain sphere and within certain limits, and that to resist such action, where scripturally taken, would be to resist the authority of the Lord Himself. Insubjection and self-will are here, as ever, most serious for the soul of him who displays them. The assembly is not a set of people gathered by their own wills, or governed by rules enacted by mutual agreement, and which may be canceled in the same way as made. In it the Lord's will must have supremacy alone, the Word of God being its expression alone, and the Spirit of God its sole interpreter. When

the decision of an assembly fulfils these conditions, then alas for the man whose pride and independency would set it aside! On the other hand, where its decision does *not* fulfil them, then it violates its own character, and humility is shown, not in accepting, but refusing this.

But what *is* assembly-action? This is of first importance to consider. I assume here the knowledge of what the assembly is, and of course it is the *local* assembly of which we are speaking—those who are the members of the Body of Christ in a given place, or the “two or three” who alone may be actually gathered as that. This action, it is very simple to understand, is the action of those gathered—*ideally*, of *all* gathered, in intelligent agreement with one another.

That this is the perfect ideal should need no discussion. If, for instance, *one* of those coming together were not consulted—were left

out—it would no longer be the assembly. But more than this, if the consent of one or more of these were brought about by other means or inducements than the apprehension of Scripture and its application to the facts of the case, it is plain they would still be practically outside. For the decision of an assembly, if rightly so, is not merely an agreement that such a thing *shall* be, but also that it *ought* to be—in accordance with the mind of the Lord, and in subjection to His Word.

How solemn, for those who pronounce it, therefore, is the decision of an assembly! Let us pause here for a brief word of application, before we proceed further. It is strange and sad how readily the most simple results of obvious truths escape us. It is clear that the woman, whatever practical restriction the Word may enjoin as to her public part in the assembly, yet *belongs* to it as fully as does the man. No action of the men alone (whc-

ther formally or virtually such) is the action of the assembly. The conscience of the woman is to be respected exactly as is the man's; for her obedience to the Lord is as necessary as is his. But on this account, the woman is to be made acquainted with what is in question as much as is the man. Nothing can relieve us of our individual responsibility in that in which we are to act for God, and no one can, therefore, devolve his individual responsibility upon another, or upon any number of others: not the wife upon her husband, for instance, nor the child upon his parent. Each one of us must give an account of himself to God; and any interference, whether by constraint or *neglect*, with the claim of God upon another is really and only sin, whatever the plea.

This does not at all set aside the value of "*guides*" in this as in every other matter. Guidance supposes the intelligence and con-

science both in exercise; and assisted, *not* suppressed. As another has said, "It is not the seeing leading the blind, but the seeing leading the *seeing*." Thus none can dispute, surely, the use of brothers' meetings for preparing a matter for the assembly so that confusion may be avoided, and a godly judgment more easily attained. But this has need to be closely watched lest officialism and clerisy come in by this door, and the decision be virtually *made* here, only to be *announced* for formal approbation afterward. Such a meeting has no claim of *right*, but is only a matter of wisdom—of expediency. Those meeting in it are servants of the assembly, not its lords; to be respected and honored for their *service*; as lords, to be peremptorily rejected and refused. How easily here may custom grow into claim! Dangers beset us everywhere, and helps readily become hindrances. The assumption of brothers' meetings has been so great

as to throw doubt even upon their expediency, however undeniably useful in their place they may be. At least, *authority* from Scripture they have none.

The first requisite for assembly-action, then is, that it should be really the assembly that acts. God would have neither unexercised consciences nor violated consciences. To secure this, patience and forbearance toward one another have to be displayed, and no decision come to while one honest-hearted person remains unconvinced. Slow work this, some will object; but what if it entail much more waiting upon God, more tender care of each other, than we have been accustomed to; is it not better to reach slowly a decision in which all concur than to sow the seed of future self-accusation, dissension, and doubt among brethren? May not the slowness of some be a needed guard against the haste of others—a most real help against rash and ill-considered

judgment? Does not the endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit, too, necessitate this? Can we really claim the authority of the Lord for that which is the result of pressure put upon the weak, the timid, the ignorant—nay, even of the unconcern of the indifferent? Alas! we may; but will He that is holy, He that is true, confirm with His authority the fruit of disregard for His own precepts, and carelessness for His people?

I am aware that 2 Corinthians 2: 6 is pleaded, where the punishment of the man put away from among them is said to have been “inflicted of many,” or “of the greater part.” It has been hence pressed that a majority had Scripture-ground for giving their judgment as that of the whole. It has been also pressed that the point to be reached is the Lord’s mind, which not even unanimity, much less a majority, could secure. This last is evidently true, and upsets the other. The decision

of the majority cannot be taken as necessarily the Lord’s mind, for the majority in an assembly may not be the most spiritual, or the secret of the Lord with them. As a matter of fact, at Corinth the apostle was in doubt about many (ch. 12: 21), and could not speak of the action of the assembly as being in truth of heart the action of all; although this by no means shows that all had not outwardly consented to it. To plead this for a decision by majority would surely be all wrong. On the other hand, a unanimous judgment may be wrong also: there is no infallibility of the assembly. And it is the Lord’s mind that is to be sought and found. The question is, Are any number, few or many, entitled to act as having the Lord’s mind, because of their own conviction of having it, apart from the concurrence of the assembly as a whole?

The thing is plain, that if any number assume to be the assembly, they deny the claim

of those who dissent from them to be *of* the assembly at all. Practically, they cut them off. And in so doing, they must be prepared to establish to their brethren elsewhere the claim they make; not simply the rightness of their decision on the point in question, *but of this cutting off of those who dissent*. They cannot justify this by the rightness of their decision as such. The question is, Why did they disregard the consciences of the rest? Why is the unity of the Spirit violated? Or, On which side really is the responsibility for the breach?

But now, supposing the action to be unanimous, how far and in what cases are all assemblies bound by it? How far is it authoritative for all who will be subject to the Lord?

Now of course if an assembly go beyond the limits of its authority, it has none; nay, is itself in insubjection, and to be resisted and

rebuked, not listened to. If it undertake to decree doctrines, or bring in principles in opposition to the Word, the conscience of the weakest babe is under obligation to refuse such action altogether. Of *principles* we are bound to judge. Here, the whole church, and every believer in it, are to be subject to the Word of God alone. Every act of discipline, though it were in an assembly at the end of the earth, requires to be so tested. The maintenance of false principles destroys the claim of any action in which they are found to be valid before God or man. "Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven" applies not here. We are in no wise in this case to "hear the church," but the Scriptures, which alone are "able to furnish thoroughly unto all good works."

But again, the Lord's words cannot avail to show that an unrighteous judgment is bound in heaven. The plain principles of truth and

righteousness are never, and can never be, violated in any path of duty. If grace reigning through righteousness, does not set it aside, how much less can an act of judgment set aside righteousness, and yet God require my subjection to it! Of course, I must be very sure of my steps here, and that my own judgment is just of the case before me. In a conflict of views humility will in general go right, where pride is certain in some way to go wrong. The point we are upon is not the manner of dealing with evil, but the very simple principle that the authority of the Lord can never be pleaded to make me bow to it. That is impossible. I can never do it without defilement and dishonor to the Lord, whose holy name it is blasphemy to connect with the upholding of sin.

An assembly-action, then, if the assembly be not (as it is not) infallible, must be judged of as every human act is. If there is in it

no unscriptural principle, then in most cases we are bound to accept it, not as infallible in any wise, but as an assembly act. The Body is one, and what they have done we have done. We do not affirm it to be righteous, and it is capable of being recalled and repented of, if shown to be unrighteous. Questions of fact can in general only be settled there where the matter judged occurred. It is manifestly impossible to carry it around the world for fresh decision in any place where question may be raised. Such a course would prevent any thing being ever settled, would transform every assembly into a court of appeal in every case that may arise, and load every gathering with the burdens of all. Moreover, it would set gatherings at issue with one another throughout the world, and destroy all practical unity whatever. For the act of another assembly is our act, and if it be not according to God, the remedy is not to set up another against

it, but to reverse and repent of what has been wrongly done. There, where the wrong is, it should be righted, and in this way every gathering should be open to listen to and weigh any godly representation from another gathering. Has it not been from a straining of the words, "Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven," that an assembly-act has been so much looked upon as practically irreversible, and that such a thing as the repentance of an assembly is hardly *recognized*?

The thought leads plainly to an implication of infallibility in the judgment which the Lord (it is supposed) maintains, and this, in turn, leads to practical carelessness in judging. How can they repent of what they say, with unintentional blasphemy, is bound in heaven? And what a millstone upon the assembly must be such unrepented sins. No wonder they should be easily taken in any snare of Satan

afterward, who have thus far yielded already to him!

Let the real responsibility of assemblies be recognized, and the duty of public recall and repentance insisted on for what is done amiss, and in this the Lord will be really honored, and His authority maintained, and there will be blessing accordingly. But this high-church pretension is but the haughty spirit that precedes a fall.

On the other hand, independent action is division begun, and *this is only justified in the last extreme*, when otherwise we should be ourselves involved in evil against which protest is no longer of avail. We must be sure also that God has really put a matter into our hands for judgment, before we undertake to be the judges; else it is no wonder if we err grievously. If evil be *plain*, God would never involve us hopelessly in complicity with it, although patience and lowliness will be abso-