

## "Illness of the Assembly"

- J. Wilbur

The Christian assembly can be viewed as a body much like a human body (1 Cor 12). A human body is made up of individual cells that when put together make the whole. Individual cells die and others divide. Over time, the individual cells that make up a human body may change numerous times, but the body remains the same. So it is with the Church. First, in the greater sense. It was created at Pentecost with just a few individual "cells." The Church was born. And then, in the local sense. Individual expressions of the Body of Christ are established in localities: assemblies. These assemblies all have a birth, they all have a life, and they all have "personalities" that affect how they mature. Sadly, many suffer a death. This is the warning given by the Lord Jesus Christ to the assembly at Ephesus (Rev 2:5).

As with humans, an assembly can experience "infant mortality," where the assembly as a whole, because it is never grounded on the Word of the Lord Jesus Christ (His Gospel *and* His ways), never grows to maturity, but rather dies. The founding "cells" of the assembly may indeed have been firmly grounded as individuals, but for some reason, they fail to properly convey that foundation to the subsequent generation. The sad result is that that assembly ceases to be. Mature men must step forward to teach the body of believers in that locality all the council of God (2 Tim 2:2, Acts 20:27).

An assembly can suffer illness as the disease of sin invades it. As with so many diseases of the human body, the infection often originates from the outside. The world's methods and ways can drain the energy of an assembly before the assembly even knows it is ill. While focusing on all that *appears* wise and necessary to the neglect of the plain revelation of the Scriptures concerning the meetings, man's tradition can take hold like a fever that may never depart. Definite and serious measures must be taken for the health of the assembly if it is ever to fully recover. The traditions of men must be abandoned completely and the "ways of Christ" re-established (1 Cor 4:17). Many chronic diseases begin very subtly, almost undetectable, like so many seemingly "good" ideas in the assembly. In the end, after some generations, those "good" ideas may very well bring about the death of the assembly.

But, disease does not always originate from the outside. Cancer begins and grows from within the body itself and spreads throughout. There is only one sure remedy; the cancer must be removed. Despite the pain of the surgery and despite what a world with its misunderstanding of love might think, any Sin must be cut out from the body. If left unchecked it will in time spread and bring about the end of that assembly. The cancer must be cut out without mercy and without hesitation in accordance to the Word of God (1 Cor 5:7,13; 2 Cor 2:5-8).

As distressful as it is to see a person kept physically alive by man's medical mechanisms, how much worse is it to see an assembly, professing faith in Christ, being held together by nothing but the spiritual equivalent of a life-support machine. Unto the church of Sardis, the Lord Jesus said, "...*Thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead*" (Rev 2:1). So many assemblies of all sorts and persuasions are dead, kept alive only through fund-raising, attractive contemporary music, etc. Few of these places started out that way. How many assemblies are even now relying on man's methods to boost numbers?

Josiah, King of Judah, found the Book which had been lost in the house of God. And it was through strict Obedience to God's Word and dependence on Him that Josiah saw a tremendous revival among the people of God (2 Chron 34:15). The solutions to the legitimate problems which face assemblies today do not lie in the world, and they do not lie in man's wisdom or methods. They can be found through practical faith in the person of the Book, the Lord Jesus Christ. And those solutions will be experienced alone through obedience to Him. Ever so slowly, the Book is getting harder and harder to find in the House of God. The body is very ill indeed.

In the end, the promise of the Lord Jesus Christ is sure: "*Upon this rock, I will build my church, and the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it*" (Mat 16:18). The Rock is Christ (1 Cor 10:4). He is the foundation (1 Cor 3:11). He must remain the focus and head in all things to the individual *and to the assembly* (Eph 1:22), including His methods (e.g. 1 Cor 14:37). As our desire is to bring pleasure to the heart of God, we ought to take great care what we do in relation to Christ's Body, the Church and its local expression (1 Cor 3:12). It is not good enough to be hearers of the Word (James 1:22). If we love the Lord Jesus Christ, we will obey Him even when it is difficult or even when it seems impossible to us (John 14:15,24; 1 Cor 16:21). God's desire is that the Church should not remain an infant, but that it should live and grow to maturity in Christ Jesus our *Lord* (Eph 4:15-16). As God said to Joshua concerning his

obedience to the Word, *"Be thou strong and very courageous, that thou mayest observe to do according to all the law, ... that thou mayest prosper whithersoever thou goest"* (Josh 1:7).