

Reception into the Local Church

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Our purpose is to examine God's word to determine what it has to say regarding the matter of who can be received into the local church – or as it is often called, the biblical teaching on *Reception*.

There are people – a minority we suppose, who are naturally inclined to be reclusive. As for the majority of us it may be fairly said that we possess a strong communal instinct. We readily seek companionship among our fellow human beings. But we tend to go about this in a selective manner - like attracts like; so we seek out those with whom we can share and further common-held convictions. Football clubs, social clubs and political parties are prime examples. Being part of a likeminded community bestows particular benefits to those within it. These benefits are conferred by the particular character and cause of the community, and they are jealously guarded because of it. Therefore, when a person holding convictions contrary to the character and cause of a community seeks to become part of it, the community responds by refusing admission to that person. *Reception* to it is denied and they remain in the “outside place.” In this the community's character and cause are preserved and its benefits assured.

This principle of *reception* and its *purpose* is enacted in the Bible. In the OT we have Israel as God's special community with its peculiar character and cause ordained of God. Gentiles were not to be received within its community lest its character become defiled and its cause deflected (unless of course they became converts - proselytes). We see the principle of an “outside place” and an “inside place” in the days of Nehemiah. There were those who were clearly outside the community of remnant Jews who had no part with them as Nehemiah declared. “Then answered I themThe God of heaven, he will prosper us; therefore **we his servants** will arise and build: but **ye have no portion, nor right, nor memorial**, in Jerusalem” (Neh 2:20). By this the remnant character and its cause was preserved and promoted such that the work prospered.

The local church has a character ordained of God – it is the **house of God**, pillar and ground of the truth; it has a cause ordained of God, which is to be a testimony to the glory of God in Christ. Its divine character and cause confer unique spiritual blessings to those within. Who the local church receives into its community will therefore impact upon its character and its cause, which will in turn determine the extent to which spiritual blessing is experienced. There are those, sadly, who have no portion, no right and no memorial in the testimony of the local church because their convictions are at odds with it.

The Church

In Scripture, the word *church* is used to refer to **the Body of Christ** - a *totality* which includes all the saved from Pentecost to the Rapture, comprising those gone to be with the Lord and those living and located throughout the world. A person becomes a *member* of Christ's Body upon his/her *conversion* to Christ. Once we are in the Body of Christ we can never be put out of it. There is no such thing in Scripture as a person having to be received into, commended to or being put out of the Church, the Body of Christ. It is of *this* Church that the Lord said, "I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt 16:18). This work is the Lord's and His alone, and so we read in Acts 2:47 that "the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved."

The churches

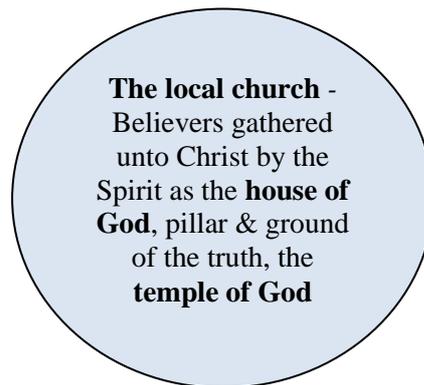
God wants those who are redeemed by Him to come together to bear corporate testimony to His redeeming glory and to dwell among them when they do so. This was true in OT times in regard to the nation of Israel after they were redeemed from the bondage of Egypt. They were to build an earthly sanctuary in which God would dwell. "And let them make me a sanctuary; that I may dwell among them" (Ex 25:8). "And they shall know that I am the LORD their God, that brought them forth out of the land of Egypt, that I may dwell among them: I am the LORD their God" (Ex 29:46). This Divine desire is no less true today in regard to those in the Body of Christ who have been redeemed from the bondage of sin through Christ. However, the Body of Christ - the Church in its totality cannot physically come together to bear a collective or corporate testimony unto God. This is why soon after the Body of Christ came into being at Pentecost we have the emergence of *local* churches. These local churches were raised by the Holy Spirit as a dwelling place of God among His people and to be a testimony to Him. Hence we have the local church referred to in the NT as the *house of God*, the *church of the living God*, *pillar and ground of the truth* (1 Tim 3:15). A pillar serves to raise, support and elevate. Jacob raised such a pillar and anointed it with oil calling that place *Bethel* - the house of *God* (Gen 28). The local church is "called out" as a testimony to the wisdom and glory of God in Christ. This is why a local church is figured as a *lampstand* (Rev 1-3). In 1 Corinthians 3:16 the local church as the house of God comprising the redeemed is figured as a *temple* or *sanctuary* in which the Spirit of God dwells. "Know ye not that ye [the church at Corinth] are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?" This is an instructive and solemn passage because Paul goes on to declare *man's* responsibility before God in regard to the local church. "If any man defile the temple of God [the local church], him shall God destroy; for the temple of God [the local church] is holy, which ye are [i.e., holy]" (1Cor 3:17).¹

The distinction in the use of the word church is again seen when we compare Matthew 16 noted above with Matthew 18, where the Lord requires a matter to be told

¹ In 1 Corinthians 6:19 the *individual* believer is also spoken of as a temple – the place of the Spirit's residence, for He indwells each believer upon their conversion to Christ.

to “the church.” “And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican” (Matt 18:17). This cannot of course refer to the Church as the Body in its totality – those already with Christ and the living millions in Christ scattered abroad. It refers to the responsibilities associated with a *local* church. The Lord’s blessed promise is “where” (not when) two or three are gathered “unto my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matt 18:20).

We have then in all this another sense in which the word church is used in the Bible - not in regard to *membership* in its *totality* but in regard to *fellowship* in testimony in a *locality*, which carries solemn *responsibilities* before God.²



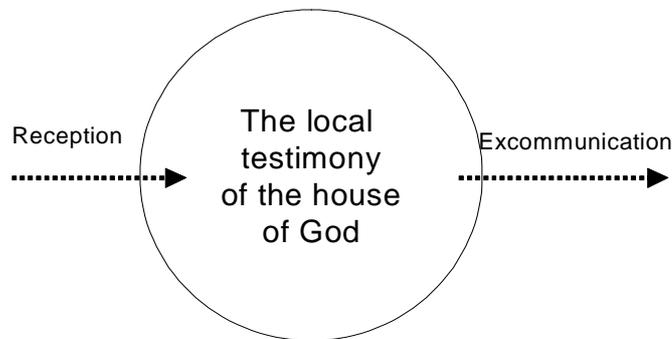
What is Reception and where does it fit in?

To fulfill its divine purpose as a testimony to God’s glory in Christ, a local church cannot have people within it whose beliefs and practices are contrary to that testimony. **This is where reception comes in.** Reception refers to the local church deciding who can be received into its testimony as God’s house. It exercises this responsibility before the Lord (1 Tim 3:15; Rev 1-3; Acts 20:28-29). The question is whether the *behavior* and *beliefs* of the person seeking to be received are compatible with the testimony of God’s house. The behavior and beliefs that make up this testimony are found solely in God’s word, and not in the ideas, charters or creeds of men. The local fellowship among the believers in Acts 2:42 had a **doctrinal** basis. Doctrine determined the *conduct* of the fellowship. It also defined its *composition* and declared its *confession* ensuring the fellowship was to God’s glory, befitting the house of God. The testimony of the local church is of vital interest to the Lord. It is a testimony *before Him* (Rev 1, 2&3).

However, reception – whom to receive is only one part of the assembly’s responsibility in this matter. It has the solemn and equally important responsibility before the Lord of putting a person out of its local testimony if their behavior and beliefs are contrary to the testimony to God’s glory in Christ. This is referred to as *excommunication*, the opposite action to reception. “Therefore put away from among yourselves [the church] that wicked person” (1 Cor 5:13). Both reception and excommunication are vital in maintaining the unity, purity and integrity of an

² The idea of being a *member* of a local church is not found in the word of God. Believers are members of Christ’s Body and members of “one another” because of it. For a believer to be a member of anything else is a schism – denominationalism/sectarianism.

assembly’s fellowship in testimony – the character and cause of God’s house. When therefore we ask “Who can be received into the local church?”, we are in effect asking, “Who can be received into the testimony of the local church to God’s glory revealed in the Person and work of Christ His beloved Son?”



Receiving on the “ground of the one body”

It is sometimes said that the local church gathers on the “ground of the one Body.” Since all believers are members of Christ’s Body and are members one of another, then all believers are eligible to be received *locally*. However to gather locally on the “ground of the one Body in Christ” means there can be no excommunication from the local church. If an assembly receives on the basis of the one Body of Christ, then it must also excommunicate on this basis – which is nonsensical because no one can be put out of Christ Body. The “unlearned” in 1 Corinthians 14:16 is a saved person and he is thus in the Body of Christ; but he is not in the local church for he occupies a seat apart from it. The local Church gathers unto a risen and ascended Christ, and does so on the ground of His work – redemption, which is on resurrection ground!

Receiving on the basis of baptism

There is no biblical principle or practice that sanctions receiving a person into the totality of the Body of Christ *or* into the fellowship of a local church *because* of their baptism – of any sort! We will note later that NT baptism – immersion upon the confession of Christ is a vital matter in determining who *can* be received into the local church.

The mutual responsibilities involved in Reception

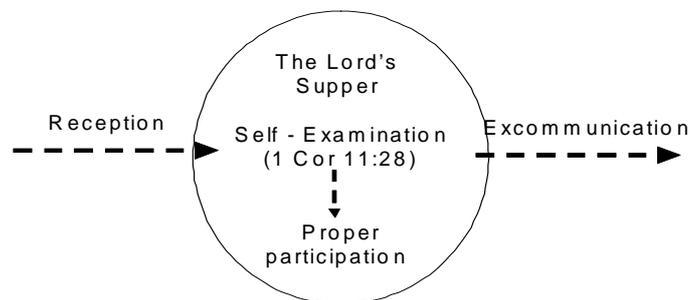
The local church gathers as *body of Christ*—“ye are body of Christ” (1 Cor 12:27).³ The expression “body of Christ” means that the local church when it gathers is to have

³ The omitted article places emphasis upon the “character” of the local church. It is not *a body of Christ* because Christ is not divided into many bodies (the error of denominationalism). It is not *the body of Christ* because this comprises all saved since Pentecost—even those at home with the Lord.

a *united* testimony to the glory of God. When receiving believers irrespective of the duration, the church brings them into the high privileges and responsibilities of this *collective* testimony. Can a believer be scripturally received into anything less than this? *All* who are received immediately become part of that local church, united in fellowship with those already within in their testimony to the glories of God in Christ. What a blessed privilege – and what a solemn responsibility! Reception confers a solemn yet blessed responsibility upon *both* the receiver *and* the received before God.

Misused texts in regard to Reception

1 Corinthians 11:28: “But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup.” Paul is not dealing here with receiving people into the church at Corinth. This exhortation was directed to those *already* in the local church at Corinth (1 Cor 1:2-3; 11:17, 18, 20, 33 etc). Paul was correcting the church over their improper celebration of the Lord’s Supper. He was not asking the Corinthians to examine their worthiness *to* break bread. Being within the local church, saved and baptized, they were all eligible to do so (1 Cor 1:2-3; 13). He was exhorting them to examine whether or not they were breaking bread *worthily*! Many were not giving proper regard to what the bread and the cup meant, partaking of them as part of their social festivities. They were rebuked for this (1 Cor 11:20-22). This self-examination was *not* in regard to sin, false doctrine or personal worthiness. Failure in self-examination in regard to the Lord’s Supper results in divine judgment from the *Lord* (1 Cor 11:29; 32), for only the Lord can search hearts. The self examination of verse 28 has nothing to do with the assembly’s responsibilities before the Lord when receiving another into its testimony. It is wholly to do with a person’s proper attitude when participating in an *activity* within the assembly – the Lord’s Supper. Interestingly, if such “self examination” is meant to apply in reception, then why was it not used in regard to Paul in Acts 9 when he sought to be received into the church at Jerusalem?



Romans 14:1: “Him that is weak in the faith, receive ye.” Here reception to the local church is the subject. “Ye” refers to the church at Rome. Some believers were selective in their food and observed fasting days. Faith in Christ liberates from these things. Some had yet to appreciate this - they were “weak in the faith.” It was in regard

to *these* matters that they were not to judge one another (v 13).⁴ Such matters are the responsibility of each individual before the Lord (v 6); each person is to be fully persuaded in their own mind in regard to them (v 5). The expression “weak in the faith” should read *weak in faith*. It does not refer to sin, holding false doctrine, or refusing to be baptized, all of which relate to disobedience to *the* faith.

Romans 15:7: “Receive ye one another as Christ also received us to the glory of God.” This exhortation as the context demands is directed to those *already* in the church at Rome – “the God of patience and consolation grant you [the assembly at Rome] to be likeminded one toward the another [to each other within the church].” The moral context is as in chapter 14 – tolerance and patience towards one another in regard to different personal views on meats and days. In this case the motive is stressed – unto the glory of God (vv 5-7).

Five essential questions concerning Reception

1. To what are people received?
2. Who can be received?
3. Who receives?
4. When can people be received?
5. How is reception to be administered?

To what are people received?

1. Reception in the NT is “into” the assembly and “into” its testimony

This truth was noted above and now we put forward specific biblical teaching underlying it, citing the relevant passages of Scripture. We look first at the biblical principle and pattern and then follow its unexceptional implementation.

The biblical principle and pattern declared

“Then they that gladly received His word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto [the Lord] about three thousand souls. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers” (Acts 2:41-42). Note the order. Those who *believed* were then *baptized*, and then brought *into* the *fellowship* of the believers at Jerusalem – the local assembly. This included the breaking of bread and prayers and into the totality of assembly life and testimony as confirmed in verses 44-46.

The biblical principle and pattern followed

Acts 9:18-28: Again note the order. Paul believed, he was *then* baptized (v 18), and

⁴ Paul's letter to the Galatians mentions such “weaknesses” in regard to foods and fasting days. Romans 14:1 does not refer to the Sabbath days or to Jewish feasts. The teaching of Colossians 2:16, is that Christians are to refrain from observing the shadows – the Jewish days, feasts etc., and so we avoid being judged by any man – Jew or Gentile. Christians are not to abide within the shadows (v 17). To do so is to deny the fulfillment and reality which is in Christ. Anything that links or suggests that Christianity is an extension of Judaism is utterly false. It denies that Christianity is a wholly *new* thing in Christ.

then he was received into the local fellowship. “And immediately there fell from his eyes as it had been scales: and he received sight forthwith, and arose, and was baptized.” He assayed to “join” them. He was with them in their going out and their coming in – he came into the assembly’s life, love, liberty and light. **Acts 11:26:** They “assembled themselves with the *church*” at Antioch. **Acts 15:4:** “And when they were come to Jerusalem, they were received of the *church*.” **Acts 18:27:** Apollos was to be received by the brethren in the region of Achaia (the church at Cenchrea, Rom 16:1). **Acts 20:6-12:** At Troas, Paul and his brethren were received into the church [the disciples], and gathered with it, participating in its breaking of bread and in the ministry of the word of God (vv 6-8).⁵ **Acts 20:17-18:** Paul speaks of being with the *church* at Ephesus – obviously being received by it; “Ye know, from the first day that I came into Asia, after what manner I have been with you [the church] at all seasons” (v 18). **Acts 20:28-29:** The responsibility of the elders at Ephesus in reception was to the *church*; “after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you [the church], not sparing the [little] flock [the church]” (v 29). **Acts 21:17-19:** “And when we were come to Jerusalem, the brethren [the church] received us gladly. And the day following Paul went in with us unto James; and all the elders were present. And when he had saluted them, he declared particularly what things God had wrought among the Gentiles by his ministry.” **Acts 28:13-14:** seven days with *the brethren* at Puteoli. **Rom 14:1:** Reception is to the *church* - “receive ye.” We note, too, it is from one church to another. **Rom 16:1:** Paul exhorts the *church* at Rome to receive Phoebe. **1 Cor 16:10:** Timothy was to be received into the *church* at Corinth. “Now if Timotheus come, see that he may be with you [the local church] without fear: for he worketh the work of the Lord, as I also do.” **Phil 2:29:** Paul writes to the church at Philippi (v 1). Epaphroditus was to be received into the *church* at Philippi. “Receive him therefore in the Lord with all gladness; and hold such in reputation.” It was reception in the LORD for it was into the Lord’s House. **Col 4:10:** The *church* at Colosse was to receive Marcus. **Philemon 12, 17:** Paul writes to Philemon and to the *church* in his house to receive Onesimus (v 2) - “receive him.” **3 Jn 9-10:** The context shows reception is to the *church*. The actions of Diotrephes in casting out some of the brethren from the local church, though wrongly motivated, bears witness to an “outside” place.

The lesson from biblical commendation

In all cases in Scripture, commendation (and therefore reception) is to the church and thus into its testimony. In the case of Phoebe it was, “I commend unto you [the church at Rome] Phoebe our sister. The assembly was to receive her into its life, love, liberty and light (16:1-2); **2 Cor 3:1:** (cf **7:2**, to the church at Corinth - receive us): “Do we begin again to commend ourselves? or need we, as some others, epistles of commendation to you [the church], or letters of commendation from you [the

⁵ It is clear that there were believers—a church, resident in Troas. Paul preached unto *them* not *us* (Acts 20:7); “*they* brought the young man alive ... and *we* went” (vv 12-13). Paul preached at Troas and took his leave of *them* (2 Cor 2:12-13, cf Acts 16:8). Acts 20 relates to the return—leg of Paul’s third missionary journey ending at Jerusalem. He had visited Troas twice previously.

church]?” Again, letters of commendation are to the church – into which believers are commended. **Eph 6:21-22; Col 4:8**: Tychicus was sent to the church at Colosse and at Ephesus. **Col 4:8-10**: Aristarchus was to be received by the church at Colosse.

2. **Reception was never to the “breaking of bread”** (wrongly known as the Lord’s Table). The expression “receiving to the Lord’s Table” refers to the practice of receiving believers to the breaking of bread [Lord’s Supper!!].⁶ There appears to be three variations to this practice. At the extremities we have the *closed table* and the *open table*, with the *guarded table* somewhere in between. Which of these three practices is correct? We have searched God’s word and found no biblical principle or practice that supports a person being received (or commended) to the breaking of bread. Scripture is opposed to it. The often-divisive debate over a closed, open or guarded table is therefore irrelevant. It is unscriptural to seek or grant reception “to the breaking of bread.” Moreover, the breaking of bread and baptism are the two *ordinances* given to Christians. There can be no such thing as reception or commendation to an ordinance. Receiving or commending to the ‘breaking of bread’ deprives the received of their proper privileges and responsibilities in Christ.⁷ If we think upon it in the light of Scripture, receiving or commending to the breaking of bread is as unscriptural as putting away from the breaking of bread (or from any other activity that is part of the assembly’s testimony to the glory of God in Christ).

Conclusion

The writer once asked a number of brethren who supported “receiving to the breaking of bread” to show just one instance of it in Scripture in principle or practice. They of course could not do so. Sadly, they persisted with their view knowing that they could not support it from Scripture and, what was even sadder they did so in spite of the fact that they were shown the unexceptional practice in the Bible of “receiving into the assembly.” To receive or commend to the breaking of bread is to disobey Scripture. It sets up a man-made rule and renders empty the claim that we base our practices on what is recorded in God’s word. Reception as given in the Bible both in principle and in practice is never *to* but *into* - never *to an activity*, but *always into an assembly and into the fellowship of its testimony*, whether the person is visiting (i.e., Paul) or ongoing. This is the biblical position in unity and responsibility which reception bestows to the person received *and* upon the receiving assembly- irrespective of the duration of the reception, repeatedly exemplified in the NT for our learning and obedient following.

⁶ This has given rise to the unscriptural practice of “partial” or “probationary” fellowship. Those received are not admitted into the total assembly life – which depends on “subsequent scrutiny.” In any case, the “Lord’s Table” (1 Cor 10) is not the same thing as the “Lord’s Supper” (1 Cor 11). Refer to the author’s booklet *The Lord’s Table and the Lord’s Supper* for a fuller treatment of this distinction.

⁷ It is to be noted that many who seek and are granted reception to the “Lord’s Table”, are rarely if ever seen at assembly prayer meetings, Bible studies or gospel outreach. Such lack of commitment to the fellowship in the testimony of the assembly is encouraged by the unscriptural practice of “receiving to an activity”, such as the breaking of bread.

Is reception into a federation of churches (a circle of fellowship)?

The case of the individual believer

There is no biblical principle or practice in Scripture supporting a *federation* among local churches. When a believer is received into a local church, he/she is never received into a larger circle of churches. Receiving to a federation or circle contradicts the truth of the *autonomy* of the local church and its direct and sole responsibility unto the Lord (Rev 1, 2&3). We do have, however, the wholesome *interdependence* between the local churches demonstrated in the NT, but this was a far cry from any federation among them. Interdependence is a *spiritual* matter according to the will of the Spirit, and never *institutional* which is of the will of men. So we read for instance of the *churches* of Galatia but never of *the church* of Galatia.⁸ A federation of churches in any shade cannot be anything but according to the will of the *flesh* – remember Babel (Gen 11). It was always autonomy yet interdependence in the NT, evident in that reception and commendation was from one local church to another. In the NT period this was a straightforward matter because there were no “denominational circles.” Paul noted and rebuked the carnal spirit that later gave rise to them (1 Cor 1:10-17; cf 3:1-9). Denominationalism has destroyed the once blessed and bountiful interdependence between the churches of God, as seen in the spontaneous and mutually edifying commendation and reception of believers within the Body of Christ. Denominationalism is unscriptural and we are to depart from it.

Do all the believers in a district constitute the local church?

It has been put to the writer that all the believers in a town or city comprise the *local church* in that place – irrespective of their mode of gathering and type of testimony. This being so all should be received liberally. First, apart from all else, if this were so it would be impossible to undertake a “putting away” according to 1 Corinthians 5. Second, it renders the number and demarcation of local churches dependent upon the municipal boundaries of men. Third, it is not supported by Scripture. We note later the seat of the unlearned of 1 Corinthians 14:23 which teaches that not all believers in a district are part of the local church in that district. Fourth, it is against the biblical principle that a local church is one that is marked by NT truth.⁹

A circle by circumstance?

Though not agreeing with the idea of a circle of fellowship, we can, if we are not careful foster this very thing. This can occur where assemblies influence who should or should not be received by other assemblies. Many years ago the writer wrongly became involved in such a situation, which arose from a sincere desire to “keep the unity” and to “strengthen those things that remain.” How other assemblies would react and the fear of being “cut off” by “visiting brethren” or by other assemblies soon

⁸ This interdependence is associated with biblical responsibility. An unrepentant believer put out of fellowship from a local church should not be received into the fellowship of another local church. Hence the importance of letters of commendation.

⁹ It is ironic that those who insist that we gather on the ground of “the one Body” and thus claim an assembly must receive on that basis, end up receiving those very people in their midst who by their denominational convictions and membership deny the truth of the one Body.

became a factor in determining who should be received. This same thinking was applied to assemblies. Before long a “de-facto” circle of fellowship arose which proved as unworkable as it was unscriptural. The autonomy of the local church was indeed preached - but it was sorely breached! Instead of unity there arose disunity and division.

The case of an assembly

There is no principle or practice in Scripture that warrants one or more assemblies “cutting off” another to form a “circle of fellowship” - no matter how sincere the motives may be! Biblical reception is to do with the individual believer – never to do with receiving a local church. Local churches are not “received.” Indeed, we need ask, “into what would they be received?” In the NT we do not find a federation of local churches. A believer may in good conscience before the Lord feel indisposed to visit a particular assembly; but it is the spirit of Diotrephes which then demands that particular assembly be cut off by others because of it! We are called unto a path of separation. But unless that separation is unto and in accordance with God’s glory it is mere sectarianism.

Who can be received into the local church?

Once we determine from Scripture *what* people are received to, the matter of *who* is to be received follows plainly. The relevant question is, “Can the person seeking reception be part of the local testimony to God’s glory in Christ?” In fact a second question arises here which is often overlooked. “Does the person seeking reception want to be part of that testimony?” Both answers presuppose knowing what this testimony entails. It relates to Christ and His work and it can be outlined as follows. He is:

The Savior	His glory in Salvation
The Lord	His glory in Lordship
The Head of the Body	His glory in Headship
The Centre of gathering	His glory in the midst
The Great High Priest	His glory in Intercession, Representation & Presentation
The Son of God	His personal and eternal glory as God
The Son of man	His personal glory as perfect man

These glories and their associated truths compose the biblical testimony proclaimed by the local church whenever it comes together as the house of God. It is clear that *unbelievers, sinful believers, unbaptized believers* and *believers holding contrary convictions* are precluded from being received into such a testimony. Indeed, we would ask in love, “Why would such people *want* to be received into an assembly of the redeemed, which seeks to live in holiness, who have publicly confessed Christ as Lord, who have owned Him as the eternal Son, the sinless Man and who bow to His headship and observe the priesthood of all believers?” Let us consider each case in the

light of Scripture, particularly Acts 2:41-42; 9.

1. **Unbelievers**

They are precluded from being received because they cannot testify to the truth of Christ's glory as the Savior of men; nor can they testify to the truth of the wisdom and power of God in the Gospel of Christ. (Acts 2:41-42; 9:18-28; 1 Cor 1:1-2; Rom 1; 16:1-2 etc).

2. **The sinful believer**

We speak here of the one under assembly judgment because of a breach of the provisions given in 1 Corinthians 5:9-13. He/she cannot be received. To do otherwise mars the purity of the fellowship and testimony of the house of God.

3. **Unbaptized believers**

By baptism we mean NT believer's baptism – full immersion, which is the public identification with the death, burial and resurrection of the Lord. It testifies publicly to Christ as Lord in a believer's life. To some the preclusion of the unbaptized believer will appear arbitrary and uncharitable.¹⁰ However, if it is borne out by biblical principle and practice are we not bound to accept it? There is a **biblical principle** to be noted and upheld. The local church as the *Lord's* house must bear a united testimony to His glory in lordship. It was so in days of old, for "In his temple doth every one speak of His glory" (Ps 29:9). The imperative for the believer to be baptized is given throughout the NT. Baptism, the Lord said, is to be *taught*, and therefore as with all His teaching it is to be *obeyed* (Matt 28:19).¹¹ So Peter "commanded them to be baptized in the name of the **Lord**" (Acts 10:48). We often hear the debate in reception over life and light. But we forget that both depend upon obedience. The local church is to "stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel" (Phil 1:27). The local church is to fulfill the *Lord's* great commission to "teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you" (Matt 28:19). It is this same Jesus who *God* in His wisdom and to His glory has made both *Lord* and Christ. (Acts 2:36; 41-42; 9:18-29; 22:1-21); this same Jesus before Whom the world and every knee shall bow and tongue confess as Lord – to the glory of God the Father (Phil 2). All this explains why Scripture never contemplates a believer not being baptized (e.g., Acts 2:38, 41; 8:12, 16, 36, 38; 9:18; 10:47-48; 16:15, 33; Rom 6:3-5). The church epistles are written to *baptized believers*, and practical teaching

¹⁰ We do note the situation faced by some assemblies today which have those within who in distant past days were received not having been baptized according to NT truth. This inherited situation must be dealt with in grace and much waiting upon the Lord. Although there are no biblical grounds for their excommunication, it would be deeply concerning that such believers have continually resisted the Lord's command to be baptized. Their intractable position would preclude them from taking up teaching or leadership within the assembly (Luke 6:46; 1 Tim 3:1-13).

¹¹ In baptism we own Christ as Lord, signifying that we acknowledge His claim over us. It also signifies our responsibility to Him as the exalted Man. The believer's *responsibilities* are in connection with the exalted Man as LORD (i.e., 1 Cor 11). Our *blessings* are associated with the exalted Man as CHRIST (i.e., Eph 1). The former defines our place and purpose *before* God (in the Lord), the latter defines our place and portion *under* God (in Christ).

given within them on the basis that all believers are baptized (Rom 6; 1 Cor; Col 2&3). The exhortations in Romans 6 for instance have no spiritual value to unbaptized believers other than to convict them that they must be baptized.¹² We do not read of any unbaptized believers in the NT churches. The unexceptional biblical record should not surprise us. Christ's glory in **lordship** must be the united confession of the **Lord's** house. This united submission and profession marks the divine reputation of a local church and identifies the common bond *between* the churches. "Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all that in every place [other churches] call upon the name of Jesus Christ our **Lord**, both **theirs** and **ours**" (1 Cor 1:2). Our baptism declares that sin is a defeated foe and we are dead *to sin* through Christ, His death and resurrection (Rom 6). This triumphant glory of Christ is to be the *united* collective testimony of an assembly. It can only be effectually proclaimed by baptized believers gathered unto a risen and glorified Lord. Though not required for salvation, baptism in Scripture is vitally associated with it for it marks the newness in walk of the saved (Acts 2:38). To be "baptized into Christ" is to "put on Christ" (Gal 3:27). Baptism is expressly associated with the truth of Christ's lordship (Acts 8:16; 10:48; 16:15; 18:8; 19:5; 22:16).

Biblical practice

In addition to biblical principle we have the *consistent* and *corroborating* unexceptional **biblical practice** within the early Church recorded for our obedient following. There are some 3,000 examples in Acts 2:41-42 and then there is case of Paul (Acts 9) and of Apollos (Acts 18). They all teach that reception to the local church was *after* personal baptism.

"Living the baptized life"

The question is sometimes asked, "Is baptism needed if the believer is "living the baptized life?" However, a person cannot live the baptized life apart from being baptized, any more than a person can live the Christian life apart from being born again. The Lord Himself defines what a baptized life means – it is marked by a life which has obeyed Him. "Why call ye me, Lord, Lord and do not the things which I say" (Luke 6:46)? The writer has had it said to him – "let us err on the side of grace?" But why err at all when we have clear biblical principle and practice to follow? It has also been said that the assembly must be patient and receive an unbaptized believer anticipating that in time they will come to obedience through understanding. But where is this taught in Scripture in principle or practice? Our *first* concern must be for the integrity of the collective testimony to the *glory of God in Christ*. What if such a person never comes to such an understanding? Indeed, where is the spiritual imperative to do so if they have been received? What message is signaled to the young convert regarding baptism? Furthermore, consistency would then demand that the

¹² We see this in Romans 6:3 – "All we who were baptized", not, "those among you who were baptized", or "some of you who were baptized." The practical value of chapter 6 – walking in the newness of life, is linked to our public identification with Christ's death and resurrection (baptism). An unbaptized believer therefore cannot properly experience or profess walking in the newness of life.

assembly must apply this rule to *all* like cases. For instance, the sister in Christ who has not yet understood the teaching of 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2, must be allowed to teach and lead in the assembly. When children, our parents required us to do things for which we had no understanding. Later in life we discovered the reason why, and know that our obedience was required for our *good*. In turn we require our children to obey in such things. So, too, our heavenly Father requires our obedience, not only for our good but also for the *glory* of His Son - our understanding can wait! Beloved in Christ, this is why the first principle in spiritual life is *subjection* not understanding. To forsake this biblical principle is to take the first step towards man-made rule. God's word sets the standard, not our knowledge or understanding of it. Subjection is the way of obedient faith required throughout Scripture and magnified in Christ. God *demand*s our obedience in spite of our lack of understanding, as illustrated by Abraham and Hebrews 11. No matter how spiritually learned we are we can never fully understand divine matters and so there is *always* the need for obedient subjection in the life of the believer. Let us not make terms with God upon which we are prepared to obey Him. Is the reader as the writer was once, a believer who sought vainly to live for Christ while failing to publicly bow to His Lordship in obedient baptism? Beloved in Christ, seek to do the first works – works of obedience. The root of God's delight in His people today is as it ever was. "And Samuel said, Hath the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams" (1 Sam 15:22). May we be fully seized of the truth that our subjection to baptism identifies us with *Christ's* subjection and testifies to *His* obedience – marks of His glory, to be testified in unity by the assembly. Understanding is given in blessing when subjection is exercised in obedience. "Through Thy precepts I get understanding" (Ps 119:104).¹³ To those who disagree with all this we respectfully ask, "Where are the passages in Scripture that *support* an unbaptized believer being received into the assembly?"

The case of Apollos

The case of Apollos is instructive for he was unaware of NT believer's baptism – implicit in the statement that he "knew only the baptism of John." He was mighty in Scripture, godly in life and fervent in heart and preaching to the Jews in the synagogue. Yet, the Spirit of God explicitly identifies at least one *particular* lack – NT baptism, his public identification with Christ's death, burial and resurrection. Apollos knew only the baptism of John. (Acts 13:24; 18:24-27). What was Priscilla and Aquila to do? They exercised their responsibility before God, took Apollos aside and ministered to his deficiency (v 26).¹⁴ The biblical principle and process of gaining one's brother is set forth here clearly. There are those who must be taken aside and in love shown the more perfect way, that their joy may be full in the Lord. And, we note

¹³ If the trend of receiving unbaptized believers continues, soon there will be few baptized believers within the assemblies. The truth of baptism and the glory of Christ associated with it will all but cease to be proclaimed - except by a few who will be regarded as "legalists."

¹⁴ It may be that Apollos knew only of Christ as the promised Messiah of Israel and Priscilla and Aquila spoke to him about salvation in Christ as well. Their teaching could not have been done in the church. The grammar excludes it (unto them – Priscilla and Aquila), as does the fact that both witnessed to Apollos. What obedient faith and grace shown by this man, who was mighty in God's word!

in passing that once baptized Apollos was able to be commended to the saints at Achaia who were exhorted to receive him (v 27).¹⁵ His labor for the Lord was then honored, for “he mightily convinced the Jews, and that publickly, shewing by the scriptures that Jesus was Christ” (v 28). Upon subjection to the Lord in baptism, unbaptized believers can be received. They can then unite with the assembly’s collective testimony to the truth of Christ’s glory in lordship, upholding its *collective* integrity before men and principalities and powers by having the same conduct and confession. Such is our responsibility in grace and in truth—to the Lord, and to those of His who are unaware or uncertain of His claims upon them as Lord. The apostle of love said, “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth” (3 Jn 4). May this be our commitment and joy! “For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments: and His commandments are not grievous [burdensome]” (1 Jn 5:3). Baptism is not “the door to the assembly” as some regard it; but as with conversion, it is along the path leading to that door.¹⁶

Household baptism

Some who have not been fully immersed according to NT baptism agree that baptism is needed before assembly fellowship. However, they refuse to submit to NT baptism because they claim to have already been baptized – baptized as part of a household or as an infant. But household or infant baptism is no baptism at all! How can something that is unscriptural be taken as a substitute for that which is scriptural? The instance of Apollos teaches us that even the full immersion of John’s baptism was not a substitute for NT believer’s baptism.

4. Believers holding contrary convictions. An assembly is precluded from receiving those who, through their *behavior* and *beliefs* contradict the biblical testimony of the local assembly as the house of God. There are many ways in which this can occur, for example, a believer may hold wrong doctrine relating to the *Person* of Christ. Another may hold and support practices contrary to the *work* of Christ. Godliness in life is never the sole basis for reception to God’s house. If it were, then the house of God can have within it a godly Lutheran and his confession of consubstantiation; a godly Calvinist or Presbyterian with his support for infant baptism, limited atonement and clerisy. There will soon be good and some may say even a godly number, but what chaos and contradiction in the local testimony before men and angelic hosts!

¹⁵ As with the Ephesian disciples who knew only the baptism of John (Acts 18:4-5), Apollos needed to be baptized unto the Lord. This was not a “rebaptism”, but wholly new.

¹⁶ What of a believer who is unable to be baptized due to old age or infirmity? Where a believer is able to attend the meetings, then he/she would be able to be baptized, the needed assistance given. (The lame man at the pool of Bethesda is an illustration. He needed a man to put into and out of the waters (Jn 5)). If this is not possible, then there should be a prayerful waiting upon the Lord and His guidance sought, for He knows all circumstances and can alter them according to His will to comply with His word. A mind in subjection to the teaching and a willing heart become the guiding principle to assembly reception.

Believers from the denominations

Denominationalism with its man-made divisions and practice of gathering unto names other than the name of Christ, stands in direct opposition to the work of the Spirit of God at Pentecost – the unity of the Spirit and Christ as the majestic singular Head of the Body (Matt 18:20). A detailed examination of this error can be read in the author’s booklet “Is Christ Divided?” We love and know many within the denominations to be devout believers in Christ. However, we are bound in love and in compliance with God’s word to point out that their *membership* within and *support* for such systems of men (they can never be of the Spirit) is grievous to the Lord and to the Spirit of God. We rightly denounce bringing the *rules* of men into the assembly. Yet we seem quite prepared to allow those representing the *systems* of men within it and, what is more, be part of the assembly’s testimony (which is opposed to such systems). How can their reception fulfill the biblical principle, that we “be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind” (Phil 2:2)? Their membership within these systems testifies to their little knowledge or conviction that the local church is a testimony to the wisdom and glory of God as seen in this blessed unity and in its union with its singular glorified Head.

Dangers of receiving believers from the denominations

There are proven dangers to the integrity and unity of the collective testimony of the assembly when believers from the denominations are received – we speak here of the “visitor” and not of one who has chosen to forsake denominationalism. Convictions contrary to biblical truth are wide-spread within denominationalism. Error has often been brought into the assembly because *any* brother in Christ within the assembly has the liberty to publicly teach the saints of God within it.¹⁷ Does denominational reception agree with the Spirit’s intent that “ye [the local church] be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment (1 Cor 1:10)? Over the years a “mixed congregation” has led to a quenching of the Spirit of God (1 Thess 5:19). Brethren exercised before the Lord have in many instances been required to refrain from ministering certain truths to avoid offending denominational visitors. The result is as predictable as it is historical. Truths cease to be taught and the integrity of an assembly’s testimony to the glory of God in Christ withers.¹⁸ Today many truths have all but ceased to be observed among some assemblies which, in part, is a result of receiving from within the denominations – the inevitable and historically proven folly of a “mixed multitude” (Ex 12:38). When Satan knew he could not keep Israel within Egypt, he sought to keep Egypt within Israel – so Israel left with a mixed multitude which diluted and polluted its testimony. **If Satan is unable to have us within the denominational systems of men, then he will seek to have the men of denominational systems among us.** In so doing he will taint the character and cause

¹⁷ Paradoxically, this opportunity is denied by denominationalism and its system of clerisy in all its shades. The fact that false teaching is found within some “assemblies” is a cause for great sadness and a call for us to search our hearts and Scripture before God as to the reasons why this is so. It brings into relief the vital importance of biblical reception.

¹⁸ The decay does not end here. Less of the truth is passed on to the current generation and even less to the next, and so on goes the decline in assembly testimony.

of the local assembly.

An assembly's first responsibility is to the Lord and to the testimony of His house; to be *scriptural*, not *sociable*. Those in the denominations seeking reception should be taken aside and shown the more perfect way in grace and truth from God's word (Acts 18:26). We fail God and them if we neglect to tell them of the solemn responsibilities associated with biblical reception. Our beloved from the denominations need to be made aware that reception is *into* the assembly - into the fellowship of its *testimony* to the wisdom and glory of God; that biblical reception is a mutual matter and they come into the life, love, liberty and light of the assembly. Many are unaware (and some perhaps do not care) that, if received, they will be part of a testimony that opposes much of what they believe. They should be encouraged to wait and weigh the matter before the Lord to determine whether or not they wish to be of one mind and judgment with the assembly in its witness to the glory of God in Christ. Some say, "They are only coming to break bread" – but we have noted such a response to be unscriptural.¹⁹

The contradiction to God's glory in Christ from those within the denominations does not lie so much in what they do *not know*, but in what they **hold** and in what they **support**. Biblical reception involves determining if there is a willingness to forsake that which is wrongly held and done, and to be *obedient* and *committed* to the truth by forsaking error, so that we with them can "with one mind and one mouth glorify God" (Rom 15:6). Why is it that we gather unto Christ outside the denominations? Is it because in doing so we testify to the glory of Christ, and that it bestows coveted privileges in Spirit-led worship and service unto God? If so, then when last did we speak of this to those we say we love in Christ who are within the systems of men where all this is denied? "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God, and keep his commandments" (1 John 5:2). God is glorified when a believer rejects denominationalism and commits to gathering solely among those who seek to keep the unity of the Spirit, and who gather only unto the name of Christ.

The new convert in Christ

Despite their previous allegiances to Judaism the new converts in Acts 2 were readily received (upon their baptism) into the Church at Jerusalem. They knew little if anything of the truths which were later unfolded within the NT. Their ready reception was because they were prepared to be **obedient** to the doctrine of the apostles as it was at that time, seen in that they were continuing steadfastly in it (v 42). In some cases, because of past associations the newly saved may have difficulty discarding behavior and beliefs that are contrary to the assembly's testimony. They should therefore occupy the *place of the unlearned* in order to acquire a conviction to be obedient to what is done in God's house, thus averting contention and confusion when received.

¹⁹ It would be fair to say that in many cases those from the denominations would never consider coming to an assembly if it were not for family ties or friendships.

What is meant by the “place of the unlearned”?

“Else when thou [the church at Corinth] shalt bless with the spirit, how shall he that occupieth the room [space/place] of the unlearned say Amen at thy giving of thanks, seeing he understandeth not what thou sayest” (1 Cor 14:16)? “If therefore the whole church be come together into one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those that are unlearned, or unbelievers” (1 Cor 14:23). It is evident from these verses that the “unlearned” are believers. The unlearned are mentioned apart from the unbelievers in verse 23 and are thus distinguished from them. This distinction is seen also in that they can say “Amen” to the audible worship and praise by the church (v 16). The word “unlearned” is *idiotes* and refers to one who was without *understanding* - not a “stupid person” according to today’s usage of the word. Moreover these unlearned believers are distinguished from the “whole church” (v 23), and are seen looking on from a designated space *separated* from the congregation. This is the biblical place for believers not in assembly fellowship. The separated place of the unlearned is practical in that it clearly identifies to any observers (even the angels) as to who are within and who are without the fellowship of the local church and its testimony. The writer has had it said to him that persons unlearned in the way of NT fellowship should be received because they “learn by participating,” they “get a feel” for things. The biblical teaching of a seat of the unlearned repudiates all such ideas which at best makes the house of God a place of experimentation while trifling with its testimony. Paradoxically, people who advocate such ideas would undoubtedly be affronted if they were required to receive people into their own houses on that same basis!

Who receives?

The scriptures observed already show clearly that it is the *assembly* that receives (and commends, as well as puts away). The elders do not receive but advise on reception, as we note below.

When can people be received?

Reception can occur at any assembly meeting. A visiting believer may arrive or only be present at the time of the mid-week prayer meeting and Bible study. Yet, he/she is received into the assembly on that occasion. Receiving to the breaking of bread can have the undesirable intimation that this is the only time a believer can be received.

How is Reception administered?

1. Through letters of Commendation

The above considerations show the importance of letters of commendation (introduction) where the person seeking reception is *unknown* to the assembly. A letter of commendation however is not an “automatic ticket of entry” into God’s house. It must be current and duly constructed, bearing witness to the person’s known life in and for Christ (Acts 9:18-28; Rom 16:1-2). Where believers are *well known* in life and

testimony among the churches and baptized a letter of commendation may not be required, though Christian courtesies should be observed where appropriate. “Do we begin again to commend ourselves? or need we, as some others, epistles of commendation to you, or letters of commendation from you” (2 Cor 3:1-3)?

2. **Through personal commendation?**

There is no warrant from Scripture for a person to be received on the sole recommendation of another. The assertion “I know him and you should trust me to decide on reception” is utterly unscriptural and echoes the pride of the flesh. “I wrote unto the church: but Diotrephes, who loveth to have the preeminence among them, receiveth us not” (3 Jn 1:9). It also fails the biblical test that “all things be done decently and in order” (1 Cor 14:40) and that “all things be established by two or three witnesses (Deut 19:15; Matt 18:16; 2 Cor 13:1). It contradicts too the plural responsibility given to the elders (Acts 20:28). Safety lies in many counselors (Pr 11:14). Barnabas, though a respected believer had to present his personal commendation of Paul (Saul) before a number of counselors (Acts 9:27). Paul was never received merely on the say-so of Barnabas. Further, the counselors were given opportunity to discern *both* the commendation and Saul *himself* and do so well *before* his reception. We are taught two things here. The assembly must be afforded the opportunity to raise any concerns in regard to a person’s reception where they are not commended from another assembly. After all, those received are going to join with them in their public testimony to God’s glory in Christ. This is a matter of Christian courtesy and spiritual prudence. All must be done with grace and love avoiding an “inquisition.” Apostolic discretion aside, the reputation of the commending person does not avoid the need for other counselors to be consulted.²⁰

The role of the elders in Reception

Paul urged the *elders* of the church at Ephesus to “Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the [little] flock [local church], over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers” (Acts 20:28). This was because that after his departing grievous wolves shall enter in among them [the church at Ephesus]” (v 29). **All** reception is to be referred to the elders for their spiritual oversight. In the OT the porters “kept the ward of their God.” They watched the doors to His house lest anything enter that would deny His glory within it (Neh 12:45). Further, elders must take care where the assembly commends believers. Commending to a place where wrong teaching and practice is held is a serious breach of responsibility before the Chief Shepherd.

What stumbles biblical Reception?

First, assembly failing in all things occurs when it loses sight of the truth that it exists

²⁰ It would appear that the church at Rome was to receive Phoebe on the sole *commendation* of Paul (as were others noted in the NT). This of course does not remove the responsibility of the church at Rome to assess that and any other commendation.

foremost as the **house of God in testimony** to the **glory of God in Christ**. We can wrongly regard the assembly as “our” church and focus on being sociable rather than being scriptural. God’s house is the “house of His glory [His reputation]” (Isa 60:7, cf 1 Tim 3:15). If this truth is not the firm object of heart-felt conviction of *all* within the assembly, reception will be based on social and personal considerations. **Second**, we employ expedient excuses based on earthly relationships - where the spiritual is set aside in favor of the natural. Family ties or friendships should not enter into the matters of reception or excommunication. It should be said here that there are many instructive figures used in relation to the local church in Scripture – a building, body, temple, house – but it is never figured as a family. **Third**, there is the tendency to suppose “love” at the expense of supporting “truth.” Love cannot be used to justify error. What brought joy to the “apostle of love”? It was that we walk in truth (3 Jn 4). Paul agrees, for “love rejoices in the truth” (1 Cor 13:6). **Fourth**, we may impose understanding ahead of obedience to God. Scripture enjoins obedience *first* so that understanding may follow. The believer is “sanctified unto obedience” – not unto understanding (1 Pet 1:2 cf Jn 20:29). God’s house is to be a testimony to obedience. **Fifth**, some use failure or formality in others as an excuse to avoid biblical practice. God’s order is never negated by man’s failure in it, or by the formality in which some observe it.

Godly attitude in Reception

An assembly must have a readiness to *receive* rather than to *exclude*, proving all by God’s word, mindful that believers are members of Christ, yet acknowledging the assembly’s responsibility to God as pillar and ground of the truth. This will avoid His house becoming a “drop in” for those with little conviction for its testimony – who merely wish to “break bread” out of sociability or convenience after which they leave to support unscriptural practices within other “churches.”²¹ This compromises the collective testimony of the assembly; it discourages conviction in the individual received. The early believers did not “dabble” but continued *steadfastly* in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship.

The slippery slope of Laodicean liberty and indifference

Some view biblical reception as “legalistic” and even “uncharitable.” Many have been accused of taking a “hard line” when teaching it. Beloved, take courage, if you desire to follow biblical principle and practice who can justly accuse you? Some say that if we really have the “mind of Christ” we would receive all those that a loving Christ would receive, i.e., all of His “children,” quoting Matthew 18:5-6 or Philippians 2:5 etc. However, they seem to forget that particular mind of Christ which was moved by righteous jealousy for the sanctity His Father’s house to the point of casting the money changers from the temple (Matt 21:12-13). An assembly should not gather simply to

²¹ Known as “occasional fellowship” – fellowship as “the occasion requires” rather than as required by Scripture, often encountered in the case of family and friends. It is encouraged by the practice of “receiving to the Lord’s Table.”

“protest” against error. However, one reason an assembly seeks to gather according to the Spirit-led biblical pattern is because modernism, denominationalism, clerisy and ecumenism are all contrary to the glory of God. The assemblies today observe less in the way of truth than they did yesterday. If current trends continue and the Lord has not yet come for His Church, the assemblies of tomorrow will observe even less of the truth than they do today. God will hold us to account concerning what we have passed on to faithful men (2 Tim 2:2). “Take heed now; for the LORD hath chosen thee to build an house for the sanctuary: be strong, and do it. Then David gave to Solomon his son the pattern of the porch, and of the houses thereof, and of the treasuries thereof, and of the upper chambers thereof, and of the inner parlors thereof, and of the place of the mercy seat” (1 Chron 28:10-13). Let us strengthen the things that remain (Rev 3:2). We live in Laodicean days wherein we are told to be “liberal” and to be satisfied with things “as we find them.” Hezekiah, Josiah and Nehemiah were among those not so satisfied and neither must we be so contented. We are not to be contentious for the truth, but to “earnestly contend” for it (Jude 3). May God grant us the wisdom, grace and resolve to do so.

J W de Silva 2003/4