Articles by H. K. Downie

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Inter-Assembly Fellowship (Feb 1962)

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We have had some discussion on the subject of personal fellowship and assembly fellowship. My task is to open up the important subject of inter-assembly fellowship. The importance of the subject will be realised by those who grieve over the division of assemblies into two groups.

Whether we are liberals or conservatives, we should realise that the existing cleavage between assemblies is injurious to our testimony for God and a real hindrance to the work of the Lord. For the sake of clarity I want to consider the subject under three headings: dependence, independence, inter-dependence. I think we will find that these three things dovetail in a natural and easy way.

Dependence

Assemblies of God are dependent upon something or someone for their very existence. They must have a centre, a head, a source of authority. What is the centre, and who is the head?

The centre is not geographical; the head is not ecclesiastical. The centre was not Jerusalem or Antioch in apostolic days, nor is it a large city in our day. The centre, like the Head, is a Person, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Real assemblies of God are not gathered to a doctrine, as the Baptists, or a form of church government as the Presbyterians, Congregationalists, or Episcopalians. The Head of these assemblies is not a high ecclesiastic and

most certainly not a group of itinerant preachers who try to lord it over God's heritage.

A consideration of Revelation 1-3 will make this point clear. One called the Son of Man was walking in the midst of the seven churches referred to in these chapters. He was their true centre. Whether they realised it or not. He was in their midst; their very life and power. There was one called the angel of the church in each of those churches, but his name is intentionally withheld to avoid the danger of his being made the centre of the gathering.

The Corinthian church fell into the error of grouping under the names of well-known leaders. Their eyes were off the true centre, the Lord Jesus Christ; yet, that party spirit seemed to have been confined to the Corinthian assembly. As far as we know, acquaintance with the men mentioned as leaders was not made a test of fellowship in other assemblies. A visitor to those assemblies was not asked, "Do you know Paul, Peter, or Apollos?" The test was, "Do you know the Lord?"

Alas! We have fallen on evil days indeed when an acquaintance, even though it is only casual, is the key that opens the door of some assemblies. How are the mighty fallen! Let us get back to the true Centre and the real Head, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Independence

The word that we are now considering is not an encouragement to self-will and lawlessness, things all too common in our assemblies. Independence means independence from outside authority. We can afford to be independent in this respect, if we are dependent

upon the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit in the midst of God's people.

The seven churches of Asia illustrate this point. John saw seven separate and distinct lampstands, not a seven-branched candlestick as in the Tabernacles. Each of those churches was independent of the others as far as government was concerned. They were responsible for the manner they conducted their own affairs, and, incidentally, for their own condition. The Son of Man threatened to remove one of those lampstands out of its place, but there was no suggestion that such a removal would adversely affect the other churches.

We have a good illustration of this principle in Acts 13 where Paul started on his first journey from Antioch in Syria. As the Apostle of the Gentiles, the uncircumsion, he made a Gentile city his headquarters. Peter, on the other hand, as the Apostle of the circumsion, the Jew, made a Jewish city, Jerusalem, his headquarters and starting point on all his journeys. The reason why Paul made a Gentile city his headquarters is a very simple one. It was never the divine purpose that Gentile Christians anywhere should be subordinate to Jewish Christians at Jerusalem and have to conform to Jewish laws and customs. Therefore, to preserve the independence of Gentile Christians, Paul acted as he did. The same principle applies today.

Each individual assembly, wherever it may be, is quite independent of other assemblies as far as the matter of local affairs is concerned. This principle rebukes the interference of one assembly with another, and, likewise, itinerant preachers who attempt to impose their will on

assemblies, telling them whom to receive and whom not to receive.

Interdependence

Every assembly is independent as far as outside authority is concerned, but interdependent in the matter of fellowship. This is emphasized in the figure of a body as illustrating the union between Christ and His church. Christ is the living Head and His Church a living body entirely dependent upon the Head for everything. Members of a body are dependent upon the head but interdependent upon each other.

The eye cannot say to the ear, “I have no need of thee,” etc. All the members of a body need each other. Yet, what the members of a body do not say to one another is just what some assemblies, some brethren say. I heard a preacher of a certain type say, as he snapped his fingers, “Why don’t they leave us alone? We don’t want them.”

In Acts 15 we have a splendid illustration of this very point. The first journey of Paul and Barnabas was very successful, “A door of faith being opened to the Gentiles.” That very success gave rise to a serious controversy that might easily have wrecked the testimony of the early Church had it not been wisely handled.

Shortly after Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch with their glowing report of the success of their journey, Judaising teachers came from Jerusalem to Antioch and insisted that the circumcision of the Gentiles was necessary to salvation. There was considerable discussion on the subject which evidently proved futile. At last it was decided to send Barnabas, Paul, and others

to Jerusalem to lay the whole matter before the Apostles and the church in that city.

To make a long story short, the whole matter was settled to the satisfaction of the Christians of both cities, because those early Christians realised they needed each other if a united and successful testimony was to be maintained for God.

One does not need to be very imaginative to realise what would have happened if the Christians at Antioch had acted in a high-handed, independent manner.