

## XI. CONCERTED PRAYER

"A tourist, in climbing an Alpine summit, finds himself tied by a strong rope to his trusty guide, and to three of his fellow-tourists. As they skirt a perilous precipice he cannot pray, Lord, hold up my goings in a safe path, that my footsteps slip not, but as to my guide and companions, they must look out for themselves.' The only proper prayer in such a case is, Lord, hold up our goings in a safe path; for if one slips all of us may perish."--H. Clay Trumbull

The pious Quesnel says that "God is found in union and agreement. Nothing is more efficacious than this in prayer."

Intercessions combine with prayers and supplications. The word does not mean necessarily prayer in relation to others. It means a coming together, a falling in with a most intimate friend for free, unrestrained communion. It implies prayer, free, familiar and bold.

Our Lord deals with this question of the concert of prayer in the eighteenth chapter of Matthew. He deals with the benefit and energy resulting from the aggregation of prayer forces. The prayer principle and the prayer promise will be best understood in the connection in which it was made by our Lord:

"Moreover, if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses, every word may be established.

"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 and a publican.

"Verily I say unto you, whatsoever ye shall bind on earth, shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth, shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."

This represents the Church in prayer to enforce discipline in order that its members who have been overtaken by faults, may yield readily to the disciplinary process. In addition, it is the Church called together in a concert of prayer in order to repair the waste and friction ensuing upon the cutting off of a Church offender. This last direction as to a concert of prayer is that the whole matter may be referred to Almighty God for His approval and ratification.

All this means that the main, the concluding and the all powerful agency in the Church is prayer, whether it be, as we have seen in Matthew 9, to thrust out labourers into God's earthly harvest fields, or to exclude from the Church a violator of unity, law and order, who will neither listen to his brethren nor repent and confess his fault.

It means that Church discipline, now a lost art in the modern Church, must go hand in hand with prayer, and that the Church which has no disposition to separate wrong doers from the Church, and which has no excommunication spirit for incorrigible offenders against law and

order, will have no communication with God. Church purity must precede the Church's prayers. The unity of discipline in the Church precedes the unity of prayers by the Church.

Let it be noted with emphasis that a Church which is careless of discipline will be careless in praying. A Church which tolerates evil doers in its communion, will cease to pray, will cease to pray with agreement, and will cease to be a Church gathered together in prayer in Christ's name.

This matter of Church discipline is an important one in the Scriptures. The need of watchfulness over the lives of its members belongs to the Church of God. The Church is an organization for mutual help, and it is charged with the watch care of all of its members. Disorderly conduct cannot be passed by unnoticed. The course of procedure in such cases is clearly given in the eighteenth chapter of Matthew, which has been heretofore referred to. Furthermore, Paul, in Galatians 6:1, gives explicit directions as to those who fall into sin in the Church:

"Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual restore such a one in the spirit of meekness, considering thyself lest thou also be tempted."

The work of the Church is not alone to seek members but it is to watch over and guard them after they have entered the Church. And if any are overtaken by sin; they must be sought out, and if they cannot be cured of their faults, then excision must take place. This is the doctrine our Lord lays down.

It is somewhat striking that the Church at Ephesus, (Rev. 2) though it had left its first love, and had sadly declined in vital godliness and in those things which make up spiritual life, yet it receives credit for this good quality: "Thou canst not bear them that are evil."

While the Church at Pergamos was admonished because it had there among its membership those who taught such hurtful doctrines that were a stumbling-block to others. And not so much that such characters were in the Church, but that they were tolerated. The impression is that the Church leaders were blind to the presence of such hurtful characters, and hence were indisposed to administer discipline. This indisposition was an unfailing sign of prayerlessness in the membership. There was no union of prayer effort looking to cleansing the Church and keeping it clean.

This disciplinary idea stands out prominently in the Apostle Paul's writings to the Churches. The Church at Corinth had a notorious case of fornication where a man had married his step-mother, and this Church had been careless about this iniquity. Paul rather sharply reproved this Church and gave explicit command to this effect: "Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person" Here was concert of action on the part of praying people demanded by Paul.

As good a Church as that at Thessalonica needed instruction and caution on this matter of looking after disorderly persons. So we hear Paul saying unto them:

"Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly."

Mark you. It is not the mere presence of disorderly persons in a Church which merits the displeasure of God. It is when they are tolerated under the mistaken plea of "bearing with them," and no steps are taken either to cure them of their evil practices or exclude them from the fellowship of the Church. And this glaring neglect on the part of the Church of its wayward members, is but a sad sign of a lack of praying, for a praying Church, given to mutual praying, agreement praying, is keen to discern when a brother is overtaken in a fault, and seeks either to restore him, or to cut him off if he be incorrigible.

Much of this dates back to the lack of spiritual vision on the part of Church leaders. The Lord by the mouth of the Prophet Isaiah once asked the very pertinent, suggestive question, "And who is blind but my servant?" This blindness in leadership in the Church is no more patent than in this question of seeing evil doers in the Church, in caring for them, and when the effort to restore them fails, to withdraw fellowship from them and let them be "as a heathen man and a publican." The truth is there is such a lust for members in the Church in these modern times, that the officials and preachers have entirely lost sight of the members who have violated baptismal covenants, and who are living in open disregard of God's Word. The idea now is quantity in membership, not quality. The purity of the Church is put in the background in the craze to secure numbers, and to pad the Church rolls and make large figures in statistical columns. Prayer, much prayer, mutual prayer, would bring the Church back to Scriptural standards, and would purge the Church of many wrongdoers, while it might cure not a few of their evil lives.

Prayer and Church discipline are not new revelations of the Christian dispensation. These two things had a high place in the Jewish Church. Instances are too numerous to mention all of them. Ezra is a case in point. When he returned from the captivity, he found a sad and distressing condition of things among the Lord's people who were left in the land. They had not separated themselves from the surrounding heathen people, and had intermarried with them, contrary to Divine commands. And those high in the Church were involved, the priests and the Levites with others. Ezra was greatly moved at the account given him, and rent his garments and wept and prayed. Evil doers in the Church did not meet his approval, nor did he shut his eyes to them nor excuse them, neither did he compromise the situation. When he had finished confessing the sins of the people and his praying, the people assembled themselves before him and joined him in a covenant agreement to put away from them their evil doings, and wept and prayed in company with Ezra.

The result was that the people thoroughly repented of their transgressions, and Israel was reformed. Praying and a good man, who was neither blind nor unconcerned, did the deed.

Of Ezra it is written, "For he mourned because of the transgression of them that had been carried away." So it is with every praying man in the Church when he has eyes to see the transgression of evil doers in the Church, who has a heart to grieve over them and who has a spirit in him so concerned about the Church that he prays about it.

Blessed is that Church who has praying leaders, who can see that which is disorderly in the Church, who are grieved about it, and who put forth their hands to correct the evils which harm God's cause as a

weight to its progress. One point in the indictment against those "Who are at ease in Zion," referred to by Amos, is that "they are not grieved for the affliction of Joseph." And this same indictment could be brought against Church leaders of modern times. They are not grieved because the members are engulfed in a craze for worldly, carnal things, nor when there are those in the Church walking openly in disorder, whose lives scandalise religion. Of course such leaders do not pray over the matter, for praying would beget a spirit of solicitude in them for these evil doers, and would drive away the spirit of unconcern which possesses them.

It would be well for prayerless Church leaders and careless pastors to read the account of the ink horn man in Ezekiel, 9th chapter, where God instructed the prophet to send through the city certain men who would destroy those in the city because of the great evils found therein. But certain persons were to be spared. These were they who "sigh and cry for all the abominations that be done in the midst of the city." The man with the ink horn was to mark every one of these sighers and mourners so that they would escape the impending destruction. Please note that the instructions were that the slaying of those who did not mourn and sigh should "Begin at my sanctuary."

What a lesson for non-praying, unconcerned officials of the modern Church! How few there are who "sigh and cry" for present-day abominations in the land, and who are grieved over the desolations of Zion! What need for "two or three to be gathered together" in a concert of prayer over these conditions, and in the secret place weep and pray for the sins in Zion!

This concert of prayer, this agreement in praying, taught by our Lord in the eighteenth chapter of Matthew, finds proof and illustration elsewhere. This was the kind of prayer which Paul referred to in his request to his Roman brethren, recorded in Romans 15:30:

"Now I beseech you, brethren, for the Lord Jesus Christ's sake, and for the love of the Spirit, that ye strive together with me in your prayers to God for me; that I may be delivered from them that do not believe in Judea."

Here is unity in prayer, prayer by agreement, and prayer which drives directly at deliverance from unbelieving and evil men, the same kind of prayer urged by our Lord, and the end practically the same, deliverance from unbelieving men, that deliverance wrought either by bringing them to repentance or by exclusion from the Church.

The same idea is found in 2 Thes. 3:1:

"Finally, brethren, pray for us that the word of the Lord may have free course and be glorified, even as it is with you; and that we may be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men."

Here is united prayer requested by an Apostle, among other things, for deliverance from wicked men, that same that the Church of God needs in this day. By joining their prayers to his, there was the desired end of riddance from men who were hurtful to the Church of God and who were a hindrance to the running of the Word of the Lord. Let us ask, are there not in the present-day Church those who are a positive hindrance to the on-going of the Word of the Lord? What better course is there than to jointly pray over the question, at the same time using the Christ-given

course of discipline first to save them, but failing in that course, to excise them from the body?

Does that seem a harsh course? Then our Lord was guilty of harshness Himself, for He ends these directions by saying, "But if he neglect to hear the Church, let him be unto thee as a heathen man and a publican."

No more is this harshness than is the act of the skilful surgeon, who sees the whole body and its members endangered by a gangrenous limb, and severs the limb from the body for the good of the whole. No more was it harshness in the captain and crew of the vessel on which Jonah was found, when the storm arose threatening destruction to all on board, to cast the fleeing prophet overboard. What seems harshness is obedience to God, is for the welfare of the Church, and is wise in the extreme.