

Bible Basics Conference 2015: The church

Part 11

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Place	Catford, Bible Basics Conference
Date	14.11.2015
Duration	00:33:17
Online version	https://www.audioteaching.org/en/sermons/cbb006/bible-basics-conference-2015-the-church

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[00:00:00] Our first session this afternoon is unity and authority, as it says in the program, or as I've put here, authority and unity may be a more helpful order in which to go through things, considering first of all the authority of the local assembly and then moving on to unity between assemblies, especially in connection with the matters in respect of which the local assembly has authority that we will consider. This session builds on some of the things that we considered yesterday. I think it was said that there are three main meanings of the word church or assembly in the New Testament. Sometimes it refers to the whole assembly over time from Pentecost to the [00:01:01] rapture. Ephesians 525, Christ loved the assembly and gave himself for it. That refers to the whole assembly. Colossians 124 refers to Paul's suffering for the assembly. I think that must be the assembly as it existed at that point in time, but the assembly globally, all believers living at that point in time. Sometimes the word refers to the assembly in a place or, to use our common terminology, the local assembly. 1 Corinthians 1 verse 2, I think we've already referred to this a few times, Paul writing there to the assembly of God which is at Corinth. Matthew 18 verse 17 that we will come back to and from its context, it's clear that it must refer to the local assembly as well. But at the same time, notwithstanding, for example, that there might be assemblies in [00:02:01] different places, there is one body as we have in Ephesians 4 verse 4. All believers are part of the one body from conversion. We are baptized by one spirit into one body as we have in 1 Corinthians chapter 12 and the local assembly is an expression of the one body. Now these truths may not be understood by many believers and may perhaps be practiced by even fewer believers today, but they are principles that we find in God's word and they are principles that ought to be applied by those who name the name of the Lord to the extent that we can in the divided state of Christendom. Now, I think we've referred a few times to Matthew chapter 18, just want to read a few verses from [00:03:07] the chapter. We've referred to verse 20, but it will be helpful to read the passage in which that occurs. If we start at verse 15 of Matthew chapter 18, we read there, but if thy brother sin against thee, go reprove him between thee and him alone. If he hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he do not hear thee, take with thee one or two besides, that every matter may stand upon the word of two witnesses or of three. But if he will not listen to them, tell it to the assembly. And if also he will not listen to the assembly, let him be to thee as one of the nations and a tax gatherer. Verily I say to you, whatsoever ye bind on the earth shall be bound in heaven and whatsoever [00:04:01] you shall loose on the earth shall be loosed

in heaven. Again, I say to you that if two of you shall agree on the earth concerning any matter whatsoever it may be that they shall ask, it shall come to them from my father who is in the heavens for where two or three are gathered together unto my name, there am I in the midst of them. What we have in these verses that we've read is a scenario where one believer, who I've called the believer A, sins against another believer. Believer B tries to resolve the matter with the first believer. He or she does not listen to them, in which case the second believer may take two or more, sorry, one or two more witnesses to discuss the matter with the first believer. If the first believer then still does not listen to them, the second believer may bring the matter before the local assembly and then we have the words, [00:05:05] if also he will not listen to the assembly, let him be to thee as one of the nations and a tax gatherer. We don't find there that the victim believer, believer B, has authority to judge the first believer, the wrongdoer, certainly not authority to exclude them. That authority isn't given to the additional one or two witnesses either, leaving aside here circumstances where perhaps there might be brothers who have moral authority who might be able to suggest how a matter should be resolved. But in terms of authority to judge on the matter, authority to exclude and that authority is given to the local assembly. Authority is not a word that is perhaps very palatable these days. The world in which we live seems to place quite a great value [00:06:03] on rebellion against authority. We see that so much in the media, particularly at the present time. For those who are in my generation or perhaps younger, it's something that is drummed into us by the world's system that an individual has rights and an individual should stick up for their rights and seek to have them vindicated whenever they are wronged. We don't find those sorts of principles when it comes to the Lord's things. The local assembly does have authority over an individual. Now, verses 18 and 20 are particularly important. We're going to look at a few things here. We have reference to binding and loosing. We have reference to things on earth [00:07:03] and things being bound or loosed in heaven. We also have the statement that these are the Lord's words and we also have a reference to his promise. The local assembly's authority, as we see in these verses, covers both binding, which is restricting liberty. You bind someone, you tie them up, they can't move. It's really restricting Christian liberty here, excluding someone from Christian fellowship. Not just the breaking of bread, but it should really be all Christian fellowship, excluding them from that as an act of discipline. An example of that being found in 1 Corinthians verse 5. There's also the authority of the local assembly to loose, to untie someone, to restore their Christian liberty after discipline has had its effect and brought [00:08:03] about repentance. We have an example of that in 2 Corinthians chapter 2. This exercise of the authority by the local assembly, binding, imposing discipline or receiving after discipline has had its effect, that authority is confirmed in heaven and it's conferred by the Lord himself, as we have in the verses on the slide. This authority exists even where only two or three may be present. Again, the Lord's presence is promised where two or three believers are gathered to his name. I think we had this already yesterday. When it comes to the sorts of matters that we are talking about, imposing discipline, restricting liberty to enjoy Christian fellowship, it's a decision of the assembly or in the day in which we live, [00:09:07] a decision of all of those who are seeking to maintain the testimony of the assembly in a place on scriptural grounds. Again, we've had this yesterday. It may be very difficult these days to get all of the local assembly, strictly speaking, in one place, but the application of this would be that all of those who are seeking to maintain the testimony of an assembly in a particular place, they should be involved in the exercise of that authority. It's not an authority that is given to a select few out of a company of Christians. Now, the things that the Lord is talking about, in some ways they're quite significant, quite remarkable, because he's saying that what is done on earth is going to be confirmed in [00:10:01] heaven. What is bound on earth is bound in heaven. It is implicit, though, in these verses that the decision that is made by the local assembly is the right one and that it has been reached before the Lord. Hence, it can be said as a promise, and that is the way that it's expressed in these verses, a promise that where the local assembly makes a decision to exclude or to receive, it is

confirmed in heaven. We're going to come back to wrong decisions a bit later on. Obviously, we would always want to make the right decision. These are decisions, though, concerning serious things, and the next session is going to consider them in more detail, but it may be worth considering briefly the question as to how we reach the right decision. Again, it should be a matter of exercise of the whole assembly, and it should be an exercise of [00:11:05] the whole assembly gathered unto the Lord's name. That is, relying on the promise of his presence, so that we get his help and guidance. Also, submission to his authority, but also considering what is in his interests and for his honour, which may not always be the easiest decision or the decision that makes everybody happy, but it's the Lord's interests that should be paramount. Just noted down the bottom what we've already seen, which is that the promise of the Lord's presence when we're gathered unto his name is not limited to circumstances where discipline is being exercised. It applies in many more circumstances as well, but perhaps one thing that we can bear in mind from the passage that we're considering, and in fact, the circumstances [00:12:08] that the Lord is talking about when he gives this promise of his presence when believers are gathered unto his name. It is quite a serious set of circumstances in respect of which this promise is given. Considering an exercise of discipline is a solemn thing, and obviously, good to have the Lord's presence so that we have his help, but at the same time, it's a solemn occasion, and we would have sober feelings when the Lord is in the midst. On other occasions, when we're gathered together for the breaking of bread, for example, we may have happier feelings when the Lord is in the midst, but I think it's worth bearing in mind that it's still equally serious or an equally significant and in some respects wholly, well, not just in some respects, entirely wholly circumstances whenever the Lord is in the midst, whether it's for something like [00:13:06] discipline needing to be considered or something like worship. So we've considered the authority of the local assembly to exercise discipline or to release from discipline. That brings us to the question of how decisions of local assemblies concerning these matters should be treated by other local assemblies, and how does one ensure that everybody is going down the same path? Again, we've got the verse in Ephesians chapter 4 that tells us that there is one body, so therefore, one would expect there to be unity in decisions and unity in application of decisions as well. We're also commanded in the preceding verse to keep the unity of the [00:14:02] spirit to actually put this unity into practice. I think that's the thrust of the expression, and we might again ask how this unity is to be achieved amongst different local assemblies.

Well, one could, looking at things from a natural perspective, come up with a variety of solutions. One obvious one would be to have a hierarchical arrangement amongst believers, perhaps even in many places where these sorts of structures are in place, there would be a recognition that the Lord Jesus is head of the assembly and therefore does have the authority in everything, but in some systems, there's an idea that there are some men who have [00:15:01] a place above all other believers, and they, or maybe it's a committee, they make a decision and it's passed down to people at another level, and then they go on to enforce it, and everybody has to follow decisions from people who are higher up in the organisation chart. Well, one could think that that's quite a palatable arrangement, because it makes unity very easy to achieve, because if a decision comes from someone above you, then you just have to follow it, because that's the way that everything is organised. That's looking at things from man's perspective. Something else that we might wonder about is whether it's really a matter of each local assembly being responsible to the Lord Jesus. Now, there certainly is an element of truth in this, in that every local assembly, of course, it's responsible to the Lord Jesus, but is that the end of the matter? Is it simply a matter of independence?

[00:16:09] There's some attraction to this as well, because you could say, well, each assembly is responsible to the Lord. Each assembly must get the Lord's guidance as to what is right and wrong,

and each assembly can only act according to its conscience, and you're not restricting the liberty of any assembly when you consider things from this sort of perspective. Well, as always, we have to consider what God says about the matter, and coming back to the verses that we've considered, we get some help here, because Matthew chapter 18 tells us that the decision of the local assembly applies on earth. Verse 17, I think it is, is talking about the decision of the local assembly, and if also he will not listen to [00:17:06] the assembly, let him be to thee as one of the nations and a tax gatherer, and then the Lord, in verse 18, goes on to say, verily I say to you, whatsoever ye shall bind on the earth, it's not what you shall bind in the local assembly, but what ye shall bind on the earth, and I think taking the two verses together, we see that the local assembly's decision is binding on earth, that is, it applies everywhere. It applies amongst all of the Lord's people. It applies to every local assembly. We also have the additional fact in Matthew 18, verse 18, that the local assembly's decision is recognised in heaven as well, another reason why it should also be recognised by all believers on earth, recognised at each local assembly.

[00:18:03] In practical terms, what does this mean? Well, one thing it means is that if a believer is received to the breaking of bread at one place, they should be received to the breaking of bread at other places as well. The local assembly's decision, the decision of the first local assembly to receive, that is binding on all other local assemblies and should be respected by them. I have put something in brackets there, that is, with commendation. I don't put it in brackets to suggest that it has an unimportant place. In fact, I think it does have quite a significant place and maybe just worth saying something about that briefly, because it is also a practical matter. If I go to a place that I have never been to before and I walk into a meeting there [00:19:03] and I want to have fellowship with believers that I know are seeking to meet on scriptural grounds and walk in a right path, how do they know to receive me as a believer who is also seeking to walk according to what we have revealed in God's word and someone who's not tainted by association with evil? Well, if they don't know me, they're not going to know whether it would be right for them to receive me or not. They're not going to know whether I am in fellowship at location A. Hence, it's good if I take a letter of commendation from the brethren at location A at the place where I regularly break bread and they can commend me to the brethren at location B for reception. We do have examples of this taking place in the New Testament. [00:20:03] In fact, the letter that Paul wrote to the believers at Rome is a commendation or carries a commendation at the end in the final chapter. We see that Paul commends Phoebe to the believers in Rome. It's a good practice for us to follow when we are going to have fellowship with believers at a place at which we may not be known or may not be well known. Returning to our subject though and the final point there, the corollary or the other aspect of decisions of local assemblies being recognized by all other assemblies is that if a believer is under discipline, has been excluded from Christian fellowship at one location, that discipline should be respected by believers at all other locations as well. Just to back up this thought that there should be unity amongst [00:21:06] local assemblies and unity in relation to decisions made by local assemblies, we've had reference to some of these things already. One Corinthians, we have a number of occasions, six occasions there, and I think you can make it seven if you pick up something similar that's said in Second Corinthians where Paul says that his instructions to the things that he was writing were not just addressed to the believers at Corinth, were not just relevant to them, but were relevant to all believers everywhere as well. Just to mention the first one again, one Corinthians, one verse two, Paul is writing to the believers at Corinth and all those everywhere who call on the name of the Lord. This consistency in assembly actions is also seen in Revelation [00:22:01] chapters two and three. I just wanted to say something about this briefly because going back to this structure, which is the sort of structure that some believers do suggest should be implemented. Sometimes it's argued that independence, every assembly being responsible to the Lord, but that being the end of the matter and they're not needing

to be interdependency between assemblies or unity in decisions of local assemblies, sometimes reference is made to Revelation chapters two and three to support this idea. In those two chapters of the book, we have seven letters that were written by the apostle John with the words of the Lord. I guess really the Lord's letters to seven assemblies in Asia. [00:23:03] I'm not quite sure how you can jump from that fact to the conclusion that all local assemblies are independent. There are a number of problems with that line of reasoning. One of which is that Revelation is a prophetic book. It's not a book in which we really find doctrine. Although, of course, everything that we find in the book is consistent with what we find elsewhere in God's word. It's certainly true that none of the assemblies that are mentioned there is judging any other assembly. But again, one can't draw the conclusion that every local assembly is independent of every other local assembly. What we find in those chapters is consistent with teaching that we find elsewhere in God's word. That is what's mentioned here, [00:24:01] that the words of the spirit in each of those seven letters are expressly stated to be for all believers. Kind of similar, I guess, to what we have in one Corinthians. The letters were not just for the seven assemblies to which they were written, but they were for all believers as well. There is one body. Again, not many bodies. Another verse that sometimes seems to lead to a bit of confusion and misunderstanding is one Corinthians 12, verse 27 reference has already been made to this. But it's good to have the help of an accurate translation of God's word. The verse doesn't say that the Corinthians were the body of Christ, doesn't suggest that the assembly in Corinth was some body of Christ on its own. It's ye are Christ's body or ye are body of Christ. They were a representative or a representation of Christ's [00:25:07] body, not the body. Consistency in assembly actions is part of keeping the unity of the spirit. It's part of putting into practice the fact that there is one body and we have examples of it also in Acts. I won't be able to go through these slides in any detail, but Brother Michael has written an article available on his website in which there's just some practical comparisons drawn between the three structures that we've considered independence, centralism, or the middle one there, unity, what the scripture teaches and might be useful to turn to that to consider these points and other helpful points that are made in the article.

Now, mentioned before, what if there is a wrong decision? Perhaps sometimes we jump too quickly to [00:26:11] this sort of conclusion and start asking when we consider something like Matthew 18 and the promises that are given there of things being bound on earth also being bound on heaven. Perhaps we jump too quickly to the exceptions when things are wrong and perhaps our starting point should be to have faith in one another and faith in our brethren that decisions are the correct ones. Well, I think one thing that we can start with is that if the Lord is in the midst and a local assembly is reaching a decision on that basis and in subjection to him and his guidance, the decision won't be the wrong one, the decision will be the right one. [00:27:01] Of course, we're all weak, we're all infallible. Sorry, we can't claim infallibility, we might be fallible. And perhaps these things do arise from time to time. The promise, and I think we've said this already, the promise that's given in Matthew 18 can't apply to a wrong decision. That decision can't be ratified in heaven and can't be ratified in the presence of God. But again, that's not really what Matthew 18 is talking about. When it comes to considering these things in practice, I think, as I've already said, we need to respect our brethren and the starting point is that a decision of a local assembly on a matter of discipline or a matter of reception, prima facie, should be respected. That doesn't exclude discussion of matters and I think it's consistent with, one, all of us being humble, also all of us seeking to keep the unity of the spirit, [00:28:08] that there would be a willingness to discuss concerns about a decision. I think those feelings, though, need to be on both sides, need to approach these things consistently with other scriptural principles as we have in the verses mentioned there. I would say, though, that one thing that is extremely important is that the person who thinks that they are aggrieved by a decision against them, that they don't go on protest but rather leave matters with the Lord.

I just want to refer to the two scriptures that are mentioned there in the bottom point of the slide. Psalm 37 verses 5 and 6, commit thy way unto Jehovah and rely upon him, he will bring it to pass and he will bring forth thy righteousness as the light and thy judgment [00:29:05] as the noon day. If one has been wronged, God will bring things to light in his own time.

Much better to leave it to him to bring out what is right or wrong rather than us seek to do it ourselves. We also have the example of the Lord Jesus as referred to in 1 Peter 2 verse 23.

He, when reviled, reviled not. Again, when suffering, threatened not but gave himself over into the hands of him who judges righteously. One who suffered unrighteous treatment much more than any of us ever will, he left matters to God as well. Ignoring decisions of other local assemblies is a serious thing because it's a denial of principles that we've been considering [00:30:01] today and it's really a denial of the fact that Christ is head of his assembly because if Christ is head then of course there will be unity. I know it may sound good to think that every local assembly can act as its conscience stands before the Lord but really it's reflective of what we read about in the times of the judges at the end of the book. Every man did what was right in his own eyes. I don't think that's really much of a commendation at all. Rather recognition of assembly decisions keeping is a demonstration of unity and again the things that we have been considering today. Just a couple of points. We sometimes talk about recognising an assembly.

If perhaps we hear about believers in a particular place and we want to have fellowship with them, [00:31:07] sometimes there's talk about recognition. I think what that really means is that believers in one place recognise that there's a group of believers in another place that are seeking to meet in a scriptural way and without any reason to be separate from them. Sometimes it's necessary for there to be separation between local assemblies. Principles that we have in scripture about individual separation apply to assemblies as well and there's not time to go into this but there's a something from which we can draw some lessons in the Old Testament in Deuteronomy 13 where one city in Israel was guilty of idolatry and the rest of the country was to cut it off.

I think we can draw the principle from that. Unity in relations between assemblies is not [00:32:06] just about discipline. It's not just about if one believer is in fellowship in one place, he or she can break bread in another place. It's about much more and it should be practised in many other things as well. Perhaps if we spent time focusing on unity in these things that are mentioned on the slide, then a lot of the situations in which we may find it difficult to put unity into practice, perhaps they wouldn't arise. It's good to have occasions such as we're having this weekend where we can in a measure express the fact that we are, although we come from different places and may break bread at different places, we are all one in Christ through fellowship, sharing God's work together, discussing matters with one another, expressions [00:33:01] of love and all of these sorts of things. As I said, good for us to invest time in these sorts of things in addition to the principles that we've been considering earlier.