
THE
EMPTY SEAT



By

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OUR Lord had promised the Apostles that "where two or three are gathered together in my name"—*unto* my name: that is, a specific assembly to meet the Lord in worship—"there am I in the midst of them" (Matt. xviii. 20); and behind locked doors on the first day of the week, in the first post-resurrection gathering of millions extending down nineteen centuries, our Lord appeared, exactly according to His promise; and *He* has never failed since. Nor must we. In the words of Jeremy Taylor:—"Fail not to be present at the public hours and place of prayer, entering early and cheerfully, attending reverently and devoutly, abiding patiently during the whole office, piously assisting at prayers, and gladly also hearing the sermon."

EMPTY SEATS

Two facts show the startling decay in Christian assemblies to-day, one fact dealing with lapsed membership and the other with the non-attendance of outsiders. (1) A Commission appointed by the Congregational Churches of America, after six years' labour over a range of 1,000 churches, reports that only 30 per cent. of the seats are being used, and only 25 per cent. of the members are in attendance at all. (2) In one district in London, where there are over 100 churches, twenty years ago 25 per cent. of the population attended a place of worship: to-day 5 per cent. only attends. The Churches are emptying as never before in our lifetime.

JUDAS

Now the Holy Spirit has photographed for all time, behind the closed doors of the Upper Room, two empty seats. The occupant of one, after taking the sop, had gone out into the night, an outstanding sorrow of every preacher's heart:—missing faces, that come for a moment into the light, glide away into the darkness, and will never be seen again until

the Great White Throne. But an apostle's empty seat is far more tragic; for it had been filled for three years: now, as the seat of the first great apostate of all time, it is empty for ever. Such are the antichrists who withdraw from the Church. "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us: but they went out, that they might be made manifest how that they all are not of us" (1 John ii. 19).

THOMAS

But the other chair, also empty, embodies for nineteen centuries the absent church member; for "Thomas, one of the twelve, *was not with them*" (John xx. 24). No remotest reason is given for his absence, thus covering, doubtless designedly, all possible causes which ought never to have been.*

* Love imperatively demands, however, that we very carefully bear in mind the reasons for absence that are perfectly legitimate. It may be removal to another church, under what is believed (rightly or wrongly) to be Divine leading; or it may be illness, or the illness of others at home, or unavoidable home duties; or it may be professional duties falling sometimes on part or the whole of the Lord's Day; or it may be an exhaustion after the week's work which makes attendance possible, but not wise; or it may be Christian work elsewhere for the day, or for a part of it.

The Saviour Himself draws attention to its gravity: for He says to Thomas:—" *Become* not faithless": he had taken the first step on the road to apostasy.

FELLOWSHIP

Now the first consequence of the empty seat is that, trampling on a divine ordinance, and ignoring inspired precedent, it loses all that for which the church was created. The first post-Pentecostal gathering is designed as our model. "They *continued stedfastly* in the apostles' teaching"—that is, for us, the Scriptures—"and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and the prayers" (Acts ii. 42). Even of a Quaker assembly when not a word is being uttered, Robert Barclay says:—"When I came into the silent assemblies of God's people, I felt a sweet power among them which touched my heart, and as I gave way unto it, I found the evil weakening in me and the good raised up." The abiding glow of worship; the inspiration of Christian friendship and example; the building upon our Most Holy Faith by ever deepening knowledge; the unconscious growth in character by habitual godliness:—all these are lost as we leave the church's tropic atmosphere to wander amid the icebergs of the world.

CHRIST

But an empty seat's still graver loss is obvious. "Thomas," we read, "was not with them *when Jesus came.*" Of all the Apostles he needed most what the Lord brought—proofs of the resurrection; yet he was the one apostle absent when the Lord brought the proofs; and he was not present when our Lord "breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost." Those who can least afford the loss are absent when Jesus comes to bless His own. And what is most striking is that it is Jesus—and, so far as we know, Jesus alone—who recalls the absence; for on the next Sunday, without a word from the apostle, He "saith *to Thomas*, Reach hither thy hand"; and the blessing which He gave him on that second Sunday, He had never given him throughout the week. CHURCH BLESSINGS ARE NEVER PROCURABLE AT HOME. "The very sermon that we needlessly miss may contain a precious word in season for our souls. The very assembly for prayer and praise from which we stay away may be the very gathering that would have cheered, and stablished, and quickened our hearts. We little know how dependant our spiritual health is on little, regular, habitual helps and how much we suffer if we miss our medicine."—*Bishop J. C. Ryle.*

SERVICE

Again, so far as the battle goes in which we are all involved, the absent member is a deserter: he may say:—"I hinder no one from coming; my absence is a matter for myself alone": nevertheless he shirks his duty. "One day," says Dr. Wilbur Chapman, "there came to the city of Philadelphia a very prominent social settlement worker, and he made this statement in the presence of a number of ministers. He said that the people in the slums were the lost sheep of great churches. I shall not easily forget how indignant we were. I was appointed on a committee to investigate, and at midnight I went down into the slums of my own city, and I saw the vilest man I think I have ever seen in my life, and when he saw me, and heard why I had come, he drew back his fist as if he would strike me. He said, 'I used to attend your church—not when you were there, but long ago—and they let me come into that church week after week, and month after month, and they knew I was stumbling, but they never helped me.' Then I went into the vilest house I have ever entered, and I found a poor fallen girl in that house. When I told her that I was the pastor of Bethany Church in Philadelphia, this girl sprang

to her feet and said, 'Bethany!' Then, like a crazy woman, with her fists clenched and her eyes flashing, she said, 'I was carried as a baby into your church. My mother used to take me every Sunday. Then I was in the Sunday-school. I could point you out the form where I used to sit. I began to drift, but nobody warned me, and I am here!'"* The absent member not only shirks helping us in an extraordinarily difficult battle, but he actually sets an example to those who ultimately become outcast and lost.

REPUTATION

There is another very sad consequence of the empty seat. Is it not a tragedy that a disciple of the high character of Thomas should, through a single absence, have contracted the unenviable repute down all the ages of being 'doubting' Thomas? Had he met the Lord the Sunday before, he could have examined the scars. Modernism was born in the German

* It is, however, only fair to church workers to note that neither the absence of conversion, as in these cases, nor the dying down of the flame after conversion, as in countless backsliders, can be effectually countered by personal attentions, however kindly and however right. *It is deep, personal sin before God.*

Church, whose pitiful fall (as a whole) we are watching ; and a 'doubting' Church is an emptying Church. Sir Raymond Beazley, who has visited Germany continuously for fifty years, says (*Contemporary Review*, Aug., 1936) :—"For decades it has been rather an extravagant piety which thought of church attendance oftener than once a month." With chronic absence our Christian reputation is lost, and with it our entire influence for good.

APOSTASY

Another danger of the empty seat is especially modern. "Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, but exhorting one another, *and so much the more* as ye see the day drawing nigh" (Heb. x. 25) : that is, the nearer the Advent, the more dangerous becomes the empty seat, and our Lord's words the more intensely arresting :—"Because iniquity shall be multiplied, the love of the many"—the 'many' as distinct from the 'few' ; that is, the love of the majority of believers—"shall wax cold" (Matt. xxiv. 12). No one can see the end of the path which begins with leaving the church, and every moment now brings us nearer gigantic falls and open apos-

tasies. But lovely is the counterpart truth. In harvest-time farmers never set a single sheaf standing by itself ; after the grain is ripe, and cut, it is reaped together : so when God empties the seats of the watchful, He reaps them, as He finds them, *together*.

BEYOND THE GRAVE

But the supreme danger of the empty seat is on the other side of the grave ; and the Holy Spirit expresses it in words more awful than any of us would ever have dared to use. "Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together ; *for* if we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth"—the inspired Apostle includes himself : it is true even of the chief of apostles—"there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, *but a certain fearful expectation of judgment*" (Heb. x. 26).

THE ASSEMBLY

Judas's seat is empty for ever : Thomas's is empty only until the next Lord's Day ; and then follows golden service

in a ripened life, and at last a name emblazoned for ever on the foundations of the Holy City. Our assembly here is only a prelude to our assembly for ever above.* Dr. Talmage never erased the name of a dead member from his church register, as he said he hoped to call his roll on the streets of glory; and so, after his church had been burned down, 500 living members were found, and 2,500 who, as the register expressed it, had "changed their residence".

* It is beautiful to note that *συναγωγή* is used only twice: in Heb. x. 25 of our earthly assembling, and in 2 Thess. ii. 1 of our heavenly.

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