



Conducted by
Alf Marsden

“In 1 COR. 7:17 Paul uses the expression, ‘And so ordain I in all churches.’ Could you please explain what he means; and also in other places where he speaks about ‘setting things in order’?”

Some Christians seem to have strange ideas concerning the Verb "to ordain". Perhaps this is because they have heard of, or seen, very grand ordination ceremonies and have concluded that some form of mysticism surrounds such ceremonies. In fact, the idea is perfectly straightforward so far as the Bible is concerned, but there are several variations of application which we shall need to look at.

Authority

The phraseology used in 1 Cor. 7:17 suggests that Paul had the authority to "ordain" and to "set in order", and this is quite true. Paul had seen the Lord, as he explained to the Corinthian Christians, "Am I not an apostle? am I not free? have I not seen Jesus Christ our Lord? are not ye my work in the Lord? (1 Cor. 9:1). It is manifestly clear, however, that he had not the additional qualification as revealed in Acts 1:22, namely, he had not "compared with" the original twelve, but it is very clear that Paul was commissioned directly, by the Lord Himself, to be the Apostle to the Gentiles. Concerning the resurrected Christ he said, "After that, he was seen of James; then of all the apostles. And last of all he was seen of me also, as of one born out of due time. For I am the least of the apostles, that I am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am" (1 Cor. 15:7-10).

So the authority which Paul had was Apostolic, and because of this he could claim the privileges given to the other Apostles by Jesus, "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" (Matt. 18:18).

'So Ordain I'

The word rendered "ordain" in 1 Cor. 7:17 is given by the Greek word *DIATASSO*, and has the general meaning of "to arrange, to appoint, to prescribe". The word is used in Acts 7:44, when Stephen said, "Our fathers had the tabernacle of witness in the wilderness, as he had *appointed*, speaking unto Moses, that he should make it according to the fashion that he had seen."

One must always view the Apostolic Writings relative to the times in which they were written. The early Christians were bathed in the heady glow of the New Order in Christ. The Lord would soon come again and they would all be transported to Heaven, consequently, the old relationships, verities, and values could be abandoned. It was against this background that Paul had to arrange, to order, to set standards in the various local congregations, even though, it was thought, it might only be for a short period of time.

Therefore, we can understand what he had to arrange in Corinth, for example. Believing husbands were wanting to leave unbelieving wives, and vice versa; Paul had to order them to stay together. Converted slaves were leaving their masters, and Paul had to order them to stay with them, as a matter of fact he said, "Let every man abide in the same calling wherein he was called" (1 Cor. 7:20). He exhorted the unmarried to serve the Lord in the unmarried state, but he left the door open for marriage if that was the desire. He made it clear that to obey God was of more value than endless discussions on circumcision and uncircumcision. He had to arrange that everything should be done decently and in order; that there should be no defilement of the Lord's Table. He had to set in order and correct the tendency to establish parties and factions within the Church. We can enter the very heart of this great Apostle when, after recounting the many things he had suffered at the hands of his tormentors, he ended by saying, "Beside these things that are without that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches" (2 Cor. 11:28). Paul had the

heart of the true shepherd; he didn't want to see the flock dispersed and facing the dangers from all directions. Furthermore, as the Apostle to the Gentiles he had founded most of these churches. Therefore, he had to bring order out of a certain degree of chaos so that Christianity could survive in an alien world.

'The Present Distress'

Some have concluded that the arrangements which Paul made for the churches were only for a limited period of time and therefore are not binding on us today, consequently, the "order" or the "prescription" can be changed to suit our needs. I believe that because of this false idea we are now seeing religious groups condoning the possession by nations of nuclear weapons; accepting forms of doctrine on baptism and leadership which are not consistent with Paul's arrangements; surrendering to the completely unscriptural campaign for the admission of women into the so-called priesthood. But we understand, of course, that once the original is thought of as being defective then error can only be compounded. If Paul's arrangements and appointments were only of a temporary nature, then we might be excused for asking ourselves "how temporary is temporary", and where do we look for guidance once the temporary period is over. Are we then left to the capricious whims of men who claim Divine guidance and Spirit motivation? No, we must look to the Bible as the inspired Word of God and realise that only therein shall we find guidance for all time.

"Distress" in 1 Cor. 7:26 has the meaning of "necessity", imposed either by external circumstances or internal pressure. As an example of external circumstances we must realise that the first Christian communities were in an alien world and many of them had needs which could only be met by the sacrifices of their brethren. As an example of internal pressure we can quote Paul, "For though I preach the gospel, I have nothing to glory of; for necessity is laid upon me; yea, woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel" (1 Cor. 9:16).

Is there anyone today who would be bold enough to say that distress is not ever-present. We know full well that necessity exists in many parts of the world and can only be relieved by the care and concern of the brethren, or do we fondly imagine that Christians exist only in the affluent Western societies? And when did the internal pressure to preach the Gospel depart from the Church, and by whose decree? No, my dear fellow-christian and friend, the extent and the degree of the problem may vary from age to age, but the fundamental resolution of those problems must be by the Divine arrangements and appointments as revealed in the Word of God, otherwise we are in deep trouble scripturally. We can see the evidence today of what defection from that high standard has left us with, so we need to embrace the fact that what God has 'ordained' by His appointed Messengers, and handed down to use in His Word, is for the well-being of the Church *for all time*, and should be promoted by His Church today whenever and wherever we can. May He grant us the fidelity and courage to do this, for His Name's sake.