

Why a “Back Seat”?

by Norman Crawford

The expression “back seat” is not found in the NT. The “seat (or room) of the unlearned” may be anywhere in the building, so long as those who occupy it can observe the “breaking of bread” and it is outside the circle of fellowship. The verse normally appealed to when this practice is challenged is, “Else when thou shalt bless with the spirit, how shall he that occupieth the room of the unlearned say Amen at thy giving of thanks, seeing he understandeth not what thou sayest?” (1 Cor 14:16).

It has been contended that the word “unlearned” in this verse must be interpreted as meaning that the person was ignorant or unlearned in the tongue that was being spoken. Surely he was unlearned in the tongue, but a reading of the first 15 verses of this chapter will show that everyone in the assembly was ignorant of the meaning of the tongue. The words were mere sounds spoken into the air (v.9), not even the speaker understood what he said (v.14). We readily admit that the man of verse 16 was “unlearned” in the tongue, but if this is the sum total of his ignorance, why is he distinguished from all the company? He had a more urgent need than any others to understand because he was unlearned in a far more serious way than all the rest of the company.

As often happens in Paul’s writings, the use of a term is learned not only from what precedes it, but also by what follows. Verses 23 to 25 of this chapter make it clear that “unlearned” is being used of a believer who did not understand that God was in the midst of His gathered people. His ignorance reminds us of the words of Jacob, “Surely the LORD is in this place; and I knew it not. And he was afraid, and said, How dreadful is this place! this is none other but the house of God” (Gen 28:16-17). This is a tremendous preview of NT truth. Please note that the first mention of “the house of God” in Scripture is related to the Lord being there.

Verse 23 says, “If therefore the whole church be come together into one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those that are unlearned, or unbelievers, will they not say that ye are mad?” The “whole church” is emphatic by its position in the sentence. None were missing, the “whole church” was gathered. Therefore the one or ones who come in afterward did not form part of the church. They are strangers, unknown to the assembly. They might be unbelievers, or they may be untaught believers. This is not yet known.

The entire scene is hypothetical, but this does not lessen the value of its teaching. Paul explains further, “But if all prophesy, and there come in one that believeth not, or one unlearned, he is convinced of all, he is judged of all: And thus are the secrets of his heart made manifest; and so falling down on his face he will worship Gad, and report that God is in you of a truth.” (v 24-25).

If we believe that no unbeliever can offer spiritual worship, then we must admit that this man is a believer, but unlearned. The question is, about what was he unlearned? Only one fact is mentioned; the presence of God in the midst of the assembly at Corinth. Learning this great truth produces worship in his spirit. The illustration stops at this

point, but we are not wrong in assuming that he would very soon become part of “the whole church”.

The “seat of the unlearned” must be occupied by believers who are as yet untaught about the presence of the Lord in the midst of His assembly. However, chapter 14 of this great church epistle is not the only passage to which we appeal to explain our practices. The “within” and “without” of 1 Corinthians 5:12-13 make it plain that the fellowship of an assembly is made up of a certain number of believers. Fellowship is a high spiritual truth, but in an assembly there is a visible expression of it. When we break bread, we are partaking of physical emblems, and the Lord’s supper expresses in at least four ways “the fellowship” of a local assembly (Acts 2:42). Because of the partaking of the emblems, it is the only meeting of this kind, at which the “seat of the unlearned” must be visibly seen. The one loaf and one cup, the table and the circle are four blessed expressions of the fellowship in which the first assembly continued steadfastly.

The first three are very familiar to us. Not all may understand the significance of the circle. Matthew 18:20 uses two blessed words, *en meso*, “in the midst”. The Gathering Center is the Lord Himself in the midst. We gather around Him now (Heb 10:25), as we will in a coming day in the air (2 Thess 2:1).

All these expressions of fellowship make it necessary to draw a clear line between the “within” and “without” of a scripturally gathered “without” of a scripturally gathered assembly. Without a “seat of the unlearned”, there is disorder.

