

THE UNITY OF THE SPIRIT

*“endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit
in the bond of peace.”*

Ephesians 4:3

IT IS needless for one to insist at length on that which is sufficiently plain to every Christian reader—the importance which God attaches to keeping the unity of the Spirit. It is true that ‘endeavouring’ fails to give the real force of the word employed by the Spirit of God. ‘Endeavouring’ is an expression which in the ordinary language of the day is habitually applied to that which men essay or seek after, even if they have not a hope of accomplishing. They feel that they may fail, but at any rate they try or ‘endeavour’ to do this or that. Such is not the meaning of the word here, but rather zeal in heeding and carrying out what is already true, giving diligence ‘to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.’ This, however, shows that not mere effort to attain, but earnestness to maintain, is the exhortation intended.

For the unity of the Spirit is to faith a subsisting fact; and the keeping it is no less our present duty. It is not that we have unity of ours to make, or that God is to make it for us in heaven by and by. It is here and now that the Spirit has formed this unity, the keeping of which is clearly our responsibility on earth. No doubt there is much to learn from the fact that it really is, as it is called, ‘the unity of the Spirit’. It is not at all mere unity on our part, nor is it the unity of the body, though this is one result, but of the Holy Ghost who baptised into one body all who believe, whether Jews or Gentiles, bond or free. It puts forward the Divine agent, the efficient source and power of unity, the Holy

Spirit; but it supposes and includes the one body, which itself is so positive and permanent a reality that expressions often used about it are proved thereby incorrect. Of rending the body we hear in man's language or writings, never in God's word. Just as a bone of Christ was not to be broken, so the body of Christ, the church, cannot be rent. 'There is one body, and one Spirit, even as there is one hope of our calling.' These are the vital, abiding, and unchangeable truths in that new relationship. As surely as one Spirit has been sent down from heaven, there is but one body on earth; but that which the members of the body are called to keep is the unity of the Spirit.

It is not, as many interpret it, the unity of the family where the Lord guides one and all in communion with the Father and the Son; which is no doubt a very desirable, right, and blessed thing in its place, but provided for rather in John 17:21, 22, than here. 'That all might be one,' in the Gospel of John, refers to our rising by grace above all that would set or keep us apart, one in the Father and the Son. So the Lord asked for us of the Father that we might be characterised by unity. But in the scripture before us, as in the writings of Paul generally, at least where the 'body' is introduced, it is another truth attaching to the same objects, yet not at all a contingent or changeable condition of soul, but the permanent and blessed fact, that God has established unity for His own glory by the presence of His Spirit, who has united us to Christ our exalted Head in heaven.

There is since Pentecost a divine unity on the earth; not the mere aggregate of the individuals evermore called by grace, but those now made one by the Spirit of God. There is thus a divine corporation on the earth, if one may be

allowed to use so familiar an expression. This divine society—here below is not formed by the will of the persons who compose it, although it is to be supposed that their hearts if right and intelligent thoroughly go along with the grace that so united them. But the church, or assembly, of God is formed by God's will; as it was purposed by His grace, so is it made good livingly by His power, the Holy Ghost being the effectuator of this blessed unity. Hence the Spirit of God for that very reason has the deepest and the most intimate interest in carrying out this unity for Christ's glory according to the counsels of the Father. It is called the unity of the Spirit; yet let none imagine that he can intelligently keep the unity of the Spirit and forget for a moment in principle or practice the one body of Christ.

There are, of course, various ways in which the saints may fail to keep this unity; but there are two general though opposite directions in which the failure may work, which are as prevalent as they are manifest. The first is by setting up a unity larger than that of the Spirit; the second by making it less. There may be a worldly looseness on the one hand, or mere partyism on the other; and the danger is so great that only God's Spirit can keep us looking to Christ by the word. Whatever may be the object or excuse, the will of man himself must be at bottom the motive at work in opposition to God's will.

In the first case men are prone to enlarge the unity. They insist on taking in multitudes beyond the members of the body of Christ, souls recognised as of Christ without adequate ground for it. Oh what dishonour to that excellent Name! I speak not of infirmity in accrediting any supposed to be true, but of the deliberate intention to accept, and treat

as belonging to Christ's body, persons who do not themselves even profess to be His members, and have evidently never passed from death unto life. Rome, it is true, had so done in its medieval sway over the west; and the Eastern bodies, the Greeks, Nestorians, etc., were no better, any more than the Catholic church before that great rent which set them at variance. They had all sought and received the world by means of fleshy ordinances, apart from faith and the reception of the Spirit. The Reformation, much as it did, in no adequate way rectified this radical error. Protestantism rejected the woman ruling over the nations, and if possible all nations; but, ignorant of the unity of the Spirit, it set up in each realm, where its influence extended, its own independent religion as by law established.

Such is the well-known principle of nationalistic bodies, wherever found, whether in England or in Scotland, in Germany or in Holland. They profess to receive all decent people in the districts or parishes. It is avowedly a religion for every body, and in no way the intention or the desire to incorporate none that are not living members of Christ. Birth or local connections are allowed unless there be open scandal. There is no demand of life or faith, still less of the gift of the Holy Ghost, as of old (Acts 11:16, 17). It is rather such a pattern as Israel affords, not the church wherein is neither Jew nor Greek but all are one in Christ Jesus. It is a question of family life and of geographical limits, and people are not Israelites or heathen but own the Christian religion, being in what is commonly called a national church: yet is it not clear that in a national church the unity of the Spirit cannot possibly be kept? One may be a true

Christian, or child of God, but there is neither the thought nor the possibility for a member of a national church to keep therein 'the unity of the Spirit'. Hence they speak of the Church of England, not of the church of God in England: still less do they contemplate all that are Christ's on the earth.

The fact is that, in escaping from Babylon, they have come to acknowledge a unity wholly different from, and opposed to, that of the Spirit. They have set up a unity which, if carried out with complete success, would comprehend the whole nation, saving perhaps those who eschew all show of religion. For I do not forget that the Rubric provides against heinous or manifest scandal. Notoriously, however, in every quarter, and almost in every family, there may be persons of more or less respectability, moral and amiable men, who know they are not born of God, and would shrink from pretending to be members of Christ, if they were not misled to claim the place on ritual ground. Most of these would shrink from being called 'saints,' and hesitate not to apply the word as a cant term of reproach to God's children who are not ashamed to call themselves what they are.

Clearly then such as disclaim the name thus are not saints, unless you can honestly conceive of a believer so sunk or dark as to make a scorn of God's designation for His children. And you may rest assured without a doubt that he who thinks and talks so does not walk as becomes a saint. Now if a man is not what scripture calls a saint, he is certainly not a Christian, except for God's judgment of his hollow profession. Is it not plain that a Christian is a saint, and a good deal more? There were saints in Old Testament

times; there were saints before the cross of Christ; but were they really Christians so called? A Christian is a saint since redemption, one who is separated to God by faith of the gospel, in the power of the Holy Ghost, on the ground of the work of Christ. Whatever he may have been naturally before, God has quickened him together with Christ, having forgiven all his offences; and now, brought nigh by the blood of Christ, he draws near to God as a child. He is also a member of Christ's body.

Now these are the persons who are called in the bond of peace to keep with diligence the unity of the Spirit, setting their faces against everything which might falsify that unity. It is not merely that the Spirit inwardly, and the personal conduct outwardly, must be suitable to it, which of course is true; but if the affections and walk were ever so excellent, it would be a serious thing for the Christian to annul or overlook the expression of that unity. Yet does not every believer dishonour it who owns any unity whatever that is not of the Holy Ghost? If he owns the fellowship of nationalism in this or any other country, is it not clear that he is off the ground on which scripture places all the saints? As a nationalist, how can he be keeping the unity of the Spirit? He may behave as a true child of God otherwise; in general he may walk worthily of all respect and love; and certainly he ought to be an object of tender concern to any who are zealous in keeping the unity of the Spirit. For if true to their calling they must pray for the deliverance of all the children of God who are not in this following the will and word of the Lord Jesus.

Unquestionably those who own a unity which takes in the flesh, on the basis of rites open to all the world, are on

ground far wider than that of the Spirit, and cannot be walking in accordance with it. True unity is exclusive of every other; as you cannot serve two masters, you cannot share a twofold communion. The unity of the Spirit admits of no rival.

But there is another form of departure from the truth which may hinder God's children from keeping the unity of the Spirit. By misuse of doctrine or discipline they may form a unity not only in fact but in principle and design narrower than Christ's body. Are such on God's ground? I trow not. They may openly draw up their own form of government, or they may privily have an understood, though unwritten, system of rules which exclude saints as godly as themselves who cannot accept these rules. Here we have a sect. Their decrees are not the commandments of the Lord, yet they become practically as authoritative as His word, or (as is usual) yet more so. What is it for men to pretend that they have no human rules, when they introduce some unheard of conditions of fellowship, here rigidly, there loosely, according to varying policy or the caprice of their rulers, for those who come within their range? Anything of this nature takes the shape, not exactly of nationalism, but of sectarianism, which (instead of too wide or loose borders) rather seeks to split up those who should be together, making their communion express their difference from their brethren, and in no way standing together on that unity which is of God. It is in principle sectarianism; and, if they know better, they are more guilty than ordinary dissenters.

Under this head we find God's children often scattered through the pressure of questionable and even wrong

discipline, or of unduly urged if not false doctrine. Some prefer a communion which is distinctively Arminian, or decidedly Calvinistic. Some might press particular views as to the coming and kingdom of Christ; others as to ministry, bishops, elders, etc.; others again as to baptism, the mode or the subjects. These ecclesiastical legislators seem not at all aware that their abuse of these doctrines or practices is incompatible with keeping the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, they themselves being wrong, if not in their views, at least in the way they are pressed.

Behind these public and settled aberrations from the will of God about His children, it will be found that there lie predisposing causes that grieve the Holy Ghost and hinder the true and spiritual perception of the saint. The most personal and perhaps most common hindrances flow from the state of the soul, through ignorance of a full delivering gospel. Sin in these circumstances has never been thoroughly judged as before God, and consequently deliverance (Rom. 8:2) is but partially, if at all, known even in principle. Still less is there the power of the Spirit in unsparing application of death with Christ to self practically. Perhaps even the forgiveness of sins as a complete thing has been but feebly apprehended, as made apparent by the notion of the need of a fresh recurrence to the blood of Christ, or (as others would put it) of a constant process of cleansing going on, which they ground on a misunderstanding of the present tense in 1 John 1:7, ignorantly reducing it from its moral import to mere actual time. Others again have a wholly superficial and even fallacious view of the world, as if it were now all consecrated to the Christian by that cross of Christ, whereby

on the contrary the Christian is crucified to the world, and the world is crucified to him.

The flesh and the world being thus inadequately judged according to God's word in the light of the risen Christ, the heart is not in communion with God touching all within and without. Though there may be the utmost zeal for souls as far as their danger and God's pardoning grace are understood, and true and burning love that Christ should be honoured in their blessing, nature still has a large place, and the word and spirit of God do not absolutely govern the heart separate to Him who is dead, risen, and on high. In such a condition how can souls be expected to form a sound or spiritual judgment on the church, complicated as the question now is by its ruined state? They value science, letters, philosophy, which exalt the flesh, as well as associations which allow of ease and honour in the world. From lack of intelligence in the word, and feeble sense of fellowship with the Father and the Son, they fail to judge the present evil age and are absorbed in 'their own things,' if not ever seeking greater. They are consequently in danger of being the victims of prejudice and prepossession. They do not give to Christ His due and supreme place in a practical way; nor do they freely rise above brotherly kindness into the purer atmosphere of love according to God, so as to care for the church unselfishly as Christ's body. They are not prepared to break fully through the vain conversation which tradition has generated as much in Christendom as of old in Judaism. They shrink from the trying consequences which unhesitating and thorough obedience of the truth must entail on every one who is subject to the Lord. The eye is not single, and therefore the

body is not full of light; the path looks uncertain, the word seems difficult, and danger appears to lie in the faith that follows the Lord at all cost.

Are we then to fall back on prudence and require a certain measure of intelligence before reception? This is just one main mischief that has to be ever assiduously avoided, and treated as a mistake in principle, yea, a sin against Christ and the church. Nor could anything more directly tend to make the most sectarian of all sects than to exact, from the souls who seek to come in, a right judgment as to truth least known by the saints, the mystery of Christ, or in particular the one body for them made harder still, as it is apt to be in practice, by sections growing out of the actual fallen condition of Christendom.

Never was such a requirement heard of, even when the church began and the presence of the Holy Spirit was a wholly new thing. Saints were received on the confession of Christ's name, God having given to all the like gift, His seal and passport. The intelligence was on the part of those who recognised the worth of that Name and the gift of the Spirit as to themselves at the beginning. Had they claimed intelligence of the church as a condition of fellowship, it would have really proved their own lack of intelligence, and counteracted that for which Christ died—the gathering together in one of God's scattered children.

Has the present ruin of the church altered this primary principle? The firm foundation of God stands, but with this seal: The Lord knows them that are His; and, let every one that names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity. What bears His name is like a great house with vessels of honour, and vessels of dishonour, from which last a man has to

purge himself, if he would himself be a vessel of honour, sanctified, meet for the master's use, prepared unto every good work. If the public state be evil, individual fidelity to Christ is imperative: unity is not to overbear it, nor bind the Christian to unite the Lord's name with unrighteousness. Personal purity is to be followed also; and this not in isolation but with those that call on the Lord out of a pure heart. Not a word about requiring ecclesiastical or doctrinal intelligence, but 'with those that call' etc., *i.e.*, with real saints in a day of lax and hollow profession.

At a later day, 'the last hour' of John, we see how strongly the spirit of God insists on first principles. 'Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God: and every one that loveth him that begat loveth him also that is begotten of him. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God, and keep his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous. For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world, even our faith. Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God?' In presence of many antichrists, Christ abides the touchstone. The spirit holds to His person un-hesitatingly. To add ought is to take from Him, to dishonour His name.

Is then knowledge of truth or growth in spiritual intelligence to be slighted? In no way; but it is false and vain to require either as a preliminary condition from saints who seek fellowship according to God. Help them, instruct them, lead them on in both. This is a true service, but arduous withal. The other is sectarian, and wrong.

If there are any who plead for so great a departure from Scripture and more especially from the characteristic truth of God's assembly, let them betray their new invention in opposition to the Lord, that others also may fear. Christ ever abides the one test, the only centre, to whom the Holy Spirit gathers. What the Lord declared just before the church began remains even more manifestly true, now that He is dishonoured in the house of His new friends no less than in that of His old. 'He that is not with Me is against Me, and he that gathereth not with Me scattereth abroad' (Matt. 12:30). It is imperative to be with Christ for one's soul, in order to please God and not dishonour His Son; but there is now the privilege and duty of gathering, as well as of individual allegiance; and he who does not gather with Him only scatters, whatever appearances may say to the contrary. It is the once rejected and dead, the now risen and glorified, Christ, who is the attractive centre; and hence the sign of His death in the breaking of bread is equally the sign of the one body, which they in effect deny and contemn who would restrain it to their few, refusing the many, that is, all whom Christ contemplates and welcomes. He has not asked this at their hands; nor does He sanction such action in His word. And if not warranted of Him, what is it but party and arbitrary restriction, which does not refuse the vile only but the precious, unless they fall in with their unauthorised course whether they think it right or not?

Thus the direct tendency is to coerce and demoralise; for what is sought is not conviction on ground of Scripture, but, where there is no conviction, a blindfold subjection, a bare and often reluctant and unhappy acquiescence, an appearance of fellowship which is no longer living but

dead. For the Spirit we have received is assuredly a spirit, not of fear, but of power and love and a sound mind; and in no way does He endorse what is thus formal in character, under human pressure or influence. The consequence is terrible: a premium to the more vaulting and turbulent spirits, who now more than ever would 'hold the reins'; the comparative retirement, from their just and grace-given place, of those who care not 'to rule save in the fear of the Lord and by His word; the destruction of moral principle in such (and they are very many) as seek to silence their disapproval of the movement as a whole and in detail, either by attachment to leaders, or in holding to the greater number, which they fondly call unity. Protest (say some), but stay within; that is, protest but only in word! This we used to regard as the painful compromise of place-loving evangelicals; now do we not see it standing where it ought not? It is anything but truth and right; and this unity!

But there is all the difference of truth and error, on the one hand, between consistency with the unity of the Spirit for Christ's glory, carried out in holiness and grace according to His word, and, on the other, self-deceived and misleading abuse of unity to cry up a party bent on division with violence, which refused humiliation and prayer to arrest the evil, and declared Scripture needless for its demands or its justification.

No intelligent saint would ask for a positive letter of commandment, like a Jew; no one expects a modern place or passing circumstance to be named in the Scripture: to speak as if anything of the sort were sought is to evade and condemn oneself yet more. Where is the scriptural principle for turning a local difference into a wedge of universal

division? Beyond controversy, when a question is raised with a world-wide scattering of the saints as the penalty, all who love the church are bound to be assured that the test is of God according to His word.

Some of us remember such a test more than thirty years ago. But then it was whether we could consent to make a true or a false Christ an open question. This we rejected with horror, when a large company of saints adhered to their leaders (even while they ignored the judgment of the assembly where the evil occurred), who let in the known partisans of a proved anti-Christian teacher, and denied formally their responsibility to judge it solemnly for themselves.

This was no test of man. It is the certain distinct requirement of the Lord. We are divinely commanded to reject any who bring not the doctrine of Christ (2 John). This goes far beyond the dealing due to those who act independently or make a sect. No ecclesiastical error, however real or grave, could justify such rigour.

The foundation truth of Christ demands it. We owe it to Him who is our Lord, who died for us, whose glory the word guards as nothing else. To say that then it was a question of the Head, now of the body, in order to put the two as much as possible on a level, is both want of faith in Him and want of intelligence in the word. It is an undue and even unholy exalting of the church, and so not only an unspiritual blunder but an evident excuse for yielding to sectarianism. We should never have been warranted to have acted as we did in 1848-9, if Christ had not been blasphemed. As a test it is absolutely unscriptural to equalise the church with Him, even if it had been true,

which it was not of late, that the one body was at stake, for the meeting wrongly begun was nowhere recognised.

The comparison is a sophism. For the question of old was not about Christ as Head at all, but about His person and relationship to God as such. An antichrist was taught; it was not a mere failure, bad as this may be, in holding His headship. And so far now from maintaining the unity of the Spirit, so far from acting faithfully on the ground of the one body, the object has been and is to force on us the recognition of a meeting which had deliberately gone out and set up in self-will as a party, a meeting that never yet adequately and honestly owned these public sins to those against whom they sinned, not to say to all saints. The aim, of course, really was division, for no sober Christian thought such ways right; but certain were resolved, cost what it might, to sever between those prepared to accept as of God a meeting guilty of unjudged party work, and those who cannot but reject such independency for Christ's and the church's sake.

If this is not a human test, and as the result a sect, it would be hard to find either; for the ground is not even a difference of doctrine, still less as to Christ, but at most a question of discipline, even if the discipline were right. But I will go further. Take the hope of the return of the Lord Jesus. You know how very important it is for Christians to be waiting in truth and heart for Christ from heaven; but would you require that those who seek fellowship in the name of the Lord should understand and confess that hope before you receive them in the Lord?

Would not this be a sect? Be it that your assertion of the Christian hope is ever so right, and that the person in quest

of fellowship is ever so ignorant on that subject; but who authorises you or others to stand at the door and forbid his entrance? Perhaps by entertaining some wrong thought, he may fancy that the Christian, like the Jew, or the Gentile in Rev. 7, has to go through the great final tribulation. Granted that he little understands the place of the Christian from not seeing his union with Christ in heaven, which is made known by the Holy Spirit in this day. Hence he is in confusion and knows not that the Lord will come and take His own before the days of that terrible retribution which is coming upon the world. He may even share the thoughts of men, is unwise as any in Thessalonica and fall into the delusion of trying to escape the great tribulation, as some did forty years ago by going to Canada. Too much occupied with prophecy, they had lost or never known the true hope of Christ's coming; and whenever we get absorbed in anything, whether prophecy, or the church¹, or the gospel,

¹If any one wants proof of the schismatic misuse of truth at work, he can see it in the *'Voice to the Faithful'* for August, 1882, where the writer is so betrayed by his anti-evangelistic zeal as to say that 'A company of saints gathered by an evangelist seldom is sound in principle.' (p. 247)! This crying up of one's own line is as unsound in heart as it is in principle; an offence alike against grace and truth. Every right-minded evangelist hails with joy the service of pastors and teachers, that they may perfect the work begun by the Lord through himself. But if these were not blinded by self-occupation they would rejoice in the blessing (or what they call 'the success') of the evangelist, as alone furnishing them with a sphere for their own ministry: for how in general are saints to be called and gathered if not by the evangelist? and think of the confusion in what follows, where brethren from whom these men differ are contrasted with '...a member (however unintelligent) of the body of Christ.' (page 248)! Is the evangelist then not a member of that body? The apostle (Eph. 4:11, 12) ruled differently his place, relation, and function; but this pretentious school not infrequently show the worth of their intelligence by independence of Scripture. If this be the sort of thing the sheep now get, they are truly to be pitied.

rather than with Christ, what but grace can hinder us from going farther astray?

And this brings me to the main point I would now press. The unity of the Spirit embraces not only the intelligent but the simplest of God's children; it contemplates the body of Christ, and all the members in particular. For those who believe the gospel of salvation have the Holy Ghost dwelling in them and are Christ's members. They are therefore responsible to walk, as we are to own Him, in that relationship which grace has given to all. As members of Christ's body, they are bound diligently to keep the unity of the Spirit. There are national bodies and dissenting societies which have within them many, if not the mass, of God's children; and these systems, by claiming to be churches, prove a great perplexity to the believer. The evil of party, which showed itself in the early days, not only repeats itself, but works now with very great aggravation. Notwithstanding, grace would strengthen those who seek to do Christ's will according to their true relationship. It is man, and man pushed on by the enemy, that makes stumbling-blocks and difficulties great, yea, in appearance insuperable, so that the children of God may be tempted to give up true unity. Of course every faithful servant of the Lord has to seek, if not the removal of these obstacles, at least to help God's children in surmounting them. In a day of growing confusion, the constant effort of the enemy is to deceive and baffle and make it seem hopeless to keep the unity of the Spirit.

It is for us to consider whether we are using diligence to keep that unity in peace. No doubt there are internal dispositions or conditions requisite to do it aright. Some say

the mystery must be known. Of such intelligence I do not doubt the importance in its place and time; but of this the apostle hints not a word here. What does he say? 'With all lowliness and meekness, with long-suffering, forbearing one another in love.' Such are the declared and worthy qualities which the apostle seeks in those who would keep the unity of the Spirit.

And is it not well for us to challenge our souls, whether our confidence is in the apostle's word or in man's theories? Oh, that we might cultivate such ways of grace as these in ourselves, and urge them on others, in order to a walk worthy of our calling! Can we doubt that it is in this condition only that we can duly keep that unity: not in haste or harshness, not in impatience of others or self-confidence, but with all lowliness and meekness, with long-suffering, forbearing one another in love? There was need of all this then: is it less indispensable in our greater difficulties now?

For then there was no perplexity through open rivals, no competitors for the claim of God's assembly on earth. The main hindrance was from within. Now there are those and other obstacles. Am I connected with any association which ignores the one body and one Spirit? Am I attached to anything that systematically opposes this unity? It is not a question merely of wrong persons coming in unawares; for the fatal thing is not that evil should enter, but that it is known and allowed. What evil things did not effect an entrance into the assembly even in apostolic days? But God owns the unity as of the Spirit so long as there is the true-hearted purpose, in dependence on the Lord and according to His word, to keep, or purge, out evil. It is not the entrance or amount or even character of evil that destroys

the assembly, but the continued acceptance of it under the Lord's name, even when it is known.

But God will not sanction in His assembly the allowance of any real evil whatever; and evil, no matter what its shape or measure, must be judged as inconsistent with His presence who dwells there. The assembly is the pillar and ground of the truth: how then can falsehood be a matter of indifference in the house of the living God? Christ is the truth; and, without controversy, great is the mystery of piety. Hence the church's intolerance of that which undermines Christ. There must be the disallowance of all leaven where the feast of Christ the paschal Lamb is kept. A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump; and none can be tolerated, be it moral, as in 1 Cor. 5, or doctrinal, as in Gal. 5. If one called a brother be characterised by corruption or violence, by ways wholly opposed to the truth and character of Christ and to the very nature of God, he must be excluded from His assembly.

What then is to be done if we find views, judgments, and principles at work which trench on and narrow, and so really counteract, the Spirit's unity? What if unscriptural tests be pressed so as to shut out deliberately souls at least as godly as themselves? What if conscience toward God be not respected, if there be no longer room for liberty in the Spirit and responsibility to the Lord Jesus? Were it merely an opinion of one or more, which was held without forcing it on others, there would be in this no sufficient ground for resistance. It would be sad to see saints preoccupied with their little theories in presence of Christ and that word which lives and abides for ever. Ordinarily it would suffice to express regret at, and protest against, what one might

believe unsuitable among Christians; for we are called to peace and forbearance as well as fidelity. If you find in others what you cannot approve of, does not Scripture amply forewarn you of this, and call for patience, whilst looking to the Lord?

The children of God, called though they be to the enjoyment and expression of Christ, habitually demand the exercise of long-suffering and grace, as beyond doubt you yourself draw largely on the forbearance of your brethren. It cannot seriously be expected that those who compose the church of God should forego the character of a family, with its fathers, young men, and babes, to imitate an army under martial law. Regimental order is as far as possible from that which the written word prescribes to God's church, where, instead of a regulation standard, the utmost variety prevails, high and low, strong and weak, or even uncomely (1 Cor. 12).

Scripture lays down the rule by which foreign elements, if they enter, are to be tried; and as there are manifold evils that may seek a footing, so there are distinct scriptures that apply to each case, from private rebuke to public censure, or in the last resort putting away. Those who cause divisions and stumblings are to be avoided; the factious, after a first and second admonition, to be refused; the disorderly, to be withdrawn from; those that sin, to be reprov'd before all; the wicked, to be put away. Reserve and rebuke have their application, no less than the extreme sentence of excision.

Nor would one deny the just practice of declaring outside those who have either gone away, wilfully refusing all admonition, or who audaciously despise and deny the

unquestioned assembly by setting up another meeting, and so render admonition to be scarce more than a form.

The lesser excommunication was not yet invented, that is, the 'declaring out,' so stretched as to take in brethren who had no intention of going out: a convenient, but unscriptural way of getting rid of such as gave umbrage. Surely whatever is done ought to be according to the plain positive teaching of God's word. It is for the Lord to command—the church has only to obey. I take for granted that I address Christians who believe not more in the sufficiency of the written word than in the supreme authority of Him who wrote it for our guidance by the Spirit of God. Development is of man's will, and unbelief. God has left nothing to be added. The church is under the orders of the Lord. If the church recognise any one, it is because the Lord has already received him; and if the church put away, it is simply as doing the Lord's will. The church has no independent authority to legislate, but is called to believe, pronounce, and execute His word. Consequently, in all things the church has to remember that she is subject and He the Lord. He is to order, she to obey—her one place, privilege, and duty. The moment the church lays down an extra-scriptural test, she takes the place of the Lord, and there is a practical assumption, yea, a virtual denial, of His authority. The result is to form a sect in departure from the unity of the Spirit.

The apostles, though set first in the church, were patterns of Christian humility. Who was so remarkable for patience as he who was not a whit behind the very chiefest, to whom a unique place was given by the will of God and the authority of the Lord Jesus? How much then should

every true servant of Christ cultivate lowliness in these days! If a man think himself to be a prophet or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things written are the commandments of the Lord. Let his very subjection to the word of the Lord prove the reality of his mission from Him. This is of the last moment for our souls now; for perils and perplexities are constantly springing up, which affect the saints wherever they may be, and not least those who are gathered to the name of Christ.

Let none fancy this is to disparage those admirable men whom the Lord used in days gone by. Cherish unfeigned respect for such as Luther, Calvin, Farel, and Zwingli, though quite allowing the infirmities of everyone of them. It is childish to find fault with Tyndale and Cranmer, whilst idolising Melancthon or John Knox. They were all of like passions as ourselves; and if disposed to study their lives and labours, there are ample materials not far to seek for criticism; and so with other men of God in our day. But is it of Christ to be on the watch for that which may not be of Christ? Faults are easily seen; it needs today the power of the Spirit to walk, not in their traditions, but in the like faith. Rarely has there been a time when faith has sunk to a lower ebb among those who might be supposed long inured to it than the present. It is most common to find saints who groan over a course as utterly wrong, and yet persevere in it for the sake of company, etc. How often they have to others insisted on the ancient oracle: 'Cease to do evil; learn to do well.'² They believe it doubtless: why not, giving all diligence, add to their faith virtue? Have they lost all courage in Christ and for Christ? I speak of what is now

² Isaiah 1:16,17

going on to our common shame all over the world. The compromise which you would hardly expect in new-born babes of God characterises men who have long known the Lord, and even suffered not a little at one time or another for the truth's sake.

Beloved friends, it is of the greatest moment that we should try our ways, whether we deceive ourselves, or are in deed and in truth keeping the unity of the Spirit. Do not set against that duty the sad fact that the church is now a ruin. The question is, Are we not always to be obedient? It is not the point, how many or how few of Christ's members may act together according to the word of the Lord. Do we own, ourselves, the obligation to be thus faithful? The unity of the Spirit is a constant responsibility for the children of God to keep with diligence as long as they are upon the earth. He abides with us for ever. To keep it therefore is always a paramount duty.

Take a practical illustration. There is assembled in this room a company of members of Christ's body, who can allow neither the broad ways of nationalism nor the narrow alleys of sectarianism. They desire above all things to walk together so as to please the Lord Christ. What then must be their stand? What position ecclesiastically ought they to take, if they would act with spiritual intelligence and fidelity? If any in this city be already gathered to His name on the ground of the one body, they should not be ignored. It would be independence, not the unity of the Spirit, to take no account of such a gathering. The member of Christ's body who sought fellowship would ask, as he ought, if and where saints were gathered to His name. He finds, we will suppose, there are some meeting in this room, and prefers

his desire to be with them on the same blessed ground of Christ. If they challenge his faith, it is not from lack of love to him, but from care for Christ's glory. They do not receive him because he says that he is a member of Christ's body. They require adequate testimony, where they have no personal knowledge. Nobody ought to be recognised on his own bare word; even the apostle Paul was not at the first. God took care to give an extraordinary witness through a certain disciple named Ananias, a devout man according to the law, having a good report of all the Jews that dwelt in Damascus, as in Jerusalem subsequently through Barnabas. The word is so plainly thus, and the danger so great otherwise, that no saint, who duly reflects with a heart and conscience true towards God, would wish to be accredited merely on his own word. Souls may deceive themselves, even if upright; but if you or I were to be so accredited, where is it to end?

Again, a Christian is brought before them, who desires to remember the Lord along with them. Perhaps he belongs, as they say, to the national establishment, or to a dissenting society. But he is well known as a child of God, walking according to the measure of light already possessed. What is to be done? To refuse this member of Christ, without the strongest ground of known sin, would put shame not on him only but on the Lord. It were to deny our title, the true centre of gathering. Membership of Christ attested by a godly life is the sufficient and only right ground on which a Christian should ask to be received. If one understood all mysteries and all knowledge, if one had all faith so as to remove mountains, one ought to plead His name alone.

Are there then no exceptions? May there not be valid reasons to forbid even an accredited member of Christ's body? Certainly there are, as Scripture shows. Leaven of malice and wickedness is intolerable (1 Cor. 5); leaven of heterodoxy as to the foundations (Gal. 5) is yet worse; and the word is, 'Purge out the old leaven that ye may be a new lump.' Here are unquestionable barriers reared in the word of God, and due to the Lord Jesus. If any man that is named a brother be unclean in deed or in word, in ways or in manifested spirit, we are commanded not so much as to eat with him. And it were a far graver sin, if one did not bring the doctrine of Christ, or even denied everlasting punishment for the lost. God assuredly will never allow the profession of Christ to be a passport for him that dishonours Christ. Here, and here most of all, is the Holy Ghost jealous, if the word of God is to be our rule.

All truth is no doubt important in its place and season; but it is worse than ignorance to put the body on the same level as the Head. Ecclesiastical error, even if real and grave, *never* approaches the denial of the doctrine of Christ. Weigh how the apostle of love, the elder, solemnly warns us to be on our guard in such a case. We are not free to receive even privately, much less publicly, those who bring not the doctrine of Christ. We are unequivocally bound not only to disallow heterodoxy in general, but in particular to reject that which is, and those who are, a lie against Christ, yea, to treat those who receive such as partakers of the same evil deeds. But we are not entitled to equalise the church with Christ, like a Romanist, or to put ecclesiastical error along with evil against Christ's person. This is not faith, but

fanaticism: what can we think of such as conceive, or of those that circulate, this trash as the truth?

Still, in keeping the unity of the Spirit, we must accept the scriptural responsibility of purging out leaven. And, as we have seen, the Spirit of God writes direct to an elect lady and her children, because on such a question as Christ the duty is immediate and peremptory. Years ago, in having to do with such an one, that Epistle stood us in good stead. For on her pleading that she was but a sister, and it was not her responsibility to do this or that, she was at once reminded that, it was not to an assembly, nor even to a Timothy or Titus, but to a lady and her children that the Holy Ghost wrote, insisting on her own personal and unavoidable responsibility. We may be sure that the Spirit of God did not thus inspire a letter to a lady and her children, without the most urgent necessity, and in order to meet just such an excuse for shirking what is due to Christ at any time.

All know that women are liable to err on the side of their affections, being naturally more disposed to act through feeling than with calm judgment. The word of God recognises this in repressing them ordinarily (1 Tim. 2), and in the special warning of 2 John. Their activity is always to be dreaded in cases short of Christ, a dishonour to themselves and to the men whom they mislead. The truth may not be always pleasant, though ever wholesome and good; and it is the truth that one desires to press upon souls, and that we ought to welcome. We are bound to see to it that the church of God be not made a cover for any known evil, and above all not to admit or screen knowingly that which sullies Christ's glory. But women are bad leaders or even instruments, save as Scripture warrants.

Let us distinguish things that differ. The English Establishment, in spite of many and grave drawbacks, had a holy object in its rise, turning its back as it did on an abominable and ever swelling imposture. Though much hindered, especially by the king, in its work of clearing itself from many inveterate superstitions, it honestly set its face against what was known to be evil. But it retrograded afterward, until its ritualistic observances being made a test forced out many pious nonconformists, whose origin thus was morally respectable and godly. For it was no mean struggle in those days to keep a good conscience, and to stand opposed to those who were dragging them down into formalism. We need not speak of the Wesley and Whitfield movement, which was in main missionary, not ecclesiastical. We know later on, how powerfully God wrought in awakening His children fifty years ago to a sense of the departure that had taken place from the original ground of keeping the unity of the Spirit. In such days it was no small thing to recognise that there is such a reality on earth as the presence of the Holy Ghost, and consequently the body of Christ. Hence, if members of that body, it is our inalienable duty to keep that unity in its true character, whilst subject to the conditions which the Lord has laid down in His word, and to none other. The Spirit has created that unity, a unity which takes in all members of Christ's body, excepting those whom discipline according to the word requires us to reject.

It may interest all to know that not the least weighty testimony that was ever given of late on this momentous subject was written in the year 1828 (*Considerations on the Nature and Unity of the Church of Christ* by JND). The

point was to show how impossible it is for saints who would honour the Lord to go on with the world, instead of walking (were they but two or three) in that unity which is of God; that in denominations the bond is not their unity but in fact their differences, and in no case therefore the communion of God's church at all, in faith contemplating, as every true assembly does and must, all God's children. Those who call this looseness do not know divine ground, and have unwittingly slipped into a sect.

Far from looking for or valuing ecclesiastical intelligence before souls take their place at the Lord's table, it is quite a mistake for us to expect it, and a shame rather than an honour to the few who may possess it. For how did they as members of Christ acquire such knowledge? In manifest unfaithfulness; either still continuing in their denominational enclosures and activities with a bad conscience; or in the anomalous state of mere hearers outside, seeking to attain a more familiar acquaintance with that truth in which their outside position declared them to have neither part nor lot, as if their heart were not right with God. Yet all the while they were members of the body of Christ; and as such they should have been within, learning more soundly and happily the truth they were acting on in their simplicity, a truer and better sort of intelligence than that intellectual insight into the church, which has been so erroneously over-rated by some in our midst.

The fact is that we are apt to forget our own beginnings and the gracious dealings of the Lord with us when we ourselves first broke bread, knowing as little perhaps as any. How many brethren are now among the firmest and most intelligent in fellowship, who saw but dimly not the

church only but even the gospel of salvation, and revealed truth in general, when they found in the Lord's name an immediate passport to His supper! They were by no means clear as to their future course, though attracted by the grace which saluted them as brethren, and enjoying the simple faith which bowed to the word of the Lord in a way and measure beyond their previous experience. How unwise and unbecoming for such now to exact from enquiring brethren a knowledge of the church far beyond their own standard at their start, and in fact not to be got save within the assembly, and in the path of obedience where the Spirit guides into all the truth! To those thus growing up and led, catholicism or denominationalism is judged by the word, and felt to be altogether unsatisfying and distasteful, as being evidently of man and not of God. What gives these new and strong convictions? Neither influence nor prejudice, neither argument nor imagination, but the truth appreciated by the power of God's Spirit.

Are we then to play fast and loose with divine truth? Nay, but it is a question of the Lord's way with those who are His and have yet to learn: is it to be in liberty or in bondage? Doubtless every Christian ought to keep the unity of the Spirit, as gathered to the name of the Lord and to none other. A saint cannot legitimately have two communions. Is not the communion of Christ's body in principle exclusive? Follow with all your soul the Lord Jesus, own the one body and one Spirit, receive every godly member of His in His name. In this there is neither looseness nor sectarianism. As the word of God is plain, so does the presence of the Spirit abide; nor do I allow that keeping the unity of that Spirit is a vain show. As He

abides, so does His unity; and those who have received the Holy Spirit are bound to walk in that unity, and in none other. They are added of the Lord together, members of the assembly which God has formed for Himself in this world; and I deny the title of anyone to set up either rival or substitute. If you have His Spirit, you already belong to this one body, and are called to carry it out to the exclusion of all others.

Thus it is no voluntary society we have to do with. It is no question of framing something better than either nationalism or dissent, nor an alliance which really condemns, while ostensibly it sanctions, the existing institutions of orthodox Protestantism. The truth however, is that, before all these essays, God had Himself formed His church on earth; and such as have His Spirit are thereby constituted members, responsible to act accordingly. In His church leaven of doctrine or of practice is intolerable, if we bow to Scripture. Every Christian is bound to reject falsehood and unholiness, and this corporately as well as individually. For the ruin of the church does not shut us up to individuality. If we follow righteousness, faith, love, peace, it may and should be with those that call on the Lord out of a pure heart. Isolation it is a sin to seek, as being a denial of fellowship. The church of God means the assembly of those that are His. But if ever so many, we are one bread, one body. As the Lord's Supper is the outward expression of this unity, it is unworthy of believers to complain that too much is made of His Supper and Table; for it is God who calls them His, not we who only cleave to His word and confide in His will. Doubtless we need to keep Christ in this before our eyes; if not, we are in danger

of moulding His Supper according to our will or caprice. If by the grace of God we have the Lord Jesus before us, our hearts will go out towards all that are His walking after a godly sort.

For a long time Satan has been endeavouring to falsify the testimony of Christ amongst those professedly gathered to His name. One of his wiles has been, under pretence of light and righteousness, to undermine grace and truth in recognising freely the members of Christ's body. Utterly misconceiving the stand against neutrality, they would make no Christian welcome to the Lord's Table who did not judge his old position by more or less intelligence of the one body and one Spirit; that is, without a virtual pledge never again to enter their so-called church or chapel. This is, to my mind, not unbelief only but a bad and base principle. It is in an underhand way to make a sect of those that know the church, but really to prove how little they themselves appreciate the one body: else they could not let knowledge override relationship to Christ, as they do. Never is the church rightly or truly learnt save within, according to the word, where you must leave room for growth in the truth by faith and God's grace.

There is then the danger of virtually denying Christ's membership by looking for an antecedent intelligence about His body which it is as unscriptural as unwise to expect, and the more wrong as it exists but feebly in many who have for years been in fellowship. But besides, there may be no less difficulty and danger among those already received, where the claim of truth or righteousness is pressed without grace. And those who are most wrong are apt to talk most

loudly of that which they really imperil or unwittingly annul.

There are not many who remember the Plymouth division in 1845-6. Moral charges were not wanting then, but it mainly turned on an effort of a large and influential party which lost faith in the Lord's presence and the Holy Spirit's free action in the assembly, seeking independency with its leaders. It is needless to say that the heavenly character and the unity of the church had faded away, as well as waiting for the Lord Jesus as an immediate hope. God would not suffer in our midst such lack of faith and of faithfulness. But the mass of the saints were beguiled by the error, and deaf to the warning; and but few separated, branded as schismatics by those who boasted of their numbers, gifts, and happiness. What was the relation of those who for the Lord's and the truth's sake were forced in conscience to stand apart? The high-minded majority utterly refused humiliation and rejoiced that those were outside from whom they had been long and with increasing bitterness alienated. The minority met at first in private houses only to humble themselves and pray, as after a little to break bread. But they never thought of rejecting the poor famished sheep who occasionally sought to break bread with them, without severing their connection with Ebrington Street. For indeed they were not only bound there by many ties, but under great fear through the swelling words and persecuting deeds of their old leaders and friends, not least of sisters who played an unenviable part in that sad history. They had of course this moral safeguard that none committed in will to the Plymouth defection, especially no chief, but scorned the seceders. Only the

simple came, and, because they came, were cut off by the Ebrington Street party. But we received them freely in the Lord's name, even though they might be weak enough to wish fellowship still with their old friends.

But the moment that the blasphemous heterodoxy as to Christ appeared, there was an end of all this forbearance. The door was closed on all that continued with an antichristian faction. As long as it was an ecclesiastical error, however firmly we refused it and came out from it, there was patience with those who failed to discern it, or to judge it practically. Such known saints of Ebrington Street as came were cordially received; and who ever heard of even one in these circumstances refused? But on the contrary, when the false doctrine against Christ was known, an uncompromising stand was made from the first; and no soul was received thenceforward who did not clear himself from association with so deadly an insult to the Father and the Son. With partisans of that evil Bethesda identified itself, and necessitated the world-wide division which ensued in 1848.

What then can be judged of those who confound these two things so fundamentally distinct? the ecclesiastical error, and the false doctrine as to Christ's person and relationship to God? or the ways to be pursued in each case?

The divisionist party of today seems to me as guilty of independency and clericalism as that of Ebrington Street in 1845. And, believing them to be thus false to the truth of the one Spirit and one body, I cannot but feel thankful for God's overruling grace in the midst of overwhelming sorrow. For their intolerance of others has taken the

initiative; and they have either gone out from, or driven out (too often by unworthy manoeuvres), their brethren whose one desire is to abide gathered, as we have so long been, to Christ's name. But they have proved their ignorance in the plainest way and to a surprising degree by prating malicious words about Bethesdaism, when they might know, if not blinded by haste and ill-feeling, that there is not allowed a shade of that evil for which Bethesda and the so-called neutrals were judged.

Let them beware lest, beginning with ecclesiastical error like Ebrington Street, they themselves fall ere long into like heterodoxy. I pray that in God's mercy our brethren may be spared such further sin and dishonour of the Lord. But detraction and neglect of Scripture and of facts as well as of consistency with all we have hitherto learnt and done before God, are a slippery by-path; from which it would be joy indeed and great grace from the Lord to see them recede.

THE DOCTRINE OF CHRIST, and BETHESDAISM

WE ARE bound to receive one another, but only, as Christ received us, to the glory of God. (Roms. 15:7.)

Does this mean to receive one who brings not the doctrine of Christ, or those that receive such an one to the dishonour of the Father and the Son?

The principle of welcoming every Christian, walking as such, is consistent with the resolute refusal of all who dishonour His name, whether morally, doctrinally, or by association. 1 Corinthians 5 is no plainer for rejecting an immoral professor, than 2 John is for refusing those that do not hold a true Christ. Their alleged good qualities ought not to accredit them: the word of God as clearly bars it, as Christ's person and work demand our subjection. To be neutral where the truth is at stake is to partake of the evil deeds of His adversaries.

2 John is decisive that it is not enough to be sound personally in the faith. Even a woman, the elect lady, and her children, are carefully warned by the apostle of their direct responsibility, if they received one who did not bring the doctrine of Christ. "If any one cometh unto you, and bringeth not this teaching, receive him not into your house, and give him no greeting; for he that giveth him greeting partaketh in his evil works" (vv. 10, 11. R.V.). Thus distinctly is the principle laid down by the Holy Ghost, that the simplest saints who countenance the confessor of a false Christ partake of his evil deeds, even without imbibing the evil doctrine. A spiritual mind would feel that, dreadful as it is to fall into such heterodoxy, in a certain sense more guilty is he who, professing the truth of Christ, consents to

fellowship with one that denies it. "Now ye say, We see; therefore your sin remaineth." Neutrality in such case is heinous sin, and this proportionate to knowledge.

Thus 2 John proves that absolute refusal of this worst evil is due to the Son of God. The evil admits of no hesitation or compromise. Had the elect lady, spite of the apostolic warning, obstinately received into her house one who brought not the truth of Christ, she must have identified herself with the deceiver and its consequences. Vain the plea that she had been a dear child of God, both in faith and walk: the written word nevertheless pronounces her a "partaker of his evil deeds;" and God's word is better than all our reasonings and all our feelings. Whatever the motive, she had knowingly disobeyed and committed herself and her house to high treason against Christ. She had more or less sanctioned that which to the last degree denied and dishonoured the Lord of glory. Hence, till she cleared herself from the sin, in the sight of God and His saints, she had sunk morally into complicity with it. The better her light, the worse to behave as if she had none. To receive her in such circumstances would be to participate in similar wickedness, however men may ridicule it to their own foul shame. Indeed to receive her thus would be receiving her not to God's glory but to His shame, because it is barefaced indifference to the affront put on His Son. "Whosoever denieth the Son, the same hath not the Father." "He that honoureth not the Son honoureth not the Father which sent Him."

From the first those called "Brethren" have proved that they do not make light of ecclesiastical evil, by separating from all unscriptural associations, even if Christians join.

But they have hitherto refused to put indifference to the Christ of God in the same category with offences against the unity or the discipline of the assembly. Party spirit on either hand may seek to class all together. But it is as unscriptural as it is unholy so to exaggerate ecclesiastical offences (of which all sects are guilty), or so to extenuate deep and damnable denial of Christ, which characterises only the worst antagonism to God. His word warrants and demands this distinction, which no sober saint used to doubt, and none would now unless carried away by worthless theory or straits of false position.

The evil doctrine against Christ, which has given us most trouble for thirty years, is that, apart from imputation or vicarious suffering, Christ came as a man and an Israelite into a condition of distance and inflictions from God, in which “He was made experimentally to prove the reality of that condition in which others, but more especially Israel, had sunk themselves, by their disobedience to God’s holy law, a condition out of which He was able to extricate Himself, and from which He proved that He could extricate Himself by His own perfect obedience” (B. W. Newton’s “Remarks on the Sufferings” etc., p.12). “And Jesus, as man, was associated with this place of distance in which man in the flesh was, and He had through obedience to find His way to that point where God could meet Him as having finished His appointed work—glorify Him and set Him at His own right hand, in the heavenly places; and that point was death—death on the cross—death under the wrath of God” (ib. pp.31, 32). “He was exposed, for example, because of His relation to Adam to that sentence of death, that had been pronounced on the whole family of man”

(B.W.N.'s "Observations" etc., p.9). "The mission of John must be regarded as an all-important era, not only in the life of the Lord Jesus, etc. . Indeed unless grace be the same as law, and destruction the same as salvation, the infinite importance of that era cannot be denied" (ib. pp.10,11). "Moreover, the exercises of soul which His elect in their unconverted state ought to have ... such exercises, yet without sin, Jesus had" (ib. p.26). "The anointing of the Spirit would never have come on Him at Jordan, unless He had been fore-ordained and certainly known as the victim to be slain at Calvary" (ib. p.32).

It is true that, when this deadly poison was analysed and the godly stood aghast, Mr. N. printed an "Acknowledgment of Error" in applying Rom. 5:19 (first clause) to Christ. But this did not satisfy even his most trusted associates, who owned solemnly in print that it was an elaborate system, permeating their views of scripture generally, and quite as fatal as any one had charged on them. One indeed warned that souls resting on what they had taught for years could not be saved. For Christ was thereby made by birth to be in man's distance from God, and especially in Israel's by a broken law! obnoxious therefore to the two-fold penalties, not vicariously, but by association as one of them!! But He extricated Himself by obedience, faith, and prayer, out of some of those inflictions by which He was threatened, passing by baptism into grace—from Sinai to Zion! But the exercises which the elect when unconverted ought to have (!) if possible were His!! Yet He had, notwithstanding, to find His way to a point where God could meet Him—death under God's wrath! If this be not a systematic and complete overthrow of

“the teaching of Christ” in scripture, words are meaningless. No heretic more thoroughly or subtly debased Christ; some like Irving taught more truth than B.W.N. It is a denial, not a confession, of Christ coming in the flesh: which truth does not mean the bare fact, but the divine person of Him who came in flesh. He, and He alone, born of woman, might have come otherwise; but thus He was pleased, for God’s glory and the reconciliation by His death of man and all the universe heavenly and earthly, to come in flesh. Had Newtonism been true, Christ must have died for Himself—could not for us, for creation or for God’s own glory. Again, if He be supposed to extricate Himself by good works and ordinances, the truth is overthrown in this way too. And if His death were still needful for Himself to be saved (error usually being incoherent), as well as to get the anointing of the Spirit, His person is denied, and all hope of saving others wholly and necessarily destroyed.

I am grieved to add that the blinded author of this fundamental heterodoxy printed “A letter on subjects connected with the Lord’s Humanity;” in which, after the so-called Acknowledgment of Error, he re-affirmed the principles of both the “Remarks” and the “Observations” which had horrified even his own oldest friends and most of his partisans. Arianism etc. on the one side, and perhaps Irvingism on the other, deny the Lord’s glory more openly; but does any false system more thoroughly than his make Jesus anathema? Compare 1 Cor. 12:3.

When the meeting at Bethesda Chapel (Bristol) admitted several partisans of Mr. N. and thus occasioned a separation far and wide among “Brethren,” it had been for years fully owned as enjoying intercommunion. Hence, there is no

honesty in comparing that meeting with individuals coming from the national body or from dissent. How far Bethesda really coalesced, it may be hard to say: still it was an accomplished fact, and no question was raised till the crisis of 1848 came, when reasons were sought to palliate the fatal deed of receiving the known followers of a convicted heretic. Now we have always excepted cases of real ignorance. But what could justify receiving persons of intelligence who came straight from his party, eulogising and circulating the very tracts which contained the anti-Christian doctrine already described. Bethesda received them in the most determined manner, driving out not a few souls, some of them among the most enlightened, spiritual, and devoted there, who refused to sanction such indifference to a blasphemy at Bristol, from which at all cost they were apart at Plymouth and elsewhere. Not satisfied with letting these persons in, ten of the leaders at Bethesda put forth a too famous document, in which they laboured to defend their refusal of investigation before receiving the incriminated. The first thing insisted on was that the Bethesda meeting should clear those who signed it: else they would minister no more in their midst! Was it surprising that the mass fell into the snare, and consented to vote the leaders right, before the tracts were read, or comments allowed, in presence of the meeting? After the breach was consummated they held meetings in which Mr. N.'s doctrine was condemned, especially by Mr. M.,³ as

³ As much is made of J.N.D.'s visit to G.M. after these meetings, it may be stated that Mr. D.'s hopefulness was not shared by his brethren, who knew that Bethesda never owned its sin in receiving Mr. N.'s partisans, and never repented of the false principles in the *Letter of the Ten* (adopted by a formal vote of its constituents). It never so much as noticed the sin, after the seven meetings, of receiving back two of

strongly almost as by any outside Bethesda. God however took care to test its moral value ere long, if a few were deceived at first.

Partly by this, and partly by other means, Mr. N.'s partisans were got to retire from Bethesda, expressly not waiving their claim to be there, but desiring to release the leaders from some of their difficulties. Could this yield a moment's satisfaction to a sober Christian? Bethesda was bound to clear itself openly of a sin of the gravest kind openly done: mere words would not avail, nor getting rid of souls in an underhand way. Subsequently a party was formed, a public building was taken, Mr. N. was had there, two of "the Ten" (Messrs. A. and W.) being found in their midst. The movement failed; and these two leading men, to speak of no others, after Bethesda's loud denunciation of the Newtonian blasphemy and after their own public association with Mr. N., were permitted to return to Bethesda, without the smallest confession of their notorious and flagrant sin! All they owned was the wrong of leaving Bethesda; but they were not asked, nor did they give, an expression of sorrow for the wickedness of fraternising with one who still retained the main parts of his heterodoxy as to Christ. And this after the seven meetings!

Now because we renounce all fellowship with such ways and persons, we are covered with the bitterest reproaches

the Ten who had gone out and publicly supported Mr. N. before all Bristol! In the face of grave facts like these, what was the value of theoretic censure of the doctrine? Mr. M.'s rude repulse only compelled Mr. D. to feel, as others felt, the hollowness of Bethesda throughout. Mr. D's power lay in expounding the word, not in disciplinary action, as he used to own freely throughout his life. As he once said to me long ago, "my favourites turn out scamps." This was never more applicable than in his later years, when they carried him away.

possible! We are taxed with “new tests,” and I know not what. Whereas, on the face of the matter, it was the beloved apostle, not we, who wrote 2 John. And if he introduced no new test when he insisted on uncompromising rigour wherever a false Christ was in question, how charge us with it who are very simply carrying out the word of God given through him? Those who plead for laxity in such a case, would be more consistent if they denied the authority of this Scripture altogether.

This then was the origin of the Neutrals, or Open Brethren as some of them prefer to be called. They more or less sided with Bethesda, some going farther, others not quite so far, but all on substantially the same principle, if not of receiving the partisans of an antichrist, certainly of palliating those who so received and making “one lump” with them. Not one meeting ever ventured to reject the most guilty leader in that neutral result. To refuse such an one would be to give up their evil line of things.

For it is no question of receiving Christians in Christ’s name, graciously dealing with ecclesiastical ignorance. This we have always held (save a few who played an unhappy part in the late disasters) to be thoroughly of God; and I trust we shall ever so continue, believing and acting on it as due to Christ. With Open Brethren it is a wholly different case from welcoming a godly person, in spite of his sect. For they were once with us on common ground of scripture; they owned the “one body and one Spirit,” as gathered to Christ’s name. Their origin, the reason of their existence, was to defend and maintain the reception of men tainted with the worst sin—indifference to the truth of Christ. That

they may have liked independency before, that they walk in it and enforce it since, is true enough; but he that puts forward independency of principle, as the plague-spot of the O.B., is blind to their characteristic and most serious evil. And if he goes so far as to reject individuals for independency, he must, to be consistent, abandon all the largeness of heart which marked Brethren from the first, and the principle which their best and wisest leaders cherished to the last,—our title of grace to welcome godly saints out of an orthodox denomination, though independency is stamped in various forms on all. No denomination, as such, great or small, does or can stand on the “one body and one Spirit” of scripture for principle and practice alike. It demands living faith ecclesiastically, and an entire superiority to the world and flesh, which must have independency open or latent but real.

We have ever allowed that in the ranks of Open Brethrenism there might be individuals wholly and honestly ignorant that it is founded as a society on indifference to a true or a false Christ. Where this is certain, one would seek to deal pitifully with them; and no one was freer to receive such with a grave caution than the late J.N.D., as almost all others of weight have done. Timid men, ever prone to sectarian barriers, have alas! refused even such. But no upright neutral brother would seek, wish, or submit to, such terms: only those who have neither faith nor principle, who are ready to break bread at Bethesda, and at Park Street, and with us too who refuse both systems, if they were allowed. These are the worst of all and can only corrupt, as they are already corrupted.

Is it asked, How do Open Brethren stand now? The answer is, As they began, or rather worse. Indeed evil may grow or spread, but does not get better or die. Scripture requires that it be judged, which is its doom, if we are faithful to Christ. Not only did Newtonians get in and were never put out, but some are known, as Mr. John Beaumont can testify, to play fast and loose with the denial of everlasting punishment, in as respectable a company as they have in England. The conduct of the leaders and meeting was flagrant; but no meeting nor even individual seemed to mind it, beyond a protest, which was put in the fire, and all went on together—in love so called! but where is the truth? Where is Christ?

Granted that in some places under strong pressure they put away a clique of these offenders; such vigour may be now and then, here and there. But, where it is not so (and nothing is harder than to get necessary care against error), they maintain intercommunion all the same. They are on a free-and-easy ground, which admits of every one's will and tries nobody's conscience. An "assembly-judgment" there too over-rides truth and righteousness, to the deep dishonour of the Lord and His word.

In one of their recent "Appeals" C.E. argues that a true platform contemplates all the saints of God, as we have often said and still say. But the O.B.'s abuse of this godly plea is to accredit, not only Christians guilty of sin, but yet more their society got up by the determination to shelter such from scriptural judgment. This was not the case with any orthodox sect known to us; and therefore O.B. have no title to the same gracious consideration. Others began for good according to their light. Open Brethren began by

palliating evil or screening evildoers, in departure from the light they once had. To receive saints in Christ's name was never meant to let in such as dishonour His name; which is as mighty to detect those who treat Him lightly, whatever their pretensions, as to encourage the godly who may be ever so ignorant. An honourable man among O.B. ought not to wish fellowship with us, if he believe in his own policy, and ought to resent the plea of ignorance, which, when ever true, would not be used in vain. And as to "thirty years," what difference does this make, if the same old principle abides?

That it does abide is plain from J. R. Caldwell's "Exclusivism" (Glasgow, 1882); who, though wholly unknown to me, is reported to be as sober and conscientious a representative as could be desired. Here we have the error as lively as ever. 1 Cor. 5:6 is perverted (p.8) just as of old. He mocks the idea that the whole Corinthian church was leavened, and seems to think it absurd, if it were, to call upon them to purge out the leaven. Thus does he convict himself and his party (for in this they have always been alike) of guilty opposition to the word of the Lord. It was exactly because they were as a whole leavened by the little leaven allowed in their midst, that the apostle commanded them to purge out the old leaven that they might be a new lump, "even as ye are unleavened." This was their standing in and by Christ; and, because they were thus unleavened before God, they must purge the leaven out; for it leavens, not the one offender only, but the whole lump. The reasoning of Mr. C. is wholly false, but it betrays the unholy principle common to them all. It is a question not of every individual in the Corinthian church becoming incestuous,

etc., which is truly absurd, but of the whole assembly being defiled by the evil they knew and did not judge. Hence the restoration was, not merely through discipline nor only self-judgment of the wicked person, but by a deep work in the assembly also: “in all things ye have approved yourselves to be clear in this matter.” (2 Cor. 7:11). The Open Brethren are thus fundamentally at fault. Their distinctive difference is corruption in principle now, as more than thirty years ago.

I should not, I confess, turn to an Anglican divine to find spiritual instruction on such a theme, considering how the National Establishment stands condemned in practice by its own Homily for Whitsunday (second part). But it is painfully instructive to see how Dean Alford disproves and rejects the same unholy lack of intelligence as in the Open Brethren’s argument for their party. “Are you not aware that a little leaven imparts a character to the whole lump? That this is the meaning, and not ‘that a little leaven will, if not purged out, leaven the whole lump,’ is manifest from the point in hand, viz. the inconsistency of their boasting: which would not appear by their danger of corruption hereafter, but by their character being actually lost. One of them was a fornicator of a fearfully depraved kind, tolerated and harboured: by this fact, the character of the whole was tainted.” (The Greek Test. ii. 507, fifth ed.). What Mr. C. assails unwittingly through his false position is the apostle’s “theory” as well as practice as to defilement. Equally below the Anglican are his unfaithful remarks on 2 John. We do not say that the lady, if she had received him who did not bring the doctrine of Christ, was to be treated “exactly as you would treat” the anti-Christian teacher himself, but that

she thereby became a partaker of his evil deeds. So Bethesda and the Open Brethren have fallen in similar cases.

Their point of departure is so anti-scriptural, that their most recent and cautious apologists cannot but expose their party badge to the withering condemnation of scripture. Having left God's word, their prudent course (humanly speaking) would be, like their delinquent antipodes, to attempt no self-defence but wrap themselves up in silent pride.

Scripture is not silent as to their great sin. "Come out," therefore, brother, that you partake not of the sins and so receive not of God's strokes.

William Kelly

Recommended further reading:

- *Unity and Authority*, booklet, W. R. Dronsfield
- *FER Heterodox on Life Eternal*, hb, William Kelly
- *Lectures on the Church of God*, hb, William Kelly
- *The Brethren*, pb, Andrew Miller
- *History of the Brethren*, 2 vols. hb, N. L. Noel
- *The Origin of the Open Brethren*, booklet, H. Smith
- *Path of Faith in an Evil Time*, booklet, H. H. Snell
- *The Origin of so-called Open-Brethrenism*, bklt, W. T.
- *Called to Fellowship*, pb, H. Wijnholds



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