

THE OPEN MEETING.

Second Edition.

THE open meeting among the Christians called Brethren has now been for many years before the notice of other Christians.

Amongst its opponents, some look upon the open meeting as nothing better than spiritual radicalism—a meeting where every one has as much right to speak as another, in other words, a meeting founded on self-sufficiency and self-conceit. Others, again, compare it to a Quakers' meeting, where nobody opens his mouth unless moved by the Spirit, and where, in consequence, the one great rule is to wait upon the Spirit.

It will be seen, in the sequel, that the true idea of the open meeting is equally removed from both these notions.

The open meeting springs out of the wondrous character of that salvation wherewith all are saved who come to God through the shed blood of His Son; for the Church is saved not only *through* Christ but *in* Christ, now risen and seated in heavenly places (Eph. ii. 4-13); and, as the result, the Spirit of God DWELLS in the Church down here on the

earth,—the same is the Spirit of Christ (Rom. viii. 9).

The Holy Ghost's DWELLING in the Church down here on the earth (as distinguished from new birth by the Holy Ghost) is the token of the Church's participation in the resurrection of Christ, in union with Himself. So, the Spirit of Christ DWELLS in the Church. This is the other Comforter, sent down from heaven (1 Pet. i. 12), to abide with and in the Church for ever (John xiv. 16, 17).

But there is more than this. The DWELLING of the Holy Ghost, the Spirit of Christ, in the Church is attended with *power* to testify; and therefore we are told, "When the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth which proceedeth from the Father, He shall testify of Me;" again, "when He (the other Comforter) is come, He will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment;" and, again, "when He, the Spirit of truth is come, He will guide you into all truth (or, rather, all the truth): for He shall not speak of (or from) Himself; but whatsoever He shall hear, that shall He speak; and He will show you things to come. He shall glorify Me; for He shall receive of Mine, and shall show it unto you" (John xv. 26; xvi. 8, 13, 14). In harmony with this, we find the Lord Jesus thus speaking prophetically of the times of the other Comforter, "If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink. He that believeth on Me, as the Scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water." The Evangelist adds, "but this spake He of the

Spirit, which they that believe on Him should receive: for the Holy Ghost was not yet given; because that Jesus was not yet glorified" (John vii. 37-39). And so, when the Holy Ghost came to DWELL in the Church, on the day of Pentecost, we find His presence accompanied with gifts for service in testimony, both in respect to the assembly within and perishing sinners without (Acts ii. 1-4; x. 44-46; xv. 7, 8; Rom. xii. 3-8; 1 Cor. xii. 4-11, 27, 28; Eph. iv. 7-13).

This DWELLING of God by His Spirit in the Church is just the point which a certain most godly brother, whose praise is in all the churches, did not see, when he found himself in a certain town, on the south coast of Devonshire, now some 40 years ago. His whole desire was to walk in all things according to the word of God. Having begun by refusing to accept of a fixed salary for service in the assembly, he sought to bring the assembly into conformity with the word of God in all things. Without understanding on what principle the arrangements of 1st Corinthians xiv. proceeded, he sought to bring the proceedings of the assembly into harmony with it. They accordingly had what is called an *open meeting*, or liberty of ministry; but with what success, or profit, you may judge, when you are informed that this same godly brother, upon being called in God's providence to leave this sphere of service in the south for another at Bristol, made up his mind that he would have nothing more to do with *open meetings*. Nevertheless, after he had been some years in his new sphere of labour, the ministry in that meeting

also took the shape, under his superintendence, of an *open meeting*. Subsequently to this, this same godly brother was led, as needing a change, to revisit the former scene of his ministry, and was very naturally interrogated touching his varying course, after leaving them. To such interrogations he replied with all simplicity, *in public*, that, without seeing on what principle 1st Corinthians xiv. was founded, he had sought to walk in harmony with it, but had found the experiment so unprofitable that he determined, when his time came to go to a new sphere of labour, that he would try it no more. His great difficulty had been, how to repress unprofitable ministry. But he was obliged to admit that latterly he had tried it again, for such was the fact. But now he was in a different position. Now he understood on what principle 1st Corinthians xiv. was founded, and in consequence, now, he understood how to deal with unprofitable ministry. Formerly, it was *he* that had given permission to the assembly to have an open meeting. Now he felt that such a meeting was bound up in the very constitution of the Church. He had found out that God was DWELLING in the Church (1 Cor. xiv. 25). He could no longer give *his* permission to have such a meeting. God was DWELLING there, and if it was right for the Church to come together, *as such*, it must be as an *open meeting*; but, on the same ground, he now knew how to deal with unprofitable ministry.*

* He could say to any brother so ministering—"God does not call you to minister in the assembly; He bestows gifts for

The assembly is the coming together (1 Cor. xiv. 23) of those who are the *members* of the body of Christ (1 Cor. xii. 27), with the Spirit of Christ DWELLING within them, by which same Spirit gifts for the edification of the body have been bestowed upon many individuals among them (Eph. iv. 7-16; 1 Cor. xii. 11-13; Rom. xii. 3-8).

Of course, the *members* of the body, however much gifted, must not move without the guidance of the *Head*, present by His Spirit in their midst; and the natural idea of that guidance would be that to those individuals whom He would have to speak some special matter of utterance would, at His pleasure, be given (1 Cor. xiv. 30). (*by Revelation?*)

But, upon this occasion of Divine guidance as upon every other, this guidance may be obeyed or disobeyed; not discerned, when afforded; or fancied, when not afforded; and the possession of gifts may be also fancied.

Everything connected with the *open meeting* calls for the greatest lowliness of mind. Mere sanctified natural ability and educational acquirement in a member of Christ will not suffice to edify His body. And that everybody with any experience knows. A man must have a gift, in addition to being a member of Christ, in order to be able to edify his fellow-members. And, after that, he has

such work, and we all know you have not received such a gift; for God does not give unprofitable ministry."

Whilst the Church has no power to hinder true ministry, that is, God-given ministry, it has the power to stop unprofitable ministry. See Tit. i. 5-11.

to wait upon Christ, the Head of the body, his Lord,* for guidance as to whether, when the members are come together into one place, he is to move. It is only the lowly ones that will wait for, or discern, or obey that guidance. And it is only the lowly ones that will submit to the judgment of others (1 Cor. xiv. 29). The members of the body of Christ must be spiritually healthy, as well as gifted, in order to be practically available for the Master's use (2 Tim. ii. 21). Then we have to remember how shorn of gifts is the Church in our day, how few gifts remain, and this through her self-conceit and self-will and worldliness. But if there were no gifts remaining but "the gift of exhortation," still the word would be: "Let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but EXHORTING ONE ANOTHER: and so much the more as ye see the day approaching" (Heb. x. 24, 25). See also 1 Pet. iv. 7-11.

* "To wait upon the Spirit" is an expression far removed both from Scripture language and Scripture teaching. The practical difference between waiting upon the Spirit and waiting upon the Lord, who by His Spirit dwells within His people and guides them, is very great. In the former case people are apt to think that anything that comes into their minds to utter is of the Spirit: in the latter case, this is checked and corrected by the remembrance that Christ, their *Lord*, has, in reference to many matters, given us His commands, and that His Spirit cannot be the author of a suggestion to utter things contrary to His commands. For instance, "the servant of the Lord must not strive" (2 Tim. ii. 24); how then could a suggestion to strive be from His Spirit?

Some have considered that the words translated "Let everything be done decently and in order" (1 Cor. xiv. 40) might be more correctly translated, "Let everything be done decently and according to arrangement." Be it so, if any one desires it. But any arrangement that would nullify the arrangements of God would certainly not deserve to be called an arrangement. It would be a disarrangement. On the other hand, any arrangement, not so interfering and found "unto edifying," would be welcome, whether in respect to hours, or hymn-books (seeing there is no alternative), or other meetings for special objects, or anything else (1 Cor. xiv. 26).

The chief practical question in connection with the assembling together of those who are "the *body* of Christ, and *members* in particular" (1 Cor. xii. 27), is, Who are to be the persons to take part in the ministry on the occasion? Now, can any one possibly read 1 Corinthians xiv. without acknowledging that, according to this chapter of "the commandments of the Lord," by His servant Paul, the Lord has arranged that it should not be settled beforehand, or by any individual at the time, who are to be the persons to take part in the ministry? It may be said that this chapter does not apply to Christians of the present day; but it cannot be said that arrangements to settle beforehand, or by any individual at the time, who should minister, would not directly cross the arrangements of this chapter, and so "the commandments of the Lord." Moreover, any person assuming authority to arrange, either before or at the time, who should minister, would be

laying claim to a gift of discernment not possessed even in apostolic times.

The great confirmation of the idea of the open meeting is our Lord's own saying: "Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt. xviii. 20). This declaration entitles even the smallest assembly of true believers to know and enjoy, in all its reality, His presence. Those so gathered have only to wait upon the Lord, who, although unseen, is present by His Spirit in their midst; and, in the measure in which they do so in simplicity, they will find themselves helped and blessed. Yet let none count this an easy thing to do. To wait upon the Lord on this occasion, as on other occasions, is crucifixion to the flesh, but, where it is honestly carried out, it is sure to be attended with blessing. But the heart is deceitful. Brethren who do not like silence themselves, or think that others present do not like it, are often tempted to speak when they have really nothing to say, that is, nothing laid upon their hearts by the Lord. This is nothing else than lack of power to wait, and an encouragement to others not to wait. Let all be on their guard against this self-deception. A shut meeting would be better than an open meeting like this.

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