



Phraseology, Tradition, AND THE Word of God.

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PHRASEOLOGY, TRADITION, AND THE WORD OF GOD.

IN all associations of people, whatever they may be, a certain number of terse and stereotyped expressions peculiar to each association is found. And these expressions are very useful, indeed they could not be done without, for they are simply the thoughts of leading men put into human language for the benefit of their fellows. The diction of the churchman is not exactly the same in all cases as that of the dissenter, nor do each of the dissenting bodies use altogether the same vocabulary.

But while this dissimilarity in expression is useful, and cannot be very well avoided, there is a very great danger in it for those who do not think for themselves, nor inquire into what these expressions really mean. A man is brought up in a certain religious environment, and becomes acquainted with a distinct vocabulary from his very infancy, or perhaps he joins of his own will some religious body,

and in a short time becomes expert in its cut and dried forms of speech; and the sentences, which were coined by thoughtful minds to convey to others the great leading principles of their belief, are taken up by these more thoughtless and superficial minds, and bandied about amongst them, as though they knew all that these convenient forms of expression were intended to convey, until some crisis arrives, and an upheaval takes place in the little party to which they belong, which reveals the fact that they never really knew the meaning of the words they had so constantly in use.

This is a great evil of which the children of God should be made aware. Every saying of the kind, if not understood, is not only valueless but exceedingly deceiving and dangerous. It is like a deceitful bow, or a badly tempered sword, useless to him who trusts it in the day of battle. They have a trite and hackneyed phraseology at their finger-tips, but their minds are barren of ideas. Words cannot be done without, but we want the things to which the words relate. The danger is to those who will not trouble themselves to search the Scriptures in the fear of God, in order that their faith should be in His power and not in the wisdom of men.

Another thing equally ruinous is tradition. From the fall of man no people kept in its purity that which was committed to them by God. In spite of the fact that the Jews had the Holy Scriptures to turn to in every difficulty, they made the Word of God of none effect by their tradition (Mark vii. 13). Therefore it behoves every one of us to see that what we hold as the doctrine of God squares with the revelation He has given to us, and is not a hybrid production from the mind of man at work upon that revelation.

We cannot be too thankful to God for the helpers He has been graciously pleased to raise up for us in these last and trying days. For what He has been pleased to do for us in this way we should bless Him every day of our lives ; and depend upon it we shall be held by Him responsible for the use we have made of that which He has thus bestowed upon us. How great His goodness has been to us in this respect ! Let us show our appreciation of that infinite grace by a determination that, by His help, no part of His Word shall remain a dead letter to us.

Now those through whom He was pleased to recover so much, that had for centuries remained hidden in Scripture, have all passed away, and in place of the simple and precious truth a mass of tradition is being foisted upon us, and their words are quoted to give it power over our souls, when, were those men of God present to speak to us, they would turn our attention wholly to the Word of God. Instead of the doctrine of Christ getting its own vital and liberating power over our souls everything is being systematised, parties are formed with circumscribed areas, a "middle wall of partition" set up by each company against all the others, thus dishonouring God and enslaving His people.

And all this finds favour with unspiritual people, because it saves a great deal of soul exercise ; just as it is easier to sail in a ship designed by the human mind and manned by determined men, than it is to trust ourself upon the watery waste, even though the risen Saviour may be dimly discerned through the spray and the spume of an element roused to fury by the power of the devil, and even though His heavenly voice be heard above the roaring of the waters calling us to His side. But surely

it is happier and better to come to His side, even though our faithless hearts may be half dead with fear, than to repose in the best of ships without Him.

But let us examine a few of the expressions which are in common use among Christians, and let us compare them with the Word of God, in order that we may see, not only what they mean, but whether they are right expressions in themselves.

FIRST :—

The true ground of gathering for saints in this dispensation is that of the one Body of Christ.

This, as I suppose the reader is aware, has been asserted and contested time and again. I do not think, however, it is a hard matter to deal with, for the Scriptures speak with no uncertain sound on the subject. That this is the ground, and the only ground, upon which God gathers His saints to-day admits of no honest dispute. Let us look at some of the relationships in which we stand through grace, that we may see if there is in any one of them a revealed principle of gathering for His people. Take that of "*Children of God.*" This relationship is not peculiar to the saints of the present time : there were children of God from the beginning. Abel was one, and is quoted as an example of one in the third chapter of the first epistle of John. But I see no gathering out of the world for the saints of God until Israel was called out of Egypt. But this was national, and in that nation children of God and children of the devil were mixed up together. In the past dispensation there were the Jew and the Gentile : two different peoples. In the present we have

Jew, and Gentile, and the Church of God (1 Cor. x. 32). That the children of God are in the present dispensation gathered together is most true, but the mere fact of their being children of God could not make Jew and Gentile one; it did not do this in the past, nor will it do it in the future. In all dispensations, except the present one, Jew and Gentile remain two distinct peoples, whatever work of grace may be wrought in their souls.

It has been advanced that we come together in the truth of the Temple. I would like to think that we come together in the power of every truth, but I do not see in Scripture the truth of the Temple invoked to impress their oneness upon the converts out of both those sections of humanity. I can see the bearing of every great truth of Scripture upon this wonderful unity: every believer, for instance, a holy priest, a stone in the spiritual house (1 Pet. ii); a child of God, all one in the unity of the divine nature, all indwelt by the same Holy Spirit, all brethren of Christ, all calling God, Father; but the ground upon which Jew and Gentile can be together in a practical way is not in Scripture found in any one of these relationships.

Just look at Eph. ii. 11-18. First we have the past condition of the Gentiles described, then their present relationship and place of blessing. It is not the Jew brought down to the level of the Gentile, nor is it the Gentile exalted to a level with the Jew, but both are brought into a place of favour where there is neither the one nor the other. Out of both peoples has been brought to pass **ONE NEW MAN IN CHRIST**, and both reconciled to God and to one another in **ONE BODY** by the cross, and in that way slaying the natural enmity that was between them. The Jew and the Gentile remain in the world, but

here is a “*new man*,” “*one Body*,” in which there is neither. And this is a unity formed by the Spirit, for by Him have we been all baptised into one Body (1 Cor. xii. 13), and we are to endeavour to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Therefore I maintain that the only ground or principle upon which we can be found together in this dispensation is that of the Body of Christ. To be together on any other ground would be to despise the distinction made by God between Jew and Gentile (Num. xxiii. 9).

SECOND :—

Gathered to the name of the Lord.

The text quoted for this is Matthew xviii. 20, and it seems to be pressed into the service of every company of Christians upon earth. Some lay hold of it as characterising their position in contrast to all others, who in their judgment are gathered in self-will. Others lay hold of it as their authority for a position they have assumed in taking the name given to them in Scripture, in contradistinction to the nomenclature of dissenting bodies, and the headships and hierarcical rule established in popery and the episcopacy. Others again seem to claim it as a hereditary right. But however people may think they have come by it, it is a position claimed by every system in Christendom as true of themselves, some being absolutely certain that none but themselves are so gathered.

One sometimes hears the remark made by people who certainly should know better, that they have been gathered out to the name of the Lord for a certain number of years, evidently taking the passage in Matthew to refer to a sort of permanent

position, instead of a coming together by two or three saints for a special purpose. But this latter is clearly that to which the passage refers, and not to the permanent position of all gathered out of the world to Christ by the Gospel, though this is a gathering to His name that is not subject to change or interruption, unless a man apostatises from Christ. As long as the name is retained, to that name all are gathered who have been baptised, for it is to that name we are baptised. And this truth the apostle uses to convince the Corinthians of the sin of taking any other name. He asks them, "Was Paul crucified for you? or were ye baptised in the name of Paul?" If they had been baptised in Paul's name, to him they were gathered, but not otherwise (1 Cor. i. 12-15).

Therefore, however untrue to that name Christendom has been, however corrupt the professing Church has become, to that holy name all are gathered, and by the holiness of that name will the corrupters be judged. Ungodly men have crept into the sacred enclosure, perverse men have arisen who would draw the disciples after themselves, infidels and enemies of all descriptions have found a home in that venerable edifice, but still it bears the name of Christ, and still the Holy Spirit dwells in it as the house of God. Each company may have its little ecclesiastical banner carried in front by its chosen, or self-created, leader, but above all the blue banner of the heavenly Christ is waved, whether those who follow be true or false to His holy name: I speak merely of the profession people make; but "by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned" (Matt. xii. 37).

But this is not what we have in chapter xviii. 20. There it is two or more believers gathered together

for a specific purpose in connection with the interests of Christ; it may be to pray (verse 19), to exercise discipline (1 Cor. v), or it may be to eat the supper (1 Cor. xi. 18-34). Such come together with a specific object in view, and when it is finished they disperse; but in the former way in which I have been speaking of it we are viewed as a separate company in the world, and as always gathered to His name, because we have been baptised to that name, and are professedly in the confession of it in the world, out of which He has been rejected.

THIRD :—

The presence of the Lord in the midst.

This follows upon being gathered to His name, therefore we are not surprised to find it claimed by all who meet together for religious purposes. Some claim to have the monopoly of His presence, because they say they only are gathered to His name, and such will always be found confounding Matt. xviii. 20, with the ostensible and permanent gathering to which I have alluded. Others take it as true of all who come together purely in the interests of Christ. In the midst of such a babel of contending voices how good it is to have the holy Scriptures to turn to, and to know that they are sufficient for the deciding of all questions!

Now it is plain enough that such a coming together ensures His presence. Therefore a pure heart in those who meet is of the last importance. It must be a purely coming together in His interests. It must not be in the spirit of a formal routine of religious meetings. That name must be sacred to those so gathered. They meet as His representa-

tives upon earth, and to whom nothing but that which concerns that name is of consequence. Lowliness, meekness, righteousness, holiness, and truth must in some measure characterise them, and to crown all, that love which is "the bond of perfectness" must be in exercise. In short, there must be a moral answer to that which is set forth in that name, in order to secure His presence. Where there is pride of heart, unrighteousness, unholiness, bitterness, and evil speaking tolerated, there can be no gathering together in the sense of Matthew xviii. 20. This has been spoken against, but I know Him too well to allow myself to be deluded into thinking that He would give His presence to a company of evil doers.

FOURTH :—

The Table of the Lord.

Here again we find ourselves on very debatable ground. There are those who tell us they have the Table, and to partake of that Table you must be with them : you cannot find it anywhere else. If we were less acquainted with men and the boastful and silly pretensions they make, we might be for the moment staggered by such an assertion, but when we get a little better acquainted with the huge amount of empty and ignorant conceit that can find a lodgment in our evil natural hearts, we cease to be even astonished by anything we may hear men saying.

When a gathering of saints has been broken in two by some trouble which has come upon them, each party speaks of the other as having "*set up another table.*" Now I read in Scripture of the Table of the Lord, and of the table of demons

(1 Cor. x), but this "*other table*" I cannot find anywhere. Scripture says, "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?" Surely this is true wherever the loaf and cup are partaken of in remembrance of Christ. And to partake of these elements is to become identified with that which they represent—the body and blood of Christ. In partaking of these things in this way we partake of the Table of the Lord, and come under the responsibility of it.

FIFTH :—

The Breaking of Bread.

This is an ordinance which has been completely taken out of its place, as we have it in the Word of God, and is relegated to a place never once found there. With whom saints can break bread and with whom they cannot has in the present day been more in discussion than almost any religious question. It is not, With whom does Scripture say I am to walk in righteousness, love and peace, but the question almost invariably is, With whom can I eat the supper of the Lord?

Now I know no place in Scripture where that question is once raised. Of course, if on account of some wickedness a man is put away from among the saints, it is clear he is prohibited from the supper; at the same time the word is "Put away from *among yourselves* that wicked person" (1 Cor. v), and not, "Hinder him from eating the supper." I am saying nothing new when I say that I could eat the supper with a man with whom I would refuse

to keep company (II Thess. iii. 14, 15). And in the epistles in which these last and evil days are contemplated, and where we have most explicit directions for our walk, there is not one word about the supper. But where we ourselves have one word regarding those with whom we should walk we have a hundred regarding the question with whom we break bread. This is surely not having divine things in their proper proportion in our souls. Let us see to it that we have things a little more evenly balanced in our minds.

SIXTH :—

The Discipline of the House of God.

By what I have said it will be inferred that I do not think it Scriptural to talk about putting away from the Table of the Lord, or from breaking bread; and the inference will be perfectly just. If a man is put away he is put away from amongst the saints, and that as a wicked person; and of course he is debarred from participation in the privileges of the house of God, and such a person should be shunned by every Christian on earth, until signs of repentance are manifest in him. A brother "overtaken in a fault" is to be restored by the spiritual, and if restored he is not put away; for "if we judge ourselves we shall not be judged." And if he is put away, it is not because he might be a cause of stumbling to the world, but because of the holiness of God's house. Unjudged evil should not be tolerated there, and the saints are to see that it is not tolerated.

But I fear there has been allowed to lapse into disuse a discipline which is exercised over unruly saints which does not go so far as exclusion from

our company. A passage which I have already quoted from II Thess. iii. is plain enough on that point. You are to have no company with a man who goes on in a self-willed course. At the same time he has his place amongst the saints as a brother, but a brother that is rather a grief to the others than a comfort and joy to their hearts. Were this kind of discipline exercised more carefully in the fear of God, I feel certain the terrible judgment of excommunication would not require to be so frequently executed. We are to wash one another's feet, exhort one another, admonish one another, bring Christ before the hearts of our brethren, be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God for Christ's sake has forgiven us.

But alas, we have been hard with one another, and the way some one may have treated us has wounded our pride, and we are too ready to get an opportunity to separate ourselves from him, or to turn him out of our company. The only cure for this is for each of us to exercise a little self-judgment, and to keep ourselves in the love of God, so that we may be able to manifest a little of that love to those with whom we are privileged to walk, and that the resentment, that naturally arises in hearts over-sensitive to apparent slight or neglect, may be quenched by the love with which it is met, and the multitude of sins be covered, which otherwise would, like evil weeds, spread their noxious and baneful influence over the garden of the Lord.

SEVENTH :—

Our Associations.

In touching upon this subject another battle ground is discovered. The peculiar thing about all this is, that the subjects upon which the Scriptures

speak most definitely and most clearly are the subjects concerning which the saints of God have most disputation. In the plainest words that could be used we get our instructions regarding whom we are to receive and whom we are to reject, and yet we do not all seem to see alike.

Of course the natural thing is to receive all the children of God. This was so at the beginning, and had failure not come in it would have continued so until the end. But failure having come, it has been said, we have to choose our company; but that is not quite correct, we have our company chosen for us by the Lord, who makes no mistakes. It would not do to allow us to choose our company, for our likes and dislikes too often thwart our better judgment.

So many breaches having taken place in that which professes the name of Christ, the seriousness of adding one more to the existing number is but feebly felt by the saints of God. Were the gravity of it more clearly seen there would, I am certain, be fewer divisions. But unfortunately it is not only that divisions have occurred, and do occur, but once a division is consummated we are informed by some that it is not the mind of God ever to bring the two parties together again. That is to say, that if *two* brothers fall out, they must be fallen out for ever! Oh no, I am told, the reference is to companies. So, if *two* brethren fall out with *two* others they must remain in this estranged condition for ever! Oh no, I am again told, it is not *two* with *two*, but a *company* dividing into two parts. How many then does it take to make a company? What difference would it make whether there were but one brother on each side, or one hundred? Then I am told that the point under dispute and which caused

the separation is always some point of doctrine, or of ecclesiastical order, and that there can be no healing until the point under dispute has been bot-tomed and judged by those in error. Now we are getting a little nearer it. But are we to divide over every point of doctrine regarding which we do not see eye to eye? If we are, there cannot be two saints together on earth.

The fact of the matter is this, it is that "*company*" that blinds the minds and perverts the judgment of many. I belong to no company but the body of Christ, nor does God recognise any company other than this, nor has He ever recognised any company in any special way since the Reformation. No one in his senses, who knows the Bible, would attribute to God an alliance with the protestant party, which at that time broke away from Rome. He was, and has ever since been with those individuals who in difficult days stand for His truth, but with no others. These keep in company with each other, but this does not make them a "*company*" in the sense in which it is generally used.

The threat made to Ephesus that the candlestick would be removed was carried out in Thyatira, and therefore in the last three Churches the Lord presents Himself to them in His moral characteristics, and not by those in which He is seen clothed when walking in the midst of the golden candlesticks (Rev. iii). He was with the faithful individual in Sardis, and He is with the faithful individual still, but with no party or company of saints in Christendom. Faithful individuals may come together in His interests, and if they do they will assuredly have His presence, according to Matthew xviii. 20, but if they attempt to turn that which is moral into that which is ecclesiastical He will break

it up, as He has been breaking up so-called "*Brethren*," almost from the commencement.

The man of God will not be forgetful of the unity of the Church, but will seek to walk, in harmony with this great truth and with all other truths of Scripture, but he will set up no Church, nor imitation of one, but will follow righteousness, faith, love, peace, with all that call on the Lord out of a pure heart. He will not seek to amalgamate the various sections together, but he will go on, in dependence on God, with all who call on the Lord out of a pure heart, wherever they may be found, and only such determine the area of his practical fellowship. The man who brings not the doctrine of Christ he will have nothing to do with, nor will he keep company with the brother who thinks so little of his wickedness as to salute him by the way, but he will not carry things beyond their Scriptural limits, lest he be found a transgressor himself, but will seek to keep within the limits marked out for him by Him who is infinitely wise and beyond all thought good and gracious.

To take the place of belonging to any company less than the Body of Christ is to deny the meaning of the loaf on the supper table of the Lord, for "the bread which we break is it not the communion of the body of Christ" (1 Cor. x), and would prove him who did so to be a mere pretentious sectarian. As I have already said, the natural thing is to receive all the saints of God, and for the refusal of any, one must have a distinct Scripture. It would be another thing to follow a saint into places where he might go, for all have not the same light, but I would not refuse anyone for mere ecclesiastical error. I have no Scripture for that, and to do it without Scripture would be to act in pure selfwill. I should receive a

brother from one of the systems of men if in that place he was not in company with a teacher who spoke injuriously of Christ or the Gospel, but should I have to refuse him I would be certain to inform him of my reasons for doing so. I do not think that any person could give me a Scripture that would warrant me to refuse any but bad men. If there be such a Scripture I know it not.

In the second epistle to Timothy we get special instructions for our walk in the present day. We require *all* Scripture, and none of it is to be neglected, but there I get what is special for a day like the present. It sets before us the conduct that becomes a servant of the Lord in a day of confusion. He is to *withdraw* from certain people; he is to *go in company* with others; and he is to *keep himself pure*. But all this is inside the house, and directions for the *individual*. He is not told to set up a church within the Church of God, however corrupt it may have become; nor is he to form a little select *company* to which he may attach the *name* and *presence* of the Lord, the *Table* and the *Testimony*. Such pride of heart as is manifest in a position of that kind out-pharisees the Pharisees themselves.

A faithful servant will carry out his Master's instructions as far as he knows what he ought to do, but it is another thing for a servant to attempt to excommunicate every other servant who may not see quite as he does. A brother might be quite sure he should withdraw from certain others, but I might think he should not; is he to excommunicate me for this? If there is positive wickedness to be judged, and wickedness such as Scripture commands us to deal with, that is another matter. But when one finds that a certain line of thought which has taken hold of people results in the rejection of more

godly and devoted saints than themselves, it becomes necessary to see if there be any Scripture warrant for this. To seek to bind every other person down to my way of thinking is the pride and tyranny of Popery, and not the meekness and gentleness of Christ. Let us have no mercy upon evil, but let us be sure that it is evil we are attacking, and not good; and let us begin at the evil we find in ourselves.

Let us not forget the discipline that is to be practised *inside* the Assembly, where all eat the supper together. Possibly if we were more careful about this we might avoid a great deal of the sorrow that we have to pass through, and we might be more pleasing to the Lord. Let us keep well before us the great fact that we have only Himself to please, and that the opinion formed of us by men is of small importance. The Word of God is to rule amongst His people, and therefore let us seek to be subject to it. Should anyone see from Scripture that I am mistaken I shall be thankful for whatever Scriptures he may put before me for my consideration. But I must have plain texts, not textless principles, which are not divine principles at all, but mere sophistry.

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