

What is the Real Fellowship of the Church of God ?

A Letter.

PREFACE.

If the reader regards this simply as an *exposé* he will do the writer an injustice, and miss whatever blessing may be in it for himself. It would have been the merest affectation not to have recognised actually existing facts, and worse than trifling not to have grappled with the situation plainly and in real earnest ; but beyond this he has not gone. What the writer most of all desires to call attention to in the following letter are the positive truths unfolded from the scriptures. He regards the movement of which it treats as the most spiritual and scriptural revival that has occurred in the Church since apostolic days, and he would do anything to rescue it from the divisive and exclusive spirit which has destroyed in a great measure its usefulness, and even threatens its very existence.

Neither must it be regarded as, in any sense, an attack upon anyone. If certain papers have been quoted and initials given, it is only to indicate the origin of views which are criticised.

May the writer ask for a careful perusal *to the end* before any judgment is given.

What is the Real Fellowship of the Church of God?

Hear ye, give ear; be not proud: for the Lord hath spoken. Give glory to the Lord your God before He cause darkness, and before your feet stumble upon the dark mountains, and, while ye look for light, He turn it into the shadow of death, and make it gross darkness. But if ye will not hear it, my soul shall weep in secret places for your pride; and mine eye shall weep sore, and run down with tears, BECAUSE THE LORD'S FLOCK IS CARRIED AWAY CAPTIVE. Where is the flock that was given thee, thy beautiful flock? (Jer. xiii. 15-17 and 20).

Verily, verily, I say unto you, I am the door of the sheep. All that ever came before Me are thieves and robbers; but the sheep did not hear them. I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in, and SHALL GO OUT, and shall find pasture. (John x., 7-9. Last clause, N.T.).

DEAR BRETHREN,

This letter is addressed to all who, in any way, stand connected with the movement of 1825 and onward—that spiritual revival within the Church which once again made the hope of the Lord's coming prominent, led to purer worship, a more scriptural ministry, and gave back again to many of God's people a true knowledge of all that was theirs through grace, and, above all, a right conception of the Church's place and testimony. Many, to-day, stand in more or less direct relationship to this work of God, and gladly own the influence of His Spirit in it, and it is to such I now address myself. In doing so, I wish to make plain that I am addressing all, whether styled "open" or "exclusive" brethren, though my remarks may sometimes apply to one and sometimes to the other.

It may be asked, Why should I feel called upon thus to seek to gain the ear of my brethren? My answer is, that while quite sensible that I have to crave their indulgence, are there not many and weighty reasons why some word should be spoken at the present time?

1. The whole movement referred to has been rendered abortive, as far as any present testimony is concerned. Instead of brethren being a witness to the unity of the body of Christ, and the unity of the Spirit, they themselves are a witness to the very opposite, for unity there is none.

2. There is a growing desire on the part of many that this anomalous, unscriptural, and deplorable, not to say shameful, state of things should cease.

3. I trust I can say, without using the Lord's name lightly, or presuming in any way, that He would have me write, and has given me something to say; while, lastly, I derive some warrant for speaking from the fact that I have suffered more than most from the state of things herein referred to.

Before going further, may I call attention to the scriptures at the head of this letter? The first has been before my mind for many months. It contains, I believe, a message for us to-day. It begins by calling attention to the fact that **THE LORD HATH SPOKEN**, and then refers to the state of God's people. Now, if the Lord speaks, one thing is certain, you and I are bound to listen, or we disregard His word at our peril, and become infinite losers. It is no question as to the person He may speak through. No one wishes that the writer may be out of sight more than he does himself. But the real point for everyone is, Is it the Lord speaking? If it is, then we say to you in the words of the passage "*Be not proud.*" Pride is the one thing we need most of all to beware of. It is the most deceitful and dangerous of all our spiritual diseases. And, more than anything else at the present moment, it is the one thing which is keeping brethren apart. It cavils at, criticises, and holds in contempt everything that is

suggested or done by others. Pride will not accept any suggestions or follow any course, but what itself dictates. It loves to have everything carried out in its own way. Before it will give in it would rather wreck everything—it will make a wilderness and call it peace. If *I* do not do it, nothing shall be done, is its language. Let both reader and writer then have done with pride. Rather, in the language of our passage, let us give glory to the Lord our God, before He causes darkness, &c. And then Jeremiah speaks of looking for light, and “He turn it into the shadow of death.” This is intensely solemn. It shows that it is even possible to look for light, and for God to turn that very light into darkness. Why? Because the light didn’t please us. We didn’t like the vessel that brought it to us, or the way it came. and so we kept on looking for it, determined it should come as we wanted it, and not as God chose, while all the time it was there had we only had eyes to see it, when, lo, having for long trifled with it, at last it became darkness.

This was actually the case in the history of Israel—Jeremiah brought them the light—it could be said of him, as of another afterwards, “he was a burning and a shining light,” but in Jeremiah’s case they were not willing to rejoice in it at all. And he has to say, “If ye will not hear it, my soul shall weep in secret places for your *pride*”—it was pride in their day and it is pride in ours which is causing all the mischief—“and mine eye shall weep sore, and run down with tears.” Why? “Because the Lord’s flock is carried away captive.” That was the reason. And does not the same reason exist to-day? There has been a flock given to Christ, of which He is the one Shepherd, but, “Where is the flock that was given Thee, Thy beautiful flock”? Can we behold without concern the ravages the wolf and the hireling have made? Are we incapable of regarding the matter from Christ’s standpoint, and not merely from our own? We may have some little corner where we are lords, and our word is law, but does this

content us? Have we no thought as to what all the sheep are to Him? And, then, to think that, after the gathering together again at the beginning of last century, the pride and perversity of man should have succeeded in bringing about another scattering. Shall we not weep in secret places for the pride that could not only do it, but be regardless of it when it is done?

The question will be asked, What are we to do? The answer is, Let us first of all seek to cultivate the spirit and brokenness of Jeremiah, and weep for the Lord's flock. It was the thought of that that made the tears run down Jeremiah's cheek; it was the LORD's flock. Then, let us, each one for himself and herself, be humbled before the Lord. Let us no longer lift up the head or assume that *we* are all right, but abase ourselves, until each one sees who can take the lowest place in humiliation and contrition. Then, thirdly, let us definitely abandon—and it must be done individually, if it cannot be done collectively—let us abandon everything that partakes of the nature of sectarianism, everything that savors of mere party fellowship, every single thing, in fact, which would prevent us receiving one another as Christ also received us to the glory of God. Our aim must be "endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." How is that unity to be kept?

Collective Testimony.

As we have shewn elsewhere*, God's great thought, from the beginning of the creation of man until now, and right on into the eternal state, is unity. It is the divine answer to the introduction of sin and Satan's apostasy. He was the first, as far as we know, to introduce dissension into God's universe. If this be so it is no wonder he hates unity and would do anything

* Pamphlet entitled "Unity" to be obtained of the writer.

to frustrate God's purpose. He was the first to sow discord in heaven, and the rebel hosts that followed him broke up the eternal harmony. But that eternal harmony shall be renewed, through that One Whom God has highly exalted, and to Whom He has "given a name that is above every name, that at the Name of Jesus every knee should bow of heavenly and earthly and infernal beings, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father." Satan's chief opposition is against this. Are we going to aid him by our discord and divisions? Christ is so great that one day He is going to unite the whole of God's universe, but is He not great enough to unite His people now?

In view of this purpose of Satan do not Joseph's words to his brethren gather a strange significance: "See that ye fall not out by the way." All fallings out by the way tend to frustrate God's purpose. It has therefore been said, and said truly, that Satan's real effort in his attack upon the Person of Christ seventy years ago was to destroy the unity God's children were at that time manifesting. And the subtlety and malignity of the attack are seen in two ways; for if unity were maintained at the expense of truth as to Christ's Person it was worse than useless; on the other hand, if unity were broken to maintain the truth, his point was equally gained. That God would have been fully equal to this had He been fully trusted and waited for, we cannot doubt. But man was not. The crash came; and the unity was gone. Whether God will ever grant such a *measure* of unity again, we cannot say, but the only line in harmony with His will, is to seek it; and faith will seek it, in spite of all hindrance and failure. As Paul could speak, in a moment dark as midnight for Israel, of the twelve tribes instantly serving God, when two only were in evidence, and they under the heel of the conqueror, so faith, to-day, rising from amid the ashes of the past, still soars on wing and looks to God, knowing that He never lowers His flag to the enemy,

and therefore we will not "bate one jot of heart or hope, but still bear up and steer right onward."

In view of the foregoing, is it not clear that the only possible collective testimony to-day is that which embraces the divine thought of the unity of God's children? In any remarks on this head there is no thought of the unity of Christendom, but the writer thinks specially of those who have found the truth in connection with the revival here spoken of.*

There is for our guidance in this matter a principle of immense importance running through scripture. It is, briefly, this, that whatever the failure, God's people must always go back to the beginning—to the original—and maintain the essential truth of the dispensation. We say *essential* because the breakdown of a dispensation necessarily brings modifications, but it does not alter principles. In the opening verses of Isaiah li. we find an example of this. "Hearken to me, ye that follow after righteousness, ye that seek the Lord; look unto the rock whence ye are hewn, and to the hole of the pit whence ye are digged. Look unto Abraham your father, and unto Sarah that bare you; for I called him alone and blessed him and increased him." The blessing of Israel, and the purpose of God concerning them, began in Abram, and so they are directed to him. Another occurs at the end of Malachi: "Remember ye the law of Moses my servant, which I commanded unto him in Horeb for all Israel, with the statutes and judgments" (Mal. iv., 4). The truth of the dispensation is made just as prominent at the end as at the beginning, and this truth is insisted upon in spite of, and in the face of, every departure.

It is not otherwise in connection with the revival of which we speak. The more it is considered, and the firmer the truths then received take hold of one, the more one becomes impressed with the fact of that revival being the result of a special movement on the part of the

* It is these he is addressing, but not as having any distinct fellowship from "all saints."

Holy Spirit. And what characterized it? What were its leading features? Was it something entirely new? No, it was just a going back to the beginning; a return to apostolic times; a looking unto the hole of the pit whence we were digged. It was a recovery and not a new revelation. It was the realization under the Spirit's power that believers were one flock of which Christ was the Shepherd; one body of which Christ was the Head; one family gathered together in one.

We stand in relation to these truths just where they stood. Nothing that has happened since has made our position in regard to them any different from theirs. If there has been division upon division since, we have to refuse all that just as they in grasping the essential oneness of the Church found themselves free from the sectarian barriers of their day. *The history of Brethren, with all its painful failure, is not to render nugatory the truth of God.*

Our path, then, to-day, is clear. It means a simple recognition of what God in His mercy recovered to His people eighty years ago. He conducted them back to the beginning *then*; He conducts us back to the beginning *now*. The only sense in which Brethren ever were a testimony was in seeking to bear witness to the truth of Christ and the Church. The only possible testimony, to-day, is that which returns to the original standpoint, and that embraces all the children of God and disowns all sectarianism. At the beginning Brethren found real joy and power in the simple recognition of what God had formed, and not in trying to form anything. They saw that owning one Lord, having one Spirit, being members of one body were the great and abiding factors in Church life and fellowship, and in accepting these truths they found emancipation from all that kept the children of God apart. If these truths are again given place they will bring about precisely the same results. *But I am not to think of any party becoming the nucleus of this. This is what some are working for, but it must end in failure.*

Before dwelling upon what has come in to hinder the fellowship of God's people, which He so graciously recovered, let us see from scripture

WHAT IS THE REAL FELLOWSHIP OF THE CHURCH OF GOD.

Did God intend that His people should be openly divided; shut up within party walls which are never crossed; treating each other as if they had nothing in common—as if there were no affinity and no spiritual links between them whatever? It will be easy to show how mistaken is any such idea in the light of the following scriptures.

In Acts ii., 42, we read of the early Christians: "And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers." The place that *fellowship* has in the Church of God is very prominent, and here is the first reference to it. It is called the apostles' fellowship. The apostles were the first to proclaim certain doctrines, and thus it was their fellowship because, not only did others receive these doctrines, but, in addition, identified themselves with the apostles. Thus we read in v. 44 "All that believed were together." There was this company on one side and the nation on the other. Fellowship involves the idea of identification—becoming an associate—as well as being a partaker. Now in this case all who held the doctrine were in fellowship. Undoubtedly the two things went together in those days. Had anyone said, I believe the doctrine, but I am not going to identify myself with those men, such an one would not, properly speaking, have been in fellowship. But for all practical purposes it may be taken for granted that everyone who received the apostles' doctrine became an associate of theirs, and thus there was fellowship, and all were common sharers in the power and blessing that characterised the company.

This was expressed in the breaking of bread; while another feature was prayer.

The apostles are not now on earth. If they were, cannot you imagine that every sincere believer who held their doctrine would be off to join them? The apostles are not here, however. But their doctrine is. How is it, then, that all who hold the doctrine are not together? Surely in the light of this scripture they ought to be. What has become of the fellowship? If the doctrine exists the fellowship ought. The apostles themselves were nothing; their doctrine was everything. Oh brethren, where are we that such a thing is possible, that those who hold the apostles' doctrine no longer manifest any fellowship? Surely it is plain that only those who do not hold the apostles' doctrine ought to be refused at the breaking of bread.

Will you turn now to 1 Cor. i., 2. "Unto the Church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both their's and our's." It is of all importance to notice this last clause. It shows what was the bond that outwardly united all believers. Here the believers at Corinth are designated the Church of God in that place, but there is no isolation, there is a recognised bond with all other believers in whatsoever place they may be found, and that bond was the Lord Jesus Christ. All who owned Him as Lord were one. Here again the tie that unites all and demands their recognition of one another is not some particular ism, nor agreement as to the claims of certain assemblies, or adherence to a circle of meetings, but mutual submission to the same Lord. *All who owned Him had a right to be owned by others.*

I leave it to the spiritual judgment of my brethren whether something else has not now been introduced as an addition, or as a substitute for that which the apostle considered supreme and all sufficient. It will be said that times have changed, and that on

account of the evil prevalent in the Church the mere acknowledgment of Christ as Lord is insufficient. In a certain sense this is admitted. Nor are we left without guidance even here. The present state of things is foreseen and provided for in such a scripture as 2 Tim., ii., 16-22. And what does it say there? "Follow righteousness, faith, love, peace, *with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart.*" Here it is true that the apostle makes an addition, but an addition, be it noticed, to the very formula of 1 Cor. i. The Lord Himself is still the bond. Nothing can or ever will take the place of that. To put anything in its place would be to dethrone Christ. But in view of the vast profession around us characterised by a mere lip acknowledgment of the Lord, each one of us is to see that he is possessed of a pure heart, *i.e.*, a heart with only one motive, a sincere desire to obey Christ in all things. He will be one who follows righteousness, faith, love, peace, and he is to consort with those who have the same pursuit.* It will be seen that the conditions are *moral* and not *ecclesiastical*; and it is of all importance to bear this in mind, for Brethren—whether "open" or "exclusive"—have fallen more or less into the snare of ecclesiasticism, than which nothing could be more soul-withering, if it is made a substitute for life in the power of the Spirit.

Although the foregoing is true, and, in consequence of the present state of the Church there is need for the pure heart (of which, let it be said, slandering every company except our own is not a mark), yet, it is of all importance to bear in mind that fellowship in the early days was not based upon membership of meetings, but all who called on the Lord were recognised as being part of the one fellowship of the Church of God on earth. I press this because there are some to-day who would make the avenue to fellowship through reception by

* Mark, there is not a word here about deciding as to the rival claims of assemblies.

particular meetings. This is not, however, the way it is anywhere presented in scripture. But let us look further.

In verse 9 of the same chapter in Corinthians, we read : " God is faithful by Whom ye were called into the fellowship of His Son Jesus Christ our Lord." Here then we have in express terms what was true of " all that in every place called upon the Name " ; they had been called unto the fellowship of God's Son. Who cannot see the uniqueness and grandeur of this fellowship. It means nothing less for us than to be associates of the Son of God. If the Apostles' fellowship meant that which they had formed by their teaching, and by reason of their position with regard to Israel ; and all who received their message became identified with them ; so this fellowship is determined by Christ's position in regard to the world, and we have been called by God into identification with Him. But one thing has to be remembered : it is *His* fellowship. It is the fellowship *of* the Son of God. Who then has any right to interfere with it, to limit it, to make conditions, or tamper with it in any way ? To do so is to insult Christ. God called us *into* it. It is not therefore one of our own devising, upon which we can place limitations, nor can we manipulate it according to our will. It is all God's work, and we have nothing to do with it, but to accept the honour and dignity conferred upon us, and own every other associate. If God calls into it can we take upon ourselves to say to other associates, you can have no part with us ? Surely to do anything of the kind is to offer the deepest affront to Him Whose fellowship it is.

Then, further, in what does this fellowship consist, and how is it expressed ? Let us pass on to chapter x., vv. 16-17. " 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 ? For we being many are one bread, and one body ; for we are all partakers of that one bread."

This fellowship of the Son of God is, first of all, identification with him. But, secondly, as we see from the passage now under consideration, we are partakers of common blessings. This is an additional idea involved in the term fellowship. The first is identification, the second is participation, *i.e.*, a common share or partnership. Believers have a common share in the blessings of Christianity. What belongs to one belongs to all. And each owes his blessing to the same thing—the death of Christ. It is this that constitutes the fellowship. Thus the apostle begins: “The cup of blessing which we bless.” Not which I bless. The apostle being only a partaker with them. Now this fellowship in blessing is designated “the communion (or fellowship) of the blood of Christ.” Here again I would impress upon every reader the *character* of this fellowship. It is not of man’s devising, nor is it agreement between certain individuals, nor a fellowship based upon certain ecclesiastical arrangements, or church order, though these are necessary in their place; but they do not constitute the fellowship. It is the “fellowship of the blood of Christ,” because of partnership in blessing flowing from that. This gives it its character, and if I make it conditional upon anything else I destroy that character. Each one attributes his salvation to the blood. That same body represented by the bread was given for all alike. This makes them one; this gives them their fellowship; and this fellowship is expressed as all partake of the bread and wine.

Could anything more stir the soul than the contemplation of such a fellowship as this? A Person so glorious with Whom to be associated; and a death so wonderful as to secure for us eternal blessing. Removing every barrier sin had raised as between ourselves on the one hand, and ourselves and God on the other. A Person to command all hearts, and a death which tells better than anything beside how He loves us—and in which we all have an equal share.

In the light of this I want to ask my reader some very

solemn and serious questions. First of all, is there anything connected with your ways or your associations that hinders this fellowship? Have you secluded yourself behind party walls so that no one can have fellowship with you unless he consents to come within those walls? Have you practically made a fellowship of your own by acknowledging none—with rare exceptions.—but those who assemble at particular meetings? When a Christian comes to one of your meetings and would like to remember the Lord with you, and is known to some in your midst, do you give him or her a back seat because there is a difference of view as to baptism, or because he does not frequent one of your meeting rooms, or for some other reason not mentioned in the scriptures we have been considering? Ask yourself, I beseech you, these questions, and many more that may occur to yourself, in order that you may ascertain in the presence of the searcher of all hearts whether the fellowship you maintain and countenance is after all not too limited to be the real fellowship of the Church of God? In order that this may be done more effectually you will allow me to mention several matters which, notoriously, are permitted to hinder the fellowship of those connected with the original movement of 1825 to which I am here referring.

Hindrances to Fellowship.

1. Those who make fellowship (*i.e.*, the fellowship of 1 Cor. x., 16-17, which is the real, expressed fellowship of the Church of God) depend upon reception by a local assembly. There are so-called "open" meetings now which are "close" in the strictest sense of the word. No one is allowed to break bread unless he is a recognised member of that particular assembly or one affiliated with it. And in keeping with this a distinction is drawn between membership of the body of Christ and membership of a local assembly. Also two fellowships are spoken of, as if there were one

fellowship connected with the Church, as a whole, and another connected with what is local. Thus we get the expression, "The receiving of a believer into the fellowship of an assembly." Scripture knows nothing of such distinctions. Not a word about them occurs in 1 Cor. i., 2 and 9; x., 16-17. And yet this is the very epistle where, if anywhere, we might expect to find such principles laid down. The word is "with all that call on the Name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both their's and our's," not "with all that belong to some other local assembly." This would in reality put the local assembly above Christ and the Holy Spirit. The fellowship is said to be that of "His Son." And again the fellowship depends not upon joining any *particular* local assembly,* but according to 1 Cor. x., 16-17, upon being a partaker of the blessing.

Of course there must be reception in the first instance by some local company of Christians. If a believer never identified himself with any, and had never been received by any, he could not be said to be in fellowship at all. But once having been received, he has been received once and for all, so long as no question of discipline arises. But this is completely ignored by the view we are here dealing with. That view supposes there are now assemblies established after the New Testament pattern, and no one has ever been received until accredited by one of these. What an assumption! Yet, from remarks repeated over and over again by various writers in a certain section of the Church, this is all that can be inferred.

Thus in a tract called "The Old Paths," †by J.R., p. 17, we read: "Reception, according to Scripture is the welcoming of one who is known to be a believer, and who desires to share with his fellow-believers the

* We are not ignoring the local assembly, it has a most important place, but it has no distinct membership or fellowship. See note on page 22.

† Published by John Ritchie, Kilmarnock.

privileges and responsibilities of the assembly of saints." And again, "Nor is it reception to a denomination, &c." Thus he distinguishes between the two, forgetting for the moment, apparently, that the denomination here referred to is a recognised part of the Christian Church, and that anyone received by it is perforce received as belonging to Christ.

But to quote further. On p. 23 we find a more definite and sweeping statement. "The present struggle to get this introduced" (that is, the practice of receiving believers because they are already in the fellowship of the Church) "is simply the work of the enemy to blot out *the line of separation between God's assembly and apostate Christianity, and to make it easy for the fashion of the religious world being brought into the house of God.*" Here we have the doctrine full blown, and we have ourselves italicised certain words in order that their meaning may be fully grasped. I might well ask my reader, How can anyone in these days draw a line between God's assembly and apostate Christianity. The whole idea is inconceivable. If God's assembly could be separated from apostate Christianity there would be no apostate Christianity. Apostate Christianity is the corruption of God's assembly, where the evil is so mixed up with the good that they cannot be separated until the Lord comes. Scripture never supposes that God's assembly will again have a line of separation between it and the evil that has entered the House of God. All the inspired writers who refer to it warn us of the state that would exist, but they never so much as hint at any remedy. On the contrary, Peter says, "the time is come when judgment must begin at the house of God." Nothing will ever change that. Paul gives instructions to the *individual* to keep himself clear from the evil, and John addresses the overcomer; but as to what J.R. sets forth, not a word.

He objects also to "occasional fellowship," and here, again, we see the same thought underlying his remarks viz., that the assembly of God is in some way very

specially connected with O.B. meetings. Otherwise why raise objections to "occasional fellowship." We are not contending for the term; if anyone can furnish a better let us have it by all means, but that the thing itself is a happy circumstance, and quite in accord with scripture, I do not doubt for a moment.

I am no advocate for the slipshod way that would dispense with all barriers, and allow anybody, whether known or unknown, who claimed the right to partake of the Lord's Supper, to come and do so unquestioned, and unchallenged. Such carelessness, if not utter indifference to the Lord's honour, is inexcusable, living as we do in a day when evil men and seducers are on every hand. But where an individual is known, and his whole bearing and speech gain our confidence at once, to refuse such an one is simply to proclaim ourselves a sect. Scripture knows nothing of membership of your meeting. If you meet as Christians, the visitor in question takes his or her place as one of you. To receive such is to own the truth of the "one body," to keep the unity of the Spirit, and at the same time raise the strongest protest possible against all sectarianism. If you do otherwise you are simply making a church of your own with a fellowship in addition to the fellowship of the Church of God. J.R. says he has never known anyone helped by such a reception. His knowledge must certainly be extremely limited, or else the meetings he frequents must be strangely lacking in spiritual power. Cases have been brought under my own notice where those thus allowed to break bread have never wished to return to their former associates. On the other hand those who have met with a polite request to sit back have never recovered from what they have looked upon as unjustifiable treatment for which there is not an atom of scriptural warrant.*

"Ecclesiastical pretensions or 'High Church' claims ill suit the times in which our lot is cast"; we are still quoting from J.R., but who would believe it? If no Christian is to be received until he has joined that

* See note on next page.

kind of assembly J.R. delineates, such an assembly tacitly, if not avowedly, claims to be the only Church of God in the place. This the Needed Truth party actually does, and it is at least consistent. But again to quote J.R. He says, we cannot "ignore the failure of nineteen centuries and set up churches, claiming apostolic authority and Pentecostal power."

There is of course a "within" and "without," but "within" and "without" of what? Not in either case a merely local assembly. The man put away at Corinth was designated a "wicked person," and was put outside the whole church on earth. To talk about such an one being still a member of the body of Christ is wholly beside the point. Such terms are inadmissible and inapplicable to a man in his condition. If our dear brethren who talk so much about the distinction between the body of Christ and the local gathering, would substitute for this the "visible" and "invisible" church, some of their remarks would, in my opinion, at least, be nearer the truth. Why, it is to this very local assembly at Corinth the apostle alludes when he says, "Now ye are body of Christ." The truth of the one body found its local expression there. And then, as if to remind them that they were only the local expression of something universal, he adds, "And God hath set some in the CHURCH," and then enumerates the gifts. Gifts are not set in the local assembly. If, then, the above distinction is maintained no gifts could be exercised. But because they are for the whole Church, therefore local assemblies ought to recognise them. And precisely

* Two things have to be remembered One, that we cannot refuse any Christian, known to be such, and walking consistently, because it is the Lord's table, and not ours. The other, that we cannot *invite* anyone to partake, and this for precisely the same reason—it is the Lord's table and not ours. How can we invite people to a table that is not ours? We have no power to invite, and we have no power to refuse, except in the case of evil. Where a person is known, it would be legitimate, of course, to make him aware he would be welcome.

for the same reason ought every local assembly to recognise every believer because each one has already been admitted into the Church universal.

The way in which the truth of the Church, in all that constitutes its essential reality and greatness, is ignored by certain writers, and attention exclusively fixed upon the local assembly is to say the least extremely misleading, and where accepted must be attended with loss. All that they seem anxious about is to have a church where there shall be a place for elders. Thus one reason given by J.R., in a tract entitled "Reception to God's assembly," why no one shall be introduced to break bread, is because it "does away with the place and work of those whom God raises up and fits to do oversight work in the assembly." No one would wish to make light of such work, or of godly men who undertake it. Care for the saints and a certain degree of oversight is absolutely necessary if things are to be done decently and in order, but those who seek to fill such an office need to remember what J.R. himself has told us that one cannot "ignore the failure of nineteen centuries, and set up churches, claiming apostolic authority and Pentecostal power." Elders, originally, were always ordained by apostles, or apostolic delegates, never by the Church, and therefore while "faithful men" will ever seek to guide and care for the flock, they will also remember that they can possess no absolute official authority, though the statement of J.R. that the introduction of one to break bread, who is not amongst the number, "sets aside the place and work of those God raises up," seems to imply that they have.

But surely there is no office for admitting one to be a partaker of the Lord's Table who is already in the one fellowship. J.R.'s further objection is: "For if one claims the right to introduce his friends on his own responsibility, he cannot deny it to another although only a babe." There is of course a right and a wrong way of doing everything, and we may concede

that a novice is hardly the one to take upon himself the sole responsibility of introduction. Certainly elder brethren should be consulted and time given for any questions. Then J.R. proceeds: "Suppose one desiring to be associated permanently with that company is named that morning as having left his denomination, does the casual visitor share in receiving him? Surely anyone can see the absurdity of such a position." The "absurdity" exists only in the mind of J.R. because he is so obsessed with the idea of a handful of Christians being *the* assembly of God in a place, and the thought of joining *it*. Did he see that the breaking of bread, first of all, had reference to remembering the Lord, and secondly, to the expression of the fellowship of the whole body (not of the local company merely) already existing in virtue of a share in common blessings, the absurdity would disappear.

May I add one word of counsel before closing this part of my letter? *Let us not confound Church fellowship with faithfulness of walk.* No one would make light of the latter. Yet it would be disastrous to confound the two. Could there have been much more unfaithfulness, or a sadder condition, than marked the Corinthians? The apostle has to rebuke them for their carnality, for their ignorance of God, and many other things, yet, it is to this very company, more than any other, he unfolds the amazing blessedness of Church fellowship. But all centres in the Person and work of Christ, not in our faithfulness. "Let a man examine himself" (not other people), he says, "*and so let him eat.*" And "we are *all* partakers of that one loaf."

Is it only into the local assembly that people are admitted? Instrumentally, of course, an individual can be received only at one place at a time, but, notwithstanding, this reception by the local is into the universal. Thus a member in one place is a member everywhere, and there is no such thing as receiving *into* a local assembly in addition to the Church as a

whole. Do we not need to observe the distinction between being received *by*, and being received *into*? We are received *by* the local; we are received *into* the universal. And, from this point of view, the one is as much by human instrumentality as the other.* Is it not important to see that the local assembly is but an expression of the whole; not having a distinct fellowship: and only receiving into the whole, and not into itself? There is no such thing in Scripture as membership of meetings. And is there not a real danger in certain quarters of the local taking the place of the universal and obliterating it? The way Scripture presents the truth is just the other way. It is the truth of the Church as a whole—whether as the body, the house, the temple, or the city—it keeps before us; and it is this which enables us to form some conception of it—what it embraces, what it is to Christ; what are the counsels of God concerning it; what is its fellowship, and what are its privileges; and thus be able to apprehend “with all saints” the breadth, and length, and depth, and height, and know the love of Christ which passeth knowledge, and be filled into all the fulness of God.

In a day of ruin such as J.R. refers to, what we have to guard against is anything like officialism and definite attempts at reconstructing the Church. The

* Two things need to be remembered; (1) We are in the Church by the baptism of the Holy Ghost (1 Cor. xii. 3): this is by God's work, and is invisible; (2) there is a reception into the outward and visible Church by those already in it—this is by *water* baptism (Acts ii. 41 and 47; x. 47). Here we have people added to a visible company. It will be admitted a supposed young convert might, on various grounds, conceivably be refused. If refused, could he be said to belong to the Church? But those who have power to refuse have also power to receive, and if so, into what? Surely into the Church viewed outwardly as the House of God. Saul of Tarsus was converted by the roadside, and without human instrumentality; but human instrumentality comes in in connection with his identification with the disciples of Damascus. Someone had to baptize him, and in so doing he was publicly admitted amongst the number (Acts ix).

Church, as to its administration, as committed to human responsibility, has hopelessly, and irretrievably failed. And the writings of the Apostle John—the last of the inspired writings—are peculiarly *a propos* to the present moment. In all the thousands of inspired words he has given us there is not so much as a reference to the externals of Christianity. All the emphasis is laid upon what is vital and essential—life and character; fellowship with the Father and the Son, and with one another; relationship with Divine Persons; the possession of the Spirit, and the manifestation of love and righteousness. This, as it were, forms the citadel of Christianity, and with the maintenance of these things we are to be occupied. But with anything like setting up a new and renovated Church, a select fellowship, or a party formed upon an ecclesiastical basis—let us away with. Ought it not to be said, and I say it with deep humility and shame, this is where Brethren have missed their way. They had no charter to form another Church; the Holy Spirit could never sanction any fellowship but the one He Himself had established. Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit was always obligatory, and is to-day—and found expression, as it does still, in the Lord's people assembling together and walking and working together, but *only* as the possession of the Spirit and divine life, with the accompanying walk, were the recognised bond. As soon as other terms of fellowship and recognition were introduced the movement went more or less to pieces, or if kept together, it was only by external links that were valueless. No company, to-day, kept together by *mere* church order or any mere human regulations can be of any account, or be any testimony.

What the real testimony is, is very clearly indicated in Paul's first epistle to Timothy. The testimony first of all concerns God's attitude towards all men—in other words, the Gospel; and then the behaviour of those who form God's house, for it is through them men are to learn God's character. God's house

is a house of prayer and where true godliness is to be witnessed. The first part of this testimony is expressed in the words: "Who (God) will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus; Who gave Himself a ransom for all, a *testimony* in due time"; and the other: "That thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the Church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth."

Let me ask my brethren—whether called "open" or "exclusive"—are these the things that most of all occupy you? Is the whole soul of everyone of you taken up with the "gospel of the glory of the blessed God," as was the soul of the one who penned these words? Does the whole long suffering of Christ as set forth in *his* conversion, in all its unspeakable forbearance, tenderness and love make you feel that it is almost the only thing worth talking about? And, then, in the sense of this unspeakable mercy do you pray for others who are still in ignorance of it? Do you make supplication, prayer, intercession, and giving of thanks for all men, that God, as revealed to you in all His blessedness as a Saviour, may be known to them? The men lifting up holy hands in prayer and the women adorning themselves as professing godliness. And, having done all this, are you anxious, that, having prayed *to* God, and spoken *for* God, there shall be nothing in your conduct out of keeping *with* God, but the very God who was once manifested here in flesh, so that He might be actually seen, is again seen in your ways as forming part of His dwelling place? (Read carefully 1 Tim., i.-iii.).

Such is the testimony in connection with the house of God; and this is supplemented by the testimony in connection with the Church, as the body of Christ, which is unity. If we substitute any other circle, or

any other company, or any other fellowship for that of "all saints" we have ceased to occupy Church ground, and there practically ceases to be any testimony. The only testimony that was ever possible, or ever will be, is that which finds a place for all Christians *as such*, without any additional terms whatever, except that they are walking consistently. So Romans xii. 4-5: "For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office; so we being many, are one body in Christ, and everyone members one of another." So 1 Cor. xii. 12: "For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body; so also is the Christ." Again, Ephesians iv. 4: "There is one body, and one Spirit." It is the thought of unity all through in connection with the body, and unless this unity is comprehended and conserved we have simply a human, instead of a divine, idea before our minds.

2.—Baptism.

We have dwelt at some length upon the subject of reception and that which is germane to it, because it is this question of receiving one another which lies at the root of most of our difficulties. This reception is in some instances denied because of *supposed* evil, which either does not exist, or is not of that character which calls for utter rejection; and in other cases because the local assembly is allowed completely to overshadow the one assembly of God to which all His children belong, and which of itself gives them the privilege of fellowship with all others. We now approach another matter which is sometimes made a real obstacle to fellowship. We refer to baptism. Are divergent views on this ordinance of sufficient gravity to hinder the fellowship of the Church of God? Or, to put it in another way, Is baptism anywhere made the pivot or basis of our fellowship? If it is not, then clearly

it is not essential to fellowship that our views upon this rite should be absolutely in agreement.

In considering our answer to this question, it is worth while to remember that the Apostle John, though he wrote a gospel, several epistles, and the Revelation, does not once mention the subject of Christian baptism. It is evident therefore that he, at least, did not consider it vital to fellowship, for fellowship is one of his great themes. It may be objected to this that he does not present things exactly from a Church standpoint. This may be true; nevertheless, the omission is suggestive. Let us then turn to the apostle of the Church. Will it surprise anyone to be reminded of these words of Paul? : "For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel." Does it look, in the face of such a statement as this, as if the apostle would ever have said, Now, remember, every particular in connection with baptism is of such supreme importance that you are even to refuse the Lord's Supper to those who differ from you in the smallest degree. And if any teacher should come who thinks he has learned from scripture that this rite of baptism has its application to the children of believers, see that you bolt and bar, and doubly lock the door and put up the shutters, so that he shall not have a look in anywhere. Who can conceive the Apostle Paul speaking in this way? Is there one sentence of his on record that favours such an attitude? If so, let it be produced.

Will the reader who is inclined to give not only baptism, but what he thinks the scriptural view of it, a very prominent place, please remember, that we are not here discussing the value of baptism, much less seeking to get rid of it, God forbid, but only seeking to find an answer to the question—Is it in scripture, made the basis or test of fellowship?*

Now, if the Apostle Paul has not anywhere spoken as we have supposed above, how are we to understand

* I do not mean the rite itself, but different views of it,

the following remarks, which appeared in the "Believers' Magazine" for September, 1909, page 107? "Baptism is neither the bond of fellowship nor the door of entrance to assemblies of believers gathering only in the Lord's Name. But such seek to give Christian baptism, as set forth in the Word, the place of importance that God there claims for it, and to exclude the unscriptural theory of so-called 'Household Baptism,' which is a counterfeit of the truth, alike in its subjects, mode, and meaning. If one who is a public advocate and teacher of this wretched device of Satan—which has thrice at least divided so-called 'Exclusives,' and is still clung to and taught by some who have seceded from them—comes as a teacher, wishing to instruct others, those who watch for souls in that assembly would be unfaithful to their trust, if they opened their doors to that which would lead God's people into error or cause division, either or both of which a teacher of Household Baptism would, as many know to their cost."

Before going into the main question raised in the above quotation, it is necessary for the sake of truthfulness to point out that the statement is erroneous, misleading, mischievous, and inconsistent. It is erroneous because "Exclusives," so-called, have never been thrice—nor even once—divided over the question of baptism.* Multitudes of them have gone on together holding different views because they found no warrant from God's Word for making it a point of division. It is misleading, because it supposes that certain views on baptism import a sanctity and superior qualifications which are lacking where these views do not obtain, whereas everyone, of any experience, knows that the godliest and most enlightened saints and teachers of all time might be ranged on opposite sides as to their opinions regarding this ordinance. It is mischievous, because, where accepted, it can only have the effect of

* This has been repeatedly pointed out to the Editor of the above magazine, but he has never withdrawn the statement.

discrediting many of the Lord's people and servants, and thus depriving one another of fellowship and mutual help. And it is inconsistent, inasmuch as it holds up "Exclusives" as a warning, and all the time advises exclusion. It speaks of baptism causing division, and yet insists it shall cause further division, by advocating the closing of doors against those who are in every way qualified to teach, simply and solely because of views on baptism.

Household Baptism is described as a "wretched device of Satan," but in our opinion the "wretched device of Satan" is in making baptism a bone of contention. The enemy's device is always to divide God's people, and he cares not what he uses to accomplish it. How cleverly he succeeds when he can get the sheep of Christ to quarrel and disagree over what they all confess is only outward; and to act as if this ordinance was of greater moment than all the vital and spiritual truth which makes them eternally one. This indeed is the wretched device of Satan. May God deliver His beloved people from falling a prey to it. Then further, the paragraph in question suggests indirectly that those who hold certain views on baptism would come with the special view of teaching it. This is a bad and baseless insinuation.

But do those who attack their fellow-believers for holding Household Baptism, and because of it would actually withhold teachers from exercising the gift committed to them by the great Head of the Church, really understand what they are attacking? For instance, the writer, quoted above, says it "is a counterfeit of the truth, alike in its subjects, mode, and meaning." This seems to display at once a lamentable ignorance of this "wretched device of Satan." There is absolutely no difference in the mode, for Household Baptists do not sprinkle, they always and only *immerse*. As to the meaning, it means *unto* Christ and *unto* His death. And we presume adult baptists attach this meaning to baptism. The only difference therefore is

as to the subject. While Household Baptists accept believers' baptism, they think that scripture warrants them in the thought that it has an application to the children of believers. And all that is meant by it is explained by 1 Corinthians x. 1-2, as applied to Israel. Here we are distinctly told that "all were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; and were all baptised *unto* Moses in the cloud and in the sea." Here, at all events, it cannot be denied that the baptism applied to children. And its significance was this, that all blessing and all deliverance for them in that day were bound up with the leadership of Moses. If they left Moses they would practically have been without God. Baptism, as some of us see it, has a similar application to the children of believers to-day. In allowing the rite—the initiatory rite—of baptism to be performed they commit them unto Christ, and unto His death. They acknowledge in so doing that they have no hope for their children apart from either; none whatever from the flesh, even though the offspring of Christian parents. They do not build at all upon baptism itself, only upon what baptism is *unto*. They believe it connects them outwardly, *but only outwardly*, with that which will save them, if, in due time, they accept it by faith. In the meantime it is for the parents to count upon God to work by His Holy Spirit in the hearts of the children, while their responsibility is to bring them up in the nurture and admonition of that Lord whose Name has been called upon them. Does all this look very much like a "wretched device of Satan"? Many can thank God for this privilege, as affording them, according to His own method, as they believe, an additional reason for counting upon Him.

But why do I write all this? Is it to try and inculcate others with this deadly doctrine, as some aver that it is? That is not my aim. But I have briefly set forth, what is after all only, perhaps, an inadequate statement, something on the subject in order that my dear fellow-believers may at least understand *what* it

is they are stigmatising in this dreadful way, and that they may escape from the unhappy and dangerous position of treating as of the devil, what, after all, may be of God. I have never yet met the person, or come across the book, that could tell me the *whole* truth about baptism, and if this is so, why are we not content to hold what we see to be in accordance with the word and allow others to do the same ?

It has been asserted, recently, by those who ought to know, that many dear brethren regard Household Baptism in the same light as Baptismal Regeneration. With the exception that both apply to infants they have absolutely nothing in common. Those who hold the former do not believe their children are made members of Christ, and inheritors of the kingdom of heaven. They do not think it necessary to take them to a so-called church, nor to a font, nor to employ a "priest." Nor do they think that any internal or spiritual change is wrought upon the child by the application of the water. And therefore the two things ought never to be confounded or treated as if they were one and the same.

Let me now put this question. Are different views of baptism a legitimate and proper cause why brethren should be sundered the one from the other ? Is a rite which has nothing to do with a person's justification before God, the possession of eternal life, or any of those blessings he has in Christ to separate us because our views upon it differ ? Nor is the question even as much as baptism—for we all hold baptism—and we all hold believers' baptism ; and we all hold immersion—but of not being able quite to go the same distance together. The Household Baptist can go all the way the Adult Baptist goes (I do not say as to every shade of interpretation as to its meaning, that is not the point, for adult baptists differ among themselves as to this), but he goes a little further. Very well, this means there is a little bit of the road they cannot travel together. Is that to mean they will not walk any of it together ? Does not the apostle say, " Whereto we have already attained,

let us walk by the same rule?" If I am going ten miles along a road, and another is only going five, is he to refuse my company the first five, because he is not going the last five?

Again, if a man who keeps a store can supply my needs with regard to a dozen commodities, am I to starve because one article he keeps I have no fancy for? Yet we find an editor of a Christian monthly deliberately advising the exclusion of teachers whose views on baptism do not altogether accord with his own. He would rather the sheep of Christ should starve than have *any* food from one who holds Household Baptism. To speak plainly this is nothing more or less than to make baptism everything, and Christ next to nothing. And the terrible and mischievous effect will be that the servant of the Lord who could come with edifying ministry to feed and help the flock of Christ, finds the door shut in his face; the hungry sheep inside; while all that meets his gaze is the placard "We are Baptists."* No wonder he turns away with a burning sense of shame and indignation at the outrage done to the One Who sent him. He had not come to instil baptism into the minds of any, his heart was too full of another message. He had come to speak of a Person at Whose feet we must all bow down, and of a love that passes knowledge; but this finds no entrance for him, and sadly and regretfully he seeks some open door where they will listen.

What are we to think, then, of a difference of opinion about baptism being made a test of fellowship, whether applied to the communion of the Lord's Supper or to the exercise of gift? If it is Christ's fellowship, who dare make it a fellowship of baptism? If it is the fellowship of His death, who would substitute anything else? Dare we allow anything to compete with Him and His sacrifice, much less displace them?

* I am far from crediting all my brethren called "open" with this, and am only dealing with the quotation on p. 27.

Yet this is what is being attempted. To do so is to tamper with the crown rights of the Son of God; to invade His prerogatives, and rob Him of His glory; it is to give an ordinance the place that He alone ought to occupy. I am persuaded that believers are not alive to the full purport of such suggestions or they would never so dishonour their Lord. Personally, I would rather be silent on the subject of baptism all my days than cause one jarring note over it, for I feel that Christ has not sent me to preach baptism but to preach Him.

3. Is the distinct or special fellowship of various groups of assemblies an expression or a denial of the fellowship of the Church of God, and is its maintenance the keeping of the Unity of the Spirit?

Has my reader ever noticed the striking analogy between the course of the movement we are here following, and John's three epistles? In the first we have the manifestation of the Eternal Life, and the relationship and fellowship consequent thereon. It was with this aspect of truth the inauguration of the movement with which Brethren stand connected largely had to do. The very name testifies to this. What does "Brethren" suggest but the possession of a common life in which we are brought into relationship and fellowship with the Father and the Son and with one another? This was the first stage. In the second epistle the great subject is holding the truth, which is essentially the truth of the Person of Christ. This marks the second stage. False doctrine as to Christ was propagated and led to division in 1848. Not so much, strange to say, over the doctrine itself, but as to how best to meet it. The third epistle presents to us Diotrophes, and depicts the last and present stage of our history. Diotrophes, who has long reigned supreme, has a fourfold character. He loves to have

the pre-eminence; he does not receive the brethren; he forbiddeth them that would; and he casteth them out of the Church. I ask anyone, who has any knowledge at all of the events of the last five and twenty or thirty years, whether this has not found its counterpart amongst ourselves? Has there not been the Diotrophes spirit, and has it not become more and more accentuated?

The effect of it has been to split up Brethren, whether "open" or "exclusive," into groups of varying size—each group, practically, restricting its fellowship. The truth of the Church of God—except in theory—has been given up, and each and all, with few exceptions, have settled down to their own company; the main object being how to increase its following and keep itself from being contaminated by any thing outside of it. Thank God there has been a recovery from this of recent years, and those who think for themselves and desire to have their thoughts moulded by the truth have come to see that this only hinders and falsifies the true fellowship of the Church of God. I do not mean, of course, that those who compose these companies are not Christians, but what I do mean is, that there are members of the body of Christ, and not in any way disqualified for fellowship, not only in all these different sections, but outside of them, yet unrecognised.* Now this it will be observed is the very opposite pole to the original starting point. The exception made in the case of certain individuals, which occasionally occurs, does not seriously challenge what is here stated. So that in addition to belonging to Christ you have to identify yourself with a particular federation of meetings; and when you have allied yourself to this you are as far off as ever from those who happen not to be of your particular party.

Dear brethren, what does all this mean but that certain meetings have become everything to certain

* As regards the fellowship of 1 Cor. x.

believers. There is a church within a church; and half a dozen of them; a fellowship within a fellowship; as well as a membership *ab extra* to the body of Christ. And, worse and more terrible in its consequences than anything, belonging to your meetings becomes the all-important thing. Church fellowship with all its privileges, as well as keeping the unity of the Spirit, become identified in your minds with a certain set of meetings. *Every single thing is judged from that standpoint.* You have a group of meetings before you and your estimate of every person and all that relates to them is according to whether he or she belongs to that group. A more false, misleading, illusory criterion could hardly be imagined.

Consider all this with regard to one group of meetings and it is startling enough, but when you have multiplied this by six, if not more, what have you got? Yet, such is the accumulated misery and complexity of the situation. Not only are we asked to believe that *one* circle of meetings represents the true fellowship of the Church and the unity of the Spirit, but we are faced with half-a-dozen rival claimants. Before the situation thus created can be acquiesced in, reason must abdicate her throne, common sense take her flight, and every spiritual idea of the Church be dissipated.

The fact is, brethren do not seem to see that the claim of any one of these "circles" to represent the fellowship of the Church of God exclusively, and to express the unity of the Spirit, is nothing short, when stripped to its naked meaning, of a claim to be *the* Church. Everyone must come to them to be in fellowship, and everyone who does not is denying the unity. Was there then no fellowship before, and no unity of the Spirit? If there was not, by what marks can we distinguish the right fellowship from the wrong, among the multitude of different aspirants to this unique honour of having at last, after sixteen centuries of darkness and chaos, rescued these precious and glorious realities, and made them facts-*once more*? But surely

every thoughtful and intelligent mind will admit that there has always been Christian fellowship and the unity of the Spirit, however dimly apprehended and imperfectly realised. In what did it consist but in owning Christ as Lord, in having His Spirit, in possessing a common share in Christian blessing, and a life in harmony therewith? And if in these things *then*, it must consist in these things *now*. Consequently a fellowship or a unity based upon anything else *to-day* cannot be proper Christian fellowship or proper Christian unity.

It may be asked, What, then, were Brethren raised up for? Is not the answer simple? Not to form any new fellowship, or any new Church, but to make it possible for Church fellowship and the true unity of the children of God to find some more real expression. To give testimony to what *already existed* on the ground of redemption and by virtue of the abiding presence of the Holy Ghost. This was how the movement began, and how it would have gone on, had not Brethren at length begun to think more of a person's relation to them than of anything else. But the *real* fellowship is that which flows from a person's relation to *Christ and His death* and the powerful operations of the Holy Spirit, and not from adherence to a select body of Christians. And the unity of the Spirit is that which the Spirit formed on the day of Pentecost, and there never has been, nor can be, another. If *this* were only truly owned to-day, what a change would come to pass. If we do not own the Spirit's unity—which embraces every member of the one body—we have no divine unity at all, we have at best but a club or a confederation.

I have read papers and letters in which it was clear the writers in speaking of the unity of the Spirit had nothing else in their minds beyond the various sections of Brethren.

But, it will be urged, is not "separation from evil God's principle of unity?" Let it be remembered that these are human words, however highly we may think

of the one who uttered them, and not scripture; and next, like every other aphorism, it may easily be pressed too far. It states a partial truth, and only that. "Separation from evil" never could *of itself* produce unity. It can only conserve a unity already existing. In John xvii., where unity is so prominent, we have first life, then the manifestation of the Father's Name, and lastly the prayer that we might be kept from the evil. But the last would never produce unity apart from the other two. To be occupied with evil, and on the look out for it, thinking mostly of what I am to judge, is only to fall under the power of it myself. And the way we have taken to judge evil is precisely where our failure is most conspicuous. It is the cause of our sorrows and confusion of face this day, and yet many seem inclined to go on with it to the bitter, bitter end. By this persistent judging of evil we have produced more evil than the *supposed* evil we sought to get rid of. Nowhere are we less vindicated before God and men than here. Had we gone on occupied with the truth; had Christ been more before us; and had we sought to see the good in others instead of the evil, we should have had a very different history.

Sufficient proof has been now given that there can be no fellowship other than that which is common to all Christians, and no unity of the Spirit except that which embraces all believers. Certainly, half-a-dozen antagonistic sets of meetings cannot be the unity of the Spirit, for they are mutually destructive.

There is, however, another view to be taken of the matter. It is not merely that the real fellowship of the Church of God is lost in the whirlpool of conflicting circles of meetings, but these circles of conflicting and antagonistic fellowships are a growing and positive evil. First, as regards their moral effect. This seems wholly overlooked, but it is very real. If anyone is to be true to his party, or the circle with which he is in fellowship, he is compelled to discredit every other circle, and think disparagingly of many a godly saint. Nay, it

is compulsory that he treat, as far as Church fellowship goes, those, perhaps, more spiritual than himself, or, at least, his equals, but in any case, saints—that he should actually treat these as if they were scoundrels and debauchees. They are alike outside his circle; and if they come to one of his meetings they would—as far as the breaking of bread goes—be classed together. As I said in the last preface to “The Gates of Jerusalem”: “The saddest feature of all, perhaps, is the necessity that devolves upon each circle to blacken and discredit every other circle. Only in this way can each separate circle of meetings be maintained. For if there is nothing to be said against another circle why is the ring kept up?” The moral effect of looking at my own little circle as something superior to all others, is too obvious to need enlarging upon. It is only the individual “I” magnified. Moreover, in order to keep their own circle inviolate, as is supposed, men are led to do things of which the world would be utterly ashamed—and to do them without a blush, not because they are bad men or wish to be bad, but because in their minds their circle and the truth are synonymous, and they cannot see anything good outside of it.

Next, as to the exercise of gift. We often affirm that gift is for the whole church. What do our rigid lines of demarcation make of this principle? I quote from a letter, received some time ago, to show how the sheep of Christ suffer; and I earnestly commend these remarks to the leaders in each party. “There is one point you have not mentioned, but which I have often noticed, and that is the saints suffer so terribly from the *division* of ‘gifts.’ One meeting has a teacher, another an evangelist, a third a pastor. On account of the barriers some meetings get no teaching, &c., &c. The gifts were meant for the edifying of the *body* of Christ, not for the benefit of one small party; here we have six or seven meetings, if there could but be intercommunion how rich we could be, and how the Lord’s precious Name would be honoured.”

Thirdly, these circles mean that we go along only with those who agree with us on what after all are only minor points. The consequence is the great truths of revelation are not allowed to bind us together, and "all saints" do not occupy us, but just a few. The necessary effect is contraction and stultification. All this I know will be denied. In theory, of course, it is otherwise, but theory does not count for much here. I deal with things as they are. These parties and rings exist. They exist to the terror and confusion of simple souls, and to the damage of the whole Church of God. And it cannot be too plainly stated—the necessity of the case demands it—that to allow such a discrepancy between practice and theory is *to act a lie*, however little this is meant. In discussing these questions with others, I have often found few points of difference as to theory, but in actual practice the theory has been discarded. This is to deceive everybody. Either abandon the theory or bring the practice into harmony with it.

Many feel that something should be done to bring to an end the inconsistency that exists between theory and practice. It is the spirit of Diotrophes that hinders the accomplishment of this. We are in the state of things described in the third epistle of John. Is it impossible to get back to the first epistle? Many long for a return, I truly believe. They groan under a system that necessitates the rejection of their brethren. The present condition—the reign of Diotrophes—is truly awful. To what a depth have we fallen! If we wish to realise it, we have only to compare the first epistle of John with the third. The difference between the two represents the measure of our declension. Contrast this statement: "That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also *may have fellowship with us,*" with this: "But Diotrophes, who loveth to have the pre-eminence among them, receiveth us not prating against us with malicious words; and not content therewith, *neither*

doth he himself receive the brethren, and forbiddeth them that would, and casteth them out of the Church" (1 John i. 3 and 3 John, 9-10). Think of the difference between fellowship with the Father and the Son and the fellowship inaugurated by Diotrephes; of the fulness of joy promised in the one, and the bitterness, pride, and callousness involved in the other; and we shall have some conception of our loss and degradation, our sorrow and our shame.

But if Brethren have changed, if instead of the fellowship of the Spirit, bowels and mercies, and comfort of love, it is the iron hand of Diotrephes; if instead of knowing the sublime meaning of that closing utterance of the first epistle: "We know that the Son of God is come and hath given us an understanding," we are made to know that Diotrephes has not only come, but become prominent and pre-eminent; yet, thank God, the truth has not changed, and we may yet find our way back to it. "Fellowship with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ!" What more can God give us, and would He ever have us satisfied with less? And in the enjoyment of that fellowship, from which not one true child is excluded, the desire will be fed which can only be satisfied in fellowship with all others who have a share in it. People sometimes ask: "Why are you so anxious about our fellowship?" Our answer is: For the same reason the apostle gives. His fellowship with the Father compelled him to say to all the children: "That ye also may have fellowship with us."

Independency.

The charge so often brought against the advocates of such views as are here expressed is represented by the above word. But who are the real independents after all? Precisely the very people who level the accusation against others. Thus, if a few Christians walk in separation from all others, and arrogate to

themselves the exclusive right to be considered the only company true to 1 Cor. i. 9—as we saw recently implied in a letter—this is independency. When a company in any locality refuses to recognise another company of Christians who call upon the Lord, and seek to walk in obedience to His commands, as far as they have light—this is independency. When you see six or more companies of the Lord's people standing apart in rigid isolation, one from the other, this is independency. Independency, according to scripture, is to treat other members as if they were not of the body, and to say, "I have no need of thee." I know people who are guilty of this, quibble, and say, We embrace all the children of God, and would like them to be with us. Yes, of course you would, and a very big "us" it would make. "An available mount of communion," and *you* the mount. But this is putting something in place of the Church, and worse still, in place of Christ.

It would not be independency if, for godly reasons, anyone refused to go to a certain meeting, and yet went to other meetings still in fellowship with it. Nor would it be independency on their part to receive him. Our fellowship is not grounded upon *agreement* as to the *standing* of certain meetings, as to whether they are to be recognised or not. If a meeting was virtually sectarian by refusing the members of Christ, I should leave it, but I should not make my leaving it a test of fellowship for others, nor should they make it a test for me. This is constantly done because of an entirely erroneous conception of the truth of the "one body." No such idea as the decisions of one meeting being binding upon all, or, on the other hand, the necessity to recognise a particular meeting, is ever connected in scripture with that glorious truth.* Except

* I am supposing a case where an individual has ground for disowning a meeting. The same principle would apply where a meeting disowns an individual, supposing, of course, it is no question of actual sin in either case.

in the matter of actual sin and *evil* doctrine the question of fellowship at the Lord's Supper ought never to be raised. (See 2 Cor. vi., 14-18; Eph. v., 11-12; 2 John 9-11). And even then each meeting is responsible of itself to judge evil; for, as I have said, there is no such thought in scripture as the decision of one meeting binding others. Acts xv. affords most valuable *indirect* evidence (and indirect evidence is often the strongest) which conclusively proves this. Paul and Barnabas went up to "the *apostles* and *elders*" about a certain question (v. 2). Verse 6 says, "The *apostles* and *elders* came together for to consider of this matter." Not a word as to the Church. It is quite true that in v.v. 22-3 the whole church is associated with the declaration sent forth. That we can perfectly understand. It made the declaration more emphatic. The church at Jerusalem held a unique position. But in no sense was it an assembly decision upon a general question which became binding upon all other assemblies, and, henceforth, a universal test of fellowship. The bond of our fellowship is the Lord and His Spirit; not whether we feel we can all recognise the same individuals and meetings. We *ought* to do so of course, but whether we *can* do so is another matter.

Is it not quite clear what independency is? It is to refuse any member of the body of Christ his privilege in the breaking of bread. It is to refuse the ministry of any servant the Lord may have sent forth, provided, of course, his character and connections do not dishonour his Lord. It is to raise barriers and apply tests scripture does not sanction. It is to establish a fellowship and enforce a unity other than, or in addition to, what the Holy Spirit has formed. In one word, it is to walk in separation from others, who have an equal right and equal share in all the privileges Christ's death has made theirs, and who have not forfeited recognition by either immoral conduct or evil doctrine. To refuse to enjoy with others the privileges which we

only possess in common with others, and on the same ground—this is independency.*

One more question remains to be discussed. It is this.

Ought the controversy of 1848 to be closed?

Into the original ground of discussion we cannot enter here. Nor is there any need. If *all* that has been said against B.W.N. and Bethesda were true, I, in common with many others, would still feel that the question is not one of sixty years ago, but of *now*. Bethesda itself pronounced the doctrine bad, and eventually refused it. Whether they entirely cleared themselves is not a question for us who live sixty years after; it must now be left to One Who will decide without partiality and without mistake. At all events, Mr. Darby visited Mr. Muller after the final decision of B. was made known, and whatever different versions of this interview may be given, it must have been with peaceful intent and not to provoke further war. Any other interpretation of the visit is inconceivable. Moreover, in 1878—more than thirty years ago—he wrote: “I have no wish to keep up the Bethesda question, not that I judge the evil as less than I thought it, but that from the length of time many there . . . know nothing of the doctrine so that they are really in conscience innocent.” Still another generation has arisen since these words were penned. If there was any truth in them then, how much more now. If thirty years had made such a difference, how much more sixty.†

* It would, of course, be independency if an evil-doer were put away at one assembly and received without repentance at another.

† We have now reached the *third* generation. In Deut. xxiii. 7-8, it says: “Thou shalt not abhor an Edomite; for he is thy brother: thou shalt not abhor an Egyptian; because thou wast a stranger in his land. The children that are begotten of them shall enter into the congregation of the Lord in their *third* generation.” This was under law. Are we, in a day of grace and with regard to the brethren of Christ, to insist upon harsher dealings? In order to avoid any possible misconception, I would add, that, no comparison is instituted here.

The lapse of time, then, is one point in favour of closing this controversy. Another is, the doctrine associated with a certain teacher at Plymouth is not held or propagated by the brethren from whom many have been so long separated. It must be remembered that any gathering on lines that might be termed Brethrenistic which is not known to be "Exclusive" is dubbed as "Open," even though repudiated by them; we cannot therefore vouch for every hole and corner in England; but, if I may be allowed to speak for Open Brethren as such, I think I may safely assert that false doctrine of any kind, really deserving that name, is not only not taught, but would not be tolerated in their assemblies. A frequent charge against our brethren is, that a person, excluded from one assembly for evil, readily finds admittance into another without any reference to his antecedents or any change in him. In considering this point what has already been suggested has to be borne in mind, viz., that there are meetings up and down the country which are not strictly "open" any more than they are "exclusive," and into meetings of this nature it is very possible persons of evil habits, or false notions may find their way when excluded elsewhere, but, again, it may be asserted that brethren who recognise their responsibility to the Lord and to their brethren, do not receive such derelicts unquestioningly. Numbers of charges under this head have been investigated and found to be utterly groundless.

If, then, we consider the lapse of time since the division; if we take into account the fact that the doctrine is repudiated on every hand; and that care is exercised in reception, the question to be faced is this: Is there any reason why a special ban is to be placed upon brethren in the Lord known as "Open"? Hitherto this ban has remained with undiminished force. There has been no relenting of any kind. These brethren have been treated unlike any others. Others have been received from all the different sects and from the

Establishment, if known to be godly; not so these. Can we any longer justify this distinction? It is not a question of adopting their methods, or agreeing with them on points of detail in their local assemblies, nor is it a question of amalgamation. There need be no disturbance whatever of local arrangements. But is there any reason why these should not be received at the breaking of bread. in just the same way as any other Christian? Nine hundred and ninety nine out of every thousand know absolutely next to nothing about the questions that agitated Brethren sixty years ago, much less had they any share of responsibility. To raise any question with them seems as ungracious an act as could be conceived. They are brethren, they are children of God, they are members of Christ, they are ignorant of evil, on what possible ground can they be denied their Christian privileges? My personal testimony is that they gather to the Lord's Name as much as others, and I have realised the Lord's presence in gathering with them.

An objection often raised is, they have never judged the Bethesda question. In what real and rational sense can this be judged now? If the doctrine is meant, then that *is* judged, for no one holds it. And was judged many years ago, however tardily, as some think. If the way of dealing with it is meant, how can people be asked to make themselves responsible for acts done by others sixty years ago? To judge evil doctrine is one thing, to judge whether certain methods employed to meet such a difficulty were the best under the circumstances, is another thing altogether. Then, further, to whom is this confession to be made? Considering the divided state of Brethren the thing becomes an impossibility. Is not the fact rather that we all need to confess to one another, and to the Lord? "Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed."

Is it any wonder after all the evil alleged against themselves that the Open Brethren have entered upon

reprisals? There are those who accuse the Exclusive Brethren of false doctrines. It is truly deplorable the spirit that has been engendered. Brethren, can this be to the honour of the Lord? can it be for the good of His people? or is it calculated in any way to advance the spread of the gospel? Is it not time these mutual recriminations ceased? What possible good can there be in prolonging a controversy which cannot now by any manner of means do any good, but is, every year it continues, increasing the amount of harm?

When Hezekiah sent his letters of invitation to Israel to come to Jerusalem to keep the Passover, we do not read that he made any conditions that would tend to frustrate the gracious purpose he had in view. The conditions arose only out of the nature of the case. All is summed up in these words, (they) "Humbled themselves and came to Jerusalem." We read after, that many of them "Had not cleansed themselves, yet did they eat the passover." "But Hezekiah prayed for them, saying, the good Lord pardon every one." Here was grace. Instead of making the conditions as burdensome and rigorous as possible, it was all the other way. The consequence was the ordinance was kept and there was "great gladness."

Now what would answer to the humbling and the coming to Jerusalem to-day? For myself I have received considerable comfort and help from a consideration of Luke xvii. 1-19. Here we have, first of all, the Lord telling His disciples (and it is specially a word for us): "It is impossible but that offences will come." This cause of stumbling may come from anywhere, even outside the Christian circle, and so a solemn warning is given to any one who might occasion it. Then we have the nearer circle, "Take heed to *your-selves*." The danger lies there, too, not only outside. Have we not proved it? Brother falling out with brother. What is to meet it? The faithfulness that rebukes, and the love that forgives. Is it any wonder in the presence of such amazing forgiveness as the

Lord here inculcates the Apostles should exclaim : Lord increase our faith ? The Lord's answer implies that if we only have faith we should get rid of all the disturbing elements, for faith loses sight of everything else but God. The moment I am looking at some *thing* or some *one* else I am walking by sight. And what is this sycamine tree—this wild fig—which has to be displaced, but—at the bottom of all and at the back of all—the flesh with all that the flesh naturally glories in ?

Then in vv. 7-10 our Lord's remarks come closer home still—it becomes intensely individual and personal ; and, if we know ourselves at all, it probes us to the very quick. In all our service do we think only of the Lord and His exaltation ? When we have served others, do we return to serve Him ? Are we content with no reward, but just to look up into His face and then fall down on our knees confessing, We are unprofitable servants ? “ The cattle I have been feeding are Thy cattle ; Thou Thyself hast been the food given ; the grace to give it has been Thy grace ; and Thou alone canst give the increase. I have only done my duty.” Are we content to make nothing of ourselves and everything of Him ? And does not the incident which follows carry us still further on the same line ? Where does it lead us but to the feet of Christ ? The blessing is not enough, it must be the Blessor. He “ fell down on his face at His feet, giving Him thanks.” He wishes to get into the lowest place that his Saviour and Lord may have the highest ; and with his face away from every other sight but the ground on which *His* feet stood, he adores. This was in Samaria, the outside place of reproach and rejection, and where else would we desire to be but where we see the cleansed leper, until glory dawns and the Kingdom is established ? For the next paragraph speaks of the day of the Son of Man.

Now, dear brethren, whether “ open ” or “ exclusive,”

are we willing to be there? Here is the "humbling," and here is the "Jerusalem" for us. Can we not unite in exalting Him? Is He not worthy to have the first place, and, indeed, to fill every place, so that there is no room for us at all, except on our faces at His feet? Whatever our disagreements and differences, are we not at least at one about this? We shall never get rid of them in any other way, but only as we turn away from them to Him. The stumbling blocks have come. Let us leave to the Lord's judgment whoever caused them. We have forgotten to take heed to ourselves as we ought, and consequently there has been rivalry, and strife, and envy, and bitterness. And we have forgotten to make nothing of ourselves and everything of Him, as our passage so plainly shows we ought; but what is the remedy for it all? Is it not a return to Christ? And, instead of exalting ourselves, and *our* meetings, to join in exalting Him. Instead of proclaiming ourselves right, proclaim that He is worthy. Here is something to attract, and hold, and unite us all. Only on our faces at His feet can we find peace and healing. Here let us all come, and here let us all stay, waiting for God's Son from heaven.

The other day in B——— there stood in one of our oldest meeting rooms, on a certain Lord's Day afternoon, one of the most noted evangelical preachers of our time. He pointed out to the few who stood by him the place in the gallery where Sunday after Sunday he used, as a boy, to sit. Then, pointing down to a spot in front of the desk, he told them how, on one particular occasion, he listened to an appeal from the lips of a servant of the Lord, now gone to his rest, which led him to decision for Christ. And then, having said this, he added these significant words: "But," he said, "you Brethren are too *quarrelsome* for me!" And it is to this our testimony is reduced! Where can we hide our shame? Where, but at His feet. And who can take it from us, but the One Who by His word could cleanse even the leper? Surely if we only get into His presence

we shall yet "with one mind and one mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

A few practical suggestions and observations must bring this already too lengthy letter to an end.

1. By way of a practical suggestion, cannot brethren belonging to different fellowships meet together for prayer? What is there to hinder this approach, at all events? It was tried recently in a certain Midland town, and with such favourable results that it has been repeated. Surely all who hold the apostles' doctrine are really in fellowship and have at least common ground for prayer.

2. In this letter there is no attempt to force fellowship. The writer is well aware this cannot be done. He has only indicated the fellowship which is of God and he must leave the saints to follow it. All we have to do is to give effect to the fellowship which *exists* by the work of God, and not allow it to be hindered by the work of man.

3. The line taken up in this letter, the writer feels, cannot be wrong, for scripture exhorts us to "follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith we may edify another." (Rom. xiv. 19.). What chance have we of edifying one another while we remain in our separate circles? The same chapter tells us what are the paramount things in which the Kingdom of God consists: "Righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost," and then adds: "For he that in *these things* serveth Christ is acceptable to God, and *approved of men.*" Now if scripture says such are *approved of men*, why do we disapprove, by refusing fellowship to many such? And this in the face of the plain injunction: "Wherefore receive ye one another, as Christ also received us to the glory of God."

4. Is it not evident that a system that is built upon principles the very opposite of these words just quoted,

and which persists in *refusing* instead of receiving many whom Christ has received, has become a system fraught with positive evil? And, if this is so, is it not clear, that though at the present time many connected with it are more or less innocent, yet, ere long all who uphold what is evil and mischievous must become identified with it and guilty of it? It is evil and mischievous because it denies the truth recovered in the revival so graciously granted in the early part of last century; it destroys the testimony to Christ and the Church; it is utterly inconsistent because it becomes the worst sectarianism while proclaiming loudly against it; while its harmful effect upon other Christians no one can calculate. It creates a scene of confusion and disorder and completely hinders those who would otherwise learn the truth. What a spectacle! Some nine or ten circles each maintaining its own fellowship. Each circle that proclaims against another has some other that proclaims against it, and the refusers in turn become the refused.

5. It is no question of amalgamating sections or parties. This would at best only make larger sections and larger parties. Nor is it a question of adopting other people's methods, or having to endorse other people's line of service. If we get occupied with these things we miss the main issue altogether, which is simply this: that what I have in the way of Church privileges I only have in common with all other Christians, and I have no right to treat any as if they had forfeited them unless they really have. No mere failure to discern an ecclesiastical principle, or mere want of light can constitute ground for such forfeiture; only known, wilful sin. We need to remember the solemn word in 1 Cor. viii. 12: "When ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ"

6. While brethren remain as they are they cannot be a testimony, for they only testify to what separates them. And thus instead of there being a testimony

to the unity formed by the Spirit, and to all that binds us together as Christians, some single point of departure becomes the key note, and everything of supreme moment is forgotten. Why should not our Lord's own designation content us? "*My brethren,*" is the way in which He spoke of us all. In the realisation, once more, of being His brethren, should we not become one again? If we would only remember we are brethren, and drop our *Brethrenism*, our difficulties as well as our disgrace would become a thing of the past.

7. The only possible corporate testimony is that which is based upon the unity of all believers, and comprehends "all saints." And the fellowship of the Church of God is what it always was. Laid down in the Word as follows:

1 Cor. i. 2. Those we are to recognise as in the fellowship. "All that in every place call upon the Name of Jesus Christ out Lord."*

1 Cor. i. 9. Whose fellowship it is. Not ours; but, "Called unto the fellowship of His Son." We are associates of the Son of God.

1 Cor. x. 16. In what the fellowship consists. A common participation in blessing. "The cup of blessing which we bless." And then a common expression of it (v. 17). "For we being many are one bread, one body; for we are *all* partakers of that one bread."

And what makes all this effectual is "the communion of the Holy Ghost" (2 Cor. xii. 14).

Brethren, here is the abiding fellowship of the Church of God. Let us remain true to it and God will honour us. But if we make our meetings the bond of fellowship instead of God's Son and His death, there is only further disaster before us. If any think they have been faithful in the past over certain matters, when others were less so, may they be enabled to leave that with the Lord, and not make questions of years ago tests of fellowship to-day amongst people ignorant of the questions in-

* Calling on the Lord out of a pure heart is supposed.

volved; nor make their faithfulness that upon which the fellowship of God's people is to be based.

One of the last acts of our Lord and Saviour before He went to the Cross was to stoop down and wash His disciples' feet. After He had done so He said unto them, "Know ye what I have done to you? Ye call Me Master and Lord: and ye say well; for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet." If He did this that we might have part with Him, ought not we to do it that we may have part one with another? Have we not done something very different to this; and has it not occasioned the breaches which now exist?

"Brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His *grace*." Grace alone heals; where it is lacking there are sure to be "roots of bitterness."

Yours in His service and fellowship,

RUSSELL ELLIOTT.

34, CLIFF ROAD,
HYDE PARK,
LEEDS, *February*, 1910.

This letter is not on sale, but any wishing for copies can obtain them by application to the above address. Any desiring to have fellowship in the expense can do so.

The following pamphlets, by the same author, also deal with similar subjects:

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The Gates of Jerusalem	-	-	4d.
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Also two articles in the September and October numbers of "The Witness," 1909.
