

Hindrances to Fellowship

Letters to a Friend

E. Dennett.

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The following letters are basic and simply written. Their character, as well as the ground taken in them, was determined by the position of the friend to whom they are addressed. We hope they may be useful to those who are just beginning to inquire into the ground and necessity for separation from wrong religious positions.

May the Lord, in His abounding grace, condescend to bless them in guiding some of His perplexed ones into the path which is according to His own mind and will.

Blackheath, *October, 1876*

Chapter One. Christ the True Centre of Gathering

Blackheath, August, 1876.

My Dear Brother,

The last time we met you asked if I could direct you to some pamphlet that would explain (1) why those believers who are gathered only to the Name of Christ will not meet with other Christians for "worship," and (2) why they do not associate with them in service.

The question is very important; and I will answer it, for I believe there are many at this special time, like yourself, who are seeking the truth regarding this subject. As the Lord enables me I will give you a few simple but conclusive reasons that to act otherwise would be to lose sight altogether of what is due to the Lord. Many speak of our Pharisaism and the like, but I hope to show you that in the course we adopt we are acting according to God's revealed will. It is simply a question of what the Lord would have us to do.

1. The Honour of Christ

The first reason is a due regard to the honour of Christ. I am sure you will admit, as indeed every believer will profess to hold, that obedience to Christ as Lord is the first responsibility of a Christian. The Lord Himself commands it continually (John 8: 31; John 14: 15, 21-23; John 15: 7, 10; etc.). You will also admit that Christ is the Head of the Church (Eph. 5:23; Col. 1: 18), and hence that He should absolutely control the Church; *i.e.* all its individual members, whether singly or in their collective capacity, as the Assembly. The apostle Paul says, "Therefore *as the Church is subject unto Christ*, so let the wives be to their own husbands in *everything*" (Eph. 5: 24). Admitting this, when I am asked to meet with other Christians in their "churches" or chapels, I have to inquire whether their arrangements are in subjection to Christ. If they are, I can meet with them, but if they are not, I then will have fellowship with their disobedience if I associate with them (1 Cor. 10).

The Ministry

Let me apply a test or two. Take first the ministry, as practised in the denominations, whether in the establishment or in dissent.* Is there a single Scripture which justifies the appointment (in whatever way) of one man "to conduct their worship"? As you know, I have shown conclusively in "The Step I Have Taken" that the theory of "one-man ministry" is utterly unknown in the Word of God. It is true that we find *elders*, but never one by himself in an assembly. Their office was primarily to rule (or, lead), though some might also possess the gift of teaching, for we read of those who labour in word and doctrine. What we contend for is, that there is no class of men in the Scriptures that corresponds in the remotest way with ministers in the establishment or in dissent.

*By *establishment* the author refers to the official state Church, in this case the Church of England or the Anglican Church. *Dissent(ers)* is an indication of those, sometimes called nonconformists, such as Baptists, who have left the national or established church.

Allow me one simple question: By whom are these ministers appointed? *It is by man* in every case; in dissent, by the people (who elect their minister by vote); in the establishment, generally by the patron of the "living"* and the bishop. It is by man, without any divine authority or sanction, for where can the Scripture be found which authorizes the people, or the patron and bishop, to take such a solemn step? Paul, an apostle, with Barnabas, appointed *elders* (Acts 14: 23) and Paul directed Titus to do so (Titus 1: 5). Nowhere can it be found that the authority to even appoint elders, much less ministers, has been vested in the local assembly or in the patron of a "living."

*Reference is here made to the ordaining of "ministers" and to the hierarchy in the Church of England, where the Prime Minister selects or appoints the bishops, authorized by the Queen as Head of the national church.

Such being the case, ministers so appointed derive their office, not from the Head of the Church, Christ, but from man (I do not deny that in many cases they have real gift). *Hence if I recognize them, I recognize the authority of man in opposition to the authority of Christ.*

The "Service"

This fact alone would keep me out of a church or chapel, but I would apply another test. Take the "service," as it is termed. By whom is this arranged? The order, the number of hymns, of Scriptures read, of prayers, etc.? Again the answer is, by man. The whole thing, indeed, has this underlying principle: that man has liberty in the Church of God to do what is right in his own eyes. We maintain, on the contrary, that our sole responsibility is to be in obedience to Christ: therefore, we have no liberty to originate anything, but in all things we have to be subject to the Word.

Jealousy therefore for the honour of Christ, as the Head of the Church, will keep me outside of everything where His authority is disregarded.* It will be said that we must forget about our little differences and show love one to another. No, I answer: I must not let go a single

thing which Christ commands, nor must I tolerate a single thing which does not have His sanction. Therefore, while owning my responsibility to love all the children of God, I also own my responsibility to obey Christ as my Lord; and it is written, "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God, *and keep His commandments*" (1 John 5: 2).

**Jealousy* is wanting to maintain what is properly mine; *envy* is wanting what another has.

2. The Presence and Leading of the Holy Spirit

Now I ask you to consider that if I meet* with other believers of whatever denomination, I would *be a party to the practical denial of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church of God*. The characteristic of this Christian dispensation is the presence on earth of the Holy Spirit. What makes a Christian, according to the Scriptures, is having the indwelling Spirit (Rom. 8:9): the Church was constituted by the baptism of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2; 1 Cor. 12: 13). The importance of this truth is seen from the emphasis laid upon it by our blessed Lord in John 14-16. The point to which I call your attention is, that, because of the presence of the Holy Spirit, He claims the right in the assembly of the saints to use whom He will (1 Cor. 12-14) for ministry or service.

If therefore I assent to the human arrangement and participate in it by my presence,* of a one-man ministry, I am clearly acting as if I did not believe in the presence and leading of the Spirit. If I do believe in it, then, by my presence, I am wilfully opposing His action and thereby infringing on His sovereign rights. This would be a solemn position indeed to take.

*The author refers to "officially" being gathered on the basis on which this group of believers or denomination comes together. When a believer who takes the scriptural ground of gathering is present in the building for family obligations or social reasons, like a wedding or a funeral, this would not indicate that he/she gathers with the people in this "church" or group as if standing with them on the same (sectarian) foundation.

I do not insinuate that the beloved Christians who are in the denominations wilfully take such a position. I know they do not. The fact is, many are in ignorance of this blessed truth. As a proof of it in one quarter, I will cite from a publication of the denomination with which you are connected. It is an exposition of the dedication of the temple by Solomon. One of the lessons is "the reverence we should feel in worship should be as deep *as though an emblem* (referring to the cloud that filled the house of the Lord) of God's presence was with us. He is as surely near" (Gen. 28: 16). What can more clearly demonstrate that the truth of the presence of the Holy Spirit is almost unknown? But if we know it, are we to act as if we did not?

It is therefore impossible for me to be present' at a "service" where this truth is ignored, and where, by human arrangements, the Spirit of God has no liberty to act through the members of the body of Christ there present. In this way the Holy Spirit is quenched (1 Thess. 5: 19-20). Surely you would not have me oppose the Spirit of God. *Jealousy therefore for His sovereign rights keeps me apart from believers in such a position as I have described.*

3. The Priesthood of All Believers

One of the plainest teachings of Scripture is, that all believers are brought into the same position, the same place of perfect acceptance before God, and that all have the same privileges in Christ. Peter is thus able to say to all to whom he writes, "Ye also, as living stones, are built up a spiritual house, *an holy priesthood*, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ" and again, "Ye are a chosen generation, *a royal priesthood*" (1 Peter 2: 5, 9). John, in like manner writes, "Unto Him who loved us, and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and hath made us kings and priests unto God and His Father" (Rev. 1: 5-6).

In Hebrews we have the same truth everywhere implied. Christ as the one Priest is seated at the right hand of God; the veil is rent, and all are exhorted to draw near, "having boldness to enter the holiest by the blood of Jesus" (Heb. 10: 19-22). The consequence is that there cannot be an earthly priesthood now, except indeed in the sense that all believers are priests. The appointment therefore of a special class of men, by whatever name they are termed, whether "priest?" or "ministers" to "conduct worship," is inconsistent with the privileges of all believers and is practically a denial of our common priesthood. Is it not a great shame, with the light we have from the Scriptures, that we should have acquiesced in these things so lone. For if we all are priests, what folly to appoint another to pray for all assembled, *and to do this whatever may be the state of his own soul at the time!* Every Lord's day, at the same time, he must stand before God to pray the same number of prayers as the appointed minister of the congregation, or to read the same prayers from the same book.

My beloved brother, as you have been sitting or kneeling in your pew, has it not often been that your own heart has been filled by the power of the Spirit, and you have yearned to pour out your thanksgiving and praise before God? But you would not be permitted to do this, for there is one in the pulpit whose office it is to pray and praise for you, and the effect is as if he only were the priest, and that you were not in the same place of nearness and privilege. Can you be content with such a system? *Jealousy for the privileges of my fellow-believers hinders my being present at such a meeting.*

4. Lack of Discipline

There is another reason I would mention. I would be in danger of becoming a partaker of evil deeds (2 John 10-11) in many a church and chapel to which I might be urged to go for "worship" or sermon.* It is well known that in most of these there is no discipline whatsoever. Gross immoralities would in some cases be dealt with, but evil doctrines* are seldom regarded as requiring discipline. Take your own denomination. Only the other day I observed that a well-known minister was present at a Bible conference, where he avowed his belief in the doctrine of the annihilation of unbelievers.† This, however, neither affects his standing nor his fellowship with the "churches" of the same denomination.

*Referring to teachings that attack the Person or the Work of Christ, or contradict essential and basic truths as presented in the revealed Word of God.

†Denying the reality of hell, the eternal lake of fire, where the unbelievers with spirit, soul and body will suffer God's wrath, separated from Him in outer darkness, under the consequences of the choice of their own will in rebellion against God.

I could point out several cases of the same kind, such as, for example, where ministers holding the non-eternity doctrine are freely admitted to preach in the different chapels and are members of the same associations with those who are, as to this, sound in the faith. Indeed, in denominational systems, *discipline cannot be exercised*, for if you exclude a believer from one chapel he will find ready access into another. And, as you know, it has been recently decided by the ecclesiastical courts* that a clergyman cannot refuse the "sacrament" to one who denies the eternity of punishments, the personality of Satan, and who even casts a slur upon many portions of the Word of God.

*Official church meeting of leaders, under the laws of the country, to decide upon disciplinary measures.

Should I have fellowship with evil like this? I do have fellowship with it if I meet* with those, be it only occasionally, who tolerate these things. A little leaven leavens the whole lump; a house suspected of leprosy had to be shut up and avoided (1 Cor. 5: 6; Lev. 14: 34-53). Thus separation from evil is God's principle, and I dare not depart from it under the false plea of love; for He is a holy God, and we by His grace are holy. Hence the exhortation, "Be ye holy, for I am holy" (1 Peter 1: 15-16).

*Especially in the breaking of bread, prayers or associating myself with them in service.

The reason we so often overlook our responsibility in this respect is we think more of one another than we do of the Lord. God's glory does not occupy the first place in our souls. It is precisely here that we are all liable to fail. These perplexing questions, indeed, could scarcely arise if the Lord had His due place with us, but once my eye is diverted from Him and is directed to my fellow-believers, I am plunged into uncertainty. It is not too much to say that most believers have fallen into this error of putting the saints before the Lord. As an example of this, at a recent "convention" of believers of all denominations, a principal member of it, in closing the proceedings, summed up the objects for which they had met. The first, he said, was union; the second, brotherly love; and the *third*, the exaltation of Christ. Far be it from me to insinuate that the speaker *meant* to put the saints before the Lord. He did so, however, and thus was unconsciously supplying an illustration of the wrong indicated.

Now, dear brother, I have given you some of the reasons that forbid my meeting with other believers in their "churches" and chapels. More might be added, but those given are sufficient to show you why we think we have the Lord's mind for the course we adopt; that it is not from an overcritical spirit or Pharisaism; that it is not from bigotry; but solely a question with us of what is due to the Lord. We have separated and remain apart from the meetings of other believers, because we are convinced it is the path in which the Lord would have us walk. It is outside of everything devised by man; in a word, outside the camp *with the Lord* (Heb. 13).* To act otherwise, therefore, would make us unfaithful to our convictions, give us a bad conscience, and cause us to lose communion with our blessed Lord.

Commending the whole subject to your prayerful consideration,

Yours affectionately in Christ,

E.D.

*Excellent commentaries and explanations are available to elaborate this point. The immediate context of this passage refers to Judaism. However, by way of application we may regard man-made religious systems, where the Lord finds Himself practically "outside," as far as man's responsibility is concerned. What the Lord does in His sovereign grace, is to be left to Him to decide. This present study deals with the responsibility of Christians to act upon New Testament teaching concerning the centre of gathering (Matt. 18: 20).

Chapter Two. The Exclusive Character of the Ground of Gathering

Blackheath, August, 1876.

My Dear Brother,

I next must indicate on what ground the Lord would have His people gathered in assembly, for I have already shown you why we cannot meet with other believers. You rightfully could say to me, "You have given me strong reasons why I should not go to a denominational church or chapel, and therefore I think you ought to go a step further and direct me where to go." It is in anticipation of this that I propose to point out some marks whereby the assembly of God may be known locally.

1. Christ the Centre of Gathering

The first essential is, that Christ alone should be the centre of gathering. The Lord himself teaches us this when He says, "Where two or three are gathered together in (*unto 'eis'*) My name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matthew 18: 20). I must point out that the Lord does not say He is in the midst of *every* gathering of His professed people. He is only in the midst of those gathered unto His name. Unto His name! Not unto His name and something else besides, like some truth, doctrine or form of ecclesiastical government, but unto His name alone, outside of and apart from every human system and arrangement, gathered round about and unto the Person of a risen and glorified Lord! It was not possible to be thus gathered until after the death, resurrection and ascension of Christ, for it is the Holy Spirit who gathers and He gathers only to a risen Christ.

But you will say, "Surely all believers of whatever name are thus gathered," for I have met repeatedly with the same assertion. It would be easy to refute it, but I prefer to apply a test. Ask a true "churchman" to go to a dissenter's chapel, and he will decline. In like manner ask a zealous dissenter* to go to "church," and he will at once refuse. In both cases they have conscientious objections to the course proposed. This could not be if they were both respectively gathered only

to the name of Christ, for they both profess to love that name, and how could they refuse to go where His name was the only centre of the gathering?

*For the expressions *churchman* and *dissenter*, please keep in mind what has been said earlier about the Establishment and dissenting sects or "churches." The same remarks may apply to other forms of church organizations, even when there is "inter-communion" as occurs frequently today.

The fact is, the dissenter *adds* to the name of Christ certain ideas of his own (drawn, as he thinks, from the Scriptures) on church organization and government; and the churchman, in like manner, has surrounded the name of Christ with his traditions. I grant you that both are generally willing to receive all Christians (this is not universally true, for the largest "church" in your own denomination makes baptism by immersion a condition of membership), *but it is on their own foundation* that they are willing to receive them. Thus, if you go to the "church," you must of necessity agree in all their plans and modes; and so also if you go to a chapel.

You will therefore see that it is not true that denominational Christians are gathered to the name of Christ alone. If they were, they would repudiate all human names, glorifying only in the name of Christ. In fact, a denomination does not appeal to all believers, but only to those of like doctrines and views. Thereby, they practically confess that Christ alone is not their centre.

Let me then earnestly warn you that no gathering can be according to God's mind if the name of Christ alone is not the centre of attraction. Well might the Spirit of God exhort us through His servant, "Let us go forth therefore *unto Him* without the camp, bearing His reproach" (Heb. 13:13).' These huge busy religious organizations round about us truly form the camp, and hence it can only be outside of all these that gathering to the name of Christ is possible. Don't be content until you have found such a gathering, for finding it, you can enter upon the enjoyment of all the untold blessing which is summed up in the words, "There *am* I" (not, "there will I be") "in the midst of them."

2. The Ground of the One Body

A second essential is, that the gathering shall be on the ground of the Church — on the ground of the body of Christ — *and hence it will be around the table of the Lord. I will* explain this more fully. That Christ is the Head of the Church we have already seen; and since He is the Head, believers during this dispensation are members of His body. "By one Spirit are we all baptized into one body" (1 Cor. 12: 13), and consequently we are said to be "members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones" (Eph. 5:30). We are therefore united by the Spirit to Christ in heaven, for "he who is joined unto the Lord is one spirit" (1 Cor. 6: 17). As a consequence we are also "members one of another" (Rom. 12: 5). There is the closest possible bond — a vital bond — on the one hand, between Christ and His people, and on the other, between all believers. This is the unity which the Spirit of God has formed, the unity of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12: 12-13). We are exhorted to be diligent to keep "the unity *of the Spirit* in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4: 3).

This being so, the ground of the gathering of the saints should express this truth, owning thereby (if I may so speak) the unity of the body. That is, we must be gathered as *members of the body of Christ*, not as Anglicans, Wesleyans, Presbyterians, Independents, or Baptists,* but solely as being members of the body of Christ. Any ground of meeting, therefore, which is *wider* or *narrower* than this, is a denial of the truth of the body and thus cannot be God's ground. The application of this principle destroys all denominationalism at one blow; and it ought to do so, because the foundation upon which denominations are based is utterly contrary to the Scriptures.

*Other sectarian names and associations can be added to this list, depending on the local or regional situation in which the reader may find himself.

A further consequence of being gathered as members of the body of Christ is that it will be around the *Lord's table*. The apostle teaches this truth when he says, "The bread which we break, is it not the *communion* of the body of Christ? For we being many are one bread (or one loaf) and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread" (1 Cor. 10: 16-17). The loaf on the table in the midst of the assembled saints is thus the symbol of the oneness of the body of Christ; and inasmuch as all partake of it, it is the further symbol of common membership of that body.

How wonderful in its simplicity! Hence, in the early church the disciples always on the first day of the week came together to break bread. (Acts 20: 7; 1 Cor. 11: 20). They came together *for this purpose* (compare also Acts 2: 42). The object of their being gathered, was not to attend a "service," to hear sermons, but to break bread, and thus to "show the Lord's death till He comes" (1 Cor. 11: 26).

Search, dear brother, for these features of the Assembly of God in your own neighbourhood. Where will you find them in the manifold "places of worship" around? Is it too much to say that your search will be in vain? It's a sad sign of the church's failure and of the utter confusion of this evil day!

3. Liberty of the Holy Spirit

Another characteristic is liberty for the Holy Spirit to minister by whom He will. I have already spoken of this in my first letter, and therefore need not add much here. I may remind you that this also springs out of the truth of the body of Christ. Read very carefully 1 Corinthians 12-14 where it is expounded. There you will see that "the body is not one member, but many," and "that to one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom, to another the word of knowledge," etc.; that "the eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of thee" (1 Cor. 12: 8-21). The apostle thus says, "When ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation" (1 Cor. 14: 26-33). Here is the recognition that every distinct gift comes from the Head of the Church, and that there must be room for its use by the Spirit in the Assembly. If there is not, the coming together (meeting, church, service) is not according to God.

The evil of allowing no exercise of gift apart from the "minister" has kept people in a state of ignorance of the truth, through the incapacity of their chosen minister, when there are often some in the congregation with more knowledge and more gift. There he is, Lord's day after

Lord's day, repeating the barest doctrinal elements, and these distorted by the way they are presented. Furthermore, it is almost impossible to remove him from the office to which he has been appointed. But you have known cases of this kind yourself, and I will not therefore enlarge. I will ask you whether this evil should not convince you that such an arrangement cannot be according to the mind of the Lord?

4. Exercise of Godly Discipline

There must also be the godly exercise of discipline according to the Word. Satan frequently deludes souls now by the presentation of the counterfeit of the truth. On this account it is necessary to be on our guard. It is thus quite possible that you might apparently find the three preceding marks, where there is the absence of this fourth point. Be sure therefore to seek this also, or you may fail in your search.

Discipline has to be exercised in two directions: upon immoralities, specified in 1 Corinthians 5, and upon those who hold false doctrine (Gal. 3 and 6; 2 John: 9-11; Rev. 2 and 3). Most agree (although they may neglect it in practice) that evil walkers ought to be put away from the Lord's table, but there is great opposition to the application of discipline to doctrine. Much is said about "liberty of conscience," but I deny that we have any liberty of conscience against the Word of God, to which we must implicitly bow. "To the law and the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because they have no light in them" (Isaiah 8: 20). The plea is plausible, but one can at once detect in it the device of Satan. If he can undermine the foundations of definite truth, it is as if he had conquered by open opposition.

A professed believer who denies the value of the blood of Christ is as surely lost as an open infidel. To remember this will help you understand the difficulty which the carrying out of discipline for doctrine has met. It really comes to this in some instances: the reception of the enemies of Christ into so-called fellowship. You cannot find the assembly of God where there is no discipline for doctrine, for holiness ever becomes God's house.

5. Subjection to the Word of God

In the assembly of God everything will be ordered in subjection to the Word. The Scriptures must be supreme because they are the expression of God's will. Hence nothing can be tolerated which is either opposed to, or *which is without the sanction* of, His Word.

We are not left to our own judgment and device, but provision has been made in the epistles for the smallest details of the assembly. It is therefore no less disobedience to act without the authority of the Word, than it is to act contrary to it. It is exceedingly important to bear this in mind, for if you examine the matter closely, you will find there is not a denomination of Christians who have not ordered a number of things as they themselves have deemed best.

To illustrate what I mean, I may mention a conversation I had last year with an old fellow-student. I said, "Have you the authority of Scripture for this and that and the other, specifying a variety of things in their ecclesiastical arrangements?" "No," he frankly replied, "we have not,

but," he added, "I contend that we are at liberty to adopt the plans and methods which our experience shows to be best." And, stripped from all disguise, this is the common ground taken.

I contend that everything ordered in the assembly, every act and procedure, all the activities of the saints — prayer, praise and ministry — must be regulated by, and have the direct sanction of, Scripture. The Head directs all, and that Head is Christ; He has recorded His will for us in the written Word. Hence, He has put us in the place, not of devising and arranging, but of obedience.

Wherever you find the marks already mentioned in combination, you will find the place where God would have His saints gathered, because they are the marks of His own assembly. It is true you may find much weakness and imperfection in the saints so gathered,* and these two things have always characterized the Church since the death of Stephen, and will characterize her until the Lord comes.

*How it humbles us today, when we see the condition of the Christian profession, much worse than in the last century. Most of all, how sad to see that the descendants of those who confessed and practiced these Scriptural principles which Mr. Dennett defends in this pamphlet, have been divided by carnal actions. Some 'brethren' groups have even followed false teachers and have developed into cults. However, the failures in the history of "brethren" so-called do not nullify the divine principles that the early "brethren" stood for, and to which they returned. The same truths are still valid in our day, just before the coming of the Lord.

Cautions

On this very account, however, I may add a caution. It is sometimes said the saints at such a place are so earnest and active that surely it would be according to God's will that I unite with them; or there are so many souls converted under the preaching of Mr. X, that it cannot be God's will that I should be in separation from such an honoured servant of the Lord.

Two remarks may be made upon this. First, to argue in this way is to substitute our own thoughts in the place of God's, to follow our own reasonings instead of the written Word. Secondly, there is scarcely a form of Christianity, however corrupt, that might not be supported in this way. If I see ritualistic clergymen earnest and devout (and thank God there are such), am I to conclude that God would have me in association with them? Again, when God in His sovereign grace and mercy — in tender compassion to souls — mightily uses His preached Word for the conversion of sinners, whether in Catholicism, the church of England, or dissent, am I thereby to infer that these systems are after His own heart? Nothing could be more deceitful; and yet these illusive and deceptive reasonings are ensnaring souls on every hand.

Should I be afraid that you will be deluded in this way, dear brother? No, I am convinced the Lord has begun to show you the truth; and having begun the work, He will surely carry it on to completion. But I urge you onward and even remind you of your responsibility, and I am sure that when once you are found in the only place on earth where God would have His saints to be, not only will your gratitude and joy before God abound, but you will also wonder that for so many years your eyes were closed against a truth so plainly revealed in the Scriptures.

May the Lord alone lead you, so that no subtlety of the foe, no decoy which he is so ready to present to exercised hearts, may turn you aside. If your prayer be, "Make Thy way plain before my face," you will soon discover that "unto the upright there ariseth light in the darkness" (Ps. 112: 4).

Yours affectionately in Christ,

E. D.

Chapter Three. Why So-called "Brethren" Cannot Unite With Other Christians in Service.

Blackheath, August, 1876.

My Dear Brother,

I now will answer your question why so-called brethren cannot unite with other Christians in service. Many are asking continually the same question; and recently,* during the evangelistic work of Messrs. Moody and Sankey, it was thought strange, if not a proof of our being outside of the current of God's thoughts, that we did not actively take part in the movement. It is indeed argued by some that, even supposing we have the Lord's mind as to His Church, there is not sufficient reason (as it appears to them) why we should not have fellowship with others in service, when no church principle is involved. Such is your own difficulty, and I will try to meet it according as the Lord may enable me.

*Please, remember that the author is writing in 1876. However, the same questions arise today concerning Billy Graham and Luis Palau for example, without speaking about other issues like association with the Roman Catholic Church and the so-called Charismatic Movement or links with para-church and religious organizations.

1. Pray for All

We can and do pray for many a servant of the Lord with whom we cannot have fellowship. I remember once, while abroad, that an evangelist was preaching the gospel in the very house where some in fellowship were staying, and, though they could not attend his meetings, they met to pray for him every time he preached. It is my own case at this very moment. I am writing these lines in Germany. In this town a well-known English Christian is preaching the gospel, and I most sincerely and earnestly pray that God may use him for His own glory in the conversion of souls. But there are many reasons why I could not attend his meetings. In like manner, when Messrs. Moody and Sankey were in London, they were continually prayed for by the saints at Blackheath.

You will thus see that it is not from any indifference to their labour that we stand apart. Indeed, it is a sore trial to be compelled to be separated from many whose zeal and devotedness we admire, a trial that could not be borne had we not been taught the precious lesson that the

glory of Christ is the one thing to be considered, that He alone must be our object. I am sure you will confess that dear as His people are to us, He Himself is dearer than all others.

2. Supporting Evangelists

Let me take first the case of evangelists, for these present the greatest difficulty to many minds. Nothing can be clearer from Scripture than that the service of the evangelist is individual. He receives his gift from Christ as ascended into heaven, and to Him alone as Lord is he responsible for its exercise (Eph. 4: 8-11). It is important to be clear upon this point, as there is much confusion about it.

I read last week a speech by one of your own "ministers," and he declared that the main work of the *church* was in saving souls. No, I reply; it is not the work of the church at all. It is God's work through the preaching of the gospel; and He has committed the preaching of the gospel *not to the church, but to evangelists*:- to all who with any measure of gift can preach the gospel. The preaching of the gospel is therefore, entirely an individual service.*

*The local saints can identify with the evangelist (when walking properly) and his work, not only by prayers, but also by material and other forms of support. However, the evangelist looks to the Lord for his guidance and sustenance, but appreciates of course the fellowship of his fellow-Christians.

There is still another point. The evangelist is also a member of the body of Christ, and has his place as such (I am speaking now of the normal condition of things) in the assembly of God. While his service is individual, and no one can be permitted to come between him and his own personal responsibility to the Lord, *he yet goes, or should go, out for service from his place in the assembly*. As a consequence of this, if the Lord uses him in the conversion of souls, *he will lead those who have been saved through his preaching back with him to their place in the assembly*. For as soon as they have believed, they are sealed by the gift of the indwelling Spirit and are members of the body of Christ, and have their place as such at the Lord's table. Surely the work of the evangelist is not done until those who have been converted by his instrumentality are guided into their true place as believers.

We have the fullest fellowship with all evangelists who thus labour. If we had not, we would not have fellowship with God in this respect, for, labouring according to His own mind, they can count upon His presence and rest in the confidence that His name will be glorified, whether men receive or reject their message.

Do the majority of evangelists labour in this manner? Take again the recent evangelistic movement in England and Scotland. What was its starting point? The agreement to have nothing to say as to "church" differences and *to endorse all sects that combined in its support!* The method of operation was as follows: Before the two evangelists would go to any place, there had to be agreement between the ministers of all denominations. "Evangelical" clergymen, Dissenters of all shades, and Wesleyans met side by side, forming a committee in support of the movement. The evangelists on their parts would have nothing to say to church or chapel; they would send their converts to all alike. So it was done. If God in His grace converted a sinner, he was sent

back to the church or chapel which he had previously attended. Names were duly catalogued and forwarded to their respective ministers.

Can any one pretend for a minute that this was according to the mind of God? If the churchman thinks that dissent is schism, can he conscientiously recommend, or join in the movement that recommends, a soul as soon as he knows the Lord to go into schism? Can the dissenter, who holds the state-church to be an abomination, conscientiously unite to send a young believer back into that system? And yet they both did it; for a short time holding a truce as to their differences. "He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in that which is much," a divine principle which ever abides, but whoever will act upon it must often stand apart from the activities of his fellow-believers.

3. Other Movements and Activities

I have mentioned only one movement, but the same characteristics pervade most of our modern religious proceedings. It was the same with "the higher life" movement.* Many societies are founded upon the same tacit or avowed agreement, to ignore the Church of God; and many individual labourers, those whose names command most public attention, professedly take the same ground. Permit me then, dear brother, to ask you, in all plainness of speech, if you think it can be pleasing to God to be silent as to the question of His Church? Could the true Head of the Church look with complacency upon any man-made agreement, could He be silent upon arrangements which practically affect the unity of His body? There cannot be any doubt as to the answer. There is our ample justification for declining association with those who thus act.

*This movement over-emphasized the inward spiritual life and contemplation, but underestimated the need for objective study of the Word. It was a form of dualism, linked with pagan influences and mysticism, according to which philosophies the body and material things are of a "lower" order, whereas spiritual and religious matters are of a "higher" order.

The case is still stronger. It is not only indifference I charge upon those of whom I have spoken, but hostility — *open opposition* to the true ground on which God would have His saints assembled. This is a very grave position to assume; for if there is only one ground on earth (as the scriptures teach) upon which believers ought to be gathered, it is a solemn thing indeed to be hostile to it, i.e. to be willing to endorse all the grounds of sectarianism, but not the true ground of the Church. Therefore, we could not, without being false to the truth, join hands with those who oppose gathering only on that ground.

There is yet another aspect of the case. While we are condemned by fellow-believers for standing alone, those who condemn us don't desire our communion unless we will give pledges which they have no right to exact, and which we could not give without being unfaithful to the Lord. Some time back I was asked to preach the gospel in an undenominational building. Before I could reply, it was added, "Of course you will not mention any of your peculiarities." Would one, for the sake of going to a particular place, agree beforehand to keep back anything the Lord might lay upon his heart to speak? No, it comes back to the point already touched upon in the last letter. Is it the Lord or my fellow-believer that I have to set before me? The apostle says, "If I yet pleased men (make this my object), *I should not be the servant of Christ*" (Gal. 1: 10).

I would like to go a little farther into this question. As we have seen before, our place is "outside the camp" (Heb. 13: 12-13), and therefore a place of separation. Are these servants of whom we have been speaking, inside or outside the camp? They are not outside, for they either tacitly sanction or openly link themselves with all the sectarian systems which man has organized and reared, these very systems which in their totality form the camp. If then, I, by God's grace, have been led outside the camp to Christ, must I return into it or associate with those who are in it, for the sake of fellowship? I must either lose fellowship with Christ* or avoid fellowship with those who are in this position. This being the case, you will see the necessity of our continuing in separation; that indeed, fidelity to Christ and loyalty to the testimony He has committed to us, forbids our taking any other path.

*With regard to the light the Lord has given me, I would lose the enjoyment of communion with Him, because of my disobedience. This does not mean that believers who are in the camp, would have no fellowship with the Lord at all. They are ignorant as to the true character of the camp in God's eyes, but they may enjoy fellowship with Him, according to the light they have.

But, People Are Being Saved

You will, perhaps, argue, "But consider how many people are being saved; and if people are being saved, surely such an object demands our active co-operation." There are two answers to this question. First, it is sad to notice how continually man and his blessing exclude or subordinate the thought of God and His glory. It is true that souls are being saved by the ministry of the Word, and we are very thankful that God in His tender mercy is thus gathering in such numbers before the coming of the Lord. But are we to rest in this? Is He, by whose grace the blessing is received, to have no glory from those who have preached the Word or from those who are being saved? Not for one minute do I desire to insinuate that the preachers and converts will forget the source of the blessing, but what I mean is this: Is not the claim of God over the saved ones to be asserted? Are they not to be reminded that, being saved, they are saved not for their own blessing merely, but for God's glory and that God will be glorified in their entering upon the path of separation and taking the place of obedience and testimony? The desire of God's heart for them is not accomplished until they have come forth without the camp unto Christ, bearing His reproach.

It seems almost cruel to say to newly converted persons, in answer to their question, "What is my next step?" that we must refer you to your own study of the Scriptures. Recently I asked one who had just been converted, "Are you at the Lord's table?" His reply was, "There are so many tables, I do not know which is the Lord's." This is only a sample of the many believers who are "wandering as sheep without a shepherd." let the evangelists, therefore, take their stand upon the Word of God, being prepared at all costs, even at the expense of the co-operation of many beloved brethren, and of popularity too, to have God's glory before them as the first thing in their own labours. Let them also put it before those who are saved by their ministry. As long as this is not the case, I cannot be in association with them.

Secondly, if I am to co-operate with all who are used in the conversion of the unsaved, I will have to associate with Catholics, ritualists and every other section of Christendom.* The fallacy lies in supposing that God endorses the position and ways of every one who is so used.

Many are thus deceived. I read a letter from a minister to a believer who had been led outside the camp, in which he took this very ground. He said it was a very solemn thing to oppose a ministry which God had so manifestly owned by the blessing He had granted through it. But the question is this (and surely a teacher of the Word should have remembered it). Is the particular ministry sanctioned by the Scriptures? If it is, we are bound to receive it; if it is not, we are equally bound to reject it. So with one who is used in the conversion of souls. While I honestly bless God for the display of His grace, for my own guidance I have only to ask, Are the ways and position of the labourer according to the Word of God? If they are, I can heartily join hands with him; if they are not, I cannot associate myself with him in his false position, in his *disobedience*. For disobedience it is, though he may be unconscious of it.

*This is a real problem today with otherwise bona fide preachers like Billy Graham and a host of others.

Religious Societies

If I am constrained to be apart from many devoted labourers, how much more from the "religious societies" which extend throughout the world, with their elaborate machinery for the raising of funds and their diverse activities, one of the saddest symptoms of the corruption of this evil day. I am intimately acquainted from my past position, and from having served on many committees, with their modes of action. But I do not desire to draw the veil that conceals so much that is alien to the mind of Christ, and it will be enough to say that no instructed Christian could be connected with such.

Take up certain copies of the "religious" newspapers or church-sponsored magazines, and you will find bazaars advertised, many of which are rendered more attractive by military or other bands, and lotteries. Advertisements of sermons by notable men, with collections afterwards; meetings so arranged as to attract by the repute of the speakers the largest number of people. All these things are done professedly in the name of Christ.*

*I am not able nor allowed to judge the motives of those who do these things. The point is whether I can associate myself with these things, as they conflict with the light the Lord in His grace has given me.

Oh, my brother, to mention these things is to reveal their character, as well as to show the hopelessly corrupt condition into which the professing church has fallen! Can you wonder then that we stand apart or that we urge continually the need of separation from all these things which are so utterly opposed to the mind of the Lord?

I know the path of the believer, and especially of the servant, is increasingly difficult in this evil day. But we have been forewarned, and our resource has been provided. "This know also," says the apostle in writing to Timothy, "that in the last days perilous times shall come" (2 Tim. 3: 1); and if you will examine the whole chapter you will find mainly three things. First, the characteristics of "the perilous times" (vv. 2-9); second, that persecution must be the lot of the godly (vv. 10-12); and finally, that the word of God is our only resource (vv. 14-17). I commend this chapter to your earnest prayerful study, with the hope the Lord may use it to untangle you

from all that is contrary to His will and give you confidence in Himself to take boldly the place of separation.

Having the Lord's Mind

In conclusion I may add that the essential thing in service is to have the mind of the Lord concerning that on which we are engaged. It is impossible, therefore, to lay down absolute rules which will meet every case, but if I am in communion with Him who deigns to send me, the path will be plain, however difficult it may be to walk in it To be, however, in communion, I must be both *obedient* and *dependent*. Our Lord thus said to His disciples (and surely also to us), "If ye abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you" (John 15: 7). The order is significant: abiding in Him first, i.e. living in constant dependence upon Him, and then His words abiding in us, controlling and governing us altogether; yea, forming Christ Himself in us; that is, first state of soul, and then the walk, life, activity, formed by the Word. Begin with Christ, and then there it not much difficulty in knowing what is suitable to Him in our path and service. May I ask you then, dear brother, to look away from your own thoughts, from your own service, and from the thoughts and face of your fellow-believers, and let your gaze be directed singly to Christ as you cry, "Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?" For "if thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light."

Yours affectionately in Christ,

E. D.

Chapter Four. Until He Comes

Blackheath, August, 1876.

My Dear Brother,

In these few lines I would like to leave you, if possible, in the presence of Him who alone can make the truth a living power in your soul. The danger is so great of letting the truth slip by us, of comforting ourselves with the thought that others go on happily. Therefore, we are inclined to say, "Why should we be troubled with all this exercise of soul?" I will only bring two things before you in reply to this question.

1. The Coming of the Lord

The first is the coming of the Lord. Are you, dear brother, living in the daily expectation of the return of Christ? What has He told us in His last message to His Church? "He which testifieth these things saith, Surely I come quickly" (Rev. 22: 20). Three times in this chapter He makes the announcement. (vv. 7, 12, 20). What a blessed prospect is thus unfolded to us! Who went down into death for our redemption and met all God's wrath that was due to us as sinners? His love was so vast and so intense that many waters (those waves and billows of wrath which passed over His soul) could not drown it, and the floods could not quench it. We shall be

permitted to behold this very same Man, though now His sorrows are ended and He is glorified at God's right hand. We will see Him as He is, for we shall then be like Him (1 John 3: 2). What a prospect! How it fills us with unspeakable joy to anticipate it, as we look away from all else and think of that moment when He will come to receive us unto Himself, that where He is we may be also (John 14: 1)! Well indeed might we anticipate it, for that moment will be the fruition of His own joy, as well as the consummation of our blessings.

2. The Lord's Three Expectations

There is a question that springs out of this, and this is the second thing I wish to bring before you. During the little while, the interval of waiting until He comes, what does our Lord expect of us here? This chapter (Rev. 22) gives the answer. We have pointed out the threefold announcement of His speedy coming, and now let us look at their different connections. The first is, "Behold, I come quickly; blessed is he that keepeth the sayings of the prophecy of this book" (v. 7). Thus He teaches us that *obedience* is what He prizes in His own while they await His coming; and this obedience, as we know from John 14, is the proof of our love.

Who then, with such a word as this, will seek to excuse himself from obedience? Will not every true believer rather say, "What a privilege my Lord has bestowed upon me, to permit me to declare my love for Him whom man rejected, by keeping His Word!" With what delight does His eye rest upon those who amid trials and even dangers, make this the one object of their lives!

Then He speaks again, and says, "Behold, I come quickly: and my reward is with Me, to give every man according as his work shall be" (v. 12). Here we are taught that He looks for *faithfulness* in His servants; and, moreover, that He will recompense them accordingly (compare Luke 19: 12-26). Again, and for the last time, He speaks, "He which testifieth these things saith, Surely I come quickly." The response of John is, "Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus" — a response which should flow spontaneously from the heart of every saint. Thus we are taught that during the little while we await, our *affections* are very precious to Him.

These then are the three things which He looks for from us now: *obedience*, *faithfulness* and *affection*. In the light of this truth, the prospect of the Lord's coming and what He values in His saints while they are expecting His return, I ask you, dear brother, to consider and to decide the questions which I have had the privilege of bringing before you in these letters.

Commending you once again to the guidance and blessing of the Lord,

Yours affectionately in Christ,

E. D.