

# An Open Letter On Present Exercises

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July, 1938.

Beloved Brethren in the Lord,

This letter is written in the humble hope that it may be some little help to those gathered to the Name of the Lord, who, in many parts of this country, as well as in other lands, are deeply distressed by individuals, and in a few cases by meetings, that, in spite of protest, persist in having intercommunion with Open Brethren meetings, and thus take a course which, it is feared, if not firmly refused, must lead to further division among the people of God.

It is common knowledge that in America a division has been caused amongst the so-called Grant Brethren owing to the fact that certain individuals, and meetings, have persisted in taking a course that has led them into intercommunion with Open Brethren.

Further, we have recently seen how a large number of the so-called "Lowe" (or "Elberfeld") Brethren in Germany have, not only abandoned the truths of the Assembly in order to meet the demands of political leaders, but have also departed from divine principles by the further retrograde step of amalgamation with the Open Brethren.

In the face of these facts it surely becomes us to raise our voices, not only against this solemn departure from the path of separation, but also on behalf of the truths involved. Thus, while seeking to avoid all personalities, the writer would seek to call attention to the great principles that are at stake; to warn brethren against the methods by which the enemy is seeking to rob the Lord's people of the truth; to arouse exercise as to the low spiritual condition that exposes the people of God to such attacks; to appeal to the consciences of those who are leading in this down-grade movement; and to encourage those who oppose it to stand fast in the Lord and the power of His might.

Looking back over the long history of the professing Church we can thankfully own that there have been gracious revivals of evangelical truths. But, beyond all such revivals, let us not forget that, in the early part of the last century, the Lord recovered to many of His people the great truths concerning Christ and the Church.

At that time the eyes of many were opened to see, not only the absolute necessity and importance of the knowledge of forgiveness and justification, but that, beyond all these personal blessings with which the mass of believers are content, there are the deeper truths of the calling and purpose of God unfolded to us in the mystery concerning "Christ and the Church."

Thus the truth of the Church in its different aspects was gradually recovered to the people of God. Believers were seen to be "One flock" under "One Shepherd"; the one Body of which Christ is the Head; the House of God for an habitation of God through the Spirit; and as the Bride espoused to Christ.

It was further seen that distinct privileges and blessings are connected with these different aspects of the Church. It became clear that as the "one flock" the people of God are viewed as "**strangers and pilgrims**" passing through this wilderness world wholly dependent upon "one Shepherd" for spiritual food, and protection from every foe. As the one body of which Christ is the Head, it was seen that the people of God are viewed **as a heavenly people** united to, and represented in, their Head in heaven, and as the one body, are left here to represent the moral excellencies of Christ on earth. As the House

of God it was seen that believers are viewed as "**the pillar and base of the truth**" to witness to the grace of God in the power of the Holy Spirit. As the Bride of Christ, it was seen that Scripture views the people of God as taken up for the satisfaction of the heart of Christ, and as such are to be subject to Him in response to His love.

Further it was seen that these privileges and blessings entail corresponding responsibilities. If God gives light, it is incumbent that we should walk in consistency with the light. At once the question arose, How can we take up our responsibilities, and walk according to the light that God has given, and yet remain in religious systems which, by their constitution, doctrines, and practice, in different measures, set aside every truth 'concerning "Christ and the Church"'? In answer to this question it was found that Scripture provides for this day of ruin, and that the individual who desires to answer to the mind of the Lord is instructed to "depart from iniquity"; to "purge" himself from vessels to dishonour; "turn away" from the mere religious profession that has "form of piety," but denies the power thereof; and, having separated from the evil, is to "follow righteousness, faith, love, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart."

Thus the believers, to whom these truths were recovered, found that if they answered to the truth of the "one flock," and followed Christ as the "One Shepherd," they would be led outside the camp and every religious system formed after the pattern of the camp. (John 10: 3; Heb. 13: 13) Further, they found that if they walked in the light of the one Body of which Christ is the Head, at once they were outside every religious system which in practice is a denial of the one body, or sets aside the Headship of Christ. Again, they found that if they walked as becomes those who form the House of God, at once they must refuse every religious system which, by its human organization, ignores the presence of the Holy Spirit. Lastly, if walking according to the truth of the Church as the Bride of Christ, they found that, in devotedness to Christ, they must refuse all teaching that would draw their hearts from Christ by presenting "another Jesus," "another Spirit," or "another gospel." (2 Cor. 11: 2-4) Thus, in order to answer to the light, those to whom these truths had been recovered separated from the religious systems of men in order to gather to Christ alone in the outside place of reproach.

But, as in Apostolic days, the great effort of the enemy was to rob the saints of this great mystery concerning Christ and the Church, so from the moment of this recovery of the truth, the enemy has unceasingly sought to rob us of these truths. He has sought to accomplish this end in two ways; first, by seeking to lead us to adopt **principles** which, in practice, deny these truths; and secondly, by seeking to lead us to abandon **the path of separation** in which alone they can be carried out.

The first great effort to lead believers to adopt principles destructive of the Church in its practical administration was made in connection with the Open Brethren movement which had its origin in a meeting known as "Bethesda," Bristol. Of this movement, one has given a true summary, as follows:- "The avowed principle of the 'open' communion of the independency of each one gathering of every other is — we know — contrary to the One Lordship of Christ, to the truth that He is Head, to the fact that there is one Spirit, to the consideration that the instructions given in the Word of God to one gathering are in view of, and for the guidance of, all gatherings in Christian fellowship (1 Cor. 1: 2; 4: 17; 7: 17; 14: 33, 34; Rev. 2: 7, 11, 17, 29; 3: 6, 13, 22); and it is inconsistent with the 'partnership' (fellowship) to which all Christians in every place are called (1 Cor. 1: 9), and with the truth that there is one body, energised by one 'ego,' Christ. These truths recovered to us by the grace of God, are distinctly challenged in these days by the principles of independency affirmed by 'open' brethren as such, and are rendered the more alluring and deceptive to the ordinary Christian by the undeniably evangelical activities of those who profess them. We would acknowledge that which is of God in any Christian, and thankfully do so; yet if Christians justify principles destructive of the testimony of the

Lord because they are held in common with much gospel interest, we cannot accept this as the true way of the Church according to Scripture." (W.H.W.)

For several generations those to whom these truths had been recovered realised the seriousness of this movement. They saw that inasmuch as those who were led away into this independent movement had given up the light, they were, in this respect, in a far more serious position than believers in the sects who had never received the light. Thus those who sought to remain true to the light God had given firmly refused to have fellowship or intercommunion with gatherings of Open Brethren.

But what has been the recent history of those to whom so much light has been given? Have we not to confess that of late years there has been a gradual tendency to decline from God's principles, to forsake the old paths and seek a wider path which entails little reproach and is more popular and pleasing to the vanity of the flesh? One has truly said, "The principles of God may be deserted by easy gradations. They may first be **relaxed**, then **forgotten**, then **despised**. They may pass from a **firm** hand into an easy one, from thence to an **indifferent** one, and find themselves at last flung away by a **rebellious** one. Many have at first stood for God's principles in the face of difficulties . . . , then merely grieved over the loss of them, . . . then, been careless about their loss or maintenance . . . and at last, with a high hand broken them." (J.G.B.)

Have not these words a solemn voice for us in this our day? Have we not to admit that the great truths concerning Christ and the Church have been largely neglected? We read hardly anything of them in printed ministry; we hear little of them in public ministry, and they are seldom mentioned in the prayer meeting. It is not, indeed, that we have given up the gospel: but is there not a real danger of sinking down into evangelism without the mystery? It has been truly said that, "The mass of Christians would be satisfied to see the saints up to the gospel with "good conduct, and good works." But as in Paul's' day, so in this, if we are to enter into "the full assurance of understanding to the full knowledge of the mystery of God" it will entail "great conflict."

Moreover, the enemy is not only seeking to rob us of the truth by the neglect of the truth itself, but, it is increasingly evident that he is seeking to do so by leading us **into** intercommunion with Open Brethren and thus **out of** the path of holy separation which is alone consistent with those truths.

This movement has shown itself in two ways; first by **individuals** in different meetings, persistently ministering in Open Meetings (and in some cases breaking bread). Secondly, by **meetings** not only approving of individuals going to Open Meetings to minister, but also inviting Open Brethren to minister in their midst, and thus, by the "interchange of pulpits" leading to all barriers being broken down and to the ultimate inter-communion with the independent position, by the underhand method of "peaceful penetration".

Wherever this course has been taken, whether by individuals or meetings, it has invariably led to sorrow, confusion, and disintegration. We may well ask, then, Have not those who have taken this course ceased to follow "righteousness, faith, love, peace, with those who call upon the Lord out of a pure heart"? As one has said, "To profess to be separated to Christ — and this is the only consistent cause of our being where we are — and yet to dabble on every possible occasion in every or any system from which truth demands separation, is not **righteousness**." (W.H.W.) To seek to escape reproach by taking a wider path, with its numbers and popularity, and approval of the religious world, is not **faith**. To take a path that only brings sorrow and confusion among those in the outside place, and bolsters up our fellow believers in false systems that do not give Christ His place as the "one Lord," nor the Holy Spirit His place in the Assembly, is surely a heartless disregard of **love**. To deliberately pursue a course that ignores the consciences of the Lord's people, and leads to further scattering and division,

cannot be the way of **peace**.

Those who prefer this wider path can easily take it, and do all that they are doing without bringing any confusion among the people of God, by simply withdrawing from those who have always firmly refused this course as contrary to the mind of the Lord. This surely would be the only upright path for such to take. Alas! seeing there are individuals and meetings that refuse to take this course, the question arises how are those to act who desire to maintain what they know to be the truth? In the case of **individuals**, who, after all protest, persist in associating with Open Brethren meetings, and thus "cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine ye have believed," we are definitely told to "avoid" such. (Rom. 16: 17) Where this instruction has been faithfully acted upon, the meetings have been finally delivered from such troublers by their ultimate withdrawal, for no one can remain in a meeting who is avoided by all. In the case of **meetings**, that definitely take independent ground, the only course is for the neighbouring meetings to take the matter into godly consideration, and if every protest and appeal is unavailing, to refuse to have further fellowship with the meeting. In a few cases our brethren have been compelled to take this sorrowful course, and hitherto, acting in the truth of the one body and the one Lord, the judgment of the neighbouring meetings has been respected by brethren generally and thus we have been spared the sorrow of further division.

Recently, however, a more serious exercise has arisen inasmuch as cases have occurred of meetings taking independent ground while **the neighbouring meetings refuse to take action**. Thus there arises a class which while not going to the extreme lengths of independency yet refuse to raise any protest against those who do so. Such take a neutral position and, it is to be feared, under the name of charity fall into the snare of indifferentism, and thus fail in love to their brethren, and faithfulness to the Lord.

This presents difficulties of a more serious nature, for it is evident if those in the immediate neighbourhood of a meeting taking independent ground refuse to act, then those further afield, who desire to retain the truth and act for the Lord's people and the Lord's glory, will, for their own protection, have to act. In so doing they must remember that they are not dealing with an ordinary matter of local discipline but with an abandonment of principle that concerns us all. Thus it would seem the only course, if protests and appeals are unavailing, is to firmly refuse to have fellowship with the independent meeting, in spite of the refusal of the neutrals to take action.

Furthermore, we must surely feel that it is not enough to judge and refuse this independent movement, but that it also becomes us to humble ourselves for the low spiritual condition that has made such a movement possible. That which brought about the ruin of the church at the start was **a low moral condition**, as the Apostle had to write, "All seek their own, not the things which are Jesus Christ's." Like the returned remnant of Haggai's day who ceased to build the house of the Lord and occupied themselves with their own houses — and thus failed in the very purpose for which they had been brought back to the land — so we, in our day, have failed to maintain the truths for which we have been delivered from the Babylonish captivity of the sects, and have settled down in our own things seeking our own ease and respectability. Does it not, then, behove us all to humble ourselves before the Lord for our failure, and judge ourselves for our worldliness and the consequent neglect of the truths so graciously recovered to us?

Thus humbling ourselves in His presence may we not count upon the compassions of the Lord, seeking that He might graciously stem this downgrade movement, and grant a little reviving by drawing us to Himself, and to one another, in obedience to His words, and in the bonds of His love?

It has been said that whatever truth God has been pleased to give to men He commits it first to

their responsibility to hold in its integrity. Secondly, that men always fail in their responsibility. Thirdly, that the truth men have failed to maintain, God in His grace makes good in a remnant. Thus, in spite of all the failure and disintegration that has taken place amongst those who have received so much light, may we not confidently trust that, in this land as well as in others, there will be found until the end, the twos and threes seeking to walk in the old paths, and who, in great outward weakness; will seek to keep the Lord's word, and not deny His Name. May it be our earnest desire to be found of this number when the Lord comes!

If then, in the face of every opposition we are to hold fast that which we have, that no man take our crown, it can only be as we "Stand fast in the Lord"; are of "The same mind in the Lord"; as we "Rejoice in the Lord" and remember that "The Lord is near." (Rev. 3: 11: Phil. 4: 1, 2, 4, 5)

Looking at the sorrowful and divided condition that exists amongst those to whom so much light has been given, we may be tempted to lose all hope and say with Jeremiah of old, "**The anger of the LORD hath divided them; He will no more regard them. . . . Our end is near, our days are fulfilled; for our end is come**" (Lam. 4: 16, 18). Nevertheless, if we look above and beyond all the failure, to the Lord, faith will also say with Jeremiah, "**Thou, O LORD, remainest for ever; thy throne from generation to generation. . . Turn thou us unto Thee, O LORD, and we shall be turned; renew our days as of old.**" (Lam. 5: 19, 21)

Yours affectionately in the Lord, HAMILTON SMITH.