

A Letter on Neutrality as to Christ, or Bethesda.

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Beloved Brother,

I am glad at having received your second letter, and I purpose, if the Lord will, to give it a larger answer than perhaps you counted on. But I do so designedly — for I believe the "Brethren" have, under present circumstances painful as they are, an opportunity of learning some good lessons, and we may, through grace help each other to improve the moment.

For that end and with that hope, it is well to separate our minds, as far as we can, from the personalities and even the acts, which have marked the progress of this controversy, that we may be the more free to look at the principles involved in it. But if you judge that there has been too easy a passing over of certain offences, I refuse not to own (as I said in a former letter to which you refer) that I have indeed been stumbled by some things done, said, and written, which I believe every saint ought to be able to judge, and judging, to resent.

If it be said, in defence of these things, that relative claims are to be postponed when faith apprehends the Lord's claims, I can understand that, and see it largely illustrated in scripture. But I do not understand, that, because Satan is assailed or because a work of the enemy is undergoing exposure, respect to some ordinary rules of good faith and charity is to be denied. I read that, when Michael contended with Satan, he did not bring against him a railing accusation.

One from whom for more than twenty-five years I have learnt much of the mind of God, long since said to me, "Take care you do not correct the flesh by the flesh." Had this been remembered by us all in the progress of this sad controversy, we should now have to rejoice in results instead of mourning over them.

And it is not only that wrong things have been done; opportunities of good have also been hindered and lost. A sifting has been going on, I would not deny. But in the progress, some have not had the skill of a Master's hand. Has there been that "gentleness," that "patience," that "meekness," in instructing, which the Apostle enjoins, even where a work of the devil is distinctly owned? Has there been his required "absence of striving?" (2 Tim. 2.)

I am quite ready to say these things, and to ask these things, dear brother. But still I say, I would rather that we could consent to lay this aside for a time, and look together at what through God's grace, even this occasion (grievous though it be) may afford us and bring to us a blessing. If there were in each and in all a readiness to discover and confess one's own measure of wrong, a harvest might be and would be reaped. And from the letter of request lately written to B- from brethren near London, I cannot but hope that this readiness does exist.

Yon ask me to answer one or two questions as to what my conduct would be, were I in certain places. I do not like the language generally of either threat or resolution; nor do I find that I am as yet equal to say what would be the course in many cases which might be suggested. Here in Dublin we are speaking together, and desire to do so patiently, not listening to hearsays or charges, but considering principles of action, with God's mind in His word about them, as far as we have grace to discern it.

To deal however, with principles in the abstract, or as at a distance, is a different thing from dealing with persons and places long loved and cherished. The affections get at once engaged. I should not, for the present, lightly seek many places which I could mention to you from this feeling; greatly

longing for a time of restitution among us, and willing to escape from the necessity of acting, if I may do so, without foregoing clear duty or service.

You tell me, there are precious saints at B-. Sure I am of it, dear brother, and can recall happy moments of the Lord's presence, times of refreshing, as we speak, between their souls and mine. Would there were an open heart in all to let in the flow of these sweet remembrances! For sure I am there are many misinterpretations, and in a thousand instances confidence is deserved where now it is withheld.

And further I say as to B-, let acts be allowed to cancel acts. If prejudice were not at work among us, this, I believe, would be readily allowed. If B- at the beginning were slack in judging the evil doctrine, her subsequent dealings with it may be received as restoration or repentance. Common grace and candour would (under ordinary circumstances) be pleaded for as much as this. And I could indeed say, Oh that this candour and grace were in exercise! But still, on the other hand, I would expect that B, on her part, would be ready to act further than she has, if uneasiness remain as to the real value of these ulterior acts of her's in the minds of any. If her faithfulness to the Lord be still questioned, let her add zeal, and revenge, and clearing of herself, to what she may have already done.

This is not too much to expect from either side.

But acts, dear brother, are not the only ingredients in the case. There have been standards lifted up. And B-'s standard puts her on wrong ground. I am sure of it. Principles avowed by public writings, after the most solemn sanction of the whole assembly, are (in my eye) standards. And these writings are not to be cancelled by acts or by any private communications.

They must be cancelled by writings of equal dignity with themselves. If the assembled brethren sanctioned them, let the brethren be assembled to annul them, with confession too of the error they were betrayed into. I allude to the "Letter of the Ten." And I say further, that if that letter but seem to admit that doctrines which involve reproach on the Lord Jesus may be carelessly passed by — if it but seem to admit that communion may be held with places defiled by such doctrines, let me ask you, dear brother, ought it not to be renounced with indignation? Ought not private injuries to be forgotten, that this service may be done in a way worthy of it? But my present purpose is not with B-. They are surely not only at liberty but bound to act to their Master. But as my late letter, to which you refer, has led to no action on their part, I am not appealing to them again. A letter from an individual, though printed, is no act of the assembled brethren, such as the case asks for. My business therefore is not now with them. But I have a purpose and a desire towards others who are truly dear to us all.

There are, as you know, (because you refer me to them) other public writings as well as this "Letter of the Ten." They are called Memorandums or Statements put forth by the gathered saints of some different places, well known to us and long loved and cherished. I invite you to look again at those writings for a little. I lament them very much, for they are hindering restoration. Be sure of it: negative ways are not sufficient in moments of general alarm and suspicion. Defective statements ought to be remedied; they hinder restoration. These writings do not, I know, give us *all* which the brethren in those different places would set forth, if they saw the need. I want them to see this need. The anxiety and diffidence which have been raised demand a heavy pressure to allay it, and these writings only increase it. They are direct stumbling-blocks in the way of restoration.

They do not give pledges that anything more than christian fellowship is proposed. Read the Declarations for instance from Tottenham, Torquay, and Taunton. They are not the voices which would naturally break forth from church-ruins; and nothing other than such voices ought to be heard in these Declarations. I do not say we need them at all. But if we get them, let them be such. Evangelical brotherhood, or christian association, will not meet (as you happily express it) "the instincts of the

living stones." No, indeed. Those instincts desire "the spiritual house, the holy priesthood." If these Memorandums come forth in such an hour as the present amongst us, let them avow the peculiarities of the church. The moment demands this, and any thing less than this will be a stumbling-block. It is not like one's infancy of twenty years ago. Questions are now raised which had no place then. Fears and suspicions are now awakened as to the principles of our common ways in Christ. The time is important to the edification and health of our gatherings, and calls for more consideration than those writings give it.

I greatly desire the dear brethren would review them. One letter from a kind-hearted brother (well-known among us) seems to speak as though false doctrine were not matter for the action of the gathered saints, wrong practices being their due concern. I know you are not of this mind, and I know not where I am, if such a thought as that is to find place among us. We might well open our eyes, not with admiration but with amazement and sorrow, and ask, "what manner of stones and what buildings are here!" Weak though we be in more senses than one, still we are to be as decided as John himself in shutting the door in a given case — as fervent as Paul himself in purging out leaven; and though but a church-ruin, we are still to do the duty of the church in being a pillar of the truth. Those Memorandums or Statements (to say no more) do not avow right principles, while (in a very important article) the "Letter of the Ten" is *inconsistent with right principles*.

It is this which led me to say (to which you refer) that they were not as guilty as the Letter from B-. They were put forth, I do not doubt, simply to meet a moment of peculiar character, and seem to take independent ground; and, as I said before, they do not, I know, adequately present the mind of the brethren who signed them. But I desire that the stumbling-block may be taken out of the way. "Cast up, cast up the high way," dear brother, "gather out the stones, lift up a standard for the people." These writings are stones to be gathered out, I am sure. They hinder our travelling together "the high way." The recalling of them would be a gathering out of stones, and lead (I have hope) to the lifting up of a standard worthy of the people of God in this day. I dread a fixed and adopted separation among us. Efforts ought still to be made for a restoring of gatherings one to the other, and for their finding themselves in an advanced position. It is terrible to contemplate a permanent breach.

Thus have I taken upon me to speak to you, beloved, but designing it to be in the hearing of those brethren who have put forth those writings, and indeed of all the brethren. For it is my thought, as I have already said, that we have an opportunity now of growing together, if heat and pride and the spirit which brooks not delay or opposition do not work to spoil us of it.

And here I will consider something further with you, which this matter has suggested to me.

I am aware that some are hindered by the fear that we are abandoning our former ground, on which the thoughts of "the church being in ruins" had put us. But this is not so.

Connected with this, let me remind you, that Israel, after their return from Babylon, was Israel still. They had not the ark, the glory, nor the Urim; nor did they affect that to which such things were needed. But they fully recognised themselves as God's Israel. As far as they could, they did the services of such, and behaved themselves as such; but they never did anything in any other character, or what was *inconsistent with that character*.

This is much to be remembered. Did they, I ask, bring home with them the customs of the heathen? "The latter house" was not what "the former house" had been, and the old men wept; but, as far as conditions allowed it, the ways of the two houses were alike. They never brought in the customs of the heathen; and, as simply and surely as ever, they took knowledge of themselves as the Israel of God. Their circumstances were changed. They were in ruins. Their fair things and their honourable

things were spoiled. They were subject to the Gentile. But they were Israel still. This was their principle. And accordingly, as soon as any thing was discovered inconsistent with that, it was judged. You remember the case of intermarriages, and the more pertinent one of Nehemiah avenging the act of Eliashib who prepared a chamber for Tobiah the Ammonite in the house of the Lord.

They owned their circumcision, their separation to God, as jealously as ever. They refused Samaritan brotherhood, while they were debtors to the patronage of the Gentiles, and were partakers of their bounty. Horonites, Ammonites, and Moabites, were the same to them as ever they had been.

No glory had entered the latter house, as it had the former. This may have tried their faith. The Ark had not been preserved for them, as in another land of Philistines, nor had it returned to them as in victory from another temple of Dagon. It was lost to them. This may have tried their faith also. Nor had they their priest with Urim and Thummim. Thus were they in ruins, shorn of beauty and strength; and some of their brethren were still in Babylon. But in the presence and midst of all this, they avow themselves to be God's Israel as surely and simply as ever. They allow of nothing inconsistent with "the former house," they well knew and were constrained to feel, that they had not all its glory in "the latter house."

This is for us, dear brother. We are, in our way and measure, to be "stewards of the mysteries of God," and that too, under the holy sanction of being "faithful." And neither love's sake, nor brotherhood's sake, or any other impulse, is to prevail with us to forego the services which attach to so precious a stewardship. The peculiarities of the house of God are to be our peculiarities; and though we own Israelites in Babylon, we are not to own Samaritans or Chaldeans in Zion. Nor are we to own ways unworthy of Zion in a returned captive, though we see him the witness of ruins and of weakness.

This theme is worthy of our thoughts; and I confess I desire all our dear brethren to take counsel upon it. Would that they were to do it together calmly and in love

I own saints (to be sure I do) where I cannot see church-ruins, as for instance in the Establishment. The Establishment is not a church-ruin. It is an important thing in the earth, which must scorn the idea of ruins. Nay, it denies the church in her very first element; for it has not gone to Christ as a Stone "disallowed of men," but has linked His name with the government and men of the world. But God's dear people are there.

But even, when an assembly is not of that earthly and important character, and takes a lowlier bearing, yet it may not be a church-ruin. I must still inspect it, whether or not it own the peculiarities of the house of God.

Christendom is not to be mistaken for church-ruins. Christendom is as "a great house," which I must judge — the few who call on the Lord out of a pure heart form the church-ruins where I must be found. (2 Tim. 3.) And it is a holy question for us, beloved; — "Are we upholding merely christian fellowship? or are we dwelling, according to the holiness of God, within the precious precincts of a church-ruin?" In a time of growing intelligence and social advancement as the present is, when long peace among the nations has given great play to the skill and speculations of man, and when the religion of the human mind has been cultivated and respected, it is needful to remember, with increased care, that the truth of God and the house of God have their blessed peculiarities; that not one of them is to be sacrificed to the morals, the politics, or the religion of man; and that we are not to mistake for them what man produces, be it as good as it may. Ruins are weak things; but still they tell of the original building. And so, in our present weakness, we must still tell of the peculiarities of the church.

In the truth or mysteries witnessed by us — in the nature, subject, and purpose of our discipline

— in the ways and ordinances of the assembly — in the whole process of our common edification, the peculiarities of the house of God must be seen. I avow ruins as simply as ever. But if it be necessary, I add, that they are church-ruins, unlike either the old Roman temples, or the buildings of the philanthropists or Reformers of this our day.

Farewell, beloved. Do not blame this letter as a mere protracting of a painful discussion. Is it not better to be patient with one another, or (if it seem so) to protract discussion, than to sit down contented with our divided state? I remember the same brother (to whom I have already alluded) also saying to me some long time since, that it was a terrible thing to be indifferent about those with whom we were ever joined at the Lord's table.

May he, and you, and I, and all of us, cherish this godly sentiment, now that a trial has come upon us.

Let our dear brethren at Tottenham, Torquay, and Taunton, read this letter; I mean to send a copy to Bath. Indeed I should be glad if *all* saw it; and if we could but get our hearts exercised *together*, so as to meet again in an advanced position for our common blessing in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Ever yours, beloved brother, J. G. B.