

Present Exercises and a Loyal Path

Reprint of a letter, 1923. W. H. Westcott. 2nd Edition, 1932.

(1st edition entitled '*Present Exercises and a Middle Path.*')

My dear -.

Your letter of the 8th is before me with all its reminder of the difficulties of today. Fain would we give ourselves undistractedly to the pursuit of Christ in God's presence — His joy, and the Man of His pleasure. Fain would we study without cessation all that the Spirit brings before us in the Word, of God's thoughts in connection with Him, and be in all the liberty, the beauty, the power of the new order of man of which He is the Head. We can appreciate the position of Jude when he says, "I have been *obliged* to write to you, exhorting you to contend for the faith once delivered to the saints." In the pursuit of ministry, it is at times necessary to face evil, as well as to teach or learn the good.

There is nothing so heart-breaking as facing the state of things in the Church today. We humbly bear our share in the failure in its widest aspect; the corruption and ever-accelerating apostasy, the trend Romeward (in principle) of pious minds, and the leaning to Modern Thought in its great variety of forms, on the part of nearly all the rest.

But particularly, one could spend his time sighing and crying in the spirit of Jeremiah, over the terrible collapse of those who have claimed to be delivered from these palpable and general failures, and have contented themselves with the name of "brethren," so plainly God's name for all Christians (John 20, Acts 12, 1 Thess. 5).

Here, where human machinery no longer exists to maintain outward unity (though that outward unity be ecclesiastical agreement and not the unity of the Spirit), nothing could have kept us together but the faith of the Son of God and walking in the Spirit (Gal. 2: 20, Gal. 5: 16). The first keeps us right objectively, the second right subjectively. This is primarily individual; but we can never be prepared for collective exercise, unless right individually. All the practical use of the truth unfolded in Ephesians, Colossians, or Corinthians; in Timothy, Peter, or Jude; requires that the individual be in the light of Christ in glory, the risen Son of God, and that he be, by the Spirit, responsive to that light.

Alas! more of disintegration and more of disruption has set in among those who have protested against the disunity of the Church (whether Greek, Roman, Anglican, or Nonconformist), than ever has happened in *these* main sections. We may say that about a century has passed since the exodus began from these human and national systems, that saints might meet on the ground of the Assembly of God alone, according to the Scriptures, under the Headship and Lordship of Christ, and the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit. It is a marvellous conception, and it showed a path which instructed, exercised, devoted Christians felt and do feel to be of God. It seemed to be the realization of the Lord's own word, "I have set before thee an open door." But it is so pre-eminently a spiritual thing, stripped of all vestige of man's methods of co-ordination and cooperation, so entirely dependent upon the giving Christ His place, and walking in the Spirit, that it could the more easily be damaged the moment any individual allowed the flesh and his own will to act. As time has progressed, we have seen not only individual failure, which could be dealt with locally, but the failure of strong men of dominating influence, who — not content with ministering the truth in simplicity for its own sake, nor making sufficient allowance for varied aspects of truth, — have tended to rally admirers round them. Perhaps unconsciously have they done so at first; but, in the long run, and finding that a considerable number have supported their line of ministry, they have lost sight of the Headship of Christ (or certainly their

supporters have lost sight of it), and have cultivated the special friendship of these who saw eye to eye with them, until a party has been formed. Without adjudicating in *every* instance of this as to whether the teaching in question is such as to necessitate separation, facts of this past century prove that many of the separated saints thought themselves compelled to take sides; and to our shame and confusion of face, we have to own the heart-breaking and much multiplied divisions of today. Is it possible that the so-called "London" brethren or so-called "Glanton" brethren, or others, glory in that which is our common shame?

Now with regard to those who have followed Mr. Kelly, Mr. Stuart, Mr. Lowe, and (in America), Mr. Grant, it seems probable that the parties who have rallied round these leaders, may tend steadily to disintegration, as these men steadily recede into history. Personal influence counts for much, but naturally it diminishes in force after the death of a leader; and the question comes to be raised by the new generation, "Was this division or that warranted *as a division* at the time it occurred, or was it the outcome of party feeling which at that time ran high?" Admitting that certain teaching is defective, and militates against the presentation in that locality, or by those persons, of Christianity at its full height, has there been, according to the Word of God, a justification for the excommunication which was in the heat of controversy exercised?

It is right for us to own the hand of God upon us in discipline, when our state is allowed to produce disruption. No mere confession of mistakes in past divisions can produce unity according to God. Divine unity in Christianity exists on the ground of the excision of the flesh in the death of Christ, and the establishment of a new order of man in Christ risen, into which we have entrance *experimentally* only so far as the Spirit of God forms Christ in us. I say *experimentally*; for had one been writing of what is true of every Christian in Christ, and according to God's thought and counsel, i.e. what is true of a Christian *before God* — there is no measure and no degree. To reach this practical unity of which I write, do we not need to judge that *state* in which division was thought to be the only method possible? Flesh takes many forms, and one of its forms is that of attaching the Name of Christ to its own decisions and actions. We say we do this or that *in the Name of the Lord*, and yet, how the heart breaks and we have to hide our faces in the dust, as we think of the actions to which the Name of the Lord has been appended. O God forgive us! The spirit of John 16: 2, is at times in evidence, "They shall put you out of the synagogues; yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service." Not that it is done against conscience: he will verily "*think*" that he is doing nothing but right. Ezek. 11: 14, 16, often recurs to my mind, in which the people who claimed to alone be in the peace where the Lord at first set His name, debarred their brethren and their kindred from fellowship with them; yet the Lord in His grace says (if I may so put it), "Do you think you are going to hinder Me from vouchsafing My presence to them by your expulsion of them from Jerusalem?"

So some of these sentences of excommunication may ultimately be found to be excesses of fleshly zeal under pretence of acting in the Name of the Lord; but while owning with deep self-judgment the sorrow of division, must we not go deeper than the act, and judge the previous allowance of the flesh which called down the governmental judgment of God?

But now, if we eliminate the thought of those sad divisions with which we have to connect the names of prominent leaders, we are confronted with the exercises to which you more particularly referred: viz., the position taken by "London," and the position taken by the "Open" Brethren. For everyone who knows the principles and practices of these two groups, can see that they lie at the opposite ends of a straight line.

I love the "London" brethren, and was heartily at one with them if we speak of the exercise caused

by looseness and lawlessness. Whether in England or in Africa, one's whole heart revolted against the inconsistencies of men who demand the privileges of the outside place with Christ, where Christ is all, and yet form associations and adopt methods which are thoroughly inconsistent with that outside place. One is almost against one's will, reminded of Nehemiah 13, and the grave relations of Eliashib and others with Tobiah the Ammonite; not because Tobiah can be put on a par with Christians, but because one of the people of God. Like Eliashib, can be so inconsistent with the place *he* took. Alas! Tobiah only used his place inside the favoured circle to keep up a 'liaison' with the enemies of the remnant. See Neh. 6: 16-19.

I love the brethren who are now with "London," for no one wants to deny how much they have of truth amongst them; and their separateness of walk has, no doubt, attracted many of those who are sick of the ever-growing looseness in Christendom. But their creation of a new fellowship, the time at which they did it, and their claims since they did it, with grave tendencies more and more pronounced to one-sided and false doctrine, have put me outside and have kept me outside of their ranks. They are too "rich and increased with goods" to miss a poor insignificant brother like me, though I own with a broken heart how much I miss them. But they were, I feel, wrong in their attitude in 1908 over the Alnwick matter; and my Scripture to prove them wrong would be an Old Testament one — Deut. 22: 1-3 — where Alnwick and Glanton are depicted morally in all but names. The spirit which they showed in that year of sorrow, and the spirit of Christ as enjoined in all the New Testament, have been lamentably contrastive, as proved in bitter truth by hundreds of humble saints who — even if unable to meet them in argument — could not think their dictation in church matters right, nor according to grace and truth. But while their present lines of ministry would, in some ways, be a great change and a great help to us who need it, in other ways it is so sadly one-sided that they do not know their own deformity. It is so unguardedly subjective in its enforcement of the Spirit's work in saints that it obscures, and in some instances, denies the truth that God has made true of His saints in Christ. But the saddest and most distressing feature of all perhaps, is the consummate self-satisfaction of nearly all their writers and speakers; their pitying condescension toward those who are outside their wall. I do not want to associate with those who ignore what is of God among *them*, any more than one would ignore what is of God in *any* Christian; but I wish they knew their own deformity in these respects. It is not because of any disagreement with their exercise about separation that one is apart from them; but they have forced brethren's consciences on a false issue, and have hurt themselves as much as they have hurt others (as will be proved in the long run), by cutting off saints who would have supplemented their own ministry, and perhaps have helped to preserve them from extravagances.

But at the other end of the straight line I have referred to, are the "Open" Brethren. Individuals are among them, as are in every Christian circle, who are models of piety, devotedness, and gospel zeal. But of the ground taken by 'Bethesda' characteristically, I have no more doubt than I have of Anglicanism. Their origin as a separate group of brethren is their considered acceptance of Christians who sat habitually under Mr. Newton's ministry (though they had to recognize that Mr. Newton himself was not sound as to the Person of Christ), if these Christians said that they did not themselves hold the doctrine. Such might be constantly supporting Newton's doctrine by their presence, and yet verbally deny their participation in his heretical tenets. For in this case it was not some matter of church discipline, or some interpretation of a disputed text. It was an assertion of the peccability of Christ, and hence, if consented to, left us without a Saviour, and with no Christianity — (1 Cor. 15). Our faith would have been vain, we should yet have been in our sins.

But apart from the historical *origin* of "Open" Brethren, their refusal, at that time, to concede the Divine principle of defilement by association with evil, has given birth to the whole method on which

most of their meetings are based; for anyone claiming to be a Christian may demand to be received, and, in general, would be invited to break bread; and each meeting is independent of each other meeting, since no corporate responsibility is owned. It is an easy come and go method of congregationalism; and those with them fail altogether of giving any expression to the truth of the One Body, and indeed, of the Headship and Lordship of JESUS, the Christ, in a collective sense. For obviously if the latter be held in any practical sense, the judgment to which He leads in one locality, would be confirmed and upheld whenever He is so acknowledged. Their notorious looseness in this is sometimes bad enough to shock themselves; and here and there in the country, you hear of meetings where some brothers insist on more care, though at the same time, receiving from and commending to "Open" meetings everywhere. So that if on the one hand, one has been shut out from the "London" brethren because of their ultra-exclusivism, one is equally debarred from "Open" brethrenism by its inordinate and systematic looseness.

Now, in between these two, lies our present position. There are many, who know at least a little of the Headship and Lordship of Christ, who wish to walk in this loyal path of fidelity to Him, neither re-adjusting the conditions of fellowship as the "London" brethren have confessedly (through their leaders) done, to the exclusion of those who ought not to be excluded; nor lapsing into the indifference and looseness of "Open" Brethrenism. They wish to keep in the truth of Paul's gospel, while owning their feebleness in presenting it. They wish to be conversant with God's mind in the Assembly and with Christ's glory in it too, and consistent with its every aspect; but own with shame and confusion of face, the terrible failures of today. They have exercises upon exercises. They see some tiring of the looseness which marks the day in which we live, and slipping into the "London" enclosure to escape that exercise. They see on the other hand, some tiring of the very suggestion of corporate testimony, and in their weariness, and also to escape exercise, slipping into "Open" Brethren practices and positions. And between these two lesions, it sometimes looks as if everything were going.

But what are we to do? Are we to shun the difficulties, or are we to call on the Name of the Lord?

I see nothing for it but in this very difficult, and perhaps narrowing path, to call upon the Name of the Lord. My heart is broken, the sorrows of God's saints press on my spirit; yet will I not surrender this confidence, that in Christ there is resource today for the day. Whether He will revive ministry, whether He will gather others, whether He will by some overturning of social order and the outbreak of persecution, draw saints together, or by any means soever lead us to own our common sin in the dust before Him, I know not. Whether He will Himself come, whose coming is, after all, the only panacea I *know* of, and bring to a speedy end all this sinful strife among His saints, I cannot say. But at least, through every exercise, and in spite of every sorrow, one finds himself loving all saints more and more, one finds the beauty and glory of Christ becoming to one's heart grander and sweeter and one learns hopefully to say, "Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls; yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will joy in the God of my Salvation" (Hab. 3: 17, 18).

Warmest love, dear -, from

Yours faithfully in Christ

April, 1923. W. H. WESTCOTT.