

## Review of Four Letters to the Christians Called Brethren

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"Four Letters to the Christians called 'Brethren' on the Subject of Ministry and Worship." By Arthur Augustus Rees. Second Edition. London. Passmore and Alabaster.

(B.T. Vol. 10, p. 348-352.)

Mr. R. writes kindly himself, but he does not scruple freely to cite unkind remarks of others, which only ill-feeling can account for from their authors. On this little need be said, for nothing can be more evident than that these unhappy effusions aim merely at detraction. They have nothing that tends to edification in their sayings or doings. If Mr. R. is animated with no such bitterness, he is at sea, and so exposed to every wind that blows. "Whilst I question your principles, I am not defending those of other Christians. On the contrary, I am far from satisfied with the worship and ministry of the 'sects,'" etc. He admits, as the result of Brethren's study of God's word, unworldliness, and devotedness, and scriptural views whether one thinks of the church or of the world. Would to God there were ten-fold more! But whatever there is among them that he values its due to keeping Christ's word, and not denying His name. Only it were passing strange if they were wrong in what they have most of all sought — uncompromising fidelity to Christ in the ways of His house. Is this "schism?" If "Brethren" are wrong there, trust them nowhere else. If right in that which has cost them so much, Mr. R. will own that he has much to learn.

But Mr. R. starts with a mistake. No intelligent brother could accept his statement of their "principle of meeting, worship, and ministry." No person at all accredited has ever put things so in a book or tract emanating from such. Doubtless the difficulty is great for an outsider. Not one Christian in a thousand can understand till he is *bona fide* in fellowship, though he may know enough to attract him, and more than enough to condemn denominationalism in every form.

Brethren go back to the written word about the assembly, worship, and ministry, and confide in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit to make it good in spite, but taking account, of the ruin-state of Christendom. This is their principle, and it differs as radically from that of Friends as from other societies. For if others fail in owning the sovereign action of the Spirit, Friends have failed quite as fatally in owning the word of God, as Mr. R. must surely know. Now you can have the power of neither, if you do not honour the Lord in both; and it is recurrence to both in faith which distinguishes, "Brethren." To this they have sacrificed everything which stands in the way, as they will by grace so long as they are true to the Lord.

But they see clearly that, besides coming together as God's assembly dependent on the Lord to work in by the Spirit, as we read in 1 Corinthians 12, 14, there is also His working by individuals as evangelists, pastors, teachers, etc. Wherever gifted men are found among "Brethren," there is at least as much of the latter as of the former; and "believe there is a freer and fuller circulation of this individual ministry in their midst than exists anywhere else. Some of these servants of the Lord move about, and others reside and work more fixedly, all over Great Britain, Ireland, France, Switzerland, Holland, Germany, Italy, etc.: in some places few and far between, but there they are. So it is in America, the West Indies, Australia, New Zealand, not to speak of some few in Asia and Africa, though one shrinks from saying even thus much. Mr. R. wholly overlooks this, one of the most patent and characteristic facts among "Brethren." He is exclusively occupied with the assembly as such. This is not to be wondered at, for nothing like it is found anywhere else at present; yet none can deny that it was quite as striking when the church of God was first known as distinct from Jews and Gentiles. Then, as among

Brethren now, there was the gracious action of the Spirit looked for in the assembly, of which the Lord's supper was the central feast, and with liberty for the members of His body, only subject to His regulation by His word; and then too, as now, we see Him using His servants far and wide, who spread the gospel outside, and acted within as joints and bands, knitting all the body together, and ministering nourishment also.

One is surprised that Mr. R. should see the least resemblance to Brethren any more than to scripture in the principle of the Friends, who, in fact, ignore God's assembly more than any community in Christendom. They really hold that the manifestation of the Spirit is given to *every man in the world!* instead of understanding that this is to each in the church. This of itself falsifies all their action, and shows its fundamental opposition to God's assembly, not merely in practice, but in principle. Next, they avowedly set up what they call the living testimony of the Spirit above scripture, which accordingly is shut out of their meetings no less than hymns. Who can wonder? Men quarrel with the written word when it condemns them; and none offend worse in this way than Quakers. Even Popery, with all its worldliness and worse, does not deny the difference between the first man and the Second, between flesh and Spirit, between nature and grace, between the church and the world, so flagrantly as the Society of Friends; and yet their principle Mr. R. imagines to be so like Brethren's, that he cannot see the least difference! Why, Friends have not one true idea about the church as Christ's body, or God's house; still less do they acknowledge the Spirit's sovereign action in it, or the difference between this and individual ministry apart from it. They confess the necessity and reality of the Spirit's action; and no doubt, so far as godly men among them act in faith as to this, they are blessed. But there is otherwise the most complete contrast between Brethren and Friends. Does not Mr. R. know that in a proper meeting of Friends elders exercise control over those who speak? Is this the principle of 1 Corinthians 14, or of Brethren?

He will have it however, that Friends are more consistent in practice, because of eschewing hymns and tunes. But what saith the scripture? Do Friends in very deed bow to the word, as well as look for the power and guidance of the Spirit? We find the use of metrical compositions in singing contemplated, both in private and in public (Eph. 5: 19; Col. 3: 16; 1 Cor. 14: 15, 26; James 5: 13), These are clearly not the Psalms of David, but christian compositions, without a line of inspiration, yet open to and needing the direction of the Spirit in the assembly, like everything else. No doubt, if people have a mere theory of the Spirit's action apart from scripture, like the Friends, one can understand their exclusion of hymns from being sung in their meetings, and even of scripture itself, though it be inspired. But this is consistency with a delusion, not only without subjection to the word, but to its deep and open affront. And if Mr. R. knows the facts, I am surprised that he should write thus coolly of a course so systematically unscriptural as that of Friends, or that he should not perceive that Brethren have the authority of scripture for their procedure as to singing hymns in and out of the assembly.

How is this? He is misled by his inability to see that scripture is equally clear *against* a pre-arranged discourse in the assembly as for singing hymns, as is ordinarily done, provided the Lord is waited on there and then. He does not see that it is a question of what the word authorises. The Corinthians were on the same ground as his argument supposes till they were corrected by the first epistle. They thought it was simply a question of power, and if therefore half a dozen prophets spoke, it might be all well; and if any spoke in a tongue without interpretation, they were free to do so; and if women could utter the word of wisdom or knowledge, why should they not? They had the gifts, and should use them in the assembly. But no; the apostle affirms the great principle, forgotten by Friends as well as Mr. R., etc., but acknowledged by Brethren, that the power, however truly of the Spirit, should work subject to the authority of the Lord, and hence in obedience to His commandment. (1 Cor. 12: 26-

40; especially ver. 37.)

We are not therefore inconsistent with the true guidance and action of the Spirit, when we submit ourselves to the word of the Lord; and in this very portion it deals with spiritual manifestations, yet it sanctions the singing of such psalms as are used in the assembly. There *is no* recognition of an "ordinary sermon" in 1 Corinthians 14 — there is of singing: only all must be to edifying, as well as decently and in order; and these ends cannot be but in the Spirit, who works in the assembly, in order that there should be the reality of "God in them of a truth," and not the more arrangements of a denomination after its own will.

The Holy Ghost was given to abide for ever; and the Lord sets out His own ordering of the assembly by His apostle, grounded on that presence and action of the Spirit. He is there to guide and work. It is worthy of Christ and His redemption that so it should be. We know it is abandoned by Christians in general; but has the Lord repealed it? If not, it abides, and even those who do not practise its order hesitate not to cite verse 40 as a warrant for their own order to the subversion of His. Let men speak with contempt of those who in their feebleness cleave to it; the Lord will not. Those who meet there in faith can tell, without boasting, of an enjoyment of His presence and power unknown elsewhere. But not of this would we speak, but of what is due to His word and Spirit. He is a Spirit of power, of love, and of a sound mind; and works sovereignly, certainly not alone in "ex-clergymen, noblemen, gentlemen, and military and naval officers." Many of the working classes are gifted men, and blessed, some of the lowest of "the million," no less than from the highest rank. It is as true now as ever that gift is independent of learning or station, and we would take a lesson from 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, no less than from 1 Corinthians 14. But it is a serious thing when a grave Christian thinks that, because the Spirit no longer displays miracles or tongues or their interpretation, He does not give the word of wisdom or the word of knowledge, teachers, helps, or governments. Mr. R. has sunk low in unbelief to write, or even conceive, such a thought. He severs the action of the Spirit from the word, and virtually denies both.

Hence he forgets that the Spirit is on earth to care for the saints. Could He not guide in a scriptural way (to meet the difficulties Mr. R. is pleased to imagine) the five thousand Christians said to assemble at the Metropolitan Tabernacle? or, fifty thousand, or one hundred thousand, if there were as many in London, who judged sects to be evil, and gathered to the Lord's name? But then the schism! Yet is it schism to separate from what denies Him? Difficulties exist, but He is equal to all emergencies. Is it faith, or unbelief, to be neutral where a true or false Christ is concerned, or to pervert it into a ground for sitting down, contentedly or not, in denominationalism, contrary to God's word and Spirit? "Inspired worship or ministry" no brother pretends to. Is not such language an exaggeration to blink the importance of abandoning human ways, to the slight of both scripture and the Holy Ghost?

It is certainly not our duty to defend the Freemasons' Hall meetings, any more than those in Dublin spoken of. There was probably no fixity of principle in either. But it seems fair to say that neither the former nor the latter seem to have been professedly ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ, but rather brotherly conferences, such as they were. Mr. R. therefore is scarce justified in judging them by 1 Corinthians 14: Do doubt far more than "two or three" spoke. In neither case was it the assembly as such. Does he understand the question?

What has been said is a sufficient answer to the comments in "The Church of Old" or the remarks of several brethren, as well as to Mr. R.'s own statement, already shown to be inaccurate; to the speech of John Foster, the essayist, and the certainly not intelligent clergyman who thought some brothers spoke by *inspiration!* till he heard them misquote scripture. One must be forgiven for not dwelling on

such poor stories as these, or on the equally poor replies. But it may be repeated, in reply to page 18, that there is no question of the choice of a text, still less of the preparation and delivery of a discourse in 1 Corinthians 14; there is of the use of a psalm there. Is it not in excellent reason that the apostle proves the latter, and ignores the former?

All that grace has given us is liable to abuse, from the salvation of the soul to the worship of the saints in the assembly. Yet you do not remedy the possible evil by denying or obscuring the truth, but by pressing it on the conscience in self-judgment. The Holy Spirit dwells in each Christian, as He does in the assembly; yet He makes neither inspired, but both responsible that all which is done in small things or great he done in the Spirit. This is first irksome to nature; then the truth is questioned; lastly the possibility is denied, but this is no less than departure (I say not from Christ, but) from the living power of Christ and the church. Take, for instance, the singing of hymns in the assembly. Does the Lord deign to guide in this by the Spirit, or does He leave it to our flesh? It is surprising that a Christian should cavil at what is so plain. 1 Corinthians 14 speaks of what an individual might do in the assembly, not of individual exercises at home; and there is not a word implying that the words and the service were either of them given by inspiration.

Yet none that speaks among Brethren, or elsewhere, should shrink from the application of the rule in 1 Peter 4: 10, 11. Alas! this is not only not the practice, but forgotten, perhaps denied, as the rule. It is false that Peter means inspiration, or that Brethren ever claimed it, but always maintained the contrary. Doubtless it is true that the Quaker system so claims — a twofold error, in depreciating the written word, so as practically to deny its inspiration, and in exalting their spoken testimonies, so as practically to claim inspiration. All the teaching of Brethren is most distinct against this presumption; a brother guilty of such folly would be put out forthwith as led of Satan.

As to the fullest ordering of the assembly in scripture, it is found in 1 Corinthians 14, as grounded on 1 Corinthians 12. But Romans 12, Ephesians 4, Colossians 2, James 3: 1, 1 Peter 4: 10, 11, evidently fall in with it, not to speak of the Acts of the Apostles. Matthew 18: 20 is the Lord's anticipative resource for the worst of times, guaranteeing His presence to even two or three gathered to His name. But it is distinctly and solely on the ground of the church, and no other. To apply it to sects is not only unintelligent neglect of the context, but faithless indifference to the wondrous privilege there pledged.

Of the citations in pages 23-30, it would be painful to say much: so thoroughly are they stamped with captiousness. But this may be remarked, that their writers knew well that Brethren do not set the Holy Ghost's presence against the Lord's employing men in His service as permanent gifts for the blessing of the saints, whether evangelists, or pastors and teachers. Would that they had not let slip convictions which once seemed divinely given, and that they were not now perverting the fact of gifts from Christ to weaken the still graver truth of the Spirit's presence, which imparts its weight to these gifts! That there is thus a rejection of the appointments of Christ for the edification of His body is an unworthy cry. No brother refuses to acknowledge the bishop of the New Testament, either in principle, without appointment, or in fact, if duly appointed; and the main ground for refusing denominations of every kind is because we judge them, as well as ourselves, by the apostolic model. The strength of Brethren therefore lies, not in negation (as has been, with too much truth, said of Protestantism), but in the positive truth of the word acted on in simple dependence on the Spirit. "One body and one Spirit" is the very reverse of a negative principle, and it is ours, gainsay it who may. Of those who minister among Brethren there is the less reason to speak, as it is plain those who raised the question betray forgetfulness of God's word and Spirit as to His church and ministry. It were well to weigh 2 Corinthians 10: 12, 18. It is the more uncomely, as we pretend to no gifts which we do not allow in other saints, and, what is more, we urge that the Spirit dwells in the house of God, not in the Brethren

merely, only we seek to act in faith of it, and others do not by allowing their modes of worship and ministry apart from scripture to hinder.

Of the second pamphleteer there is the less reason to take notice, as page 5 confesses that it is not our principle he repudiates, but its abuse. The words of scorn which are quoted are self-condemnatory. And it is evident that the minds of men who could so write had lost, if they ever had, a due sense of the church's ruin. As they lapsed into alienation, they must needs justify their own defection by a vigorous onslaught on their old friends, high and low. Yet who ever heard of men, essaying to lead others, whose efforts were so suicidal? They may have furnished fresh scandal to such as believe all evil against Brethren; but never did a movement so totally fail to act even on their intimates. Where are they even now? Was not this truly "pretension without power?"

For our part we do not claim a power for ourselves that God has not given to in Christians. The Holy Spirit is the energy for everything acceptable to God, as witnessing to Christ, and effectuating His will in those that are His. Brethren do not claim Him as in any way peculiar to themselves; they hold that, as He dwells in every Christian, so all saints are bound to judge contradicts or fetters the recognition of His presence and action in the assembly. That they reap a blessing from God answering to their faith one doubts not, any more than that all Christians lose who do not believe in it, or who, if they believe, walk not in faith. That there are among Brethren men who slight what is due to His presence. whom they own, coming out of the sects which built on other grounds, is true; but such men either go away, and try to blacken what they had little honoured when ostensibly with Brethren, or they fall into sin so as to require public discipline, In one way or another the Lord does not fail to watch over those who are gathered to His name, and deals jealously with what dishonours it. For it is freely allowed that nowhere is pretension without power so unbecoming and hateful and sure to be judged, even in this world. A just censure we would accept and bow to God in it, as an excellent oil, which shall not break the head.

Let Mr. R. then be assured that Brethren set up no claims, either personal or ministerial. They would fain urge on all saints the dishonour done to the Lord in denying the Holy Spirit His sovereign freedom of action in the assembly, as well as in using gifted men in direct responsibility to Himself (not as the officials of a denomination), and this in the unity of His body. But what can Mr. E. mean by speaking of their application of 1 Peter 4: 11 to their own ministry as "mistimed, misplaced, and untrue?" They apply it to every true mouthpiece of God, and feel it to be most solemn and searching for themselves, as for others; but to talk of it as he does, as if it were seine exclusive possession on their part, proves that Mr. 11. understands neither the passage itself, nor the spirit in which it has been applied by them. Does he know what it means, or he himself means, by saying what he does in page 31? It is certainly not inspiration any more than mere speaking according to the scriptures (p. 47): the one being as much too high as the other is too low a sense put on the passage. There is real unbelief of the Spirit's action in Mr. P. and his friends. Cannot, does not, God give one who is in communion with Him, as to speaking, to Ray just what He would have said? Where are men gone who deny that we should even look for this? It is the only right thing.

Then follows a quotation from Olshausen, with which Mr. R., agrees, to the effect that the charismatic form of the Spirit's operation (that is, gift) ceased in the third century. Is it to this unbelief we are invited by Mr. Rees, or by the one who commends his "very temperate and christian letter?" Did it never occur to him that his figure of "the crutchless cripple, stumbling at every step," might apply, not to Brethren, but to the few who have lately gone out from them? At any rate, it is important to note that the ground for acting on 1 Corinthians 14 depends on the continuance of the Spirit's presence and power, and that Mr. R.'s theory is the denial of it since the third century. Since then he allows sanctified

natural ability and educational acquirement, but not the Spirit acting in gift.

The long extracts from the author of "The Church of Old" (pp. 34-46) may be safely left in silence. There are abundant words, but light weight. He has fallen into the same error as Mr. R., confounding the principle and practice of God's assembly (1 Cor. 12, 14) with the exercise of a ministerial gift in general. It is unfounded to separate the groundwork in the former chapter from the application in the latter.

But it is worth noticing, that Mr. R. avows, as probably all the men he quotes feel as to themselves, that it is not his aim to bring Brethren over to his platform of worship and ministry, "for I am not satisfied with it, nor with any other that I see around." This witness at least is true; not so when he reiterates the mistake that we stand on the pinnacle of "inspired gifts." What he believes to be the Spirit's guidance and power we have seen to be the mere pious use of ability and educational acquirement. Inspiration absolutely shut out error in any way; this was not the case with ordinary preaching or teaching. But the Lord has never ceased to give gifts to His servants, to each according to his several ability. The gift and the ability are not the same thing.

The main theme in his third letter is the discussion of the (to him) startling position taken in the tracts, entitled "Christ's Ministry," and "The Brethren," that elders or bishops required apostolic authority in persons only delegated to appoint them, and that, this authority failing, none can have them duly appointed now. Is it not plain, if not self-evident and certain, however startling? But he is quite mistaken in deducing hence the present inapplicability of the passages which speak of elders; and he might have gathered the denial of any such conclusion from these very tracts.

It is not contended that those chosen by a congregation, or by an Anglican diocesan, or in any other mode, may not sometimes be men whom an apostle, or an apostolic delegate, would have chosen; but that all these modes of choosing are unscriptural, and therefore the title founded on them invalid; and not the less because those who pretend to give or receive those titles are proud of them in the world or the church so-called, and, as just seen, without the least reason. But it is not denied that the Lord continues to raise up men with gift to tend the flock, as well as teachers and preachers, and that such shepherds would have been in full formal order appointed, if they had the other qualifications, and one like Titus were there to appoint them. But this was not always the case, even in apostolic days. Hence we find a notable provision in the New Testament that the saints should know such rulers, and honour them, even if, through circumstances, only doing the work they were fitted for, and not authoritatively chosen to it by an apostle or his delegate; and this principle is a blessed resource in these days, as indeed ever since the apostles' days, when there could be no such appointment. (See Rom. 12: 8; 1 Cor. 16: 15, 16; Col. 4: 12, 13, 17; 1 Thess. 5: 12, 13; Heb. 13: 17, 24.)

But this in no way supersedes or annuls the scriptures as to elders or bishops. Thus Acts 14: 23 is of great value in negating the pretension of the disciples or congregation to choose such officers as in the Presbyterian or Congregational bodies. Acts 20: 17-35 gives us a grand view of what the Lord looks for from all who labour in the way of oversight and is no less adverse to the arrangements of Episcopacy. 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 let us know who could and who could not be so appointed for want of moral power or other reasons. 1 Peter 5: 1-4 and James 5: 14 close the rear by exhortations of a general or special nature. But not a word falls to the ground for the believer; for though one might with scripture hesitate to call men elders who had not been scripturally appointed, one surely, according to scripture, honours as chiefs or rulers all who show the gift and have the requisite qualifications in other respects.

This is the way we pay deference to these passages as to elders: we own the spirit, even where the

literal or formal circumstances fail; whereas Mr. R. and his friends disown not only 1 Corinthians 12, 14, but all the scriptures which speak of gifts as vanished away since the third century. And what would have been the worth of such envoys as Timothy or Titus without gift? We are thus left, not merely without apostolic appointment of men whom we would, and do, honour now for their work's sake, but, according to Mr. Rees, without a single *charisma*, including evangelists, pastors, teachers, or any others!\*

\* It is an error that the prophets in 1 Corinthians 14, or Romans 12: 6, were inspired men, or that they were such as are described in Ephesians 2. The apostles, and they as a joint company, laid the foundation. The tracts cited do not identify the apostles with their writings, nor say that in this sense we have the fulfilment of Ephesians 4: 11.

But the strange thing is that Mr. R. sets his own avowed unbelief in 1 Corinthians 14 against our alleged setting aside of bishops or elders, and this over and over. Assuredly it were something to grieve over, if we were guilty of any haughty rejection of such officers; but how could it condone his unbelieving elimination of the only working of the Spirit in the assembly which scripture endorses, and his reduction of all to a mere human system instead of a divine? It is erroneous that the manifestation of the Spirit is His miraculous working, though the working of miracles was one, and only one manifestation, not all miraculous, as he makes them. It is, again, erroneous that he who desired to oversee during the last seventeen centuries desired a vain work, not a good one; for he might thoroughly do the work, even if he had not received that outward seal of honour which was impressed by apostolic authority when the church stood in its godly order. Who cannot see good reason for withholding (not the men, or the work, or the honour in their hearts who profited by it, but) the formal title when Christianity was falling into the horrors of Christendom?

Mr. R. owns that he is not satisfied with the general mode of their recognition and appointment (p. 48): will he say that any one has the only mode scripture recognizes, at least among the Gentiles? If he must confess that none has, he must either agree with Brethren, or take the unhappy and unbelieving alternative that an unscriptural appointment is just as good as the scriptural. He names Luther, Knox, Wesley, and Whitfield, and says, "We have seen in them, and thousands more, the work and qualifications of evangelists, bishops, and deacons," etc. Did one ever hear such confusion? Nobody among Brethren denies evangelistic gift and more in these worthies; but Mr. R. denies it in any one since the third century. The question is as to the formal appointment of elders, which is quite another thing, not of their doing the good work of overseeing, which is admitted. Mr. R. cries out that he wants "power, power:" let us recommend him a more excellent thing — obedience. Grace will then add as much power as is good for him. It is grievous to hear anyone meanwhile glorying in shame — "human order for uninspired endowments" (p. 51). Is this the church of *God*?

The fourth letter, being a mere rehearsal of the old objections in new words or figures, demands no special notice. Mr. R. speaks of Brethren not obeying 1 Corinthians 14. But that chapter is quite consistent with half a dozen praying, and several delivering long addresses (undesirable as this may be in general), if there were not more than "three." In fine, it would rejoice us if Mr. R., and our brethren generally, put us to shame by their spiritual power in honouring these and all other words of our Lord. Why not set us an example of living obedience in faith? This would indeed be to His praise if our weighty censure.