

"The Brethren': A Historical Sketch."

W. Kelly.

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This booklet of 30 pages has been sent by a reader of the B.T. who asks, "Is this book true or false?" To call it "false" might imply that the writer (whose name is purposely suppressed) stated what he knew to be untrue; but there need be no hesitation to say that it is in every respect unreliable. Like many party-men he is so shortsighted and onesided as to see nothing right but his own mistakes. "Separation" is his bugbear, "fellowship" his idol, not with the Father and the Son, but brotherly, which is often wrong. Scripture is decisive that "love" brings in what is of God; whereas "brotherly affection" may become faulty and faithless (2 Peter 1: 7). Nor has the truth the first place for his soul. The great sin to him is not keeping together and welcoming everyone charitably hoped to be a brother. Christ's glory in the church and the saint by the word and Spirit of God, does not sway him.

Yet our leaving nationalism and denominationalism, as all but our weak ones did, if scriptural condemned all sects as opposed to God's will; if unscriptural condemns our aim and position, which is a return to "what was from the beginning." I admit the writer had no such principle, nor any other; for by his own account (p. 11) he bargained when coming into fellowship to stick to his clergyman's ministry, and those who had to do with his reception were accommodating enough to exceed his demand. This was no doubt amiable on both sides; but God's will or way was forgotten by all concerned. This looseness is what he admires; to me it is caring for self and not Christ. I, as earlier than the writer, can say that it was not the rule in those days, though not disposed to question what he states of his own personal experience.

About 1843 or 4 I remember a brother asking me what was to be done, if evil got the upper hand among those gathered to the Lord's name, as of old after the apostles; and replying that we must adhere in faith to what unfaithful souls compromised. So 2 Tim. 2: 19-22 teaches. Alas! the need arose at Plymouth itself soon after, where a leader with several coadjutors came to the conclusion that "Brethren" were wrong ("Christian Witness," and all). Instead of going quietly out, as uprightness must have dictated, they chose to leaven the meeting there with his independent church system, ministerialism, and judaising (of the hope especially), to say nothing of personal conduct. Mr. Darby did all he could in vain to have this judged; and when the mass stuck to local majority, and gave up all sense of the Spirit's unity, and common consistency, he withdrew as did others, that they might be subject to the word and Spirit as before. Not long after a system of heterodoxy was discovered secretly at work in the same party. This was exposed to the deliverance of many and the scattering of the unworthy. But a part of western England really sympathised with the Plymouth system of independency, ministerialism, and the earthly hope to supplant the heavenly; and this is what the booklet tries to defend without knowing what was at stake.

Even if the alleged facts were correct (which they are far from being according

to my information), the writer's notion of fellowship is a fallacy without a divine principle-neither truth, holiness, nor love. His ideal is a free-and-easy religious club with licence to roam at will, spiritual nothingarianism, and exclusion of anything to try conscience as "contentious." Where the Lord's name is a living centre, Christians grow and correct themselves by the word and Spirit of God. Brethren, even when they met in Aungier St. (Dublin), used to settle on Saturday night for the scriptures and hymns on Lord's day! Later still at Plymouth an elder's chair was occupied at the Lord's table. But they learnt ere long that "the gifts" of Christ are permanent; whereas "elders" required apostolic nomination direct or indirect. Now the writer seems not to have learnt this or anything else, making a tradition of lax ways however wrong. "The word of our God shall stand for ever;" though even this we can only use to His glory by the Holy Spirit.