

The Latest Sect

W. Kelly.

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It may not be generally known, though familiar to many readers, that a portentous effort has been recently made in an ecclesiastical way, which is not without instruction if only for warning. It emanates from those professing Christians, who fell back on compromise when the question of a true or false Christ was raised not quite 50 years ago, and ecclesiastical independency was adopted as the means of appearing united, notwithstanding real division.

As nobody who looked beneath the surface could be satisfied with an expediency so hollow, the inevitable reaction has come; and conscience at length confesses from among themselves that these easy-going assemblies are "lawless." Throughout a considerable part of Great Britain this cry has been heard from men who ought to be credible witnesses of the facts among their old associates; as others outside them had long testified that so it was and must be on their principle, or rather on their total lack of it in any divine sense.

It seems that three canons are set up as the new distinctive standard. First, they are strict Baptists, refusing to receive any member of Christ's body who has not conformed to christian immersion as believers. Secondly, they require that every one allowed to partake of the Lord's Supper shall have previously broken off all ecclesiastical association in order to stand in their ranks. Thirdly, they claim to appoint elders over their associates, as the expression of rule in the flock of God on earth.

Now on all three points these retrograde innovators convict themselves, however self-confident, of not being guided of God.

First, it is as certain as some other facts in scripture, that the twelve apostles, though charged by the risen Lord to baptise unto the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, were not baptised with that baptism themselves. Some, perhaps all, were baptised by John; but this was no equivalent, as Acts 19 proves incontrovertibly. Nor was their own baptism during our Lord's lifetime christian baptism; for this is based on His death and resurrection, and instituted after that. To these we may add other disciples before Pentecost, of whom we hear of above 500 brethren who saw the Lord risen at once (1 Cor. 15: 6), and how many more we know not. But we do know that the Holy Spirit baptised them at Pentecost into one body. Thus signally even from the beginning must letter hide its diminished head before spirit; as of old the Lord said, even under law, "I will have mercy and not sacrifice."

Still more does the principle of grace apply in these days of Christendom's moral ruin, when the great majority of the members of Christ must be owned to be christened as infants, which they regard as valid baptism even when confessed to be irregular in some respects, and would conscientiously object to be re-baptised as unscriptural. Any company therefore that insists on this rigid view is of necessity a sect or party; for it sets up a rule which the Holy Spirit rejected at Pentecost, and deliberately excludes (without and against scripture) thousands of members of Christ who object to their rule as not of God.

Hence, when souls were deeply exercised 60 or 70 years ago through the light of scripture and in the hope of the Lord's coming, it was learnt that God had provided for the difficulty of jarring views on what was after all but an administrative sign, however important in its place. For baptism is essentially individual, as the Lord's Supper is plainly collective or ecclesiastical. Baptism is never once tied to the

assembly, but might be at the shortest notice, by the wayside, or in a prison, or along a river. Therefore long ago some of us found ourselves on the ground of that liberty which is due to individual conviction, and only opposed to the fanatics on either side, who would force the question into the assembly and break it up in honour of their predilections. These considerations are evident, which may help: that baptism, believer's baptism, is initiatory; that it is an individual confession; and that, as scripture demonstrates, none ever thought of getting baptised after recognition in the assembly though room may be left for the scruples of a troubled conscience. But this is not the only principle, learnt and acted on then, which has of late been forgotten in the haste and contention of a later day, There are frequent irregularities in baptism; as many feel, who are not novices, yet decided against more than "one baptism." To insist rigidly on letter, especially as things are now and have long been, and to make it an assembly question, is to err grossly, and fall into a sect, or "heresy" in the scriptural sense of the word.

Secondly, while there is a path graciously provided in a day of ruin for those that call on the Lord out of a pure heart, farthest from it are such as assume to be "the" church in fact, even though they may verbally avoid the pretentious claim. And what can one think of Christians whose bond of union, or test, is the acceptance of discipline in a local case, at best dubious if not mistaken and unjust! If ever so just, it would be sectarian to make it a test as is done. The more truth Christians profess to have, the guiltier they are if they forget and ignore the members of Christ who in general know scarce anything of the church, of their own relationship to it, and of their consequent duties. It becomes those who know these things in their measure to act in a spirit of lowly grace toward such as know them not. And so those acted who first and most deeply learnt from the scriptures how the children of God should walk in the midst of Christendom fallen and departed from His will, broken up into sects (misnamed churches), great or small. For themselves they fell back on the truth of God's assembly surviving the failure, claiming true-hearted obedience, and open to all that are Christ's, were they but two or three gathered to His name.

This is in no way to become a sect, because it abandons sectarianism for the ground of His church, and contemplates in faith and love all members of Christ's body, save such as are or justly ought to be under discipline. But the self-same principle demands our owning and receiving in the Lord's name all godly-walking saints who desire to remember Him, notwithstanding their ignorance of the church and consequent inability to judge denominationalism. Hence it was ever felt a privilege to welcome all saints walking with God according to their measure, unless they were tolerating plain heterodoxy preached in the place they frequented. (For if they held it themselves, there could be no question). This were ungodliness, at least as pronounced as any other iniquity.

Some excellent brothers who detest laxity have wavered as to this open-hearted attitude toward saints in the denominations, especially from 1849 and since. Such hesitation however is groundless. Largeness of heart is as right as laxity is bad. The neutrality which characterises a party then and subsequently has to be met on its own ground, to which 2 John distinctly applies, with other scriptures. But this is no reason for swerving from a first principle of scripture and denying to saints of God that to which grace entitles them, as no less members of Christ than ourselves. The denial is itself a false and sectarian thought, unless it be for fundamental evil, and betrays ignorance as to the one body, in defence of which it is mistakenly invoked. It is the more manifestly unsound, because not a few already received know little or nothing of the body and are therefore weak in fulfilling their responsibilities. It is lack of spiritual intelligence, because it awards to true thoughts or fidelity what is really due to the relationship of Christ's members, and therefore puts an unintended slight on His name and the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 11: 17). You are not intelligent, if you set up knowledge and attainment, instead of Christ, as the title.

But this new-fangled party goes to the utmost in unitedly rejecting Christ's members at large, and claims for itself exclusively all part and lot in God's church now on earth. No saints do they receive unless they are decided to follow themselves. They are self-condemned, being despisers of Christ's members, who may be more intelligent and spiritual and separate to the Lord in every way, but are rejected in principle because they utter not their Shibboleth. Nothing more ignorant, nothing more presumptuous; and the more so, as they are on the same ground of indifference to Christ's truth and glory as the leavened lump which was known for more than 40 years ago for its openness to evil.

Thirdly, their attempt to invest elders with authority is a mere sectarian assumption. According to scripture apostles chose elders in each assembly, as the Holy Ghost led them, either directly, or, as in the case of Titus, one commissioned by an apostle to appoint elders in a definite sphere. Never do we find any minister without such a commission doing such a work; still less do we hear of the assembly choosing elders.* Calvin, Beza, and others have laboured to draw up the latter brief; but it is labour lost. Scripture not only does not indicate the least trace of such a practice, but excludes the theory by the proof that such local charges required apostolic authority, direct or indirect. But there is ample provision otherwise for edification and order as every Christian may read in Rom. 12: 3-8; 1 Cor. 12; 1 Cor. 16: 15-16; Eph. 4: 7-16; 1 Thess. 5: 12-22; Heb. 13: 7, 24; 1 Peter 4: 10, 11; 3 John 5-8. The Holy Spirit, sent down to be with us for ever, fails in nothing, to glorify the Lord and care for His work in every needed way. No doubt, the pretension to imitate the apostles in ordaining, without their power or authority, is in no way peculiar to the new party, but just a falling into the prevalent tradition of Christendom; but here it is the more reprehensible, because they assume to reject all such errors, while in fact they only retrograde less excusably, The only right walk, in the present broken state of Christendom, is in obedience with all humiliation. For ought we not to feel that sin brought about the scattering, which is only increased by, the claim of all authority or power we have not?

* The assembly might choose men in whom they confided to administer in temporal things; but as the Lord gave gifts in the work, so He chose; while the apostles He authorised could authorise for a local charge.

NOTE TO "THE LATEST SECT."

(B. T., p. 368, col. 2.)

As a leader of this movement declares that they do not "appoint" elders, the writer in the *B.T.* feels bound to accept and repeat the disavowal. It is not denied that they claim to have "elders," and insist strongly on their authority, as one of their cherished and distinctive tenets. Others who make a similar claim, though not with the same pretension, have a solemn form of appointment, which probably led one to suppose it in their case virtually, if not formally. It looks rather like self-appointment.

Now it is indisputably according to scripture that the apostle *did* "choose" elders church by church (Acts 14: 23), and that Titus was apostolically commissioned to "appoint" or establish elders city by city in Crete. This was "God's way for His people having bishops." It was not a question only of such qualities as 1 Tim. 3 lays down, but of adequate authority appointing them. Scripture only recognises as presbyters men thus inaugurated, Whatever their qualities, they were only eligible for elders without or before that; but elders scripturally they were not till so chosen. It is well to know, honour, and obey those who have the requisite traits, as we hear enjoined in 1 Cor. 16, 1 Thess. 5, and elsewhere. But they were not called elders, nor ought to be so, until duly established as such. Clearly therefore to dispense with this is not subjection to scripture. The brethren of the new movement offend against God's word in pretending to "elders" in their midst without the essential title of a valid

appointing authority.

Not to appoint, then, would be right, if they did not claim to have "elders" scripturally entitled to rule. To appoint now is altogether invalid, because they have not the requisite apostle or his delegate so charged. Hence to claim "elders" according to scripture without the due appointing power is contrary to scripture and presumptuous. The paper on "Bishops and Deacons," in the little vol. of Addresses is an evasion as to this and inconsistent also; for it asserts in pp. 90, 91 what refutes p. 93.

A gift from the ascended Christ made one responsible to exercise it, evangelist, pastor, or teacher. Gifts as in 1 Cor. 12 and Eph. 4 needed no appointing authority; but, if scripture is to decide and govern, the local charge of an elder did. It is therefore evil to set 1 Tim. 3 or any other text against Acts. 14: 23 and Titus 1: 5. The one may be "the only instance where we have the apostles pointing out elders." But this one is as conclusive to faith as ever so many. And why use men's mistake about Timothy to enfeeble the certainty that Titus was delegated to appoint elders in Crete? Does either one or other give licence now to claim "elders" without analogous appointment? To do the work without that claim is what we see of old at Corinth and Thessalonica; it is accordingly sanctioned of God as the right, humble, and comely way when we have neither apostle nor delegate to appoint. So Christians have long learnt and practised; whereas the device of the new movement on their own showing is baseless pretension as well as retrograde. They might and ought to have known better, but for self-importance, which hinders true intelligence of God's mind, never more needed than in a day of ruin. To dispense with due appointment is as wrong as to unduly appoint.