

On Isolation, or Independency

W. Kelly.

My Dear Sir,

As far as I understand your position, it is one of "holding yourself aloof," or nothingarianism as to church relations. Without doubt a dry morsel and quietness therewith is better than a house full of the sacrifices of strife; as it is better to dwell in the corner of a house-top than with a contentious woman in a house of society.

But I read unmistakably in the last Epistle of the great apostle who alone communicated the truth of the church, that grace gives a wholly different resource in view of the disorder and dangers of the last days. Circumstances may indeed here or there leave one isolated; but isolation is neither the revealed provision nor the legitimate aim. The firm foundation of God standeth, having this seal, The Lord knew those that are His, And, Let every one that nameth the Lord's name depart from unrighteousness. This is individual and of deep moment as things are. But all does not end there. "Now in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and of earth; and some unto honour, and some unto dishonour. If then one purge himself out from these (*i.e.* the vessels unto dishonour), he shall be a vessel unto honour, sanctified, serviceable to the Master, prepared unto every good work." And this you own and have acted on. We are not tied to ecclesiastical corruptions where they are sanctioned constitutionally and admit of no removal. One must purge oneself out, if one cannot purge the evils out. But is this all? While the apostle bids his beloved child flee the lusts of youth, wide as they are and some of them subtle, he adds, "and pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace with those that call on the Lord out of a pure heart" (2 Tim. 2: 19-22). Thus one may and ought to look for companions and fellow-witnesses called to like fidelity. Never should one contemplate isolation. The Holy Spirit bids one by grace to desire and expect communion of saints, however great and general may be the ruin of Christendom.

You refer to disorder and party and scattering among those once united. It is sorrowfully true; but are there not some who refused these unworthy ways, and made themselves obnoxious to such as yielded to them? Some at least despised fads and cliques, resolved by grace to keep Christ's word and not deny His name, and rejecting any new departure. But a new lump was in the wind, and it was openly avowed that they did not fear division, though the apostle hated and warned against it. When a pretext is sought, it is readily found: the difficulty was to justify what saints shrank from as uncalled for and evil. Then was first heard among us the ominous cry that no scripture was needed: a strange thine for those whose watchword had hitherto been, "It is written." Truly it was a new and sad departure. Take the great council at Jerusalem, when the growth of party spirit wrought by the old difficulty that severed Jew from Gentile after the flesh to make void the unity of the Spirit. The apostles were all there, save the martyred James, Zebedee's son. So was Paul, an apostle by a higher calling than any, though all were the gifts of the ascended Christ. But even so there was much discussion. Peter spoke powerfully, and Barnabas and Paul related what signs and wonders God wrought among the nations by them. Then another James drew attention to the written word as the end of controversy. For "the words of the prophets" were decisive, Amos being cited, when they speak of "all the Gentiles, or nations, upon whom my name is called." The apostles and the elders with the whole assembly decided accordingly. Nor is theirs a question of doctrine, discipline, or practice, for which Scripture does not provide, that every thing, collective or individual, may be a matter of obeying God.

Rev. 2, 3 may be pleaded for individualism. Now the call here to "him that hath an ear" is imperative in not allowing assemblies absolutely to govern faith or practice. I am bound, whatever the pretension to authority in defence of wrong or error, to hear not them but what the Spirit saith to them. Their voice is *prima facie* entitled (like that of my parents) to high respect and obedience, but certainly not if there be wrong or error known and even acknowledged: else that holy, responsibly holy, enclosure becomes a screen for evil, and may end in a hold of any unclean and hated bird. As a prophetic book the Apocalypse does warn and call for obedience to the word; but that word was to leave no faithful soul settled down in isolation. On the contrary it encourages him, who separates from the evils men impose under the abused name of the Lord, to cherish a fellowship as much according to God as the separation. For Christ died to gather in one the children of God that were scattered abroad; and the Holy Ghost came to baptise them Jew or Gentile into one body. Never should God's will as to this inalienable privilege and duty become secondary. It is of all obligation; and the Holy Spirit abides to give both permanence and power, as we too are called to be subject to the Lord. Hence the blessedness of His own promise to be in the midst (not certainly of all Christians in their wanderings, but) of all that are gathered unto His name, were they but two or three. Let these be diligent to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace; and may they do it with all lowliness and meekness, with long-suffering, forbearing one another in love.

Yours faithfully in Christ, W. K.