

## The Rev. A. Moody Stuart on "Brethren."

W. Kelly.

To W. T. P. Wolston, Edinburgh.

Dear brother,

Visiting a christian friend in the north of Ireland a short time ago, I glanced over the "Life of Elizabeth, last Duchess of Gordon," and found in it a statement, which, one must presume, expresses views generally entertained among godly Presbyterians. The copy I saw was the fifth edition (1866): so that the representation there made has gone forth widely and long uncontradicted. As you well know, we are in the habit of letting most of these notices pass without a word, especially where their ignorance and coarseness suffice to refute their ill-will; as of Messrs. Carson, Croskery, D. Macintosh, and suchlike. But the piety and the character of Mr. M. Stuart, who has condescended to no improprieties of the kind, make it desirable to give him a distinct answer. We may be sure that he would not knowingly circulate what is unfounded.

I cite in full from pages 174, 175: "After her decease the charge of Plymouthism was brought against her Grace's memory. But 'there must be order in the church' was the expression of her own sentiments on that head; and while she had valued friends abroad belonging to the communion, there was not one of her associates in Scotland over whom the Plymouth doctrines had any influence. With the 'Brethren' the good Duchess had nothing in common, save our common Christianity. Her brotherhood was not like theirs, first severing other churches and then their own. Their frequent enunciation, 'He's a good man, but I could not break bread with him,' was contrary to every thought and feeling of her heart; for there was no good man throughout the world, with whom she would not have been too happy to sit at the table of the Lord, only counting herself unworthy of the privilege. So with their other peculiarities. In her clear and strong views of the imputed righteousness of Christ she differed from such of them as deny it, and in her love for the Lord's prayer from those who reject it is legal; in her fervent admiration of nature she differed from others; in her firm belief in the perpetual obligation of the Ten Commandments, and of the Sabbath as one of them, in her appreciation of the inestimable privilege of infant baptism, and in her high value for the christian ministry, she differed from them all.

"Her daily life at Huntly Lodge was a testimony against those doctrines which level all earthly distinctions; a constant witness to the scriptural institution and the attractive beauty of a regulated order in the world," etc.

Certainly her ordinary way and Mr. M. S.'s biography should sufficiently protect the Duchess from reproach of sympathy with those who are styled Plymouthists by all who in practice sanction the present state of Christendom. Her Grace was a Presbyterian larger-hearted than most, and with this we heartily sympathize. But one who found it so hard a struggle to cast in her lot with the Free-Church movement had certainly not learnt to judge tradition enough to go farther.

But how strange the notion that "there must be order in the church" condemns the very Christians who have left the disorders of denominationalism, in order to walk, and to walk ecclesiastically too, in subjection to the Lord acting by His word and Spirit! To me it has been for more than a quarter of a century a matter of as much surprise as shame that our brethren who do not even pretend to own the sovereign action of the Spirit in the assembly can venture to use such a text as 1 Corinthians 14: 41 ("Let all things be done decently and in order") against the "Brethren" who alone are acting on it in the

simplicity of faith. Why do they not blush to refer to God's order, which they never think of carrying out from Lord's day to Lord's day, which they *cannot* carry out as the Free, any more than as the Established, Church of Scotland? No intelligent believer can question what was the comely order laid down by apostolic authority. Far be it from us to covet tongues or external signs. They never were the best gifts; they do not, could not, suit the circumstances or moral state of a fallen church. Far from any of us then be the pretension to have all the early church had, or to be wistfully seeking for what, if it could be conceived to reappear, must, as things are, prove a snare.

But here we have the order of God's assembly for prayer, for singing, for thanksgiving, for prophesying; and if we are God's assembly, with what face stand any before the Lord who practise habitually a wholly different arrangement, founded on the directly antagonistic principle of one man's controlling action? Entirely do I believe in and value individual responsibility for preaching the gospel, or instructing disciples, as Paul did in the school of one Tyrannus. We have liberty, we are bound, to use our gifts for Christ. But the christian assembly stands on another footing—the recognition of His presence therein who divides to each member of the body as He will. "For ye may all prophesy, that all may learn and all may be comforted." That this is not practised among Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Congregationalists, or others, is too well-known; but will they dare to say it is obsolete? Does the absence of a tongue, or of sign-gifts, annul all the chapter? If they say, Yes, why do such men or women talk about "order in the church," when they thus blot out by their unbelief and wilfulness the only order in it He ever established? If they say, No, why do they not seek grace and faith to practise His "order in the church?" This it is "Brethren" desire above all things to do: if they are feeble (as indeed they are), why do not those who think themselves strong and wise try to help them? Can they say that they do or even desire this? Can they deny their hostility to those who stand and suffer for God's order in the church? I humbly think the departed lady and her associates might have been all the better for adding to "our common Christianity" a little deference to the sole order God's word furnishes for the church.

But we are told that "her [the Duchess's] brotherhood was not like theirs, first severing other churches, and then their own." Now is it not universally confessed by all intelligent men that the associations of Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Methodists, are not churches or assemblies according to God's word, but rather such sects or divisions as we are warned to avoid? Is not this felt by those who form the Evangelical Alliance? The difference is that others stay in what they know to be unscriptural, "Brethren" not only own but on principle abandon it as wrong. Who are acting with most conscience, toward God? And if evil doctrine broke out in the midst of "Brethren" worse than any they had left behind, were they not right and thoroughly consistent. in putting away or abandoning those who would cleave to it? Even if Mr. M. S. had not faith to act thus, he ought not to refuse his sympathy to what is manifestly due to the Lord, unless indeed his predilections, be with those who hold or make light of heterodoxy as to Christ, which I should be sorry to think. Certainly, if we departed from nationalism and dissent to fall back on the imperishable truth of God's assembly and on the Saviour's presence with those gathered to His name, were we but two or three, it would have ill become us to have preferred our own ease and peace to His name when dishonoured in our midst. Yet for refusing to be parties to union at His expense we are censured: will the Lord blame us for it? I am confident He will not. The blame of others is a light. thing comparatively in our eyes; it may be serious another day for themselves.

"Their frequent enunciation, 'He is a good man, but I could not break bread with him'" strikes me as a strange assertion; for in thirty years' intercourse and ministry in Great Britain, Ireland, France, Switzerland, Holland, Germany, I have never heard such a thought once, even from the least

enlightened brother. I do not say that Mr. M. S. has not encountered some such most mistaken and untoward speech, and often too; but I am assured that his acquaintance must have lain with persons wholly unworthy to represent "Brethren's" principles or practice, wherever this had been their language or feeling. It is their distinguishing feature that the table of the Lord is open to all who are His, where they are known to be walking as such; and this, as a matter, not of courtesy towards them, but of honouring Him in His members, according to the place they have in the assembly of God. Hence they might not only break bread but speak in worship or to edification, without the smallest violence to their conscience. On the other, hand, where there was deliberate maintenance of, or indifference to, evil against Christ, no name, place or reputation would induce "Brethren" to receive such. We are not so far off then, as Mr. M. S. imagines. "Our common Christianity" goes farther than many think: only act on it, and you will find the hostility, not only of the world, but yet more of worldly Christians. With the same persons you would be the best Christians going if you believed all we believe and stayed where they are, theorising, but dishonest, perhaps breaking bread in every form of disunion to show how much you value unity.

It is probably the same thing with "their other peculiarities." Thus *none* of the "Brethren" accept the notion of inherent or infused righteousness as our justification before God; not one but holds that Christ is of God made to us righteousness, and hence that the Lord imputes righteousness to the believer apart from works. Hence we have no sympathy with the Arminian slur (be it J. Wesley's word or any other's) that "imputed righteousness is imputed nonsense." But we do not therefore embrace the hypothesis that imputation means Christ's obedience of the law imputed to us. Scripture grounds it on Christ's obedience up to death — the death of the cross whereon sin was judged and God glorified about it; so that it is God's righteousness to set Christ in heaven and accept us in Him. And we too, having died with Christ, are thereby delivered from the flesh, the law, and the world, as the apostle elaborately shows; and thus, had we been the most zealous of Jews, we are no longer under law, having died to that wherein we were held and belonging to another, even to Him who is risen from the dead, that we should bring forth fruit unto God.

Again, while admitting that mistaken things have been said by many "Brethren," I had never heard of one daring to say the Lord's prayer was legal, or to reject it as legal; nor could any right-minded soul among them yield to the Duchess in love for it. The question does not lie here at all; but whether the accomplishment of redemption did not lay a new basis for believers, when, as the Lord Himself told them, they should ask the Father in His name, and this by the Spirit given to them. Hitherto (He said, long after they had been taught the prayer) they had asked nothing in His name. To go on as before is disrespect both to Christ's work and to the presence of the Holy Ghost, ignoring and slighting Christ's own words.

Nor is it true that men of calm and holy judgment among "Brethren" disparage the beauty of nature. God forbid! Only it is possible that the Duchess made sight-seeing or the cultivation of flowers an object of her life, in a way which most of us feel to be beneath a Christian. (Compare 2 Cor. 5: 15-17; Col. 3: 1-4.)

As to the perpetual obligation of the Ten Commandments and of the Sabbath, there is a radical difference: not that "Brethren" hold, as many did at the Reformation and since, that the law is abrogated, but that we, Christians, have died with Christ and are risen with Him and are hence on a ground to which the law never did and never can apply. Such is the doctrine of the New Testament (Rom. 6: 15; Rom. 7: 1-6; Rom. 10: 1-6; 1 Cor. 15: 56, 57; 2 Cor. 3; Gal. 2-5 1 Tim. 1: 9). Accordingly it teaches that we meet to remember Christ in His Supper on the first day, the resurrection or Lord's day, not on the seventh or sabbath day which beheld His grave. (Acts 20: 7; 1 Cor. 16; Rev. 1: 10.) It is

really sorrowful and humiliating to have to defend the simplest, most fundamental, truth thus lost sight of by well-meaning souls who are, as usual, stern and sharp and haughty against all who have learnt a little beyond themselves.

Evidently neither the late Duchess nor Mr. M. S. understands this, the liberty wherewith Christ makes free; and their lack of acquaintance with it lies at the bottom of their inability to appreciate the position taken by "Brethren" as to righteousness and the law. Only such persons should take heed what they say or whereof they affirm, as the apostle admonishes.

Further, many more than Mr. M. S. will be astonished, I dare say, to hear that what he calls "the inestimable privilege of infant baptism" is appreciated by a great number of those who by their adversaries are styled Exclusives, Darbyites, and such-like nicknames.

One of these also, in speaking for all, long ago explained that we have the highest value for Christian ministry in every kind and measure, prizing nothing more than its freest exercise in responsibility to the Lord, and objecting to nothing but un-Christian ministry. It certainly does seem to us childish, if not presumptuous, to hear how these good people flatter themselves that they differ from us in their "high value for the Christian ministry." They are sincere but under the merest illusion. Did the Duchess really differ from us in the principle? How came her biographer to make such assertions? The Scotch are believed to be a reading public. They ought then to have known better. For if their denominationalism sunders them from us, our writings are accessible enough and should be weighed before they write about what they so little understand.

It is well-known, that "Brethren" in general are utterly opposed to what is called radicalism; and that they were long ridiculed at first as a knot of high Tory gentlemen and ladies, unable to endure either the corruptions of Anglicanism or the vulgarity of dissent, and so establishing a sort of Madeira climate for their delicate lungs. Thus an infidel leader once wrote in one of the most respectable reviews of the Nonconformist party.

We may express some surprise too at the quarter whence such a charge emanates against us; for Scottish Presbyterians have been thought only less democratic than English Congregationalists, neither of them being usually considered remarkable for their loyalty or their lowliness.

Finally, life at Huntly Lodge may have been worthy of all respect as opposed to levellers, and a fair specimen of a "regulated order in the world;" but for this very reason, on Mr. M. S.'s own showing, it could not be a real testimony to death with Christ from the rudiments of the world. It was an effort to live in the world aright, not the walk of those consciously risen with Christ and seeking the things above where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God.

You are at liberty to use what I now write, for the correction of errors and the help of all who would know the truth.

Yours affectionately, W. K.