

# The Doctrine of Christ, and Bethesdaism

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We are bound to receive one another, but only, as Christ received us, to the glory of God. Rom. 15: 7. Does this mean to receive one who brings not the doctrine of Christ, or those that receive such an one to the dishonour of the Father and the Son?

The principle of welcoming every christian, walking as such, is consistent with the resolute refusal of all who dishonour His name, whether morally, doctrinally, or by association. 1 Cor. 5 is no plainer for rejecting an immoral professor, than 2 John is for refusing those that do not hold a true Christ. Their alleged good qualities ought not to accredit them: the word of God as clearly bars it, as Christ's person and work demand our subjection. To be neutral where the truth is at stake is to partake of the evil deeds of His adversaries.

2 John is decisive that it is not enough to be sound personally in the faith. Even a woman, the elect lady, and her children, are carefully warned by the apostle of their direct responsibility, if they received one who did not bring the doctrine of Christ. "If any one cometh unto you, and bringeth not this teaching, receive him not into *your* house, and give him no greeting; for he that giveth him greeting partaketh in his evil works" (ver. 10, 11, R.V). Thus distinctly is the principle laid down by the Holy Ghost, that the simplest saints who countenance the confessor of a false Christ partake of his evil deeds, even without imbibing the evil doctrine. A spiritual mind would feel that, dreadful as it is to fall into such heterodoxy, in a certain sense more guilty is he who, professing the truth of Christ, consents to fellowship with one that denies it. "Now ye say, We see; therefore your sin remaineth." Neutrality in such case is heinous sin, and this proportionate to knowledge.

Thus 2 John proves that absolute refusal of this worst evil is due to the Son of God. The evil admits of no hesitation or compromise. Had the elect lady, spite of the apostolic warning, obstinately received into her house one who brought not the truth of Christ, she must have identified herself with the deceiver and its consequences. Vain the plea that she had been a dear child of God, both in faith and walk: the written word nevertheless pronounces her a "partaker of his evil deeds;" and God's word is better than all our reasonings and all our feelings. Whatever the motive, she had knowingly disobeyed and committed herself and her house to high treason against Christ. She had more or less sanctioned that which to the last degree denied and dishonoured the Lord of glory. Hence, till she cleared herself from the sin, in the sight of God and His saints, she had sunk morally into complicity with it. The better her light, the worse to behave as if she had none. To receive her in such circumstances would be to participate in similar wickedness, however men may ridicule it to their own foul shame. Indeed to receive her thus would be receiving her not to God's glory but to *His* shame, because it is barefaced indifference to the affront put on His Son. "Whosoever denieth the Son, the same hath not the Father." "He that honoureth not the Son honoureth not the Father which sent Him."

From the first those called "Brethren" have proved that they do not make light of ecclesiastical evil, by separating from all unscriptural associations, even if christians join. But they have hitherto refused to put indifference to the Christ of God in the same category with offences against the unity or the discipline of the assembly. Party spirit on either hand may seek to class all together. But it is as unscriptural as it is unholy so to exaggerate ecclesiastical offences (of which all sects are guilty), or so to extenuate deep and damnable denial of Christ, which characterises only the worst antagonism to God. His word warrants and demands this distinction, which no sober saint used to doubt, and none

would now unless carried away by worthless theory or straits of false position.

The evil doctrine against Christ, which has given us most trouble for thirty years, is that, apart from imputation or vicarious suffering, Christ came as a man and an Israelite into a condition of distance and inflictions from God, in which "He was made experimentally to prove the reality of that condition in which others, but more especially Israel, had sunk themselves, by their disobedience to God's holy law, a condition out of which He was able to extricate Himself, and from which He proved that He could extricate Himself by His own perfect obedience" (B. W. Newton's "Remarks on the Sufferings" etc. p. 12). "And Jesus, as man, was associated with this place of distance in which man in the flesh was, and He had through obedience to find His way to that point where God could meet Him as having finished His appointed work — glorify Him and set Him at His own right hand, in the heavenly places; and that point was death — death on the cross — death under the wrath of God" (ib. pp. 31, 32). "He was exposed, for example, because of His relation to Adam to that sentence of death, that had been pronounced on the whole family of man" (B. W. N.'s "Observations" etc. p. 9). "The mission of John must be regarded as an all-important era, not only in the life of the Lord Jesus, etc. . . . . Indeed unless grace be the same as law, and destruction the same as salvation, the infinite importance of that era cannot be denied" (ib. pp. 10, 11). "Moreover, the exercises of soul which His elect in their unconverted state ought to have . . . . . such exercises, yet without sin, Jesus had" (ib. p. 26). "The anointing of the Spirit would never have come on Him at Jordan, unless He had been fore-ordained and certainly known as the victim to be slain at Calvary" (ib. p. 32).

It is true that, when this deadly poison was analysed and the godly stood aghast, Mr. N. printed an "Acknowledgment of Error" in applying Rom. 5: 19 (first clause) to Christ. But this did not satisfy even his most trusted associates, who owned solemnly in print that it was an elaborate system, permeating their views of scripture generally, and quite as fatal as any one had charged on them. One indeed warned that souls resting on what they had taught for years could not be saved. For Christ was thereby made by birth to be in man's distance from God, and especially in Israel's by a broken law! obnoxious therefore to the two-fold penalties, not vicariously, but by association as one of them!! But He extricated Himself by obedience, faith, and prayer, out of some of those inflictions by which He was threatened, passing by baptism into grace — from Sinai to Zion! But the exercises which the elect when unconverted ought to have (!) if possible were His!! Yet He had, notwithstanding, to find His way to a point where God could meet Him — death under God's wrath! If this be not a systematic and complete overthrow of "the teaching of Christ" in scripture, words are meaningless. No heretic more thoroughly or subtly debased Christ; some like Irving taught more truth than B. W. N. It is a denial, not a confession, of Christ coming in the flesh: which truth does not mean the bare fact, but the divine person of Him who came in flesh. He, and He alone, born of woman, might have come otherwise; but thus He was pleased, for God's glory and the reconciliation by His death of man and all the universe heavenly and earthly, to come in flesh. Had Newtonism been true, Christ must have died for Himself — could not for us, for creation or for God's own glory. Again, if He be supposed to extricate Himself by good works and ordinances, the truth is overthrown in this way too. And if His death were still needful for Himself to be saved (error usually being incoherent), as well as to get the anointing of the Spirit, His person is denied, and all hope of saving others wholly and necessarily destroyed.

I am grieved to add that the blinded author of this fundamental heterodoxy printed "A letter on subjects connected with the Lord's Humanity;" in which, *after* the so-called Acknowledgment of Error, he re-affirmed the principles of both the "Remarks" and the "Observations" which had horrified even his own oldest friends and most of his partisans. Arianism etc. on the one side, and perhaps Irvingism on the other, deny the Lord's glory more openly; but does any false system more thoroughly

than his make Jesus anathema? Compare 1 Cor. 12: 3.

When the meeting at Bethesda (Bristol) admitted several partisans of Mr. N. and thus occasioned a separation far and wide among "Brethren," it had been for years fully owned as enjoying intercommunion. Hence, there is no honesty in comparing that meeting with individuals coming from the national body or from dissent. How far Bethesda really coalesced, it may be hard to say: still it was an accomplished fact, and no question was raised till the crisis of 1848 came, when reasons were sought to palliate the fatal deed of receiving the known followers of a convicted heretic. Now we have always excepted cases of real ignorance. But what could justify receiving persons of intelligence who came straight from his party, eulogising and circulating the very tracts which contained the anti-christian doctrine already described? Bethesda received them in the most determined manner, driving out not a few souls, some of them among the most enlightened, spiritual, and devoted there, who refused to sanction such indifference to a blasphemy at Bristol, from which at all cost they were apart at Plymouth and elsewhere. Not satisfied with letting these persons in, ten of the leaders at Bethesda put forth a too famous document, in which they laboured to defend their refusal of investigation before receiving the incriminated. The first thing insisted on was that the Bethesda meeting should clear those who signed it: else they would minister no more in their midst! Was it surprising that the mass fell into the snare, and consented to vote the leaders right, *before* the tracts were read, or comments allowed, in presence of the meeting? *After* the breach was consummated! they held meetings in which Mr. N.'s doctrine was condemned, especially by Mr. M.,\* as strongly almost as by any outside Bethesda. God however took care to test its moral value ere long, if a few were deceived at first.

\* As much is made of J. N. D.'s visit to G. M. after these meetings, it may be stated that Mr. D.'s hopefulness was not shared by his brethren, who knew that Bethesda never owned its sin in receiving Mr. N.'s partisans, and never repented of the false principles in the Letter of the Ten (adopted by a formal vote of its constituents). It never so much as noticed the sin, after the seven meetings, of receiving back two of the Ten who had gone out and publicly supported Mr. N. before all Bristol! In the face of grave facts like these, what was the value of theoretic censure of the doctrine? Mr. M.'s rude repulse only compelled Mr. D. to feel, as others felt, the hollowness of Bethesda throughout. Mr. D's power lay in expounding the word, not in disciplinary action, as he used to own freely throughout his life. As he once said to me long ago, "my favourites turn out scamps." This was never more applicable than in his later years, when they carried him away.

Partly by this, and partly by other means, Mr. N.'s partisans were got to retire from Bethesda, expressly not waiving their claim to be there, but desiring to release the leaders from some of their difficulties. Could this yield a moment's satisfaction to a sober christian? Bethesda was bound to clear itself openly of a sin of the gravest kind openly done: mere words would not avail, nor getting rid of souls in an underhand way. Subsequently a party was formed, a public building was taken, Mr. N. was had there, two of "the Ten" (Messrs. A. and W.) being found in their midst. The movement failed; and these two leading men, to speak of no others, after Bethesda's loud denunciation of the Newtonian blasphemy and after their own public association with Mr. N., were permitted to return to Bethesda, without the smallest confession of their notorious and flagrant sin! All they owned was the wrong of leaving Bethesda; but they were not asked, nor did they give, an expression of sorrow for the wickedness of fraternising with one who still retained the main parts of his heterodoxy as to Christ. And this after the seven meetings!

Now because we renounce all fellowship with such ways and persons, we are covered with the bitterest reproaches possible! We are taxed with "new tests," and I know not what. Whereas, on the face of the matter, it was the beloved apostle, not we, who wrote 2 John. And if he introduced no new

test when he insisted on uncompromising rigour wherever a false Christ was in question, how charge us with it who are very simply carrying out the word of God given through him? Those who plead for laxity in such a case, would be more consistent if they denied the authority of this Scripture altogether.

This then was the origin of the Neutrals, or Open Brethren as some of them prefer to be called. They more or less sided with Bethesda, some going farther, others not quite so far, but all on substantially the same principle, if not of receiving the partisans of an antichrist, certainly of palliating those who so received and making "one lump" with them. Not one meeting ever ventured to reject the most guilty leader in that neutral result. To refuse such an one would be to give up their evil line of things.

For it is no question of receiving christians in Christ's name, graciously dealing with ecclesiastical ignorance. This we have always held (save a few who played an unhappy part in the late disasters) to be thoroughly of God; and I trust we shall ever so continue, believing and acting on it as due to Christ. With Open Brethren it is a wholly different case from welcoming a godly person, in spite of his sect. For *they* were once with us on common ground of scripture; they owned the "one body and one Spirit," as gathered to Christ's name. Their origin, the reason of their existence, was to defend and maintain the reception of men tainted with the worst sin — indifference to the truth of Christ. That they may have liked independency before, that they walk in it and enforce it since, is true enough; but he that puts forward independency of principle, as the plague-spot of the O.B., is blind to their characteristic and most serious evil. And if he goes so far as to reject individuals for independency, he must, to be consistent, abandon all the largeness of heart which marked Brethren from the first, and the principle which their best and wisest leaders cherished to the last, — our title of grace to welcome godly saints out of an orthodox denomination, though independency is stamped in various forms on all. No denomination, as such, great or small, does or can stand on the "one body and one Spirit" of scripture for principle and practice alike. It demands living faith ecclesiastically, and an entire superiority to the world and flesh, which must have independency open or latent but real.

We have ever allowed that in the ranks of Open Brethrenism there might be individuals wholly and honestly ignorant that it is founded as a society on indifference to a true or a false Christ. Where this is certain, one would seek to deal pitifully with them; and no one was freer to receive such with a grave caution than the late J. N. D., as almost all others of weight have done. Timid men, ever prone to sectarian barriers, have alas! refused even such. But no upright neutral brother would seek, wish, or submit to, such terms: only those who have neither faith nor principle, who are ready to break bread at Bethesda, *and* at Park Street, *and* with us too who refuse both systems, if they were allowed. These are the worst of all and can only corrupt, as they are already corrupted.

Is it asked, How do Open Brethren stand now? The answer is, As they began, or rather worse. Indeed evil may grow or spread, but does not get better or die. Scripture requires that it be judged, which is its doom, if we are faithful to Christ. Not only did Newtonians get in and were never put out, but some are known as Mr. J. Beaumont can testify, to play fast and loose with the denial of everlasting punishment, in as respectable a company as they have in England. The conduct of the leaders and meeting was flagrant; but no meeting nor even individual seemed to mind it, beyond a protest, which was put in the fire, and all went on together — in love so called! but where is the truth? Where is Christ?

Granted that in some places under strong pressure they put away a clique of these offenders; such vigour may be now and then, here and there. But, where it is not so (and nothing is harder than to get necessary care against error), they maintain intercommunion all the same. They are on a free-and-

easy ground, which admits of every one's will and tries nobody's conscience. An "assembly-judgment" there too over-rides truth and righteousness, to the deep dishonour of the Lord and His word.

In one of their recent "Appeals" C. E. argues that a true platform contemplates all the saints of God, as we have often said and still say. But the O.B.'s abuse of this godly plea is to accredit, not only christians guilty of sin, but yet more their society got up by the determination to shelter such from scriptural judgment. This was not the case with any orthodox sect known to us; and therefore O.B. have no title to the same gracious consideration. Others began for good according to their light. Open Brethren began by palliating evil or screening evildoers, in departure from the light they once had. To receive saints in Christ's name was never meant to let in such as dishonour His name; which is as mighty to detect those who treat Him lightly, whatever their pretensions, as to encourage the godly who may be ever so ignorant. An honourable man among O.B. ought not to wish fellowship with us, if he believe in his own policy, and ought to resent the plea of ignorance, which, when ever true, would not be used in vain. And as to "thirty years," what difference does this make, if the same old principle abides?

That it does abide is plain from J. R. C's "Exclusivism" (Glasgow, 1882); who, though wholly unknown to me, is reported to be as sober and conscientious a representative as could be desired. Here we have the error as lively as ever. 1 Cor. 5: 6 is perverted (p. 8) just as of old. He mocks the idea that the whole Corinthian church was leavened, and seems to think it absurd, if it were, to call upon them to purge out the leaven. Thus does he convict himself and his party (for in this they have always been alike) of guilty opposition to the word of the Lord. It was exactly because they were as a whole leavened by the little leaven allowed in their midst, that the apostle commanded them to purge out the old leaven that they might be a new lump, "even as ye are unleavened." *This* was their standing in and by Christ; and, because they were thus unleavened before God, they must purge the leaven out; for it leavens, not the one offender only, but the whole lump. The reasoning of Mr. C. is wholly false, but it betrays the unholy principle common to them all. It is a question not of every individual in the Corinthian church becoming incestuous, etc., which is truly absurd, but of the whole assembly being defiled by the evil they knew and did not judge. Hence the restoration was, not merely through discipline nor only self-judgment of the wicked person, but by a deep work in the assembly also: "in all things ye have approved yourselves to be clear in this matter." (2 Cor. 7: 11.) The Open Brethren are thus fundamentally at fault. Their distinctive difference is corruption in principle now, as more than thirty years ago. I should not, I confess, turn to an Anglican divine to find spiritual instruction on such a theme, considering how the National Establishment stands condemned in practice by its own Homily for Whitsunday (second part). But it is painfully instructive to see how Dean Alford disproves and rejects the same unholy lack of intelligence as in the Open Brethren's argument for their party. **"Are you not aware that a little leaven imparts a character to the whole lump?"** That this is the meaning, and not 'that a little leaven will, if not purged out, leaven the whole lump,' is manifest from the point in hand, viz. the inconsistency of their *boasting*: which would not appear by their *danger of corruption hereafter*, but by their *character* being *actually lost*. One of them was a fornicator of a fearfully depraved kind, tolerated and harboured: by this fact, *the character of the whole was tainted.*" (The Greek Test. ii. 507, fifth ed.) What Mr. C. assails unwittingly through his false position is *the apostle's "theory"* as well as practice as to defilement. Equally below the Anglican are his unfaithful remarks on 2 John. We do *not* say that the lady, if she had received him who did not bring the doctrine of Christ, was to be treated "exactly as you would treat" the anti-christian teacher himself, but that she thereby became a partaker of his evil deeds. So Bethesda and the Open Brethren have fallen in similar cases.

Their point of departure is so anti-scriptural, that their most recent and cautious apologists cannot but expose their party badge to the withering condemnation of scripture. Having left God's word, their prudent course (humanly speaking) would be, like their delinquent antipodes, to attempt no self-defence but wrap themselves up in silent pride.

Scripture is *not* silent as to their great sin. "Come out," therefore, brother, that you partake not of the sins and so receive not of God's strokes.