

A MATTER OF CONSCIENCE

In the winter of 1827-28 four Christian men, driven from existing ecclesiastical systems by faithfulness to conscience based on the Word of God, began to meet together to remember the Lord Jesus in His death. They met simply as Christians gathered to the name of the Lord Jesus Christ (Matthew 18:20), owning the presence and authority of the Holy Spirit,¹ and believing that the purposes of God would express the unity of the church, the body of Christ, in such a way that the world might know that He was sent from God² (John 17:23). They felt that the "Outward symbol and instrument" of this unity was the partaking of the Lord's Supper,³ recognizing a difference between mere sectarian confederacy and the genuine "Unity of the Spirit."⁴

The availability of the writings of J.N. Darby, coupled with the fact that he was one of these four original brothers, and a respected leader in the "Brethren" movement, provides authoritative documentation of the doctrine and practices of early "Brethren". Any writings subsequently quoted are used only for their historical value, not as dogma. Words in [brackets] were occasionally added to clarify the fragmented context.

Considering the divided testimony and practical lack of holiness in the various sects of Christianity to be analogous to the failing people of Israel described in Exodus 32, brethren felt it necessary to separate from the "Camp" of professing Christianity, seeking the Lord out of pure heart at the antitype of the tabernacle pitched without the camp in Exodus 33:1-11. (Hebrew 13:13). Mr. Darby later wrote:

*Themselves outside the camp, whatever saints had faith to follow them were companions in their position, and they were not separated in life, love, or essential unity, from those who could not [follow them]...*⁵

For these brethren, owning the presence and authority of the Holy Spirit allowed no organization; recognizing the unity of the body of Christ allowed no membership; acknowledging the absolute authority of the entire Word of God allowed no creed; realizing the holiness of the Lord in their midst allowed no evil in persons or doctrine. Thus, the prerequisite for fellowship in the Breaking of Bread was a reasonable assurance that one was a consistent Christian calling on the Lord out of a pure heart.⁶ (1 Timothy 2:22).

In 1833 Mr. Darby wrote:

*The great body of Christians who are accustomed to religion, are scarce capable of understanding anything else...You [brethren] are nothing, nobody, but Christians, and the moment you cease to be an available mount for communion for any consistent Christian, you will go to pieces or help the evil.*⁷

In providing this "Available mount for communion", consistent Christians were emphatically not compelled to separate from other religious systems.

Suppose a person, known to be godly and sound in faith, who has not left some ecclesiastical system--nay, thinks Scripture favors an ordained ministry, but is glad when occasion occurs...: is he to be excluded because he is of some system as to which his conscience is not enlightened, nay, which he may think more right? He is a godly

member of the body, known such: is he to be shut out? If so, the degree of light is title to communion, and the unity of the body is denied by the assembly which refuses him..., agreement with us is made the rule, and the assembly becomes a sect with its members like any other.^{8,9} (1869).

Brethren acted on the principle of the unity of the body of Christ in simple obedience to the Word of God. They owned the title of all consistent true believers to be at the Lord's table,^{10,11} apparently trusting God to enlighten souls as they were exposed to scriptural teaching on the proper ground of Christian gathering.

I remember a case where one growing in the truth came to help sometimes in a Sunday School, and from the other side of London, and asked brethren if he might not break bread when there--time even did not allow him to get back to his Baptist service and he enjoyed the communion of saints. Brethren allowed him gladly; and if my recollections are right, his name was not given out when he came afterwards. Very soon he was amongst Brethren, entirely, but his fellowship was as full when he was not.^{10,11}

Brethren imposed no conditions (except reasonable holiness) for fellowship; nor did they permit any conditions to be imposed on them.¹² Once it was determined that a person could break bread as a Christian, a member of the body of Christ, he was in fellowship with brethren if he desired to be.

*There is no difference (between breaking bread as) a Christian and fellowship...If his heart be pure, (II Timothy 2), I have no reason to exclude him; but if anything in his path require he should be excluded, he is liable [to assembly discipline ?]...I know no fellowship other than of membership in the body of Christ.*⁶ (1870)

Admittedly, brethren were not instantly mature in doctrine or practice. At first, human pre-arrangement of certain aspects even of the Breaking of Bread were relied on.¹³ The Lord was patient with their ignorance, and soon they learned to rely more fully on the ever present guidance of the Holy Spirit. Many brethren today have apparently concluded that these early brethren were not scripturally mature as to separation from religious systems. Let it be remembered that many of these brethren personally and painfully separated from familiar systems at great cost to themselves. The doctrine of the unity of the body of Christ was the single most compelling factor causing these brethren to "Buy the truth," and they had every intention to "Sell it not." Do brethren understand this doctrine today?

Brethren viewpoints, or at least Mr. Darby's viewpoints, did change over the years:

*For a year or two, at the beginning, I preached everywhere they let me, and others have done it... but...now...the testimony has to be clear.*¹⁴

*Let there be no mixing with the church-world,...but shew grace to it.*¹⁴

His convictions on receiving were also modified, especially after the divisions so shamefully shattered the testimony to the unity of the body of Christ professed by those gathered to His precious name.

The point is to conciliate (1) sound discipline, and (2) being outside the camp, which is of increasing importance, and (3) avoiding being a sect, which I should as anxiously do...If therefore they came claiming as a condition liberty to go elsewhere. I could not allow it because I know it is wrong, and the church of God cannot allow what is wrong. If it was ignorance, and they came bona-fide in the spirit of unity...I should not reject them,

because they had not in fact broken...[with the camp?], but I could not accept what made up part of the camp, nor any sort of claim to go to both, to be inside and outside. This is equally pretentious and dishonest...But I receive a person who comes in simplicity, with a good conscience, for the sake of spiritual communion, though they may not yet see clearly ecclesiastically; but the assembly is bound to exercise discipline as to them, and know their walk and purity of heart in coming whenever they do. They cannot come in and out and just as they please...looseness in this is more fatal than ever now.¹⁵ (1873)

But Mr. Darby ever cautioned against sectarian degeneration with the practical establishment of a membership, whether admitted to or not. He defined a sect as:

A religious corporation united upon another principle than that of the body of Christ. It is formally such when those who compose this particular corporation are regarded as being members of it. It is to walk in the spirit of a sect when those alone are recognized in a practical manner, without giving themselves out as properly members of a corporation.¹⁶

He spoke (earlier?) of the possibility of brethren becoming a sect. "Say with more light, that is all."^{8,9} In 1869, he wrote:

If people must be all of you, it is practically a membership in your body. The Lord keep you from it: that is simply dissenting ground.^{8,9}

He cautioned brethren that God could set them aside, "And spread His truth by others...if they be not faithful."¹⁴ As late as 1875 he wrote:

When persons break bread, they are in the only fellowship I know, owned members of the body of Christ. The moment you make a full fellowship, you make people members of your assembly, and the whole principle of meeting is falsified.¹¹ (1875)

Perhaps his strongest statement was:

If an assembly refused a person known to be a Christian, and blameless, because he was not of the assembly, I should not go. I own no membership but of Christ. An assembly composed as such of its members is at once a sect.¹² (Date?)

It is argued that religious systems are worse today--more rampant with blasphemous doctrines and moral evil. It is true that "Evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse" (II Timothy 3:13), but the heart of man is no more desperate now than it was in Jeremiah's day (Jeremiah 17:9). Were things fundamentally different from now in the nineteenth century? Was not the Anglican Church, from which brethren regularly received, formed partly because the Roman Catholic Church would not allow King Henry VIII to divorce his wife? Edward Dennet¹⁷ (1875) acknowledged bad doctrine in the Anglican and Baptist churches, pointing out that the Anglicans made no attempt to exclude unbelievers. His letter to a friend stated:

Indeed, besides yourself, I never met with a Dissenting minister who held the verbal inspiration of the scriptures.¹⁷

The seeds of sectarian evils and modernism were conclusively active in the days of early brethren. It is admitted that they were more generally opposed then, and godly caution is more necessary now, but

the denominational congregations tend to be more locally independent today, and many places vigorously oppose these evils even now.

Mr. A. H. Rule (1905) wrote:

*Our habit has been to receive a godly Baptist or Presbyterian and the like. But where the avowed creed of a sect involves wickedness--bad fundamental doctrine, or immoral conduct, a person still connected with such would not be received. He must sever his connection with a position in which he supports such a creed, before being received.*¹⁸

A Memorandum of A.G., quoted by the editor of A. H. Rule's collected writings implies that in Mr. Darby's day, membership in (certain) systems, backed by known moral ways, might have been accepted as GROUNDS for admittance into fellowship. Mr. A.G. felt that admittance **IN SPITE OF** membership in such a system was more appropriate in his own day. He stated that:

*It is not a light matter whether a saint of God habitually meets in **RELIGIOUS** fellowship with the world.*¹⁹

He stressed that:

*Each visitor should be clearly informed, with becoming lowliness... that he is linked with what signally dishonors the Lord who bought him, and this with direct reference to the Word of God... [usually] before the visiting brother takes his place at the table.*⁹*

Thus informed, earnest Christians who do not agree with brethren's condemnation of sectarian systems are privileged to withhold fellowship with their stand. But Mr. A.G. is careful to maintain that even then, it should be explained that "It is the Lord's table, at which there is a place for every saint walking godly and therefore for you. The way is freely open."¹⁹ His sympathies were with brethren who had "Scruples" regarding laxity in receiving from systems, though he recognized the danger of a "Pharisaic" spirit and acknowledged that "Apart from grace we shall surely fail on the one side or the other."¹⁹

{Mr. Rule himself disagreed with this way of practically excluding most Christians by implying that they are not welcome:

Why exclude them, or at least make the conditions so hard they cannot participate, without being rude and forcing their own wills.

Collected Writings of A. H. Rule, Vol. II, P. 123}

Mr. Walter Potter²⁰ (around 1900), stated that the denominations and divisions from brethren partake of the Lord's supper, but not at the Lord's table, where "His authority, His claims, and love are realized and confessed in a special way." On receiving denominational Christians at the Lord's table "As Christians" for the convenience of the occasion, he wrote:

It has seemed to me that in such cases our responsibility is not to refuse them, but to put before them why we are thus gathered, that our position is a practical protest against the unscripturalness of denominations, and that they are...for the time, identifying themselves with us in this position...Are they willing...?

He made it clear that he was not happy to have to consider the Lord's table as a convenience. Where souls were spiritually "Exercised" as to "Our position and their church", he wrote:

Where souls are exercised, it is another matter, and it seems to me one would feel quite

free in sitting at the table with them. Is not exercise of soul the important thing? Hence, no one rule can be laid down. It would surely not be of the Lord to require a godly exercised soul, connected with any of the, what we may call, orthodox denominations, that he sever his connection with his church, before we allow him to participate with us at the table. To do this, it seems to me, is to practically deny the ground upon which we are gathered.

Mr. Potter considered those from the divisions of brethren to be another matter:

They are professedly gathered to His name, and should know why they are in separation from us and we from them. Should any of them desire to partake of the table with us, their reasons for this should be inquired into and action taken according to what is found. There is always more intelligence with them, as to divine truth than with those saints in the denominations, and I believe, generally speaking, that they are not as ignorant of the causes of division as some of them would sometimes have us to think.

He finished his letter by asking:

Should not each case stand on its own merits and Romans 15:7 and Jude 22,23 be our guide?

Mr. C.H. Brown stated in the foreword to the 1951 printing of Mr. Potter's pamphlet.²⁰

A new generation has arisen who never knew Walter Potter, and yet the truth he taught his generation abides as truth today. May we believe it, value it, and contend for it.

Having reviewed the viewpoints of original and second generation brethren, it will be obvious to the honest that things are vastly different today. It is evident that many of today's brethren do not seriously consider the possibility of breaking bread with anyone that is not "In fellowship." Is it honest to deny a membership when brethren "In fellowship" can go anywhere in the world and positively identify their fellow non-members from the rest of the body of Christ in the area within moments? Let's not be delusional about what constitutes a membership! (Mr. Darby wasn't)

Much has been spoken on the undeniable fact that "A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump," (I Corinthians 5:6, morally; and Galatians 5:9, doctrinally). The question is: "When does ignorance, error, and/or association with them, become leaven or sin?" An older pamphlet²¹, written after the divisions of brethren, addressed this subject.

As to the reception of individual members of Christ, all have their place in the assembly, except the "wicked person," (I Corinthians 5), and those whose ways, deeds, or doctrine are evil. As to the latter, he that biddeth him Godspeed is partaker of his evil deeds. Obedience, therefore, necessitates unwilling separation from those who, knowing the evil, will not obey...THERE IS NO TEST BUT CHRIST. Knowledge, intelligence in truth, experience, must not be made tests...

A person who knows of evil, and has fellowship with it, (no matter of what denomination), is not free... Leviticus 5:3 tells us that as soon as the man who touched an unclean thing, knew of it, he became guilty; and Numbers 19:15 states that every open vessel without a covering in the tent where death was, became unclean. The ignorant, therefore, while ignorant, are clean, but no longer. The reception, however, as saints, brings the responsibility of instructing and leading on souls to know what is due

to the Lord's house, and His name, and that goes on inside. pp. 16,17

{Perhaps the covered vessel more realistically implies a personal resistance to the morbid state in the tent?}

The same writer plainly states that he would receive the honestly ignorant--"They are not defiled". Should not brethren acknowledge that "He that believeth shall not make haste" (Isaiah 28:16) applies to these Christians too, and allow them time to earnestly weigh a humble testimony drawn from the Word of God before categorically declaring them informed, unclean, "Open vessels;" and automatically excluding them because of their associations? The great body of Christians accustomed to religion are just as "Scarce capable of understanding anything else" today as they were in Mr. Darby's day.

If the leaven doctrine were carried out to the extremes pressed by many today, the whole lump was leavened early and consistently by communion with Christians associated with "Evil" for at least the first seventy years of the brethren movement. If ignorance is absolutely no excuse in the systems, it wasn't in the brethren either, and the whole lump would have to be corporately condemned or separated from. Even if it were true that every association (including no association) outside of brethren is analogous to pollution by dead body, could we deny the fact that even the one who sprinkled the water of separation on the poor defiled Israelite had to contaminate himself to a lesser degree to do so? (Numbers 19:21). Who could refuse to sprinkle the water of purification on an earnest soul? The word of God must still be rightly divided. (II Timothy 2:15).

Several arguments from Israel's history attempt to justify the difference between early and modern brethren's practices in receiving to fellowship. In Hezekiah's day, a few Israelites heeded the invitation to forsake the false alters of Bethel and Dan. Some had not properly cleansed themselves, but they were pardoned of the Lord and permitted to eat Passover at Jerusalem because they had "Prepared their hearts to seek the Lord their God." (II Chronicles 30). Later, when Josiah kept a similar Passover, it was "As it is written in the book of this covenant." (II Kings 21:21-23). And in Ezra's day, "The children of Israel which were come again out of the captivity, and all such as had separated themselves unto them from the filthiness of the heathen of the land, to seek the Lord God of Israel, did eat. (Ezra 6:21). Let brethren remember these were cases of return from idolatry, not earnest error. If Nehemiah's priests had to prove their genealogy, (Nehemiah 7:63- 65), let it be conceded that the Christian's genealogy is that he is indeed born into the family of God, as demonstrated by a consistent life and testimony.

Finally, it is stated that other Christians rarely present themselves for fellowship with brethren today. The painful fact is that Brethren's attitudes and practices preclude it. While attempting to express the unity of the body, they commonly refer to themselves internally as "The saints" or "The Lord's people". Many almost refuse to listen to any spiritual reflection that does not originate internally. They tend to imply that all who are not "In fellowship" with them come under assembly discipline.

Visitors desiring communion, no matter how well known, are generally forced to "Sit back," either for future examination, or to reconsider the stand they would be taking by breaking bread with brethren. If they do not eventually come to agree with most of Brethren's views on church truth, and generally refute everything else as evil, they probably will never be received. Even those associated with nothing at all are largely apt to be met with the same indiscriminate "No," unless they are willing to concede that

the brethren assembly is the only place where the Lord's presence is. A Brethren tendency today is to differentiate between the "Assembly" (as themselves), and the "Church" (as the whole body of Christ); and that while professing to meet on the principle of the unity of the body. What a paradox!, when it is all the same word and entity in Scripture.

Even children raised and observed in the assembly for years, besides a perfectly reasonable examination on doctrine and life, are subjected to an almost ritualistic mode of reception to fellowship. Admitting variations, they can expect to:

- (1) Properly request their place at the Lord's table.
- (2) Await unhurried agreement by the local brethren after examination.
- (3) Correct any mannerisms, etc., these particular brethren disagree with.
- (4) Be "Announced" as having asked for their place at the Lord's Table at a subsequent Breaking of Bread meeting.
- (5) Be re-announced on the following Lord's day, when, barring objections, they are received into fellowship.

Is it any wonder that Christians hesitate to present themselves for fellowship, when they realize that they will be made a public spectacle sitting back under scrutiny as possibly "Defiled?" When Brethren refuse consistent Christians the crumbs from a wealthy table, they can hardly deny them the comfort of having their sores licked at the other side of the gate.

In conclusion, let it be understood that this is not written to encourage laxity or indifference to evil. May brethren never harbor "Tobiah the Ammonite" in the temple, (Nehemiah 13:1-9), nor even countenance the merchants of Tyre about the gate. (Nehemiah 13:15 -21). But neither let them discourage "Ruth the Moabitess" from gleaning in the fields of Boaz. (Ruth 2:4-17). If brethren profess to meet on the principle of the unity of the body of Christ, they can expect the judgement of Christ if they practically deny it. There is a real danger and tendency of brethren being gathered to the name of **Those Gathered to the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ** instead of being gathered simply to the Name, and around the Person, of the Lord Jesus Christ. "Let us go forth therefore unto Him (not brethren) without the camp ." (Hebrews 13:13).

Beloved brethren gathered to the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ; MAY OUR CONSCIENCES BE EXERCISED!

Submitted humbly, tremulously, and prayerfully,

Bud Morris, 1977

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