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# TRUTH AND OPINION.

## A LETTER

TO

JOHN ELIOT HOWARD, Esq.,

ON CHURCH DISCIPLINE AND CHRISTIAN CHARITY  
IN THEIR RELATIONS TO SUPPOSED ERROR.

“Never be afraid to look for any truth which another Christian tells you he has found in the Bible. If you think it to be such, never be afraid to teach it; but be very sure that it is the truth.”—*The Bishop of Cashel and Waterford.*

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## A LETTER, ETC.

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DEAR SIR,

THE perusal of your recent tract, entitled, "A Caution against the Darbyites," has induced me, with mingled hope and fear, to address a few words to you touching, what appears to me to be a leading feature in the 'Brethrenism' of the present day. I mean, the judgment of supposed evil.

I dare not anticipate that what I have to say on this subject will at once be accepted; but it is not, I trust, too much to hope that it will be seriously considered.

I am, happily, old enough to remember the meeting of that first little company in Dublin, to which you refer. I heard of it at the time with deep interest; and from that day to this, I have never ceased to believe, in spite of all apparent evils and discouragements, that the great principles then laid down would eventually triumph.

Mr. Darby has, I understand, expressed



these principles in the following formula:—  
 “The children of God have nothing to do but to meet together in the name of the Lord;” which I presume means, that the only confession which we have a right to demand as a term of communion, is that of Peter, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.” You add, and I agree with you, “This was no doubt the original principle on which the Brethren met, as is shown with greater clearness in the Life of Mr. Groves, and in his letters, entitled “Catholic Christianity and Party Communion Delineated.”

If I mistake not, the history of ‘Brethrenism’ during the last twenty years has unmistakably indicated the gradual renunciation of this principle, and the adoption, in its stead, of the motto,—“Separation from evil is God’s principle of Unity;” by which is meant not separation from *moral evil* only, but from all persons who hold opinions which the Church judges to be evil.\*

\* The early Brethren “tolerated to the very verge of possible toleration all kinds of differences amongst them.” The followers of Mr. Darby take a directly contrary course, founded on their having “judged the evil” (in Mr. Newton, and in all who do not separate from him); “that is to say, having acquiesced in the dictate of their leader as to the cutting off from communion of all the Christians meeting at Bethesda Chapel, Bristol, with all who have communion with any, who have communion with those who have fellowship with Bethesda, and so on, *ad infinitum*. This is called the Unity of the Body as Christ’s spouse separate from evil.”—*Caution*, p. 16.

After telling us how cordially you agree with Groves, "that believers meeting together *as disciples of Christ* are free to break bread together as the Lord admonished them," you say, "But any reflecting person may see how vast is the range of questions which must be settled before the beautiful vision can become a practical reality. The terms of communion, defining what is meant by 'believers,' were at first most latitudinarian, finishing by a not very marvellous rebound to the opposite extreme of exclusive pharisaism."

"Then as to government in the Church (without which no large body of communicants can be expected to prosper), the originators of the system, so far as I can learn, defined nothing at all. It was therefore a vineyard without a fence, and without any of those safeguards which Divine wisdom saw meet to establish in the early Church. No wonder that, if even then, in spite of this care, 'grievous wolves entered in, not sparing the flock;' much more, in the midst of present weakness, 'grievous wolves' would be likely to enter in here; and that if Satan's ministers were transformed into the ministers of righteousness in the Apostles' days, there should be a still greater danger of the same thing now. Our blessed Saviour has forewarned us to 'beware of false prophets, which come to

you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Ye shall know them *by their fruits*. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? ”

In a note, Dr. Niblock, a friendly clergyman, is quoted as having observed, in a letter to Mr. Dorman, in the year 1840,—“Alas that so beautiful a theory *cannot* long subsist ; it is too unworldly and sainted for our polluted atmosphere. It will do, *it has done* much good, but **IT WILL FALL**. ‘Of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things to draw away disciples after them’ (Acts xx. 30).”

Now these passages either imply or directly assert that, in your opinion, the original basis on which ‘Brethrenism’ was founded is “latitudinarian ;” that it was, although a very beautiful vision, but a vision after all ; that a vast range of questions must be settled before it can become a practical reality ; that it was a vineyard without a fence,—without any of those safeguards which Divine wisdom saw meet to establish in the early Church ; that, *in consequence* of this laxity in government, “grievous wolves” entered the fold, and “false prophets in sheep’s clothing,” who were discredited by “their fruits ;” and that in the attempt to remedy this latitudinarian tendency, there has been a “rebound to the opposite extreme of exclusive pharisaism.” In

short, for this is the sum and substance of the whole, that *original* 'Brethrenism' was "too unworldly and sainted for our polluted atmosphere."

But is this the fact? I am not aware how long 'Brethrenism' retained its original character, but as the meeting in Dublin took place in 1829, and as Dr. Niblock regards the system as being "too unworldly" in 1840, it may perhaps be assumed that, as a rule, no *material* change took place for the first eleven years. That in some quarters alterations were made earlier, is however evident from the following *prophetic letter*, written by Mr. Groves in the year 1836. He says:—

"I wish you to feel assured that nothing has estranged my heart from you, or lowered my confidence in your being still animated by the same enlarged and generous purposes that once so won and rivetted me; and though I feel you have departed from those principles by which you once hoped to have effected them, still my soul so reposes in the truth of your heart to God, that I feel it needs but a step or two more to advance, and *you will see all the evils of the systems from which you profess to be separated, spring up among yourselves.*

"Your union will daily become *one of doctrines and opinions*, more than of life and love; your government,—unseen perhaps, and unexpressed—will soon be *one wherein is overwhelmingly felt the authority of men*; you will be known more by what you witness against, than by what you witness for; and, practically, this will prove that you witness against all but yourselves.

“The position which this occupying of the seat of judgment will place you in, will be this: *the most narrow-minded and bigoted will rule*, because his conscience cannot and will not give way, and therefore *the more enlarged heart must yield*. Light, not life, will then be the measure of communion; and being ‘one of us’ will become a stronger band than oneness in the power of the life of God in the soul.

“Whilst we occupy the place of only witnessing against those things *which are recognized by other Christians as evil*, we make men judges of themselves, and of *themselves* they are condemned. At the same time we conciliate their heavenly affections by allowing and recognizing all that is really of the Lord, and *sharing in it*, though *the system* in which these golden grains are found *we may utterly disapprove*.

“But the moment our position and language imply a perfect separation alike from the evil and the good, we no longer have their consciences with us. They feel that though only a brother in a father’s house, we exercise more than a father’s power, without a father’s heart of mercy; and they therefore appeal from us to our common Head, both in behalf of themselves and their system.”

Such is Mr. Groves’s defence of what is called “latitudinarianism,” and I pity the man, whatever may be his opinions, who can read so touching a letter without feeling rebuked and ashamed.

But I introduce it here simply as evidence that for *some years* at least—whether for seven or eleven does not much signify—the “latitudinarian” principle was adhered to.

The evils therefore which are supposed to have led to its abandonment must have manifested themselves during that time. I have a right then to ask, What were they? and what proof is there of their existence? Was 'Brethrenism' during all this time nothing but a vision? Did it not become a practical reality? What "grievous wolves" during those years slipped into the fold? What "false prophets" appeared in sheep's clothing?

I suppose some will reply, "Mr. Darby was the wolf;" and others will respond, "No; Mr. Newton was the false prophet." Take which answer you please to be the true one, for I am altogether disqualified from deciding between brethren who so speak. The question necessarily follows, What Church government or discipline would have kept out either the one or the other? Nay, were not both these gentlemen equally desirous of advancing an exclusive policy? Do they not, to this day, rival each other in zeal for what they call purity in doctrine? differing only as to whether this or that expression of opinion ought or ought not to be visited by separation or exclusion?

Again I ask,—Is it pretended that the early 'Brethren' were immoral or factious, unloving or malicious, or in any way stumbling-blocks to those that were without? I

trow not. On the contrary, the memories of those who have "fallen asleep" are blessed alike by men who have little better than cursing\* for each other. I am of no party in relation to these differences, having never been in a position which required me even to form an opinion about them; and if I speak of them at all it is only because they are through the press forced upon the attention of the world.

The truth is, there is nothing whatever to show that any practical evils arose from what has been so wrongly called "latitudinarianism." But there is, on the contrary, every reason to believe that the abandonment of the original principle, and the adoption, in its stead, of one *more in accordance with the opinions of the religious world*, was brought about *partly* by a not unnatural desire to avoid the reproaches of other Christians†

\* Mr. Wigram writes,—“I would rather expose my family circle to the results of the friendly intercourse of any Roman Catholic priest, than to that of any one of the five (leading Plymouth Brethren), though mourning and praying for all of them.” Again, speaking of a fellowship acting out of harmony with his own views, he says, “Rather would I go to the table of the Socinians than to it.” On the other side, Lord Congleton says of the followers of Mr. Darby, of whom Mr. Wigram is chief,—“They are *false* in what they say of their brethren,—they are *false* in doctrine,—they are *false* in their walk.”—(*A Caution.*)

† The temptation to speak or act in a particular way, in order to meet prejudices, or to prevent unkind criticism, is a very common one; but yielding to it is not on that account the less unworthy or dangerous. I regret to observe that at the recent meeting of the Congregational Union in London, the chairman is said to have

who, rebuked by the simplicity and loving spirit of “the Brethren,” taunted them with having no discipline, and sneered at the whole thing as a mere theory, far too saintly for the times; and *partly* by a wish to meet the prejudices of persons who, having been brought up under more ecclesiastical systems, could not readily fall in with arrangements which differed so greatly from those they had been

avowed that a dissertation on the Atonement, which formed no unimportant portion of his inaugural address, was not so much intended for those who heard it, as “for the world outside.”

In the proceedings of the Congregational Union of Scotland the same weakness is observable. Certain Edinburgh ministers belonging to that body had, according to the *Scotsman* and other papers, “shown their desire to erect an inquisition” by calling one of their brethren to account for his opinions regarding Divine judgments. It was admitted, at the meeting of the Union, that these good men had acted unwisely; but the defence offered on their behalf here is, that “it is very difficult for our brethren in Scotland to look at these questions as we Englishmen do; that it had become *absolutely necessary* for the Edinburgh Churches to do something to vindicate their soundness in the faith.” And yet, at the Union, no attempt whatever was made to refute the views deemed so objectionable; the incompetency of the tribunal was pleaded, and a resolution passed unanimously, simply regretting “irregularity.”

Alas! that we should have yet to learn that it is impossible to love truth *supremely*, or to serve Christ faithfully, without a willingness to be “of no reputation” in the religious world. As in war, so in other conflicts, there are positions which can only be reached by stepping over the bodies of the fallen; and *it matters little whether the glorious sacrifice that has to be made for others involves the loss of life or of character.* (For the controversy itself see Mr. Cranbrook’s sermon on “Divine Providence in its Relations to Prayer and Plagues,” and Dr. Alexander’s discourse entitled, “Prayer for the Removal of Calamities, Reasonable and Scriptural;” and on the general subject, see an article in *Fraser’s Magazine*, May, 1866, entitled, “Prayer in Connection with certain Public Calamities.”)



accustomed to, and which afforded no foot-hold on which ambitious men could plant ladders by which to ascend to power and influence.

But you will say, "Can a Church then exist without discipline? Is no distinction to be drawn between those who fear God, and those who fear Him not?"

I reply at once, *Such distinctions are essential.* Discipline cannot be dispensed with. How can men live and work together unless they are agreed? The question, however, is, *Within what limits* should discipline be confined? *By what rule* are we to separate the believer from the unbeliever, the true man from the false? *To what extent* is it needful that Christians should be agreed? These are important questions, and they touch not 'Brethren' only, but the entire Church of God.

Where shall we find an answer to them? Clearly in Scripture alone. We must, so far as we can, in this matter do precisely what the Apostles did, and nothing else,—neither more nor less.

Now what did they do? Why, first of all, they did what we *cannot* do. They brought direct and positive punishment to bear upon offenders. Ananias and Sapphira are prominent examples of this. Paul most distinctly refers to the exercise of miraculous power in support of the purity of the Church when he says to the

Corinthians, who, instead of being humbled by finding gross immorality in the body, were actually "puffed up,"—"What will ye? shall I come unto you with a *rod*, or in love, and in the spirit of meekness" (1 Cor. iv. 21)? He then solemnly delivers the offender "unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus" (1 Cor. v. 3—5). So when he rebukes their terrible perversions of the Lord's Supper, he tells them in plain terms, "For this cause many are weak and sickly, and many sleep." In other words, they sicken and die judicially. In this way it was that, in addition to declaring truth with authority, the Apostles *bound* some and *loosed* others, and in so doing, found the Saviour's assurance to them a solemn reality—"Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained." (See also 2 Cor. ii. 10; x. 8; xiii. 2—10.)

John is more explicit still, he says, "If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask and he shall give him life for them that sin not unto death;" which means, I suppose, that for such an one he shall not ask in vain. He adds, "There is a sin unto death,"—a sin which God punishes by the shortening of life,—"I do not say that he shall pray for it," since, in such a case, he has

no promise that his prayer shall be heard (1 John v. 16). These examples we *cannot* imitate; but it is worthy of notice that, in every case, sins thus punished were moral and not intellectual—the offenders were evil in their conduct, not erroneous in their belief. Hymenæus and Alexander (1 Tim. i. 20), who were “delivered” by Paul, in the exercise of his apostolic authority, “unto Satan,” were persons who put away a good conscience before they made shipwreck of their faith and learnt to blaspheme. It was the loss of tenderness of conscience, *moral perversion*, that led to their apostasy. They were punished, not for an error in doctrine, but for blasphemy. The Apostles have no thunderbolts for those who love the Lord Jesus Christ, whatever may be their mental peculiarities, or however diverse their views.

Other references bearing on Church discipline are, however, not wanting. Let us note them carefully. We have Paul denouncing *false teachers* in these terms,—“If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed” (Gal. i. 8). We have John adding, “If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed: for he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds” (2 John

10, 11). We have Jude bidding us "earnestly contend for the faith once delivered to the saints" (ver. 3). We have the Saviour himself, in the visions of the Apocalypse, declaring of the doctrine of the Nicolaitanes—"Which thing I hate" (Rev. ii. 15).

What language, you will say, can be stronger? Can it be right, you will ask, to call those who hold such errors brethren, or to commune with them at the table of the Lord? Again I reply, Certainly not. But why? Simply because all these false teachers either absolutely denied *the great facts* on which Christianity was based, or else repudiated its moral character altogether. Their doctrine was either utterly inconsistent with Christianity as a revelation from God, or else totally destructive of all moral principle. The denial that Christ had ever come in the flesh (the evil that John refers to), and "turning the grace of God into lasciviousness" (which was both the teaching and practice of the Nicolaitanes), were of this character. The errors of the Judaizing teachers were equally fatal to the Christian life, for they were subversive of Christianity itself. He who accepted the teaching of these troublers of the Church abandoned, not this or that doctrine merely, but everything that distinguished Christianity from Judaism.

But tell me, "Are these the things on which discipline among 'the Brethren' is brought to bear? Is brother after brother excommunicated or driven away because he has ceased to be a Christian at all? Were these, or such like, the evils which were intended to be met and remedied by the change from 'latitudinarianism' to 'pharisaism'?" Assuredly not.

What then was the object of the discipline? Simply to enforce *uniformity of opinion* as to what Scripture actually teaches, or rather as to what may or may not be legitimately deduced from its revelations. Speculations regarding the experiences of the Saviour; given expositions of difficult passages in the Psalms; the acceptance or rejection of certain views on unfulfilled prophecy; the duty, or otherwise, of refusing communion with other Christians on account of supposed evils in their systems; *these*, and such like *opinions*—for they are nothing more—constitute the treasures of wisdom in defence of which unity has been destroyed, brotherhood set at nought, and Christ dishonoured before the world.

But you will probably here check me by asking whether I regard the holding of erroneous opinions as a matter of slight importance? Whether I think it of little or no moment what views we entertain, say regard-

ing sin and sacrifice? respecting the work of the Lord as shadowed forth in the services of the Levitical economy, or in the mystic teaching of the Psalms? Whether I think it of small consequence how a man looks on the death of Christ; whether he holds it to be a proper sacrifice, or whether he considers it simply as a moral agency through which man is to be brought back to God? Whether it does not matter what evil things in church systems Christians connect themselves with, if only they are believers in Christ? Whether we are not bound to testify on behalf of the presence and guidance of the Holy Ghost in the assemblies of the Church?

I reply frankly and fearlessly, the importance of these things is *relative*, not absolute. Right views on these and similar points have, I doubt not, an important bearing on spiritual health; although they have much less to do than is generally supposed with spiritual life. Religion, after all, does not consist in *right views* of any kind, but in that *vital union to Christ through the Holy Spirit* which causes us to *know and feel* that we are sinners; to *appreciate* redemption by and through Jesus; to *see* the goodness of God in thwarting our evil inclinations, and to *desire* perpetual growth in goodness and in love.

What I maintain is, that by the law of

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Christ we are not called upon to show that any given man is a real Christian *before* we hold communion with him, our simple obligation being to withhold such fellowship from one who has proved himself to be otherwise ; and further, that the holding of *any opinion*, however erroneous, does not properly subject men to church discipline.

But here, to prevent misconception, let me distinguish between religious opinions and Divine truths, between human judgments and direct revelations.

By A TRUTH, divinely taught—and no great moral or spiritual truth is ever received otherwise—I understand something which *vitalizes* because it is itself vital ; which therefore necessarily, more or less, controls the life and moulds the character of the man who receives it.

By A RELIGIOUS OPINION, whether true or false, whether in harmony with, or in apparent opposition to the teaching of Scripture, I understand a mere human judgment, which, *being nothing more*, has commonly little if any influence on the conduct, and none whatever on the heart.

An opinion, if well founded, may in time grow into a truth, and so become vital. It may, on the other hand, deepen into a falsity, and so become fatal. But so long as it is a mere

opinion, whether a true one or not, it will exercise little if any influence on the character. We recognize this fact whenever we say, as we so often do, that this or that man is better than his system ; by which we mean, better than his opinions would lead one to suppose he could be.

We recognize it when, in order to show that a man is responsible for his beliefs, we argue, as we always do, that he is so because, and only because, he is responsible for the *state of mind* in which he examines evidence ; for the diligence or otherwise with which he seeks after it ; and for the candour or want of candour he manifests in dealing with it when obtained. We fancy we have demonstrated by this reasoning that error is anything but innocent, whereas we have only proved that a *wrong state of mind* is not innocent. "To err" in opinion or judgment "is human," rather than sinful, since it may be occasioned only by the weakness or limitation of the reasoning faculty. To be proud or uncandid, indolent or unfair in the search after truth, is *positive sin*, inasmuch as this is occasioned not by intellectual weakness, but by moral perversity. If error *in itself* were sin, it would necessarily follow that in the various controversies which have in all ages divided the Church, one or other of the opposing parties must have been



wicked as well as wrong. We do not, however, believe this to have been the case. On the contrary, if no other way of escape from such an imputation offers, we always fall back upon what we call the "happy inconsistencies" of men, congratulating one another on the fact that men do not, as a rule, logically carry out the theories they profess. In words of this kind we constantly admit that mere opinions have little to do with character, everything depending on *how* they are held,—in what combinations, and in what spirit.

RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCES, arising out of opinions, occupy a somewhat different position. What are called High Sacramentarian views, have, *as theories*, always been, and still are, held by multitudes, without any practical injury to the life of God in the soul. It is only when they issue in superstitious observances, or false action,—in the transformation, for instance, of the Christian pastor into a sacrificing priest; in the demand that he shall put what is called "consecrated" bread upon the tongue of the communicant; in the setting up of altars; in services "*sung*" when they ought to be "*said*;" in the adoption of Romish vestments; in a desire to be "made perfect by the flesh;" in a return to "beggarly elements," and to the bondage implied in observing "days, and months, and times, and years"

—that we are bound to separate from those who hold them. But we do so not in order to testify against this or that wrong notion, but to witness in favour of primitive simplicity, and to maintain the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free. This we can easily do without bitterness. Forms of church government, however defective, which do not interfere with the inalienable rights of a renewed man, may be, and ought to be, borne with, so long as there is a shadow of hope that better things may one day be expected.

Now I hold that nearly all the differences which at present separate real Christians, *relate to opinions and not to truths*. Illustrative instances will readily present themselves. One man is decidedly *of opinion* that in Scripture, baptism is regarded as the expression of a personal faith in Christ, and that it should therefore be administered only to persons who have arrived at years of discretion. Another is *of opinion* that the baptism of children is implied and sanctioned in the New Testament. A third holds that the ordinance in question has a relation only to persons who come out of Judaism or Heathenism, and who by that act recognize God as the one only Jehovah, revealed to man as Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. But is it not evident that one and all of these views are mere opinions? Is it pre-

tended that the holding of any one of them carries with it spiritual vitality? Do we observe as a fact that the Baptist, so called, neglects the instruction of his children, or fails to dedicate them to God? Do we imagine that the Pædobaptist thinks less of a personal profession of faith in Christ than his brother? Do we not all feel that the great truth underlying these different opinions, viz., that man must be truly baptized by the Spirit of God in order to renewal, is *held in common*, and that this, and this alone, really touches the heart of any of the parties engaged in the controversy.

The opinion that, in some sense or other, regeneration takes place in water-baptism, is as a rule quite uninfluential. Perhaps no one has written more strongly or decidedly in favour of the dogma than the late Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Sumner; and yet no one ever preached more fervently than he the necessity of regeneration by the Spirit of God, whether baptism had or had not been enjoyed. The same may be said of Mr. Simeon, and of hundreds beside.

Further, so far from its being common, as one might have expected, to find the poor and ignorant, when called to repentance, pleading that they have been regenerated in baptism, and are therefore safe, nothing is more rare.

I have heard men who have devoted their lives to Christian visitation declare that they never met with such an instance.

I admit, however, as I have already said, that an opinion *may* deepen into a falsity, and become fatal. The notion of which I am now speaking does so whenever,—whether among Romanists or Protestants,—it leads to a persuasion that the outward rite is in itself saving, and as a consequence, to the neglect or denial of any further work of God in the soul. But how are we to know when and where this is the case? Scripture supplies the answer, “*By their fruits ye shall know them.*” Practical ungodliness in connection with any professed faith *proves* the rottenness of the root from which the pretended faith springs.

Take another case. The Wesleyan denies Divine Sovereignty *in the sense* of the absolute election of individuals from the foundation of the world. The Calvinist, on the other hand, denies Free Will *in the sense* of man’s moral ability to repent and believe. Each holds, and zealously maintains, a series of consequences as necessarily flowing from these diverse views. It is no uncommon thing to find the one almost unchristianizing the other. Yet who does not see that the points really in dispute are *mere opinions*, inasmuch as they do not influence the life. The Wesleyan refers

all that he has or is to Divine grace, quite as devoutly and as honestly as the Calvinist. The Calvinist, on the other hand, has no lighter sense of practical responsibility than the Wesleyan, and places good works pretty much in the same position as his brother. The spiritual life of each is common, simply because the great Divine truth which underlies differing views is held in common.

Either of these conflicting sets of opinions *may*, however, harden into fatal error. The opponent of Election may become a mere self-righteous Pharisee: the opponent of Free Will may lose all just sense of moral responsibility, and become careless or wicked in conduct. Whenever this is the case, Scripture directs us what to do. "*By their fruits ye shall know them.*" No matter what their theories, if they have become practically ungodly, we must cease to have fellowship with them, or, which is sure to be the case, they will cease to have any real communion with us.

Again: many wise and good men, whose fidelity to Christ and Truth cannot for a moment be doubted, have in all ages,\* and still

\* Among "the Fathers" who would now be regarded as "unsound" on this subject, may be named Irenæus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Basil, Gregory Nazianzen, and many others. In later times, among the otherwise orthodox, will be found the English Lollards, some of the Puritans, Dr. Burnet, the Rev. William Law (author of the "Serious Call"), Soames Jenyns, Dr. Lettsom, Sir George Stonehouse, John Foster (the essayist), and the late Sir

are of opinion, that Scripture does not teach either the eternity of evil or the never-ending sufferings of the impenitent: *some* holding that immortality is to be found in Christ alone, and that "the second death" is utter destruction; *others* leaning to the belief that a time will come when all who have ever lived will be brought to bow before the Lamb with adoration and love.

Which of these judgments is most scriptural or anti-scriptural we may not, as yet, be able to decide; but surely nothing can justify the condemnation of those who hold either the one or the other, *unless* we see the opinion professed becoming a falsity by occasioning carelessness regarding personal sin, negligence in relation to the spiritual condition of others, or unbelief in future retribution. Wherever these signs of departure from the truth exhibit themselves, we may very properly and justly stand apart, for *by their fruits* we know them.

Take one more instance—the strongest, perhaps, that can be put, the case of the Unitarian. The denial of Christ's proper Divinity *may* be nothing more than an opinion. Hun-

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James Stephen. On the Continent of Europe, Universalism, with or without modification, prevails very largely among the most devout believers. The profound critic, Dr. Tholuck, is one of the most distinguished of this school.

dreds of instances might be quoted in which it has proved itself to be nothing more. Most of us have probably known individuals who, having received from their parents or guardians certain views commonly known as Socinian, or Unitarian, have accepted these opinions as truths, and for many years perhaps have adhered to them as scriptural, being absolutely untouched by any argument on the other side,—apparently impregnable *from without*.

But certain needs of the human heart in course of time begin to be felt, which Unitarianism as a system does not meet. The services of its ministers are felt to be cold and lifeless; a sense of want is experienced, yet no opinion is changed, nor, so far as appears, is likely to be. Devout books, however, are sought and read. What are called “Evangelical preachers” are occasionally listened to. *Much* thus heard is positively, and perhaps justly, repulsive. *More* is felt to be very questionable. But all this time a change is going on. The heart is being drawn nearer and nearer to Christ. The old dogma remains, that the Redeemer is but man; the soul, however, is made to feel that He meets wants which can in no sense whatever be appropriately regarded as supplied by a fellow-creature. Silently, without controversy, often-

times insensibly, the entire position becomes changed; Christ, *felt* to be Divine, is before long acknowledged to be so, and is loved and honoured in His true character. The opinion, once so firmly held, that it was little short of idolatry to speak of the Saviour as God, has proved at last to have been *only an opinion*. Truth, underlying opinion, has finally vindicated itself and become triumphant. The case *might*, however, have been otherwise. The erroneous opinion might have become fatal, and issued in little short of absolute infidelity. The rule still applies, "*By their fruits ye shall know them.*"

It is needless to say that what has been advanced is equally applicable to all conflicting opinions relative to the inspiration of the Scriptures. A man's theories on this subject, whether original or only adopted from others, may be right or may be wrong, deserving or not deserving of careful examination, yet they may not touch his spiritual life at all. If they issue in disregard and contempt of the written revelation, or if they lead to practical disobedience of its teachings, they declare themselves. But it ill becomes us to judge "before the time." We must *wait* the result—wait, however long, until we can apply the Lord's own test, "*By their fruits ye shall know them.*"



This, so far as I can see, is God's way of dealing with error. Man's is a very different one. He hastens to judge; he relies on controversy; he insists that the intellectual is inseparable from the moral; he owns no distinction between opinions and truths; he calls his own opinions, whatever they may be, *truths*, and, so far as he can, he punishes those who reject his teaching by exclusion from his church or company, if not from his affections.

I know very well that some will say that, in speaking thus, I am making all truth a mere matter of opinion; that I am practically denying the *certainty* of Divine revelation; that I am opening a door by which others will enter, and very easily set aside whatever command of God they may regard as distasteful. But this is not the fact.

Scripture, without question, is plain, certain, and authoritative; but man is perverse. It is to be feared that we all look upon the Bible, more or less, with a jaundiced eye. To one, it is coloured by the bias of early education; to another, by affection for this or that teacher through whom we have received spiritual good; to a third, by the traditions of Fathers, Reformers, or Puritans. The fact is indisputable, that Christian men, though renewed in the spirit of their minds, do not, and *appa-*

rently cannot, read the Bible in all respects alike. Their *opinions* as to its teachings on this or that point *have* always varied, and probably always will.

But really good men *never differ much* about TRUTH,—by which I mean, about anything in Scripture which, being divinely revealed, *proves itself* to the renewed heart; about anything which, like the sun in heaven, *is seen by its own light*. Pascal, Fénelon, the Jansenists, Lutherans, Anglicans, Presbyterians, and seceders innumerable, with or without name, *if living Christians*, hold all vital truth in common; and, because they do so, have a common life in Christ, and are in reality one when they “enter their closets” and “shut to the door.” Just in so far as faith is believing “with the heart unto righteousness,” they are united, even while their judgments respecting Divine things are endlessly diverse; and this simply because opinion, before it can become a living thing, active and influential, must, whether true or false, be transfigured. Opinion is thus transfigured and vivified whenever the Holy Spirit sets His seal upon it by making it powerful to the production of holiness of life, *but not before*. Opinion changes into error only when it finds affinities with evil within, and, combining therewith, brings forth “evil fruit.”

In the Apostolic Church, whatever might be its defects—and they were many,—this distinction was never lost sight of. In the Post-Apostolic Church, just in so far as the influence of man prevailed—just in so far as the “mystery of iniquity” took deeper and deeper root,—*opinions* were exalted, and when finally embodied in creeds, were *enforced* everywhere as truths. From that hour the true unity of the Church was broken: a unity never to be restored till that which is Divine is again effectually separated from that which is human, and the living is once more parted from the dead.

Systematic theology, in all its forms, *necessitates* this welding together of the precious and the base—this strange admixture of wood and stubble with gold and jewels. It does so whether it professes to give us the ultimate reasons of things—whether it merely deduces one doctrine from another—or whether it simply seeks to arrange Divine truth in the supposed order of its importance, and thus attempts to show what is inter-connected and inter-dependent. In each and every case the process is human, and the result, however dignified with the name of “orthodoxy,” can never be more than the expression of fallible opinion.

Nor is this less true of the Evangelical the-

ology, greatly as it may have been blessed of God to the conversion of souls. For the *power* of that teaching has never been in its theories; its *life* has never consisted in the "plan of salvation" it has announced, or in the "philosophy" of the faith it has promulgated. The Reformation, which may be regarded as the re-birth of that theology, is, says Dr. Merle D'Aubigné, "*inexplicable* on the theory of those who make that great event simply an act of critical judgment, consisting in a choice of doctrines—the abandoning of some, the preserving of others, and the combining of those retained, so as to make of them a new code of doctrine. No! *It was the pouring forth anew of that life which Christ had brought into the world.*"

Doctrine, indeed, there was as a weapon of warfare; for that of justification by faith alone was perpetually wielded in the long contest with "hierarchism, or the religion of the priest;" but even this glorious truth, when separated—as it soon came to be—from life and love, hardened into a mere formula, and ended in nothing better than a cold and dead Protestantism.

So with Wesley and Whitefield. In doctrines by no means unimportant, they differed widely. But in *power*, the power of the Holy Spirit over the hearts and consciences of men,

they were alike ; for nothing could resist the force of their appeals, or the fervour of their charity. And these sprang, not from any form of sound words, however excellent, but from that intense spiritual force which was generated in them by the Holy Ghost, and which compelled each of them to say, like the Apostle, "Woe is me if I preach not the Gospel."

This is equally the case with our modern evangelicalism, which, in the opinion of so many, is now running to seed ; having first wrought wonders in the land, and then lost its hold alike on the cultivated few, and on the crowd of intelligent artisans. And why ? Probably because it has of late years so greatly overlaid that which alone is vital,—*the ever-living truth of a full and free salvation by grace alone*,—with reasonings that have been both narrow and false ; with worthless demonstrations, based on the supposed analogy of Gods procedure with that of human courts of law ; with plans of redemption, shown to be so correct, whether viewed commercially or judicially, that their very perfection might well suggest doubts as to their scriptural accuracy ; and with speculations, daring rather than devout, on the Divine purposes, on the philosophy of sacrifice, on "satisfaction," and on "imputed righteousness." Dogmatic teach-

ing on these subjects, *when it goes beyond Scripture*, however harmless to the many who never think, or to those who, absorbed in higher considerations, are practically manifesting the Divine life, is *absolutely ruinous* to thoughtful men whose minds have been quickened by discussion, but not softened by grace. It is so, because, however human and doubtful it may be as a scheme, it is constantly presented as vital truth, and its rejection declared to be equivalent to the rejection of the Gospel itself.

To the many professors of religion whose piety is chiefly conventional, these forms of thought, being popular, are far from unwelcome. The widespread reception of evangelical doctrine by men who are avowedly averse to a spiritual life, may be urged in proof. This strange state of things is in all probability largely attributable to the apparent compactness and completeness of the "plan of salvation" teachers of this school commonly announce, and which, extraordinary as it may seem, now-a-days commends itself quite as much to the selfishness of the natural man as either ritualism or Romanism. It does so, because, like them, it *adds to*, and so humanizes, that which is Divine.

The voice of "the Spirit and the Bride" to the sinner is, "Believe and live." Have faith

in Christ, and you shall become a new creature in Him. *Then*, pardoned, reconciled to God, and freed from all dread of condemnation by the law, you shall go forth to service, not as a slave, but as a child, hating sin, happy in filial obedience, and ever anxious to "work out your own salvation" from the remaining power of evil, because He "worketh in you to will and to do of His good pleasure." *This* is the Gospel; this the good news of God, ever to be announced joyfully to a lost and ruined world.

The voice of the evangelical theologian, while not rejecting that of the Spirit, but rather embodying it, *and therefore having life*, adds,—'Do this, for in the light of the Cross you may now see that your debt is paid; that Christ has *endured the penalty* of your transgressions; that Divine justice is satisfied; that *therefore* you are freed from the awful, the eternal punishment to which, on any other supposition, you must be liable. The righteousness of Christ is now "imputed" unto you, and you are "clothed" with it, *therefore* you are "justified" as well as pardoned, and, by His grace, sure of being eventually safe and "sanctified."

I have *here* nothing to do with the precise amount of truth or error which may possibly be expressed in the particular words I have

put into the mouth of the orthodox teacher. I do not pretend that *every one* would adopt them. But I do not think I err in saying that this is the substance of the theology which is commonly regarded as alone orthodox, and which, as I have already affirmed, is in this our day both admired and adopted by multitudes who are altogether destitute of spiritual life. To such men,—and alas! not to such only,—the doctrine of a living union with a risen and living Lord, *when regarded apart from a system of theology*, is mere mysticism. To feel the evil of sin; to see Christ as the only Saviour from it; to regard the Atonement, or Reconciliation,—for this is what Atonement means,—as the work of Christ and the great central truth of the Gospel; to believe with the whole heart and soul that the Redeemer suffered for us, “the Just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God,”—that “He bare our sins in His own body on the tree,”—that “by His stripes we are healed,”—all this is *to them* mere words, if unaccompanied by explanations and definitions not to be found in Scripture, yet regarded as essential to a *right view* of the relations between God and man. But to have salvation *explained* to them; to be enabled to *see* how complete and perfect “the plan” is; how it *meets the requirements* of the Divine law; how it *satisfies* the claims



of justice ; how it combines a free pardon with an exacted penalty, and therefore how impossible it was that God *could* have redeemed mankind in any other way,—*this*, it is said, is something for the mind to rest upon, this is *a reason* for faith which cannot be gainsaid. And so it comes to pass that Divine truth and human opinion, when cunningly mingled, pass current far more readily than the purest gold if it be without alloy.

To propagate *views* men first build churches and chapels, and train ministers, and then call upon the State to secure the teaching of their notions in perpetuity by legal trust-deeds. They do this *primarily*, no doubt, in the hope and belief that by this course they can best further the cause of Truth and Righteousness in the earth ; but the secondary, and certainly not least powerful motive, is that they may thereby further and sustain certain opinions to which they attach an extravagant importance. They say they have *a right* to do this, and, in a limited sense, no one can dispute the fact. But where, it may well be asked, is there a right before God to identify *His* teaching with any of our opinions, and practically to deny that “the Lord hath more truth yet to break forth out of His holy word” than we are now in possession of? Yet this course is gloried in, even by many Nonconformists.

“We have no argument,” says the Rev. Samuel M’Call, speaking at the late meeting of the Congregational Union, with those “who denounce all ‘systems of theology,’ and who would have chapels built” (without doctrinal trust-deeds), “the successive occupants of which might, in the second generation obscure, in the third modify, in the fourth renounce, and in the fifth labour to overturn, *the sentiments* which the founders had held dearer than life.” And with the experience of the past before him, he appears to believe that a trust-deed can prevent a Congregational chapel “*five generations*” hence from being occupied by persons who “labour to overturn” anything embodied in the “Declaration of Faith and Order” put forth by the Union!

The special, though by no means exclusive bearing on ‘Brethrenism,’ of what has been advanced, will be felt by all who have watched its history with interest, not unmingled with hope. *Opinions*, urged upon the acceptance of men *as truths*, seem to me to be a distinguishing characteristic alike of its teaching and its literature. I have read much that has been written by Mr. Newton, and more perhaps that has been written by Mr. Darby; I have habitually sought out the productions of what is called “the Bethesda party,” and I have not unfrequently listened to those who minister

among these various sections ; but, so far as I can perceive, the teaching of 'Brethren' differs from that of other Christians only in relation to doubtful opinions : sometimes marked by very painful if not flippant speech about "*the blood*" (of Christ), as if this phrase meant something more or different than the *death* of the Redeemer ; sometimes consisting of interpretations as fanciful as those of Origen, —and often in these, as well as in some other particulars, bearing a very striking resemblance to the addresses of the "revival preachers" of the Church of Rome. As to that which has been put forth *controversially*, I can only say that to me, the matters in dispute seem to have little if anything to do with any *vital* truth whatever. Everywhere, in these discussions, human opinion is seen claiming to be regarded as Divine truth. Everywhere (when that which is written is not absolutely unintelligible to all but those who have been initiated into the phraseology of the sect,—a by no means uncommon state of things) it looks like a mere attempt to give prominence to certain forms of thought, or to enforce upon the body the opinions of this or that leader. Need it then excite surprise that God should blow upon *this* "Babel," as He has done upon others, and divide and scatter it ?

I do not say these things unkindly or with-

out pain, for I am well aware that in writing thus I lie open to the charge of setting myself up as a censor of others. But I do not see how it is to be avoided. After all, I only say openly what others say privately ; and if any good results from so doing, I am quite willing to bear the odium.

That other Christians too often follow very much the same course I have already allowed. But *these* do so in harmony with their professed principles as churches and denominations founded on certain given beliefs, commonly embodied in Creeds, Catechisms, or Declarations. 'The Brethren' offend, *in defiance* of their constant assertion that they are not sectarian like other men, and as it were in mockery of the pretence that while the meetings of other Christians "are nothing but mere meetings of men," the direct guidance of the Holy Spirit may, in *their* assemblies, "be reckoned on."\*

But you will here say,—Are we, then, to give up altogether the doctrine of the presence and guidance of the Holy Ghost in the Church? And further, are we to abandon apostolic practice by ceasing to separate from our communion those who hold erroneous opinions?

I will endeavour to answer each question

\* "Caution," p. 29.

simply and honestly. We are certainly *not* called upon to abandon, but rather to adhere with more fidelity than ever, to *all* that Scripture teaches relative to the power and presence of the Holy Spirit in the assemblies of believers. But we are most solemnly bound to inquire diligently as to what really is the teaching of Scripture on this subject, and to accept that, *and nothing more.*

As you and I agree in the persuasion that the promise of "the Comforter" belongs quite as much to "two or three" who may be assembled in Christ's name as to three hundred or three thousand; that His presence is not confined to cathedrals or churches, or sacred buildings of any kind; that the Divine gift is not to Ecclesiastical Councils or Corporations, to Churchmen or to Dissenters, as such, but to each and all who worship "in spirit and in truth,"—it is not necessary to say anything on that head. What I want to impress is, that this holy and never to be sufficiently valued blessing—the gift of the Holy Ghost, is spiritual and not intellectual; that the gracious influence now falls on *the heart* only, and not, as at Pentecost, on the mind and on the tongue; that God now enlightens only by purifying; that the light He imparts has nothing whatever to do with men's opinions, but everything to do with Divine

Revelation ; that He places His signet, as it were, upon His own truth, by showing it, or rather, as I have already said, by *making it* powerful “to the pulling down of the strongholds” of sin and Satan,—by *proving it* to be “a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.”

*It is this* which separates, as by an impassable gulph, the inspiration of prophets and apostles, not only from the pseudo-inspiration of poets and painters, but from the unauthorized claims of good but mistaken men, who say, in relation to mere opinions, ‘The Lord has taught me this or that ; I cannot, therefore, receive any other view.’ The only answer to such an assumption is, ‘If it be so, what you have learnt is authoritative ; you are then unquestionably right, for the Lord would never teach you anything that is either wrong or doubtful.’ Who does not see that when two equally good men, as is constantly the case, put forth this claim on behalf of conflicting views, the very assumption is its own condemnation ? The fruit of the Spirit is “love, joy, and peace in the Holy Ghost.” Where *these* are seen, whether in churches or individuals, there God is ; *not* indeed to preserve from intellectual error, to insure right views, or to produce oneness in judgment even as to Divine teaching ; but to give that

honesty of purpose and integrity of heart, that candour, humility, and *love of truth for its own sake*, which is the best preservative from error, and the surest guide to the knowledge of the Divine will.

To suppose that we are guided "into all truth" by the Holy Spirit, *in the sense* in which the Apostles were, is to suppose that we, like them, are *infallibly* taught; it is to take for granted that the Divine Book is useless without the Divine Interpreter; that instead of our reception or rejection,—our right or wrong understanding of revelation being, as it certainly is, one of the most important branches of our probation, we are, if real Christians, privileged to receive positively and passively therefrom, that which is true, without the risk of mistake or error. Nothing can be more contrary to fact, and few things more dangerous than this supposition. We may rely upon it that no power or presence of the Holy Ghost in any Christian assembly will deliver the body from the danger, ever imminent, of being swayed by the selfish aims, or led captive by the persuasions, of men who, self-deceived rather than deceiving, seek, through this channel, to secure influence or to retain power.

I am glad to perceive that, to some extent, this is now admitted among 'the Brethren.'

“I am bound,” says one, “to form a judgment about church *actions* when my subjection is claimed on the score of the peculiar guidance of the Holy Ghost.” The judgment of leaders, says another, put forth as the judgment of the Church, and the decision of the Holy Spirit, “*is Rome in embryo.*” The decisions and judgments of the London “Brethren,” says a third, “are *assumed* to be acts of the Holy Ghost.” To which answer is made by a fourth,—“Imitation of power is not power. The use of holy words will not sanctify unholy actions. The Papists used to repeat *Veni Creator Spiritus* at the burning of heretics.”

And now as to apostolic practice in relation to error. Did Paul, or Peter, or John, *as a fact*, separate from the communion of the saints those who held wrong opinions, even when, as inspired men, they *knew* them to be wrong? Scripture itself shall answer. The “heretic” whom Titus is directed, after two admonitions, to reject (iii. 10), is not the holder of an erroneous opinion, but a man who denied the necessity of good works (ver. 8), and who in addition to this was, in so doing, “condemned” even “of himself;” that is, by his own conscience. Here, as everywhere else,—and this fact must not escape careful notice,—the heretic is not the mistaken man, but the



facious and ungodly one,—a denier, in short, of the holiness of the Gospel.

Further, as I have already observed, they who held the errors John condemns—those whom he calls “Antichrists,”—were, by holding them, quickly alienated from Christianity altogether. And what was the consequence? Were they excluded from the Church? No! “They *went out* from us,” says the Apostle, “but (or, because) they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us: but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us” (1 John ii. 19). The alienation was conscious; the separation was voluntary. Nay, strange as it may seem, the *going out* of these men is regretted, not rejoiced over. Had they been right at heart, “had they been of us,” says John, whatever their anti-Christian errors, “they would have continued with us,” and—for this is implied—would have *grown* right in time; the error would have sloughed off with that renewal of spiritual health which might have been hoped for, had they kept themselves in contact with men of practical goodness.

There can be no question as to the fact, not only from the identity of human nature in all ages, but from the apostolic writings themselves, that the same tendency to doubt, to

inquire, to reason, to speculate, to infer, and to judge, which distinguishes so many in our own day, was not wanting in earlier converts to the faith. Equally certain is it, that such tendencies brought with them the same dangers and the same inconveniences which are now found to accompany unfettered freedom of thought and expression. The apostolic mode of dealing with such persons appears, however, to have been somewhat different from ours. A warning to ministers not to give "heed to fables and endless genealogies" (1 Tim. i. 4); a caution to hearers to "beware lest any man should spoil" them "through philosophy and vain deceit" (Col. ii. 8); a charge to "hold fast the form of sound words" (2 Tim. i. 13), is almost all that can be gathered up bearing the semblance even of dissatisfaction and rebuke.

I am not, of course, speaking of those "vain and profane babblings" that increased "unto more unrighteousness" (2 Tim. ii. 16); nor of men who said that the resurrection was past (2 Tim. ii. 18); nor yet of the "perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds," who held that gain was godliness, or as Dr. Trench translates it, that "godliness is lucre," — *a means of getting gain* (1 Tim. vi. 5); still less of hypocrites, who went "in the way of Cain, and ran greedily after the error of Balaam

for reward," denying the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ (Jude 4, 11); for, as I have said before, these are not *the classes* of persons on whom it is desired that modern church discipline should be brought to bear, nor is it such as these with whom 'Brethren' decline to commune, but with men who differ from them only in opinion; with men *they will say*, and perhaps not unjustly, who, though true disciples, are prone to speculate on things "hard to be understood" (2 Pet. iii. 16); sometimes "striving about words to no profit" (2 Tim. ii. 14), and sometimes open to the charge of "vain jangling" (1 Tim. i. 6). Let them, however, not forget that it is in relation to these that Paul sets us so beautiful an example of Christian candour and charity.

Even in such a case as that of Hymenæus and Philetus, whose words "ate as doth a canker," and who had actually overthrown the faith of some, he is content simply to appeal to the witness of the Spirit. "Nevertheless," he exclaims, in relation to these men, "the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his. And, Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity. In a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and of earth;

and some to honour, and some to dishonour (2 Tim. ii. 17—20). Not a word indicates that even these men were excluded from communion.\*

Need I say that if errors in opinion ought not to subject those who hold them to the discipline of the Church, still less should they be supposed to justify alienation of heart, angry expostulations, or reflections on character? Not until evil fruits *show* themselves; not until men become “contentious, and obey not the truth, but obey unrighteousness,” ought they to be subjected to the “indignation and wrath” of fellow-Christians, for *not till then* is wrath threatened by Him who is “of purer eyes than to behold iniquity,” and “who will render to every man according to his deeds.” To be angry with, or alienated from any one, whatever may be his errors, who yet “worketh good,” and who, amid all, is, “by patient continuance in well-doing,” seeking for “glory, honour, and immortality,” may be approved on earth as a supposed testimony against evil, but it is unequivocally condemned of Him who, by His Apostle, has said, “Who art thou

\* This and several preceding paragraphs are taken from a little book entitled “The Spirit of Truth,” which was published by me about ten years ago, and is now nearly out of print. I state the fact, but do not see it needful to apologize for their insertion. He who would teach effectually must repeat himself frequently.

that judgest another man's servant ? To his own master he standeth or falleth" (Rom. xiv. 4).

I have done. My object has been to turn your letter to account, not by justifying what you say of Mr. Darby,—not by condemning any one,—not by entering, in the slightest degree, into points at issue among those who ought to be one,—but by showing, which I think I have done successfully, that the divisions so much to be deplored among 'Brethren,' the prevalence of a spirit of condemnation among them, and the absence of that tone of reconciling love which is so eminently Christlike, is to be traced, not so much to the ordinary infirmities of human nature as to the adoption of a theology, formally unwritten indeed, but well understood, and supposed, though wrongly, to have been given by the Spirit of God ; a theology which builds itself increasingly upon merely human opinions ; which confounds these opinions with Divine truth ; which supports them by a discipline at once anti-apostolic and fruitful of division ; which *keeps out* of communion the many sincere and earnest souls who, in these days of ecclesiastical pretension, long for simple and spiritual worship, and which has placed before multitudes a stumbling-block in the path of Christian progress which, under the

most favourable circumstances, years will be required to remove.\*

How great such evils are I need not say to you. Where the responsibility for their continuance rests I know not ; but this I know, that it is the bounden duty of every man to desire and to pray for their removal. Divine

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\* The extent of prejudice that has been created by the spirit of condemnation which is so often indulged in by 'Brethren' was remarkably manifested at one of the recent meetings of the Congregational Union. Mr. Samuel Morley, it seems, urged "that the adult members of congregations should be prompted to meet for Bible-reading, instead of attending and giving so many insipid evening parties." There were "*parts*," he added, "in the practice both of Wesleyans and Plymouth Brethren we might imitate with advantage." On this very Christian and sensible suggestion two observations only were made, both of them by ministers of undoubted piety and of the highest standing. The one "strongly *deprecating* the practice of Christian people meeting together simply to talk over their own religious experience, from which serious evils often arose." The other remarked, "he hoped the day would never come when a system of Plymouth Brethrenism would ever find favour with the Congregational Churches. The *best way*," he said, "for a Christian man to *expand his Christian knowledge*, and to strengthen his spiritual life, was to put forth his best efforts for the propagation of the truth, and for the bringing in of wanderers from the right path." And so, *in utter forgetfulness* that only six months ago they were enthusiastically endorsing Mr. Thomas's wise and godly remarks on the error of prescribing *work* as "one of the most effectual means of personal improvement," because Christian activity and labour will not suffice for this—"the most active and laborious Christians being sometimes seen to *decline* in the power and life of the Spirit"—they leave it to be *inferred* by ill-natured people that they think it *better* that Christians should spend their evenings "in insipid parties" than take to Bible-reading, or imitate those of old time, who, fearing the Lord, "spake often one to another," and received the promise, "They shall be Mine, saith the Lord of hosts, in that day when I make up My jewels" (margin, *peculiar treasure*). What they really

Providence has placed you, Mr. Howard, in a position among 'Brethren' which will enable you, if so disposed, to do much towards bringing about a better state of things. You must pardon me, however, if I say that nothing or next to nothing will be accomplished, without a return to *the original principle* on which

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meant, I suppose, was, that it was better that things should continue as they are than that any risk should be run of encouraging 'Brethrenism,'—a very sad conclusion at the best. They would not, I am sure, endorse what was said some time ago in an article on "Bible Classes." The minister "is the human guardian and expositor" of Scripture. "If not in other matters, in this at least he should be *the highest human authority.*" He is to be "an interpreter and referee everywhere and in all companies." "The *prerogative* of the minister is to teach, and the *privilege* of his class is to be taught." "The great thing to be desired is *more extensive ministerial influence* upon the mind, heart, and character of young people." "The free discussion of controverted points does more harm than good." "Exposition must have its *throne* in the pulpit." The "paramount spiritual authority (of ministers) must be sustained." In studying the Bible, "the way of duty is the way of danger; there is no such forlorn and miserable a journey as that of a young man's travels in this track *without a guide.* Of the Supreme Guide we will not speak here, but only of the human guide who *is appointed to this end.*" "Let young men gather round their minister, and place themselves, in these matters at least, under his guidance. He may not always be such a guide as they would have chosen for themselves; but *be he what he may,* he was sent for this, among other purposes, to give them *directions in all things pertaining to the Bible.*" I repeat, these gentlemen would not, I am sure, either endorse or approve such sentiments; but it is well both for them and for their hearers to be reminded that, even among Nonconformists, ecclesiastical pretensions differing very little from those of Popish priests occasionally appear. Dissenters did not, in the last century, escape Arianism when it broke out in the Established Church, and it is but folly to imagine that they can be unaffected by the *tendencies* of the present day, whether they be towards "Broad Churchism" or "High."

“the Brethren” first met, and the hearty recognition of it as loving but not latitudinarian,—primitive, yet the very opposite of Pharisaic. This will, I firmly believe, be found one day to be the only true EIRENICON.

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## NOTE.

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SOME of the later Puritans recognized the true ground of communion among Christians to an extent not generally known. They appear to have distinctly perceived, that if human sympathies do not, as a rule, follow those which are Divine, there remains no possible basis on which Christian union can be established.

Richard Baxter not unfrequently advocated comprehension in terms which would now be considered very loose and dangerous. Calamy stipulated to be ordained "minister of the Catholic Church of Christ *without any confinement.*" Nathaniel Oldfield (of Southwark, *ob.* 1696) "was not for other terms of church communion than the terms of our common Christianity." Shower (of the Old Jewry), who preached Oldfield's funeral sermon, maintained that "where serious piety and practical religion come to be most valued, and to be *distinguishing*, nothing will be made a test or boundary to Christian communion but what is necessary to make a man a good Christian, render him acceptable to God, and carry him safe to the heavenly Canaan." Moses Lowman, when asked, "Would you have men received as our fellow-Christians who err in fundamentals?" replies, "*That* only is a fundamental mistake in religion which is inconsistent with a religious conversation." \*

\* The authorities for these extracts are given in Art. VI. of the *Theological Review* for May, from which they have been taken.

I am well aware that it is commonly *assumed*, and frequently asserted, that to this laxity is to be attributed the Unitarianism of a later date, which eventually desolated the Presbyterian churches. But *nothing can really be farther from the truth*. Whatever may have been the cause, the lamentable fact is unquestionable, that during the last century the spiritual life both of England and Scotland sank to a level far below that which it had reached in earlier days, and with all our faults I trust it may be added, far below that to which it has since attained. To this decay of spiritual vitality, which *commenced* in the Established Churches, and afterwards extended to the Nonconformists, the rise and spread of Unitarianism can alone be attributed. Whiston, a professor at Cambridge, and Dr. Samuel Clarke, the rector of St. James's, were among the very earliest to avow Arian views, and although the first was prosecuted and the last threatened, the mischief went on. The first Unitarian chapel established in London\* was placed under the care of a seceding clergyman, the Rev. Theophilus Lindsay; and the most zealous votaries of the new creed, such as Chambers, Jebb, Disney, Hammond, Gilbert Wakefield, and Stone, all came out of Anglicanism. That many of the Presbyterians, such as Price, Priestley, and Kippis followed in the same course, and that, in the absence of any legal hindrance, the old places of worship were to a very great extent transformed into Unitarian chapels, is certain; but this only shows that spiritual life was low everywhere.

\* The first Socinian society in England was formed during the Protectorate by John Biddle. He published in defence of these views both in 1647 and 1651, and was answered at one time by the learned Matthew Poole, and at another by Dr. Owen. The Westminster Assembly was sitting when he printed his Catechism, and it was seriously moved that he should be put to death as a heretic. But Cromwell would not hear of it. Biddle was, after condemnation by the Parliament, subsequently imprisoned, and eventually died in confinement in 1662.

The point *proved* is, that while articles and creeds may often be found powerful to hinder the retention of buildings or endowments by men who avow opinions adverse to a given standard, they are absolutely useless in the preservation of truth. To what a grievous extent both speculative unbelief and practical ungodliness prevailed at this time in the churches both of England and Scotland, in spite of their formularies, every one is aware who has studied the period. The defection among the Non-conformists, terrible as it was, cannot, however, be traced to latitudinarianism. The people, as is always the case, to a great extent adopted, without much questioning, the views of the men whom they had always been taught to reverence as their spiritual instructors, and to whom they were naturally attached by many ties. But this they did quite as readily in the case of churches which by trust-deed recognized the Westminster Confession, as in those which had no such legal position.

But another and still more important fact must be noticed. No sooner had Unitarianism developed than its supporters adopted a creed; *they, too*, bound themselves to a given set of opinions, and soon became quite as exclusive as other people. In the "Calm Enquiry" of Mr. Belsham, the Unitarian creed is embodied in a compact and authentic form, comprising six distinct propositions, in which the Divinity of Christ, the Atonement, and the Inspiration of the Scriptures are plainly denied, and the worship of Christ is declared to be "polytheistical and idolatrous."

Mr. Martineau observes, "Here" (in Essex Street) "was a place of worship, not founded on the open principle, but tied up, in the defining method of the English Church, to a given doctrinal view of Christianity." "Many causes," he goes on to say, "tended to make doctrine *the point of honour*, and to produce distaste for the old latitude," until at length all diversities were

merged in the present "British and Foreign Unitarian Association." And now, when some change is wished, it is discovered to be "legally impossible to alter either its object or its name," so that property bequeathed to it must be administered accordingly. Yet, in spite of all this, we are perpetually told that to fall back on Scripture alone, without a creed expressed or understood, is to adopt a principle which is sure to issue in Unitarianism, a statement which, if true, would certainly afford the best possible defence of that form of error.

The "mockery of protection" which mere creeds afford was probably never shown so openly as in the present day. In the very same number of the Review from which I have quoted, a contributor, who signs himself "PRESBYTER ANGLICANUS" (but who is *not* the writer in the *Times* under that title), maintains that the denial of the miraculous birth of Christ is in no way inconsistent with the terms of the Athanasian Creed; that "according to the existing law of the Church of England," the clergy are free to hold "that Jesus was the son of Joseph and Mary by ordinary generation," and that a definite decision to that effect "need in no way disturb the belief that Christ is the Eternal Logos who "was made flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth." On the same ground, the legality of ritualism to any extent is held to be unquestionable.

All experience clearly shows that no amount of care in deducing or defining, can ever do more than control the expression of opinion, always human and fallible. TRUTH, Divine and authoritative, rising majestically from her seat, claims to be *a life*—refuses to be defended by anything but her own heavenly panoply, and, if neglected or despised, is content to retire in solemn silence to that home above from which she originally came down.

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IS IT OF MAN OR OF GOD?

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