

Is not the Lord among US?

[The following letter and reply thereto speak for themselves. Believing that many in this country are deeply feeling the present state of things, I have felt led to print, withholding the name of my correspondent, in order that the whole responsibility may rest upon myself.—A. H. B.]

DEAR —

I have been very much exercised in heart and mind (I trust before the Lord) for some considerable time as to the position we take up—I mean as being gathered to the Lord's name and in separation from other Christians. Perhaps the fewness of those gathered with us in Scotland has pressed the subject more seriously upon my heart than otherwise might have been the case.

You are quite aware how matters stand in this country. There are perhaps between twenty and thirty in G—, a few in C—, a few in S—, two at H—, three at A—, four at D—¹, three at D—², and two at C— S—. The isolation and loneliness which this means you will, in some little measure, be able to comprehend.

Then, again, as a testimony for the Lord, my own heartfelt conviction is that we are little or none. How little love there is for many dear children of God who are not "with us"! How little zeal there is in carrying the Gospel to the unsaved! I feel very deeply, too, how sadly labouring brethren have neglected Scotland. All these things combined have had a very depressing influence on my spirit, but *all* would not cast me down

were I confident that we were walking truly in the path which He would have us, that our position were *well pleasing to Him*. A lonely path I do not mind ; to have His approval I do.

When I look back to the early days, and think of the simplicity in which those whose hearts were so clearly moved by the Lord, were gathered together to His name to remember Him according to His own desire, receiving with open hearts all who were His, just because they were His and sought Him—receiving them because they were already members of His body and members one of another ; when I think of the power and freshness of those early meetings, the blessing which resulted to souls, saints and sinners, and compare with what now exists around us, I confess the question presses itself upon my heart : “Have we drifted away (perhaps unintentionally and unwittingly) from the reality, and only now retain the semblance ?”

“Holiness becometh Thy house, O Lord, for ever,” I know, and feel deeply the urgent necessity to ever with jealousy guard the glory of the Lord and His truth ; but have we only done that ?

We do not want to justify “*our position*,” we want to get the truth, even if that does tell against ourselves and necessitates our reconsidering our position and returning (it seems to me there must be that) to first principles.

I feel that many hearts are exercised in this matter, and cannot but feel that the Spirit of God is doing the work. This is indeed a day of “small things,” but it ought not to be a day of “small hearts.”

Meanwhile, with earnest desire that the Lord may abundantly bless you in your labour of love, I close.

Yours affectionately in Him,

* * *

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MY DEAR BROTHER,

Your letter has greatly moved me, and, strange as it may seem to you, has greatly encouraged me! And for this reason, that while I sympathise with you most sincerely in all your exercises of heart and conscience, and quite agree with the sentiments expressed in your letter with regard to the isolation and loneliness you speak of, yet I take courage in the thought that here is another brother who is facing the question alone with God, and not ashamed nor afraid to own failure in our history and mistakes in our past disciplines.

I am more and more convinced that God is working widely, and leading His people to confession and contrition. Repentance and confession were found as evidence of the Spirit's work just before Christ came the first time, and I am sure it is no less incumbent upon us to-day, just before we see His face and gather together to meet Him in the air.

It was *unbelief* and tempting the Lord that made the children of Israel at the start of their pilgrimage ask the question

“Is the Lord among us, or not?” (Exod. xvii. 7).

Of course He was, for had He not just redeemed them from Egypt and brought them to Himself? In this sense the Lord is with *all* His people, and not with brethren (so-called) more than any others. In times of difficulty, of temptation, of loneliness and isolation, in times of trial and perplexity, the Lord is always with His people; He will never leave them nor forsake them.

Faith has proved this times without number amidst Diocletian persecutions, Waldensian massacres, Smithfield burnings, and Boxer atrocities. This is not what one little section of Christians can claim to the ex-

clusion of their fellow-Christians who may not see eye to eye with them.

But it was deadness of conscience and proud pretension that made some in Israel boast at a later date—

**“Is not the Lord among US?
None evil can come upon US.**

(Micah iii. 11.)

Terrible things had been going on in Israel, as we may see in Micah ii. and iii. Their conflict had not been with Canaanites and Philistines, but one with another. The princes and prophets had been foremost in this, and the people—*the Lord's people*—had suffered. It was an “evil time” (ii. 3); “doleful lamentations” (ii. 4) were on many lips; “we be utterly spoiled” well described their woeful condition. And yet in spite of all comes Jehovah's challenge to any who might have an ear to hear:

“O thou that art named the House of Jacob, is the Spirit of the Lord straitened? are these His doings? do not my words do good to him that walketh uprightly?” (Micah ii. 7).

Individual blessing there was, even in days of collective ruin.

But how sad the doings of chapter iii. Have we not seen something of verse 5 in our own days?

“Thus saith the Lord concerning the prophets that make My people err, that bite with their teeth, and cry, Peace; and he that putteth not into their mouths, they even prepare war against him.”

Has there not been much biting with the teeth at the same time that the cry of “Peace” went forth? Has there not been war against those who would not pander to unrighteous and unscriptural disciplines and cutting off of individuals and assemblies? Have not hundreds and thousands of godly saints been cut off on the plea of keeping “the unity of the Spirit”?

Has not the exhortation to keep the unity of the Spirit been clipped at both ends, and the "lowliness, meekness, long-suffering, and forbearing of one another in love" been forgotten, and "the uniting bond of peace" been ignored?

"Ah, but we have done the right things in our disciplines, even though we have done them in the wrong way," it has often been said. Now, for my part, I feel sure that often we have done very wrong things in our disciplines, but even supposing they had been right, will God allow us to do right things in a wrong way with impunity? Will He tolerate any amount of fleshly actings under the plea that we are faithful to Him?

Read Micah iii. See how the "priests" and "prophets" and the "heads" of the people were carrying everything before them, were insisting on their own will being done regardless of the feelings of those they were oppressing, until at last such was the desolation that darkness prevailed where once there had been the bright shining of the sun; and "no answer of God," where once all had felt that His words did good (iii. 6, 7). And along with all this the "heads" boasting—

**"Is not the Lord among US?
None evil can come upon US."**

Ah, it was just because of all this high-handed action and self-complacent boasting that God's hand was upon Zion in governmental chastening (see iii. 12).

Can we not see a parallel in our own times? Who are those that have brought in all our troubles? Have they not been in most cases the leaders and the heads? Have they not been teachers and men of position and influence? And the humbler folk have mourned, suffered, and been scattered to the winds, until now, as you say, in the whole of Scotland there

are scarcely fifty who recognise one another as in the same fellowship. Pretty much the same may be said of Ireland. Can we for one moment imagine that "these are His doings?" (Micah ii. 7).

I believe we have been all wrong in the whole system of *divisions*. We have gone beyond Scripture. The whole method of procedure has been a mistaken one, though I fully admit with the best of intentions.

When a trouble arises in a certain assembly and a decision is arrived at, often at the expense of driving out a large number of godly people, a manifesto is sent out to all points of the compass, accompanied by a threat of excommunication of all those who do not agree. Every assembly in all corners of the earth is thus put to the test, and wholesale division and cutting off ensues.

Now, where is the Scripture for "divisions" such as we, unfortunately, understand the word?

A matter arises, as to which there is great variety of opinion and difference of judgment, *e.g.*, Ramsgate, Reading, and Montreal. A strong party take action, utterly disregarding the consciences and entreaties of the rest. Sides must then be taken, and a world-wide division results, which must be perpetuated to all time, though none may be left alive who have any clear idea why it all happened. *This* is what has scattered and separated saints who were gathered in earlier days by the truth in the love of it. *This* is what perplexes the present generation who think at all and desire to walk in paths pleasing to the Lord and taught by His Word.

They have eyes to see that our present path is the result of having *missed* our way, and surely none but a fanatic could view our present divided state with satisfaction. It is no good *scolding* people for having any exercise of conscience as to these things.

I trust my brethren will believe me when I say that

in writing thus I have no other desire than that we should calmly and prayerfully weigh the matter in the fear of God. I feel more and more that our methods with regard to *divisions* have been wrong in principle. They are not scriptural, and need we wonder at the lamentable result in practice? Evils which in all probability would never go beyond their own locality are spread far and wide, multitudes being defiled thereby and forced to occupy their time and their thoughts with what is bad and of evil report rather than what is of good report (Phil. iv. 8). More strife and division have been brought about on the plea of keeping the unity of the Spirit than, I suppose, has ever been known in the history of the Church.

I believe we have no right to refuse the Lord's Supper to any Christian who cannot be clearly shown to have forfeited that privilege either through his own sin in practice and doctrine, or wilful association with those who refuse to judge such evil.

But "must we not recognise assembly discipline?" Certainly, as a general principle we must. If an assembly, in the fear of the Lord, has been obliged to proceed to the solemn and painful discipline of putting away from amongst them a wicked person or rejecting a heretic, then all other assemblies recognise that action when called upon to do so in a legitimate manner. But, then, that is *scriptural discipline*; it is discipline based on the Word, and not merely according to the caprice of an individual or the bias of a party.

But we have often exceeded our God-given powers, and forced the acceptance of decisions that we had no scriptural authority to make, and that on pain of cutting off assemblies who did not agree. So much is this the case that many have come to regard such an expression as *the authority of the assembly* as quite

scriptural, forgetting that Scripture really speaks of the assembly being *subject* to Christ (Eph. v. 24)—a very different matter. Hence some calmly tell us that whatever an assembly does must be bowed to, quite regardless of whether their action be a righteous one or have any scriptural foundation!

Well, here we are in a pitiful condition — scattered, broken, divided, and FRIGHTENED one of another.

What is to be done? Are we to give up the breaking of bread? Clearly not. “Till He come” is the word.

“**But who are we to receive?**” Every Christian sound in the faith and consistent in walk. For my part, I would not voluntarily or wittingly go to any assembly where this is not done. And if I were locally attached to one where godly saints, free from association with false doctrine, were refused, I should enter my most earnest protest, and *keep on protesting* till more scriptural practice prevailed. I should do so with all the kindness that I could, especially guarding against what would provoke the flesh in others.

“**But should you not leave such an assembly?**” Certainly not, until all effort and patience have proved unavailing. It is ignorance of the principles of Scripture and not wickedness on their part.

“**But would you receive K. and G. brethren and Christians from the sects?**” I reply, I should receive *known Christians*, sound in the faith godly in walk, and not associated with evil doctrine. I have been at meetings where some who usually break bread with these desired to take the Lord’s Supper and did so, being well known as pious Christians, and their meetings free from heretical teaching.

“**But must we not take sides when there is**

a division?" Certainly not. It is hard, I admit, to keep quiet when acts of violence and even persecution may be committed. To see another being bullied no doubt awakens all one's desire for *fair play* but what good can be gained by going out? This is just what Satan wishes.

If violent men push their own will to such an extent as to produce division, avoid them and leave them to be dealt with by God.

"But when others demand of you and of your assembly to declare themselves, must you not do so?" Coercion is not the fruit of the Spirit of God.

"But, then, they may cut you off." Then let them do so, and they will have to answer to God for that.

"But I say unto you, **Resist not evil**: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also" (Matt. v. 39).

I would rather be the smitten one than the smiter.

So, my dear brother, take courage, and do not allow yourself to be depressed by the state of things.

Don't forget that you are a member, not of one little section of brethren only, but of the Body of Christ. And receive all the Lord's people who are walking in godly ways, not because they are members of one section of brethren, but because they are members of the one Body of Christ.

Don't be so large as to include evil (I mean positive known evil), nor so narrow as to exclude good.

One of the most painful features of recent times has been the way in which so-called discipline has been used to gratify personal animosity; the awe-inspiring phrase "assembly action" being used to enforce it amongst those who are too careless to inquire as to the righteousness or unrighteousness of the matter.

I am not alone in thinking that at I—— there was a cruel miscarriage of justice, which had the effect of sending one brother beloved into the madhouse, the putting away of another, a godly man, as though he were a “wicked person,” and the driving out of a score of tried saints who felt themselves powerless to deal with the matter. Some may consider me unwise to speak out so plainly, but I feel that further silence would be complicity in a flagrant wrong.

The same bitter animosity has been at work at T—— W—— for years, culminating in one of the most cruel efforts I have ever known to get rid of a number of quiet and godly people whose only offence was refusal to sanction such unchristian behaviour.

It has been said to me by more than one “averse from war” (Micah ii. 8), and desiring to go on their way quietly with God—“This T. W matter is all names of men it is Mr S. and Mr S. I didn’t come out to man, I came out to the Lord.”

I for one refuse to be dragged into strife of this nature, but I find no words strong enough to denounce the profanity of using the assembly of God as a rod to smite a fellow-servant, to excommunicate *en bloc* all who disagreed, and then to call it discipline in the name of the Lord.

Let us be “sincere and without offence, and have done with all cant, and let us remember that we have to do with a God by whom actions are weighed.

All this that I have described springs out of the false position given to the assembly, giving it the character of a court of judicial decree instead of the happy home of the redeemed.

Yours, &c.,

ALFRED H. BURTON.

P.S.—Many have expressed their warm sympathy with the thoughts contained in *Where is Collective Testimony found To-day?* Some few have not hesitated to charge me with “Bethesda principles.” All I can say is that either they do not know what “Bethesda principles” mean, or that they have read my pamphlet very carelessly.

Bethesda in 1848 was guilty of receiving and defending those whose views and teaching assailed the glory of the Person of Christ. This, painful though necessary as it is to do so, I have shown in *What is Exclusivism?* It is necessary because there are still found those who hold and teach the doctrines which made the separation of 1848 a duty.

I do not charge O.B.’s generally with holding these views to-day; though I regret to have to add that some whom I have met, and who break bread at certain O.B. meetings, do hold B. W. N.’s teaching as to the Person of our blessed Lord. It may be that these meetings are unaware of the fact, but if so, I cannot help thinking that they are guilty of carelessness in reception. But, I repeat, I do not charge O.B.’s generally with this. And, indeed, I know for certain that there are very many of their meetings who would utterly refuse this and all other forms of evil teaching.

But, be this as it may, anybody who reads my pamphlet without bias will see that I do not oppose the assembly’s dealing with positive evil in doctrine or morals. What I do oppose is the wholesale cutting off of godly saints, who by no stretching of language can be called “wicked people”; and having by means of forcing disciplines which went beyond Scripture, so scattered the Lord’s people that once were together that only the merest handful are now left together; then, to use the boastful language which is only too frequently heard, that we are “a collective testimony,”

and on "divine ground," &c. &c., this I *do* deplore more than words can say.

"If ye bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed one of another" (Gal. v. 15).

Copies of this, and of *Where is Collective Testimony found To-day?* may be had from A. H. B., 3 Elmbourne Road, Upper Tooting, London, S.W. Kindly enclose a penny stamp (loose), with name and address.