

TWO LETTERS
TO
A WESLEYAN INQUIRER.

16th December, 1872.

DEAR BROTHER,

Thank you very much for allowing me to see your friend's letter. It is interesting to me, as the expression of a clear mind and an upright heart, faithful according to its light, viewing the subject from a wrong stand-point, and consequently seeing it disjointedly. It has for me all the more interest that the sentiments and convictions it reveals are very similar to what were, little more than twelve months back, my own.

I see your friend's counsel to you is pretty much what my own has been—"He that believeth shall not make haste:" "not a step before your *faith*, not a step behind your conscience."

Your friend's remarks about "the Church in apostolic times" give at once the clue to his misunderstanding, not only of "Brethren," but of the whole question of sectarianism. He has not weighed as carefully before the Lord, as I trust he will yet be led to do, the true character of the Church of God as set forth in Scripture. He intimates that the Church, which started as *one*, ceased to be *so even in* apostolic days. Nothing can surely be farther from the

truth. The New Testament presents us with a most complete example of *unity*. The Church throughout the whole world was *one* Church. Every part of it was in full and unhindered communion with every other part. Local assemblies there were, but each simply the local expression of the unity of the whole. They knew but one name—"The Church of God" (which in one aspect is the "body," in another "the house"—1 Cor. i. 2; Eph. i. 23; 1 Tim. iii. 15, &c.). Individually its members were all members of the one body, knowing no other names than those of "Saints," "Brethren," "Disciples," "Christians." Nothing like the idea of members of *a* Church, and not of all the Church—nothing like members of a sect with the name of a man, or any other "denominational" distinction, as Paulites or Apolloites. There was indeed the manifestation of the presence of the *fleshly* principles which, if tolerated, must have developed into such; but it was at once put down by apostolic authority (as in 1 Cor. i. 3), and so afforded an occasion for a warning which, instead of being heeded, has, alas! been utterly neglected to the ruin of all.

To quote the instance of subdivision of labour, in respect of the circumcision and the uncircumcision, as an example in any degree approximating to modern sectarian divisions, is as complete a fallacy as it would be to say that because God laid it on the heart of one missionary in "the Methodist body" to go to the Jews, and another to the Africans, they ceased to belong to that "body," and became separate sects. So long as they brought their converts into the unity of Methodism—*i.e.* into full communion with that "body," as to doctrine, discipline, government, &c.—they would continue in the unity of that sect. If each took up an independent ground of action, gathered his converts under a separate name, set up an independent church government and organisation, then each would be the author of a separate sect; and that whether he "intended" from the first to form

a separate Church, or whether it only "*grew*" to that, as in the case of Wesleyanism. I feel sure it was only the hurry of an unpremeditated letter that betrayed your friend into such a misconception.

Just such is, I feel sure, the explanation of his remark that a "separate sect does not destroy the unity of the *body*," and the illustration with which he seeks to elucidate it. In the first there is a confounding of the thought of the body in its *intrinsic* with that of its *manifested* character, with which the question has to do. The former is a matter wholly pertaining to God, and quite outside the range of man's responsibility. It is the work of the Holy Ghost (1 Cor. xii. 13), and man can neither make nor mar it. It embraces all true believers, wherever they may be found. The latter man is responsible to maintain (Eph. iv. 3), and a sect—or part cut off—does beyond all question destroy the *manifested* unity of the body.

The illustration of a forest fails because the oak, elm, and beech trees all continue compacted in the same group. If transplanted on to separate ground, and grouped together in distinct masses, they would cease to be *one* forest. Differences of opinion or of minds do not destroy manifested unity, *so long as the differences are not suffered to develop into organic separation*. Scripture has sharply and well defined this in its rules for the treatment of two different classes of such opinions. Doctrine destructive of foundation truth must not be tolerated within the "body;" the false teacher also must be rejected, as must he who partakes of his evil deeds by having fellowship with him. (2 John 10, 11.) For other cases of difference provision is made in Rom. xiv., &c. ; but there is no license given for any man to set up an independent Church, according to his own preferences.

The Old Testament supplies us with a most instructive parallel, if we will but give heed to it.

Suppose our brother had lived in Judah in the days of the

Judges or the Kings, and had seen the whole nation, from the king downwards, going up to worship in high places (not idols, mind, but God—1 Sam. ix. 12; x. 5, 13, &c.), what would have been his duty? Would it not have been to stand firm on Deut. xii., and refuse to add to or diminish from the commandment of the Lord, or to have fellowship with *the acts* of those who set up such worship as seemed right in their own eyes; and that although such servants of God as even Solomon, Uzziah, and the like, allowed themselves to be carried with the stream? Your friend thinks that “where God commands His blessing, there cannot be much wrong.” God blessed the reforming kings, *according to the measure of their faithfulness*, but that implied no sanction of the evils they still perpetuated; His “Nevertheless” comes in in abatement of His commendation, fixing His perpetual stigma on the disobedience (even though mistaken, or in ignorance) of otherwise excellent men. (1 Kings xxii. 43; 2 Kings xii. 3, &c.)

God deals in grace now and not in judgment, in terms of 2 Cor. viii. 12; and, where there is faithfulness *up to the measure of light*, He blesses; but if *wilful* carelessness as to His honour or His will come in; if one refuse to search into His mind when He calls to it, or persevere in a course of evil after it has been pointed out and recognised, His blessing need not be hoped for. The Wesleys were faithful witnesses for God in their day, and were His honoured instruments to bring into prominence precious truths that had long been lost sight of. But if Wesleyans refuse to march again when the cloud lifts, God having committed a fresh testimony on other long-lost truths to other hands, they will be left to barrenness, as others have been in similar circumstances.

God had but *one* temple of old, and to set up *His worship* anywhere else was to add to His Word and to do “whatsoever was right in man’s own eyes,” instead of “that which was right in the eyes of the Lord,” and was therefore *sin*.

God has but *one* Church now, and to set up whatever mars its unity, no matter how specious the pretext of expediency, is "to do whatsoever is right in man's eyes," and just *the same sin*. He has made His mind clear to us, if we be willing honestly to give heed, as He did to Israel (1 Cor. i. 10, iii. 3, xi. 18, 19, xii. 25; Eph. iv. 3, 4; Jude 19), and it has met with about the same attention. Alas! it was abundantly foretold—"It must needs be that offences come, but woe be to that man by whom the offence cometh."

Suppose your friend, living under the kings when the nation was all going up to the high places to worship, had put his finger on Deuteronomy xii., and either alone, or with "two or three" like-minded, had refused to go up, and persisted in worshipping at Jerusalem alone. Of course they would have been nicknamed and *called* a sect; but who would have been the real separatists or sect, and who the true representatives of the one true worship of Jehovah?

The case has its perfect parallel now-a-days. If there be but "two or three who take their stand on the plain, simple text of God's Word, refusing to add to or diminish aught from it, holding fast to the ground on which the Lord originally set the Church, no matter in how much weakness, these (and these alone) are the true representatives of the *one body*. If others give them a name other than that their Lord has given, *they* are not responsible so long as they refuse to adopt it; they are Christians, and among such no "denominational" distinction should be needed; if any adopt such, they do it on their own responsibility and in direct contradiction of the Word of God. (1 Cor. i. 12, 13.)

I quite agree with your friend that the unity spoken of in the first clause of John xvii. 21 is "one of nature and essence," but how was it to affect the world's belief except by a visible manifestation of it? Is it not notorious that one of the greatest obstacles to the progress of the Gospel is the disunion among Christians? If every one had had it

as often cast in his teeth as I have, he would know it only too well.

But my letter is growing too long, and I must wind it up. I will but add that, if our dear brother understood the Scripture teaching as to *eternal life*—life in Christ Jesus—he would soon see that “Brethren” have good reason for their teaching about it. If you care to copy off the accompanying notes on it, written for another object, they may help him.*

I remain,

Yours in the fellowship of Christ,

R. H.

December 17th, 1872.

DEAR BROTHER,

I omitted yesterday to touch on one or two points in your friend's letter that I had purposed alluding to, and felt led this morning to do so.

He characterises “Brethren” as “microscopic.” I am happy to be able most heartily to agree with him. I think, if there is any one thing that does characterise them specially, it is just the closeness with which they examine the Word of God. The microscope is a most precious revealer of facts; and the microscopist by its use discerns beauty, order, and harmony in the tiniest details of the Divine artificer's workmanship, which elevate and expand into greater breadth his understanding of the Divine mind.

Just so the microscopic student of the Divine Word discerns therein an exactness of language, a minuteness of order, a harmony of parts, and a perfection of plan, which

* Those notes, formerly printed with these letters as an appendix, have now been expanded into a separate tract, and are published apart.

are unperceived by the natural eye; and the result is a breadth of view and a comprehension of the Divine mind, as revealed in the Scriptures, which may, indeed, be unintelligible, and take the appearance of "muddleheadedness" to one who has not used the microscope. It was one of the things that first of all arrested my attention when brought into contact with "Brethren," what diligent and close students of the Word they seemed to be. They put me thoroughly to the blush for my own ignorance; and to this day I feel like a complete ignoramus at times in the presence of persons who have not been half so long in the Lord, nor enjoyed half my opportunities and advantages. It is just the prevalent generalising carelessness in the examination of the sacred text, that has brought Christendom into its present state of confusion. What but the most culpable negligence could have induced Christendom to accept and adopt as the most popular expression of its faith, during some seventeen centuries, a creed whose very first article is a glaring contradiction of the Word of God? No "microscopic" student of the Word would ever perpetrate the blunder of ascribing creation to God *the Father*.*

Your friend thinks "Brethren" *narrow*. I call to mind that One whom I revere has said, "*Narrow* is the way that leadeth unto life;" and as "Brethren" are walkers in that way, I am not surprised in the least that "narrowness" should be attributed to them. I believe the true servant of God is at once the *narrowest* and the *broadest* of men. He is narrow—uncompromisingly narrow—where God makes narrow, and broad where God gives breadth. He is *broad*

* "In the beginning *God* created," &c. *God* is the name which designates the deity, or Godhead, as such. Creation was an act of the Godhead. But in the Godhead there is a trinity of persons, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Of these, not the Father, but the Son and Spirit, were, according to Scripture, the active agents in creation. (Ps. xxxiii. 6; John i. 1-3; Col. i. 13-17; Heb. i. 1, 2; Job xxvi. 13; Ps. civ. 30.)

where sectarianism is *narrow*, and *narrow* where sectarianism is *broad*.

But your friend accuses "Brethren" of a lack of "scriptural breadth," and there I am constrained to contest him.

1. Brethren, with regard to the "body of Christ," hold that it embraces every truly converted soul in the world who has partaken of the baptism of the Holy Ghost (1 Cor. xii. 13); in this they are just as *broad* as the Word of God, and as the broadest of sound evangelical Christians. 2. In the matter of *Church order*, "Brethren" are immeasurably broader than any sect, because they stand on God's broad ground outside the contracted limits of all human "systems"—the ground, and the *only ground*, on which *all* true-hearted children of God *can* meet.

"Brethren" have been gathered out in great part from among "denominations," and perhaps most, if not all, of these, have contributed to swell their ranks. Each man has simply sifted out the denominational chaff from among the pure wheat of God's prescriptions as to Church order—left all that would not bear the winnowing—and the result has been that only that has been retained in common, which no Christian with a mind subject to the Word can possibly have a conscientious scruple about.

"Brethren" can fearlessly challenge any to point out a single thing in practice among them, the Divine appointment of which is not patent to even the most simple mind that tests it by the Word.

"Brethren" assume and accept no other name than that which God has given to two or three gathered together in the name of Jesus—the Church or assembly of God—they meet as the assembly of God, and as nothing else.

The Lord has instituted baptism; and "Brethren" practise it. (Matt. xxviii. 19.)

The Lord has not limited its ministration to the hands of a class; "Brethren" therefore do not dare to do so.

The Lord has given no *command* as to its being administered to infants or to believers only; and therefore "Brethren" do not dare prescribe, but leave to "every man to be persuaded in his own mind." (Rom. xiv.)

The Lord has instituted the Supper, and "Brethren" observe His ordinance. (Matt. xxvi. 26, 27; 1 Cor. xi.)

The Lord has not hinted at the appointment of any special person or class of persons with sole authority to break the bread; and "Brethren" dare not go beyond Him in this.

The Lord has put no limit to the frequency of the Supper, and "Brethren" therefore do not; but finding that apostolic practice points to at least every first day of the week (Acts xx. 7), they, by common consent, though without prescription, fall in with that custom; and as the Lord, by His apostle, intimated to the Corinthians the propriety of setting apart on the first day of the week their alms for the poor of the flock, so "Brethren" rejoice to avail themselves of the occasion of their assembling around the Lord's table to have fellowship in this.

The Lord has enjoined on His saints not to forsake the assembling of themselves together (Heb. x. 25); and as He has directed them to search the Scriptures, to make prayers and supplications, and to give thanks, and to teach and admonish one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs (1 Tim. ii. 1; Eph. vi. 19; Col. iii. 16), "Brethren" rejoice to assemble, as circumstances admit, for these various purposes.

As the Lord hath given "gifts" to His Church, when these appear in their midst, "Brethren" thankfully accept their ministry (Eph. iv. 11), and rejoice when, "having gifts differing according to the grace that is given;" he that hath prophecy, prophesieth according to the proportion of faith, or ministry waiteth on ministering, the teacher on teaching, the exhorter on exhortation, the ruler with diligence exercising God-given rule. (Rom. xii. 6-8.) They dare not prescribe

human rules and limits to the exercise of these gifts, beyond what the Lord has prescribed (1 Cor. xiv. 31; 1 Peter iv. 10, 11; 1 Cor. xiv. 26, 40), lest, in the face of the Divine warning in 1 Thess. v. 19, they should be found guilty of quenching the Spirit. When, therefore, the Lord is pleased to raise up among them an evangelist to preach the gospel, a teacher to instruct the church, or a pastor to tend the flock of God, they thankfully recognise their gifts and their full liberty, under God, to exercise them, as responsible to Him alone who bestowed them, and delight to have fellowship with them in their ministry, so long as they show themselves approved unto God.

As the Lord has placed authority for discipline in the hands of "two or three" gathered together in His name (Matt. xviii. 15-20), so "Brethren" seek to keep pure the "house of God" (1 Tim. iii. 15) by its godly exercise, putting out from among them a wicked person, a heretic and his abettor; but they welcome to *their places* at the Lord's table all who love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity, and walk uprightly in Him. They propose no creed nor confession of faith, nor other term of communion than that a person be a Christian, bring with him "the doctrine of Christ," and live a godly life.

While "Brethren" can thus challenge any to convict them of the setting up of aught that is not unmistakably scriptural, they can take the same position of boldness as to any charge of failing to act on anything that the Lord has ordained.

They are sorely blamed by some for not having among them an ordained ministry; but let any man show that God has, in the Word, made provision for the perpetuation of a humanly ordained ministry, and point out the persons divinely authorized to "ordain," and they will at once acquiesce, and accept the ministry as from God; till that be done, they dare not do so, under the penalty of immediately degenerating into a "sect:" they would be setting up something that God

has not set up, and so would be off God's ground. The first wounded conscience that could not accept this innovation, destitute of Divine warrant, would be entitled, nay, bound, to separate from them, and to adhere to God's simple ground, as the true exponent of God's Church.

This, then, is emphatically "broad" ground. Where no one thing is set up that a simple mind, in due subjection to the Word of God, could scruple to have fellowship with, and nothing left out that such a soul could, on the clear authority of the Word, require, the ground is the very *broadest* that is possible, consistently with Divine truth—a ground on which *every Christian* CAN meet, and every Christian *is bound* to meet, under penalty of the sin of schism.

If it can be shown that previous to "Brethren's" day any souls were found occupying this unsectarian ground, and "Brethren" did not enter into fellowship with them, then "Brethren" are schismatics; but if (as is notoriously true) there were none, then are "Brethren" the only true representatives or exhibition of the "body of Christ," and all Christians are under obligation before God to forsake their sects and "denominations," in order to meet with them on this ground—the very pathway marked out by the Spirit in 2 Tim. ii. 20–22, in anticipation of the ruin and confusion that has come in.

Your friend speaks of divisions among "Brethren." This is simply a misapprehension. A heretic arose among them some years ago. He was separated from fellowship. Others took part with him, and, though not all holding his doctrines, made themselves partakers of his evil deeds by fellowship.* They were also refused intercommunion. The number was large, but it was a simple act of discipline. Others have since taken part with these ("Brethren" under discipline),

* Did any one ever dream of making it an objection to the Apostolic Church, that there were some who went out? (1 John ii. 19.)

and among *them* divisions have, indeed, multiplied—a manifest token that God does not smile on them, but recognises the discipline of His assembly as He had promised. (Matt. xviii. 18.)

I pray God that both you and our brother may be led into the clear understanding of His Word, and into the path of godly obedience, and I remain,

Faithfully yours in Him,

RICHARD HOLDEN.
