

A LETTER TO A FRIEND

ON THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN

THE (SO CALLED)

Exclusive and Open Brethren.

By E.

MY DEAR——

HAVING heard that you are much exercised, and anxious to know the difference between the (so called) Exclusive and Open Brethren, I feel it to be my duty, as well as privilege as a Christian, to endeavour to help you in this matter.

I believe there are a great number of real, earnest and devoted souls amongst Open Brethren, who, like yourself, are totally ignorant of the question at issue, and cannot understand why we are separated. Souls who have real heart for Christ and desire His

glory; and who, if they were acquainted with the real nature of the question, and the consequent position of Open Brethren, would not hesitate one moment in leaving them, and seeking fellowship with the much maligned and misunderstood (so called) Exclusives.

Indeed, it would seem as though Open Brethren themselves had the same thought, or why their silence when the question is asked? or, at best, their evasion of it by their common though unsatisfactory replies, such as "Oh, it is only a petty quarrel between Mr. Darby and Mr. Newton and Mr. Muller," or, "Oh, the Exclusives exclude Christians from the Lord's table; while we are broad and liberal, and receive all who come. Moreover, if you go with them you dare not go anywhere else; while we can go anywhere we like," &c., &c.

Are answers such as these sufficient to satisfy intelligent and enquiring Christians? Surely not! Satan may, and does use them as dust to throw into the eyes of the saints to blind

them and keep them in that which dishonours Christ, and denies the truth of the Church as the body of Christ. But where the Spirit of God is working, and there is real exercise of soul and enquiry after the truth, nothing will satisfy but *facts* as to the origin of the separation, and reasons as to its continuance. Believing, then, that your desire is to know the *facts* of the case, I shall endeavour to help you, in as concise a way as possible, to the origin and cause of this sad and painful division, praying that the gracious Lord may use it to your complete deliverance, from that which is but a good and clever counterfeit, and therefore deceives and ensnares the more easily.

You know that some years ago God graciously recovered truths to us which had been lost and covered up by the dust of ages. Truths stolen away by Satan while men slept, and failed in their responsibility to hold what had been entrusted to them for their blessing.

Amongst the first of these recovered truths, was the privilege of believers to meet together and break bread on the first day of the week in remembrance of the Lord in death till He comes. (See Acts xx 7; and 1 Cor. xi. 23-26.) This necessarily brought together the godly ones from the systems around; souls dissatisfied with the existing state of things and pining for something better. Indeed, the Spirit had been moving hearts in various parts of the country, several having seen the truth, and when at last a stand was made by a few, the godly and exercised ones soon heard of it and found their way to fellowship with them, and thus the thing commenced.

Other truths then became prominent, amongst them being the Lord's coming; the Church as the body of Christ, united to Him in heaven; and the presence of the Holy Ghost upon earth, &c. The preaching of all this truth, added to the full, clear, delivering gospel, which Brethren, announced, and which God owned in a very marked way; all this,

combined with the unselfish, unworldly, and separate walk of the Brethren themselves, through grace, drew together the converts, as also numbers of Christians from the various systems, whose eyes were being opened by God to their privileges and blessings as members of the body of Christ. Thus we see that Brethren commenced on scriptural ground—separate from evil, and gathered to the name of the Lord Jesus Christ alone; and *practically one*; having intercommunion at the Lord's table (which is the outward expression of our unity, see 1 Cor. x. 17), though they were scattered in various localities; and all went on happily together.

As you might suppose, this practical expression of the truth of God could not long remain unchallenged by the enemy. His first attack was made through one of the leaders, in the form of *clericalism*, and other evils. The spirit of Diotrephes became so manifest (3 John 9, 10), that after repeated protests and remonstrances, and all proving unavailing, the Brethren were

forced to separate from this leader and those with him, in order to hold fast the truth and save themselves from the thing they had just given up as contrary to the word of God.

You will do well at this point to note God's 'within' and 'without' in (1 Cor. v. 12, 13) as making plain to you the position of those from whom we had been forced to separate on account of their acceptance of evil.

Supposing there were, say, seven different places where saints were gathered on divine principles; they would be the *true expression* of the body of Christ, though not the body itself; inasmuch as all Christians are members of it wherever they are found. Moreover, each gathering would be the *local expression* of the one body in each particular town. (1 Cor. xii. 22.) Thus there would be a practical expression of the truth "there is one body." (Eph. iv. 4.)

When therefore the evil was dealt with and separated from at Plymouth,

it consequently found its true place, 'without.'

Afterwards it was found that this leader, now outside, was undermining the very foundations of Christianity, by teaching the most blasphemous doctrines as to the Person of Christ. Doctrines, which if true, would deprive us of the Saviour, by making Him a sinner, and needing a saviour for Himself. Besides others which destroyed the nature and unity of the Church as the body of Christ.* Fellowship therefore with this leader was to be a partaker of his evil deeds. (See 2 John 9, 10, 11.)

With this sad and solemn disclosure came another, namely, that the followers of this leader were being received at the Lord's table at Bristol. So that while Brethren had put out, and were keeping out evil at one door, Satan was busily engaged bringing it in at another—the plea being, that those

* For fuller details, see pamphlets entitled "The whole case of Plymouth and Bethesda," and "Narrative of Facts," Broom.

whom they had received at Bristol did not hold the doctrines themselves. "No!" replied those who remonstrated with them, "if they did they would be heretics themselves; but they are the followers of this man and therefore (2 John 10, 11) is plain as to our course—they must not be received." Even a woman is told to close her door against them. However painful, faithfulness to Christ must come before love to Christians, especially when His Person is assailed. Neutrality in such a question there cannot be. (See Matt. xii. 30.) It is either *with*, or *against*.

This sad action on the part of Bethesda resulted at last in a meeting of the whole assembly there. A letter was drawn up by their leaders and read to the whole of the saints gathered; in which they declared their determination not to enter into the question of the heretical doctrines; and also to receive all who came seeking fellowship, so long as they did not maintain, uphold, or defend

the doctrines. This letter being read, a few godly Brethren objected to it, but they refused to hear them and thus forced them out. Ultimately it was assented to by the whole congregation by rising from their seats, on pain of losing their two pastors; and thus the whole congregation committed themselves to the sad neutrality of their leaders. *Purity* was sacrificed for the sake of *peace*. Nothing now remained but the sorrowful necessity of showing who was on the Lord's side. Bethesda was cut off. The evil was again judged and separated from, leaving it in Bethesda and those who had intercommunion with them; while those who were true to Christ and refused the evil and neutrality, were branded as bigots of the worst type. Indeed, nothing was too harsh or severe to say against them. From that time they have been termed Exclusives, whilst those who go with Bethesda are called Bethesda or Open Brethren.

But look it fairly in the face, what

do we exclude? Evil, and only evil! We are always glad to receive the members of Christ's body at His table, when free from fundamental bad doctrine or moral evil, either in themselves or their associations; but we must have a clean place for Christ.

Thus, then, the two meetings began. The Exclusives (so called) judging and separating from evil; Bethesda by the acceptance of it in their midst, and their avowed neutrality when Christ's Person was assailed.

Since then, numbers of souls have swelled their ranks ignorant of the question between us, and deceived by their professed correct church position and liberal views; and in so doing have identified themselves with all the evil in their midst, and put themselves in the same position as Bethesda itself. Can you therefore be surprised that we refuse communion to those who come from Open meetings till they have given up their position as wrong? Were we to receive them without this, it would be to give up

the whole truth, and again link ourselves with the evil and attach the name of Christ to that which denies Him. There being but *one body*, and we acting on that truth; to put out evil at one place and allow those in communion with us to let it in at another, would be to deny "the unity of the Spirit," in fact would be to sacrifice everything and allow Satan to score another victory.

I know it is affirmed that Bethesda Brethren do not hold such views as were then taught; nor would they knowingly receive those who do. Then why do they remain where they are and still keep up a second meeting? Why do they not confess their sorrow in forcing out those who could not be neutral when their Lord was blasphemed; and return to them in happy fellowship? Alas! alas! their affirmations are false to this day (not willingly so, perhaps, but ignorantly), inasmuch as individuals in their communion are known to hold the doctrines, and circulate the tracts of the heretical

teacher ; as well as others who hold equally false and wicked doctrines with regard to the punishment of sin. If it is right to refuse such persons in their meetings *now*, it was wrong in not refusing them at the *first* ; and doubly wrong in not now returning to those who did refuse them.

But further, it will be seen on examination that the principles upon which Open Brethren are gathered are not divine. They are not gathered on the principle of “one body, and one spirit ;” they are independent meetings. One gathering has nothing to do with another ; although we are told to “endeavour to *keep* the unity of the Spirit in the uniting bond of peace” on the ground that “there is one body.” (Eph. iv. 3, 4.) Therefore, instead of giving a practical expression to the truth of what God has made them (*i.e. members of one body*)—they make a number of small independent meetings to add to the already large number in Christendom, only with this difference, instead of having a minister

over them, they have open ministry and breaking of bread. Besides, the very constitution of their meetings precludes the exercise of godly discipline. Hence a man put out at one of their meetings for evil, can go off to another town, and only needs to present himself as a Christian to be received there.

Indeed, to get any discipline at all, they must give up their professed liberal ground of receiving *all* Christians simply because they are such.

Suppose a board over the door of their meeting rooms with the announcement "We receive all Christians, because they are washed in the blood of the Lamb," (and, remember, this *is* the ground they take, therefore I call your special attention to it). Then no matter what the persons may do, or what bad doctrines they may hold, they cannot be refused (or put away, if *in*), because they take the ground of being Christians, and thus answer to the board at the door. Where is godly discipline there ?

I know their activity in gospel work is often taken as proof of their being right; but we must not confound the claims of Christ with the need of sinners; nor God's sovereignty with our responsibility. Our path is clearly defined in 2 Tim. ii. 19-22, and we must not forget that, "to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams." (1 Sam. xv. 22.)

But I will not pursue this further, only to remark, that, having separated from Bethesda because they accepted evil in their midst; were they to put it all out to-morrow, their position would remain unaltered until they came back to us as at the first. (Jer. xv. 19; 2 Tim. ii. 22.)

To illustrate what I mean, suppose a train moving along on the rails, in the hinder carriages of which are a few persons of questionable character. And through the unwillingness of the rest of the occupants of those carriages to dispense with such company, the link which attaches them to the rest of the train is taken off,

and their carriages run off the rails. Now suppose that after a time they refuse to allow those questionable persons to stay any longer inside with them; and turn them out. Then they turn round to those who are in the carriages *on the line*, and say, "Now we are as right as you are; therefore you must come with us as though nothing had happened." "No," the others would reply, "you are not. We are glad you have put out the persons we objected to, but for you to be *right* you must return to us (for you are off the rails) and put the link on again as at the first, for there cannot be two trains." I am sure all godly souls who only desire the truth must see this. The point of departure must be returned to, to be right.

The ground remains the same, and our responsibility is to *express* that *fact* till He comes and receives us to Himself, and manifests us to the world as one. (John xvii. 23.) Just look how the Lord prays for the oneness

in that chapter (verses 11, 22, 23; and xi. 52;) besides numbers of other scriptures.

To act upon the truth will entail the breaking of many ties and links, which you will find painful work; and Satan will try to put Christians before Christ; and hold up this and the other good and devoted Christian whom God uses and blesses, in proof of their being right. Let not the Lord's sovereign goodness blind you to the claims of His word. Remember the *obedience is yours*—the *consequences His*. And His "well done" up there will sound sweeter than the commendations of Christians down here.

May the Lord Himself graciously guide your feet into the way of peace—into "the old paths—the good way, where you can find rest for your soul." See **Jer. vi.** 16.

Affectionately yours,
 in Christ,
 E.