


WHAT IS THE

Present Position

OF SO-CALLED

“OPEN BRETHREN”?



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POSITION OF SO-CALLED "OPEN BRETHREN" ?

IT is with unfeigned sorrow and humiliation that I take in hand to answer such a question. Only the most convincing proof of the need that exists compels me. And indeed I have sought escape from it too long, but the Lord has pressed it upon me, so that I dare not withstand Him in it. May He, then, keep heart and pen, and minister true blessing to His people by the story of what is our common shame.

I shall but very briefly state the first cause of the division, forty years ago, in the words of another,—Mr. J. G. Deck,—who went through the whole :—

"1. A gifted teacher, who, by his own confession, had, while among and professedly one of those called 'Brethren,' labored to subvert those principles of truth which they believed that the Lord had in His mercy taught them to gather upon in these last days, was discovered to have been bringing in a doctrine concerning our Lord and Master which would have rendered it necessary for Himself, had it been true, to have had a Saviour, and made Him incapable of saving others."

"2. A testimony was raised against his fearful errors by many brethren—Harris, Darby, J. Code, myself, and many others; and, more remarkable still, by several of those who had been his colleagues in diffusing his errors, whose printed confessions show the deep sense they had of their terrible nature after their eyes had been opened by the Lord's mercy. See 'Trotter's Whole Case of Bethesda,'—'Is there not a Cause?'—'Bethesda Fellowship.'—and their printed confessions.

"3. This leader himself, too, published an acknowledgment of his errors *in part*; while he still, as you will see by G. Muller's testimony in the letter I have published in my preface,* retained substantially errors that touched the very founda-

"*This letter, more than once referred to by Mr. Deck, has been supplied from his former publication:—

'Bristol, December 12, 1848.

'MY DEAR BROTHER,—

'I thank you for the loan of the three letters which I return. I have never written to you on the subject of Mr. N.'s fearful errors, on account of the greatest pressure of work; but as your letter calls for it, I just desire to tell you, dear brother, that not only have my eyes been opened long to the fearful errors contained in those two tracts, but I have stated twice before the assembled Church—in June and the beginning of July—this my judgment, as also before the laboring brethren the early part of June.

'My hope, however, was that poor Mr. N. might recover himself out of the snare of the devil, as he had confessed the fearful error concerning the federal headship of Adam, and had also withdrawn those two fearfully erroneous tracts for reconsideration. When, however, the reconsideration came out, and I found that, notwithstanding all the filing and polishing with regard to expressions, this last tract was nothing but a defence of those two former ones, I felt it my duty to change my way of acting, and at full length did I expose, many weeks ago, those fearful errors which touch the foundations of our holy faith. And since then, I have, perhaps ten times or more, before the assembled Church, denounced in the strongest terms these fearful errors; and not only I have done so, but eight or ten leading brethren besides. I only add that Mr. N.'s errors have few more decided opposers than myself, and that Mr. N.'s friends are not a little displeased with me.

'Ever yours affectionately in our Lord,

'TO JAMES G. DECK.'

'G. MULLER.'"

tions of the faith. No testimony could therefore be given more decisive as to the nature and amount of the evil.

"4. Many of his followers, meeting at Compton Street, separated from him, with the brethren who had confessed and abjured the heresy; but a large party still adhered to him, and remained in fellowship with him, though they, at the same time, put forth a declaration that they did not hold his doctrines.

"5. The question then arose as to how the Lord, in whose name they met, would have those who composed that assembly dealt with. Most of the leading brethren and assemblies judged that those who had fellowship with an evil doer or teacher, especially with one who subverted the doctrine of Christ, were 'partakers of his evil deeds' (2 Jno. 7-11), and could not be received until they had renounced his fellowship; that if the house of a lady was to be shut against a seducer, much more ought the house of the living God.

"6. Had it been a case of moral, social evil, which would have brought disgrace upon them before the world, there would have been no hesitation or difficulty. But ought not any thing that affected the person or glory of Christ to have awakened the zeal and indignation of all our hearts, as did those fearful errors which confessedly 'touch the foundations of our holy faith'? (G. Muller's letter.) Ought not those who profess to be *pure* from the errors to purge themselves from the vessels of dishonor that contain and spread them? (2 Tim. ii. 16, 21.) If saying that 'the resurrection was passed already' subverted the faith of some, ought there to have been a question as to how the disciples and adherents of such a teacher should have been dealt with?

"7. But, alas! Bethesda, in spite of all this testimony against these doctrines, and the warnings and entreaties and remonstrances of brethren within and without,—while they examined persons coming from Compton Street, received those who professed to be free from the false doctrines,

though still continuing in fellowship with the teacher of them.

“8. The result was that many faithful brethren left Bethesda rather than sanction so unfaithful a position. Ten of the leaders of Bethesda drew up a document popularly known as ‘The letter of the Ten,’ justifying the course they had pursued, and laying down as a principle of discipline that guided them in their action, that they were *not warranted to reject those who came from under the teaching of an author fundamentally heretical, until they were satisfied that they had imbibed views subversive of fundamental truth.*

“9. This led to the painful divisions that have taken place throughout the world, and which are now threatening us on every side. How can brethren thus forced to separate from Bethesda possibly with a pure conscience toward God confess that they have sinned against the Lord for refusing fellowship with those who they solemnly believe dishonored Him? Nor can they, for the sake of an unholy and hollow peace, in these days of latitudinarian indifference to the truth, till there has been confession of the past, have fellowship with assemblies of such as remain *knowingly* in connection with them.”

Objection is still made to this statement of Bethesda's principles, although the Letter of the Ten speaks for itself. But it is affirmed that the case to which it refers was exceptional, and that (in the language of one of the very “Ten,” shortly afterward,) “In all ordinary cases, and as a general rule of action, persons coming from a known heretical teacher would not be received among us, except on the understanding that they had renounced his errors, and relinquished the body amongst whom the false doctrine was taught and maintained.” “This had been the course pursued for the sixteen years before the letter was written,” adds

Mr. Groves, from whose book I extract this, "and has been the course pursued ever since."

This will be judged fully in the light of all that has since come out. The "uncertainty and ambiguity" of the views of the writer referred to are given by Mr. G. as the ground of this exceptional dealing. Unfortunately, the Letter of the Ten itself gives a very different account of the matter. True, it does speak of the ambiguity, and of the different conclusions come to as to the actual amount of error contained in the writings in question; but it adds,—

"Even supposing that those who inquired into the matter had come to the same conclusion touching the amount of positive error therein contained, this would not have guided us in our decision respecting individuals coming from Plymouth. For, supposing the author of the tracts were fundamentally heretical, this would not warrant us in rejecting those who come from under his teaching, until we were satisfied that they had understood and imbibed views essentially subversive of foundation-truth."

Now for real ignorance we would be bound to make exception; but when leprosy was suspected in any one in Israel, was he allowed to retain his place in the camp until he could be proved clean? or was he not shut up twice seven days, if need be? Bethesda would in such a case *receive* suspected lepers, and not shut them up. But not only so, there is no leprosy, they argue, until one has not only "understood," but "*imbibed*" the false doctrine.

Here is plainly the root or the whole matter. *Association with known evil does not defile a person or assembly*; this is the doctrine of the Letter of the Ten at least,

and we shall see that it is the doctrine of Bethesda and of those who go on in association with her. The time came when the views under discussion could no longer be considered doubtful. "In July, 1848,"—I quote still from Mr. Groves,—“another tract of Mr. Newton’s had appeared, in which the erroneous statements of the tracts had been reproduced, *only in a somewhat modified form*”—does that mean that they were really worse before? “This removed much of the uncertainty of the views held by Mr. Newton.” And now Bethesda as a body judged the doctrines. What was the decision when now these were admitted to be fundamentally false? It was this: “That no one *defending, maintaining, or upholding* Mr. Newton’s views or tracts should be received into communion.”

Notice, the matter of *association* with the evil had been long pressed upon them. This was the main point, indeed, as all must acknowledge. Yet they no more touch this now than before. So long as one has not “*imbibed*” the falsehood, the *going with it* is considered nothing. “Evil communications” do not—for Bethesda—“corrupt good manners.” One who receives him who “bringeth not the doctrine of Christ” is yet *not* “a partaker of his evil deed.” Yet in ordinary matters the consciences of men give universally a truer judgment.

The principles thus enunciated by Bethesda have been far and wide maintained. The fellowship of brethren as hitherto enjoyed was broken up, and those in association with her necessarily accepted her position. The meeting at Bristol was not a mere isolated example of indifference to Christ’s glory. “We con-

sider ourselves," they say, "particularly associated with those who meet, as we do, simply in the name of the Lord Jesus." Thus the "open brethren" so called, began. As a body they had their origin in resistance to holy discipline, and their "openness" meant a door open to receive those in fellowship with false doctrine, so long as it could not be *proved* of these that they had imbibed the false doctrine itself.

And now comes a serious question: *can* false doctrine be shut out after this fashion? Where those are received who are manifestly indifferent to it, can it be supposed that freedom from the evil itself can be maintained? Nor is this all; for where fundamental falsehood is held, the power of Satan in it will be shown in the spirit of dissimulation and falsehood always working in those under it. Where truth is lost, methods are not true. Satan is a liar, and the father of it. Nothing but self-judgment can deliver us from these wiles. Give, then, an open door to those not self-judged, not separate from the active agents of his mischief, what will be the result?

Certain it is that when, twenty-five years since, I first came into fellowship with brethren, the gatherings in America, in connection with Bethesda, not only received those holding Newton's doctrine, but every where among them the heresy of annihilation had found admittance. This is well known by those whose memories can reach back so far. And for years after it remained so. A change in this respect, thank God, has come, as in many others; but of this I shall have to speak further on.

We have now to consider the objection that the

letter of the Ten had been *withdrawn*. "Withdrawn" is the strongest word that those who plead this can use in this connection. I never heard, at least, of one who ventured to say "*judged*." Yet if the principles were evil, and have led to evil, why not "judged"? if not evil, why should the letter be "withdrawn"?

But withdrawn it never had been. A letter of Mr. Muller's is quoted by Mr. Groves for this, in which he says: "The paper to which you refer was never intended to be more than a mere statement of facts, and explanation of reasons for pursuing the course which the laboring brethren thought to be right at that time, under the peculiar circumstances of the case. It is to be regarded as having *passed away* with the occasion which gave rise to it."

It is evident that this is no withdrawal, much less judgment, of the letter. Mr. M—— writes in 1866; but nine years before, Mr. Craik, his fellow-laborer, expressly denies it to have been withdrawn. He says, "The judgment expressed in the 'Letter' had never been repudiated, so far as I am aware, by any of us; and I believe that if we were at the present moment to be placed in such circumstances as those in which we then found ourselves, most of us might probably come to the same judgment as is expressed in the document above referred to. . . . To say that the Letter of the Ten had been withdrawn would be incorrect in expression, and fitted to mislead in its effect."

And thus the matter has ever since remained. It is contended, however, that the principles of the letter are not now in fact accepted by Bethesda. This is not true, as we have ample witness. In a letter to Mr. Deck, in

1872, Mr. Muller gives distinct expression to the faith and practice of Bethesda in respect to this point :—

"All who love the Lord Jesus, and are fundamentally sound in the faith, we receive, *though they may not be able*, as we could wish, to *forsake certain persons or views or systems*. In this way we purpose to persevere, because we consider it God's order. (Rom. xv. 7.)

"Again, we have received persons, these sixteen years, who come from persons preaching *damnable heresies*; but we examined them, and as we found them sound or not in foundation truths, so they were received or rejected."

This brings us on fifteen years beyond the date of Mr. Craik's letter, and covers all the interval. But we are still sixteen years from the present time. Over eleven years more pass, and we have another testimony, this time from Mr. Wright, Mr. Muller's son-in-law. I print it entire, the italics being as they appear in the original letter :—

"New Orphan Houses, Ashley Down, Bristol,

"DEAR SIR :—

"19th December, 1883.

"In reply to your inquiry, the ground on which we receive to the Lord's table is, soundness in the faith, and consistency of life of the *individual* believer. We should not refuse to receive one who we had reason to believe was personally sound in the faith and consistent in life *merely* because he or she was in fellowship with a body of Christians who would allow Mr. Newton to minister among them; just on the same principle that we should not refuse a person *equally sound* in the faith and consistent in life simply because he or she came from a body of Christians amongst whom the late Mr. J. N. Darby had ministered, though on account of the much more *recent* unsound teaching of the *latter*, we might well feel, a priori, greater hesitation.

"I am, faithfully yours,

"JAMES WRIGHT."

Here the reference to Mr. Darby makes the purport of the letter quite conclusive. As to Mr. Newton, although never having publicly confessed his dreadful error, it might be argued that he had given it up, if his published writings were to be the test of this. But in the case of Mr. Darby no giving up of any views of his could be similarly alleged, and moreover, according to Mr. Groves, this unsound teaching of his received "open endorsement by the leaders of his party." Thus those in fellowship with him are more fully identified with the evil, if evil there be, than could ever be said of those with Mr. Newton. The case, then, is clear, and Bethesda is, alas! thoroughly consistent throughout. Open and deliberate association with evil does not, for her, defile. He who receives and recognizes the false teacher—damnable heresies though he teach, as Mr. Muller declares,—is *not* "partaker of his evil deeds."

I may add that Mr. Wright has been by more than one appealed to with regard to this letter. He has only to say—what is however significant enough in connection with what we may see shortly—that the publication of it was a *breach of confidence* on the part of the one to whom it was addressed! Think of the principles upon which Bethesda acts being put forth under a virtual pledge of secrecy, as a *private communication!* I shall not comment further upon this: for every true soul, it needs not.

Outside of Bethesda itself, as I have before said, the same principles have prevailed—and necessarily so,—among those in fellowship with her: Mr. Oliphant's testimony, given in 1865, and republished in 1871, is as follows:—

"The question I asked [of Lord Congleton] was the following:—

"'Would persons *coming from Bethesda* (Bristol), or those who go and hear Mr. N——, be allowed to sit down at the Lord's table with the simple statement that they believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, without reference to their walk or *where they came from?*'

"The answer that I received was as follows:—

"'Every dear child of God that is walking consistently with such a profession, *come he from whatever quarter he may, would be received.*'

"Now here I find that the ground taken by Bethesda in 1848 is fully maintained, and professed in unmistakable terms in 1864.

"I may state here from my own personal knowledge, that persons in fellowship with Mr. N—— were allowed to break bread at meetings in London in fellowship with Bethesda as late as last year, and that persons who held Mr. N——'s doctrines were in the habit of breaking bread at Welbeck Street only three years ago, whenever Mr. N—— was out of town and his chapel was closed.

"I believe that I have now given you the true facts of the case up to the present time, and this brings me to the real question at issue in 1848, and to the question still at issue in 1865, and that question is 'In what manner does evil, either moral or doctrinal, which arises and is suffered to remain unjudged in the midst of a gathering of Christians, affect the Christians so gathered collectively and individually?'

"Now the answer published, and I believe generally given by brethren of the Bethesda party is the following: 'Evil cannot defile the assembly of God, but only those who accept it.'

"In a tract published by Mr. Yapp, entitled, 'The Church of God according to Scripture,' I find the following statement: 'Meetings of believers cannot be defiled by the allowance of false teaching in them:' and again, 'The Corinthians, in fail-

ing to judge the wicked person, were guilty of disobedience and indifference to sin, but were still *unleavened*.'

"From another tract, entitled, 'A Drop of Oil on Troubled Waters; or, Remarks on the Fellowship and Mutual Responsibility of the Churches of the New Testament,' I take the following extract: 'That no individual in any Church was held responsible for evil existing in it, either doctrinal or practical, simply because he was one of the worshipers.'

"Thus we have *assembly responsibility* and *assembly defilement* entirely denied."

It is plain from this testimony how the allowance of association with evil ended—necessarily ended—in allowing the evil itself. And although with the lapse of time, and after repeated exposure, we find more caution exercised on the part of some, and principles may be kept for private communication, yet the real facts come out all through. Compare Mr. Craik's statements as to the "general rule" of Bethesda's action, with Mr. Muller's letter to Mr. Deck also, for a proof of the advance in evil from 1849 to 1856. And compare Mr. Groves' quotation of Mr. Craik for his purpose in the former case with his express advocacy of the reception of those associated with evil on pp. 51-53 of the same book.* Of this, I need give but a few sentences from p. 52:—

"One question, however, we will ask of those who think they gather their ideas of discipline from the Jewish ritual in regard to the leper,—Where do they find that he who touched the unclean was ever ranked with the leper himself? . . . There was no command to treat the one who touched the unclean as the unclean one himself. . . . Surely this savors very little of an indiscriminate discipline, which would treat

*"Darbyism;" by H. Groves, third edition.

the man who held intercourse with a leper as if he were a leper himself."

Let me ask Mr. Groves, on the other hand, Does he consider *touching* the unclean a type of deliberate association with evil? But the object of his plea is plain, and it is in accordance with it that, while he appeals on p. 51 to the second epistle of John,—“It meets the man ‘who *brings not the doctrine of Christ,*’ and says, ‘Receive him not into your house, nor bid him God speed;’”—he breaks off sharply there, and has not a word about the treatment of one who, in bidding him Godspeed, becomes “partaker of his evil deeds.”

I have before me a tract published not long since in Dublin, by an anonymous writer, but issued from their well-known office of publication in D'Olier street,* and in it I find the same principles maintained. In answer to the question, “Who should be received?” he replies “Believers in Christ, *simply as such*” “Now some of our brethren commit the mistake of pressing other tests, as, ‘What think ye of B——?’ or, ‘What think ye of —— Street?’ thus adding to the only true test of faith.” “It is clear and plain that the ‘wicked person,’ and the teacher or holder of false doctrine, should be put away; or, on the other hand, not received. The wicked person in Corinth had by his sin forfeited his place of fellowship with saints; had indeed forfeited all claim to be *considered in the circle of life*, and had therefore to be put away from those who were assembled to the name of Christ, on the ground of their having life. It was not until he had proved by

* “Terms of Christian Fellowship.”

a godly repentance that he was in that circle of life that he was restored to the assembly of living members."

Here, association with evil is omitted as matter of assembly-judgment, and by implication denied. You can refuse for nothing which does not cause a question as to the existence of life in the person refused.

I leave here the consideration of the principles which have thus characterized Bethesda and her circle of fellowship, and turn to the question of the "open brethren," as found in America. Here it is right to own how great a change is manifest of late years among them since the advent of many, especially from Scotland. The annihilationism which formerly disfigured their meetings has been done away; nor would the Newtonianism, still here and there to be found, be suffered (we may well believe) among them. Their ranks, mainly recruited and increased by zealous evangelism, contain numbers of those who not only are ignorant of the origin of the body to which they belong, but also of any evil among themselves,—at least permitted. The independency of meetings also, formerly maintained, has given place to acceptance of responsibility with regard to the condition of those connected with them elsewhere. All this presents features which are full of encouragement. On the other hand, as they draw nearer to the position they have long refused, there has naturally arisen a certain perplexity on the part of many among us who ask, Do the former lines of separation still exist? and of many absolutely ignorant of any difference at all.

The climax was reached only last year, when at a

meeting, in Canada, of many of their laborers, they gave to a brother from among ourselves who visited them a written statement, that they refused the principles of the Letter of the Ten, which had just been read to them, and recognized fully that those were to be separated from who deliberately accepted association with false teaching!

The brother in question, delighted with this assurance, believed, naturally enough, that there was no further barrier to fellowship. A meeting soon after took place in New York, in which a number on both sides came together to ascertain where we stood with regard to these things.

I do not intend to give any detailed account of the meeting, but only briefly the result. They adhered to their statement of their refusal of the principles of the Letter of the Ten; one of the most prominent stating, to our astonishment, that he had never known what they were, until the Letter was read to them at the Canada meeting. We asked, "How could that be?" and were answered, he had no time to occupy himself with such things. The brother in question had been for years preaching and teaching in connection with open brethren, holding a place perhaps inferior to none in general estimation. Yet he had never yet faced the facts and principles which affected his own position, and that of the many he was leading to accept it with him!

This certainly was not encouraging. Nor did he confess any wrong in it, but justified it fully. However, they refused these principles. They were the principles of Bethesda: did they refuse Bethesda? No,

they acknowledged, they were in full fellowship with Bethesda! But the letter had been withdrawn in England,—the old story, easily shown to be contrary to the truth. But Bethesda's principles were changed! We produced Wright's letter: they denied it meant reception *at the Lord's table*; it meant reception *as Christians*,—whatever that might be. Yet the very words of the letter were, "The ground on which we receive *to the Lord's table*." Still, they would not have it. Finally, it was suggested on our part that they could write to Mr. Wright, and get (if that could be,) a plainer statement. *They have never got it from that day to this.*

It is evident that our consciences could not be satisfied with a mere condemnation of that with which they still went on, hand in hand. Many contradictory assertions have been made, no doubt, as to Bethesda's purity. Alas! contradiction in this whole matter, from first to last, is nothing new. The one busiest in putting forth these actually asserted, in Brockville, Canada,—he being a leader among them at the New York meeting, in which it had been read and discussed,—that Mr. Wright's letter had nothing to do with false teachers, but only with reception from orthodox denominations: this is the statement of one who had left us for their fellowship in that place.

I have heard lately, again, that they refuse the principles of Mr. Wright's letter. But I have not heard of any refusal of the link of connection with Bethesda, whose principles they are, or with the many gatherings who, with Bethesda, have a door open for unfaithfulness to Christ, their Lord and ours. Thus they do but condemn themselves in that which they allow. I have

no desire to reproach them with it, but are there not among them many true hearts (surely there are!) who will not suffer matter for so grave a reproach to come to their hearing without clearing themselves from it?

A recent book by Mr. E. K. Groves, brother of the author of "Darbyism," before referred to,—a book approved, he tells us, by leading brethren in Bethesda, and designed to commend her principles to Christians at large,—while cautious enough in admitting such things as we have seen acknowledged by Messrs. Muller and Wright, reveals, nevertheless, with perfect clearness the state of matters among them. He very plainly gives us to know that any stranger, perfectly unknown to any one there, can send in his name to them as desiring fellowship and break bread on his own responsibility; while a letter from any church or minister of whom no evil is *known*, admits the holder to acknowledged place among them. People have been breaking bread for some time in the meeting who were quite unknown to any body there!

Let it not be imagined that in thus contending for the necessity of separation from those holding or acting upon these unholy principles, I am thereby justifying the principles or practices of those who have sought to maintain separation from them. This is of course another question. But *in this separation* they were right. Doubtless in dealing with a serious evil, there may have been oftentimes exhibited a harshness which has repelled those whom another spirit would have won out of alliance with it. Neither in this nor in any similar case is it to be supposed that all wrong-doing is upon one side. Of late, too, it can only be sorrowfully

owned, what the recent wide division has made quite apparent, that there has been growing up among us a clerical spirit, and a high ecclesiasticism, which have given just ground of exception and alarm. The power of the assembly has been pressed in a way truly Romish, and obedience to it has been forced so as to tyrannize over the conscience, and give it another master than the One who alone is that. These things have been a stumbling-block to many. They were, however, never principles generally accepted, but a parasitic after-growth, which, in God's goodness, He has exposed, and from which He has delivered us. Nor can we give assurance to any that there are no roots of this or any other evils remaining among us, which may show themselves if the Lord leave us here but a little while. Our only trust as to this can be in the mercy and faithfulness of Him who is Head of the body and Lord of all. Conflict with evil we shall have to maintain to the very last, and its most serious forms are not without, but within, that which should be for God on earth.

On the other hand let it not be supposed that I have made the most of the evil with which the "open" brethren are assuredly connected. I have confined myself strictly to the fundamental point; and as to this, have brought as witnesses those whose truthfulness they cannot call in question. It is Bethesda who accuses herself, who convicts herself. Are there not many who have been in unconscious association with this evil hitherto who will now refuse it as infidelity to Christ and to His truth, with just abhorrence? Surely there are many who will at once refuse it.

Beloved brethren, it is not a question of forty years

ago, merely, but a question of *to-day*. I appeal to those who know their Lord and Master, and give thanks at the remembrance of His holiness: Can you believe that to maintain fellowship, as Mr. Muller asserts Bethesda does, with those who can associate themselves consciously with "*damnable heresies*," is to glorify Him? If so, profess it openly, and let us know where you are. But if you shudder at such a thought, then by this testimony from your own side, not from ours, be assured, cover it as you may, refuse to believe it as you may, in the sight of the Holy and the True, the stain and weight of this unrepented sin rest on you, till by true repentance, and forsaking this unholy alliance, you deliver your souls! You refuse the principles? It is well. *Refuse, then, the practice.* "Come out from among them and be separate, and touch not the unclean thing, and I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be My sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty."

F. W. Grant.

March, 1888.

