

THE GREATEST OF THESE

THOUGHTS ON CHURCH UNITY AND FELLOWSHIP
AS EXPRESSIONS OF THE LOVE OF GOD

REVISED AND ENLARGED EDITION

BY

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“And now abideth faith, hope, love, these three ;
but the greatest of these is love.”

I COR. xiii. 13

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Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity ! It is like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron's beard : that went down to the skirts of his garments ; as the dew of Hermon, and as the dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion : for there the Lord commanded the blessing, even life for evermore.

PSA. cxxxiii.

PREFACE

Two or three years ago I issued privately a pamphlet dealing with the principles and practice of Exclusivism, the difficulties incidental thereto, and the sorrows growing out of it; and ventured to lay before brethren of the Exclusive community what seemed to be a Scriptural solution of the difficulties, and a sure means of guarding against a recurrence of the sorrows. A firm of Christian publishers, to whom the pamphlet was shown, thought that the expository portions of it, as distinguished from the more distinctly personal and controversial portions, might have a permanent value, and offered to publish those portions as a separate pamphlet. I was reluctant to agree to this, however, because a certain section of this expository matter was of a somewhat tentative character, and I felt, to use the expression of another, that it is "a solemn thing for a servant of Christ to write on subjects which may stamp a certain character on the state of the Church, or, at least, act on the hearts and conduct of God's children" (*Collected Writings of J. N. Darby*, Vol. I. p. 373).

I am glad now that I declined the offer; for though I still feel that the line taken in the pamphlet was in the main Scriptural, I believe that its publication would have been premature. In the first place, the light which had come to me was only partial, so that I was not fully delivered from the system; in the second place, my outlook was too narrow, and the course advocated in the pamphlet really supposed the correctness of that outlook. The course might have been right had there been (as was

then my thought) no unity of Christian fellowship on Scriptural lines outside my limited range of vision. But the thought was wrong, and obviously there is no profit in offering one's arm to a fellow-traveller who has already found a comfortable seat inside the coach.

The present production is both an abridgement and extension of the original essay. Autobiographical details have been eliminated, and a new section dealing with Unity has been added. Matters merely personal seldom have an abiding value, save as they may illustrate the ways of God in training and discipline. On the other hand, any new light, or even presentation of old truths from a new angle of vision, may be of service; and it is hoped that something of this character will be found in the accompanying pages.

The ground taken by the writer in his enquiry is what is known as Open ground, as distinguished from Close or Exclusive ground—which, indeed, is the direct anti-thesis of the former. To break with Exclusivism after an association, more or less intimate, of forty years is no light matter, however much cause for thankfulness the fact may carry: nor have I any sentiment to spare upon the system: yet the thought of severed links with brethren loved and long-known is distressing enough; and it was by way of avoiding this (for I am a weakling in matters of the heart) that I procrastinated and hung back as long as I dared, hoping against hope that some miraculous eleventh-hour accession of new light would lead to a reversal of judgment.

But God does not work miracles to save His people from a path of duty. Decision had to be made; and, by divine help, the step was at last taken. With that I found myself—suddenly—almost in spite of myself—outside. I had long been outside in so far as external fellowship was concerned (the story is a sad one, and I am trying to forget it), but most of that time my face had been towards the company, awaiting my recall with affectionate solicitude and expectation. Now I was outside indeed; not as a victim of irresponsible violence

merely, but of my own volition; outside as to personal decision and desire. As I looked around me I realised that I was breathing a freer air; albeit, the environment seemed new and strange. The circle of known friends was closed against me, and, in a sense, I was face to face with the unknown. How many beloved children of God have travelled the same road, to find themselves at last at the same bleak halting-place!

These, then, very briefly, are the psychological features which marked the crisis-moments of my deliverance from Exclusivism. The steps which led up to them may be traced in the following pages; and if, in the goodness of God, the exposition here attempted shall help some troubled soul into clearer light, or bring the cheer of greater certitude to any who have already found the path of liberty, my labour will not have been in vain.

We are in the hands of a Saviour God, Whose grace it is that teaches and delivers; and the final purpose of that grace is that we may be presented "faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy" (Jude 24). There will be difficulties and setbacks in the pathway—estrangements even, that may cut us to the quick—but the end is assured. "The glory shines before us." "Who giveth grace, ere long will glory give": and this is the soul's encouragement in all times of our tribulation. "The Lord God is a sun and shield: the Lord will give grace and glory: no good thing will He withhold from them that walk uprightly" (Psa. lxxxiv. 4). Such is the Divine purpose. Grace every step of the way and glory at the close. What wonder that the Psalmist adds, "O Lord of Hosts, blessed is the man that trusteth in Thee" (v. 12)?

River of grace, flow on!
From Love's bright fountain fed:
Barren and thirsty is the land
Our pilgrim feet must tread.

Rough is the way and drear,
And hearts a-weary grow;
But heaviness is tuned to praise
Where thy sweet waters flow.

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Where pitfalls are, and lures
Of tangled bush and thorn,
Thy silvery track a pathway points
To pastures fair as morn.

And there the traveller drinks
New love-draughts by the stream,
And, feeding on the Bread of God,
Pursues the happy theme.

And there new strength is given,
And light where clouds were grey ;
And holy purpose to endure
From strenuous day to day.

River of God, flow on!
To Love's full ocean flow!
Till glory crowns the fragrant tale
Of grace fulfilled below.

A. E. K.

THE GREATEST OF THESE

WERE I asked what marks more than anything else the saints of God to-day, I should answer—Perplexity. Not perplexity about the foundations of the Faith, though, alas! even these are obscure in many souls; not perplexity about service, for this is to the Lord alone, and although He tests the endurance of His saints He never withholds His light from those who seek it. I refer to perplexity on the subject of Christian fellowship; the walk of the individual believer with the company: with which also are closely connected the subjects of Church unity and government and the breaking of bread.

Paradoxical as the statement may appear, this perplexity finds its deepest expression among those to whom, as I believe, has been vouchsafed the clearest light on those questions—I mean, of course, the various sections of Brethren comprised within that wide circle which embraces every company from Open Brethren on the one hand to Exclusive Brethren on the other.

My appeal is chiefly to these, as having been more definitely the subjects of exercise; though, indeed, it concerns quite as intimately the whole Church of God; and realising as I do the preciousness of fellowship, and the desire that exists with many to promote on lines of true holiness a wider expression of that fellowship than is at present possible; and having, as I humbly believe, been given to see a little light on this important and vexed question, I make no apology for addressing my brethren at large in this volume.

What I do see, I see clearly; but others with wider experience and more light may be led to communicate what the Lord has given them; and so the little may grow to more; and, like the cloud no bigger than a man's hand, seen by the prophet's servant, which was the sign of an abundance of rain, these few remarks may, by the fostering care of others, lead to an abundance of blessing. All who truly love the Lord and believe in the imminence of His coming will surely not withhold their prayerful consideration from a matter of such practical and intimate importance.

As might be expected, the Lord's way is a simple way: the solution is also, I believe, a simple solution. The difficulties are not in God's Word, but in the glosses which man for various reasons has put thereon. Instead of the conflicting claims of jarring systems, involving the necessity of reading multitudinous pamphlets, or listening to interminable and contradictory explanations of events that happened five, ten, twenty, it may be even eighty years ago, and which, after all, are only man's accounts of what took place—instead of this there is a plain, simple path, which, while opening up possibilities of the widest fellowship with all who are calling upon the Lord out of a pure heart, offers a barred door to every form of ecclesiastical assumption on the one hand and to association with evil in doctrine or practice on the other.

In dealing with this question I shall need to touch some controversial matters, and specially to examine certain tenets of a not unimportant section of the Church of God, namely, the Exclusive or Close Brethren; with whom, as I have intimated in the Preface, though I once agreed, I now have important grounds of difference. With most matters relating to doctrine I am still at one with them, and value deeply that rich bequest of gracious ministry which has come down to us in the writings of J. N. Darby, G. V. Wigram, J. G. Bellett, J. B. Stoney and others. It is on the twin questions of Fellowship and Church Unity that I differ from them: and these, I need hardly say, are matters of very real importance.

For the convenience of treating the controversial part of the subject I have chosen for examination two pamphlets; a comparatively recent tract by C. A. C., in which the Exclusivist standpoint as to Fellowship and Discipline is discussed; and a much earlier pamphlet by J. N. D., which deals with Christian Unity.

The writer of the first pamphlet stands for much that is best and most attractive in the system to which he belongs, and the pamphlet itself exemplifies in a way that affects the heart the practical godliness which works by love. In selecting his essay from others, therefore, the reason is not that I have found it more open to criticism, but because it is, in my opinion, the ablest and, at the same time, the most gracious. The pamphlet is entitled *Righteousness in the Last Days*, and is published by G. Morrish, of Paternoster Square. The other pamphlet I will not name for the moment, as I propose to deal with it in the second part of this enquiry.

Now, I feel with C. A. C. that the important questions raised in his pamphlet have very close links with two Scriptures, namely, 1 Cor. v. and 2 Tim. ii.; from which, as will presently be seen, he seeks to win support for his own case: and I have read with interest, not unmingled with surprise, his statement that "saints" (by which, as the context shows, he means saints connected with his own system of fellowship) "do not claim to act as the assembly, or as being the 'yourselves'" ("wherefore put away from among yourselves," etc.) "contemplated in 1 Cor. v. 13, because they take account of the true scope of 'yourselves,' and they realize the present ruin, under the eye of the Lord . . . they own the ruin, and do not set up to be anything" (*Righteousness in the Last Days*, p. 9). The admission is important, and I shall refer to it again presently.

But the pivotal Scripture, that on which the essential questions turn, is, as the writer carefully insists, the famous passage in 2 Tim. ii. (vv. 19-22), which I will quote in full:

"Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure,

having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are His. And, let everyone that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity. But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and of silver, but also of wood and of earth; and some to honour and some to dishonour. If a man therefore purge himself from these he shall be a vessel unto honour, sanctified and meet for the Master's use, and prepared unto every good work. Flee also youthful lusts, but follow righteousness, faith, charity, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart."

That Christendom is the " great house " and comprises the whole system of Christian profession, whether spurious or real, is admitted by all. In this " great house " are vessels to honour and vessels to dishonour; persons who are living the Christian life and persons who, whatever their rightful designation, are doing quite otherwise; and the call to the man of God is to purge himself from the vessels to dishonour, in order that he may pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace, with those that call on the Lord out of a pure heart. Remark, there is no allusion to the assembly here. It is an intensely individual appeal. The word is a word of exhortation from an old saint to a younger; a clear, ringing call to a young servant of the Lord, liable on account of his *youth* to be overtaken by the lusts of the world, or to be drawn aside by foolish and undisciplined questionings, to flee the one and to refuse the other; and after purging himself—again an entirely individual thing—from what is not of God, to cultivate the fellowship of those who are calling upon the Lord out of a pure heart.

Yet many in C. A. C.'s fellowship, assuming (usually in a modestly inferential manner) that the pure of heart of the passage belong exclusively to their company, have found in these simple words authority for the fullest exercise of ecclesiastical powers, disciplinary and otherwise, insomuch that one of them (cf. F. E. R.'s lectures entitled *The Spirit's Day*) even links with those powers, or finds an analogy therefor, in the putting away of the wicked person referred to in 1 Cor. v. 13! I am not

seeking to discredit the general ministry of this brother. With much of it I agree; and even in the lectures named I appreciate the clear recognition of the common ruin and shame; but underlying the many admissions of failure is the pretension, cautiously yet firmly advanced in behalf of his own company, to exercise the plenary powers of the Church, as though the company referred to were in all the plenitude and strength of Pentecostal outpourings, and no failure or ruin had come in. Think of the mentality laid bare in such an assumption! How ill it accords with a day of departure, a day of small things; and yet the attitude is highly characteristic of the writer. Expressions like the following are not uncommon: "The assembly, if entered into at all, must be entered into spiritually, but very many do not enter into it. *I do not, however, unchristianize them*, but I doubt if they understand," etc. (*Readings and Addresses*, pp. 67, 68). F. E. R. does not propose to unchristianize his fellow-Christians, even though they fail to understand certain words, to wit: "In the midst of the assembly will I sing praise unto Thee"! What a suggestion! The amazing self-complacency laid bare in this naïve pronouncement really takes one's breath away.

Alas! unconsciously perhaps to its author, the same assumption underlies the pamphlet under review. Speaking in the name of the company with whom he is associated, he affirms three things, namely:—(1) That they own the ruin; (2) that they do not set up to be anything; and (3) that they do not claim to act as the assembly (p. 9). At the same time, taking their stand on 2 Tim. ii., and "as walking in the light of what pertains to the whole company," they "necessarily take action and they do so together." In other words—for my desire is to deal with facts rather than with the subtleties which obscure facts—while

(1) They own the ruin, the recognition is merely verbal, since they act corporately in Church matters, just as in the days before the ruin came in. They "take action together" (p. 9).

(2) While they do not set up to be anything, in effect they pause at nothing; the excommunication of supposed evildoers and the cutting off of whole assemblies being among the fruits of their "taking action." The history of Exclusivism proves this.

(3) While they do not claim to act as the assembly, they exercise the powers of the assembly (for the flow of gracious words in which the thing itself is sought to be cloaked may be disregarded)—the very same powers which the assembly exercised in the days of the apostles. The executive arm of the system is this and nothing more.

Yet C. A. C. tells us that "to speak, in a day of ruin, of coming together in *assembly character* in any other sense than as having the moral features of the assembly would be . . . ecclesiasticism" (p. 14). Is it then merely as having those "moral features" that brethren of this system come together to brand and excommunicate? I should call these *material facts*, not moral features merely. Let us have done with illusory phrases and confine ourselves to facts. Whether Exclusive Brethren claim or do not claim to act as the assembly is not the question. The crucial point is, *Are they so acting?* If they are, *that*, by C. A. C.'s clear showing, is ecclesiasticism, and no conjuring with words can make it otherwise. In the days of the apostles, when the Church was in its pristine strength and purity, assembly action went no farther: conceivably (unless, perhaps, in the case of Diotrephes) it hardly went so far. C. A. C. hints at some distinction, which I doubt not he honestly thinks he sees, between the two methods of procedure; but distinction there is none. I presume the early Christians came together "in assembly character," and "as having the moral features of the assembly"—not with any verbal pretensions to being this or that. Where, then, is the distinction? In letter, as in spirit, this is C. A. C.'s own position. If any distinction exists, it lies in the assumption of Exclusivism, which, in a day of ruin, takes assembly ground and exercises unrestricted assembly functions, as having the moral features of the assembly.

Lest I should be thought to misrepresent the point of view, I will make a longer quotation from the pamphlet. "The assembly is characterised by purity, it is the abode of God's holiness. If the saints are the shrine where God dwells, this necessitates the positive refusal and rejection of evil. . . . All saints are of that house, and we apprehend things from that point of view. . . . But we are in a day of ruin, and though the assembly still exists, and is still characterised by holiness, it is not in view as a concrete company. But exercised saints can apprehend the character of God's house, and walk together consistently with it, in spite of the ruin, though, of course, very much affected by it. If we walk together in the light of what pertains to the whole company we necessarily take action, and we do so together. We come to the solemn judgment as before God that an evil-doer is unfit for Christian fellowship, and we sever all our links of association and fellowship with him" (pp. 8 and 9).

Here, then, if words mean anything at all, we have a company ostensibly characterised by purity, and walking together in a special light, taking the ground and exercising corporately the functions of the assembly. Nevertheless we are told (the preceding paragraph supplies the statement) that "no company can claim to have the status of the assembly, or to act as such." Are we then to suppose that distinction is found between a *claim* to have assembly status and the practical assumption of that status, with resultant scope and liberty of action? Is it not plain that the moment corporate action is taken even against the humblest child of God Exclusivism takes the very ground which it disowns? Surely it is only trifling with words to pretend differently.

"No company can claim to have the status of the assembly, or to act as such." That is well. "If we walk together in the light of what pertains to the whole company we necessarily take action, and we do so together." What a falling off is here? Passing over the amazing assumption suggested by the "if," the thesis brings us to this: Though no company can claim assembly

status or function, C. A. C., and those with whom he is associated, as walking together under specialised conditions of light, have the status of the assembly and act as such. In fact, the point at issue resolves itself into a verbal nicety, a mystifying distinction between claiming to act and acting !

How much the writer is the victim of his own sophisms is illustrated on p. 14, where he says : “ If any Christians now set up to be the Church, or did any moral act which pretended to it, I should leave them, as being a false pretension, *and denying the very testimony to the state of ruin which God has called us to render.*” Yet the company with whom he is associated decrees judgments and takes action corporately, even to the cutting off of whole assemblies. If this is not “ setting up to be the Church,” and taking “ formal action ” in consonance with that pretension, I am completely at a loss. Or is refuge to be looked for in another verbal quibble and distinction drawn between setting up to be a Church and exercising the functions of the Church without a formal setting up?

Elsewhere we are told, “ If we have found a few saints with whom we can walk according to the truth, and on the line of 2 Tim. ii. 22, we have to be exercised that we do not connect with them in a *corporate* way ideas which are only to be attached to the whole company of saints.” Strange language, surely, in view of the un-deviating practice of the company ! Or are we to suppose that the refinement to which C. A. C. would commit us lies again in a verbal nicety, a distinction between *saying* and *doing*? Brethren of this system may act in a corporate way; they may set up ecclesiastical government; they may banish individuals from the Table of the Lord (excommunicate in the Scriptural sense), all this they may do, but that is quite in order, quite permissible, so long as they do not *say* that they are so acting ! Nay, the refinement goes further yet, for, with certain restrictions, and “ as a matter of convenience ” (p. 10), they can even adopt the phraseology which pertains to the assembly of God, so long as it is understood among them that it does not

mean quite all it says ! I will quote at length the passage in which this significant reservation occurs. " There are many expressions which we commonly use, as a matter of convenience, in a limited sense, as referring to those who walk together. Such expressions as ' we,' ' us,' ' ourselves,' ' the saints,' ' the brethren,' ' the assembly ' (note this !), ' fellowship.' So long as these are used simply and understood, there is no harm in them, and I have no doubt we shall continue to use them. But the very fact that we do so, renders it wholesome for us to be reminded *occasionally* "—again note—" that if they were used *formally* in this restricted sense they would be purely sectarian " (p. 10). So the borderland between Exclusivism and Sectarianism is, even by their own showing, a very narrow line—the distinction between taking a certain ground and *formally* taking it !

How many of the company understand anything of these nice distinctions, which, indeed, savour more of Masonry than of Christianity? How many would be capable of observing them even if they did understand? To such absurdities of refinement does the system commit them.

The distinction drawn by Exclusivists between putting away from the Lord's Table and putting away from the company in the midst of which the Table is set up, may also be noticed. It is said that the saints of this company cannot do the one, because believers have an inalienable place at the Table, but that they may do the other, and that they exercise the right to put away as they have occasion. F. E. R. draws the distinction thus : " If a person is put away from amongst us, of course he is put away from the fellowship of the Lord's Table ; but *that is a different thing from saying that as a formula.*"¹ Thus putting away from the company does, in fact, involve exclusion from the Table even by their own showing, and should the excommunicated person associate himself in the breaking of bread with any other than the Exclusive company he has committed an offence—" compromised

¹I leave it for keener intellects than mine to say wherein the difference lies.

the testimony ” is the stereotyped phrase—and his doing so would have “ to be judged ” before he could be received back. If he is true to their traditions he will be careful not to contract a new ecclesiastical association. It is therefore evident that to put away from among them is in effect to exclude from the Table of the Lord, and the distinction which is sought to be drawn is simply a piece of verbiage, as meaningless as it is cruel.

The late J. B. Stoney, a man of remarkable gift and spirituality, was peculiarly emphatic on this practice of Exclusiveness—rather gloried in it, one would think. “ I trust you will see how definite and exclusive the company is,” he says in one place; “ I know some of you might shrink from the word ‘ exclusive,’ but the company is exclusive ” (*Lessons of the Sanctuary*, p. 27). Observe, he is not speaking here of the whole Church of God, the aggregate of believers, the one Assembly, which, in the mind of God, constitutes a very exclusive company; but of a specialised company, his own little circle of brethren, to whom the term “ My assembly ” was to be sedulously restricted; “ the company,” as he tells us in the same lecture, “ to whom the Lord vouchsafes His presence, even two or three; *though there be others present not gathered to His Name, though professing to be.*” These others—we are still quoting from this writer—“ do not enjoy His presence ” (p. 25). “ We have seen,” he says, “ that He calls the assembly ‘ My assembly ’—an immense point—*because He is there Himself* when He calls it ‘ My assembly ’: the word ‘ My ’ gives it a definite character ” (p. 27). Note the chain of reasoning in these significant passages: it is truly Irish. The Lord calls His assembly “ My assembly ”: the “ My ” supposes that “ He is there Himself ”: *therefore* Exclusives, to whom alone the Lord vouchsafes His presence (*vide* p. 25) are exclusively the “ My assembly ”! Yet it is on loose and pride-exalting phrases such as these that the system of Exclusivism has been built up.

That “ saints can still, in the light of 1 Cor. v., refuse intercourse with a wicked person ” (*C. A. C.*,

p. 7) I fully admit, and the manner of doing that I shall presently consider; but, save in certain specialised cases, I do not admit the right, *in a day of ruin*, of dealing with such persons in the way that Exclusivism deals with them, that is, ecclesiastically in the name of the assembly of God. I admit also, and not less fully, "the necessity for withdrawing from iniquity" (p. 8); but I do not admit, as C. A. C. admits, that, in order to do this, the act must be corporate, an "acting together," "as those who have apprehended the true character of the assembly" (*ibid.*). I believe that in a day of ruin, foreseen from the first by unerring Omniscience, there is found a fitter way of dealing with evil than the way of Exclusivism, which is simply the surgical process of cutting off; and that this fitter way is laid down for us in 2 Tim. ii. 19-21, where, in spite of all the glosses with which a school of interpretation has encumbered the passage, *no thought of the assembly is found.*

That separation from evil is a duty of cardinal importance I unhesitatingly agree. It is one of the first essentials of spiritual health, and without spiritual health there can be no spiritual growth or power. The Lord give us to know more of separation! but let us see to it that the separation is according to Scripture—the thing which God enjoins, not a heartless anachronism of man's devising. Separation from evil, as I shall hope to show hereafter, does not necessarily mean separation from persons; and the distinction is of much consequence, for in it lies the key to a great controversy, and, once the meaning of the distinction is fully grasped, the remedy also is seen to lie close at hand.

Now C. A. C.'s justification for dealing ecclesiastically with evil is, as we have seen, a claim to purity, holiness—the *claim of Rome*, remark. "The assembly is characterized by purity—it is the abode of God's holiness . . . this necessitates the positive refusal and rejection of evil. . . . We come to the solemn judgment as before God that an evildoer is unfit for Christian fellowship, and we

sever all our links of association and fellowship with him ” (p. 8). That is, he postulates for the company with whom he is associated a state of purity or holiness such as warrants them, as guardians of “ the shrine where God dwells,” to deal correctively with evildoers. That is a high pretension.

And this brings me again to the Scripture which C. A. C., in the name of Exclusivism, speaks of as “ our special charter in the last days ” (*Righteousness in the Last Days*, p. 17), the widely quoted passage in 2 Tim. ii. (19-21).

The most casual observer, passing in review the later teaching of Exclusivism, must be struck with the prominence given to this passage, as well as to those closely related subjects—Fellowship and Testimony; indeed, the conviction which is still current, and which has almost crystallised into an article of faith, is that the rallying point for the Christian in a day of ruin is one or the other, or perchance both of those ideas; and that the Scripture which justifies that view, and supplies the warrant for acting upon it, is the Scripture we are now considering.

The conviction is, in my opinion, not only erroneous but mischievous, as tending to take the eye off Christ, and to direct it to the servant; for the “ Testimony,” in the sense in which Exclusives understand the term, is a testimony to some dogma of present moment, inevitably bringing into prominence the servant who presses it: while the “ Fellowship ” is a fellowship of certain Christians dominated by a special teaching, not the Fellowship of the Son of God.

“ Fellowship,” said a late Exclusive brother, “ has been made to mean agreement of a party upon some matter of discipline, instead of that holy link resulting from Christ’s death, and formed by faith in Him and by the presence of the Holy Spirit. Individual responsibility to the Lord, whether in regard to persons or meetings, has been almost ruled out, and a system of general supervision has grown up which has culminated in what Mr. R. calls ‘ metropolitan tyranny.’ In one word, it came to be,

not what is your relationship to Christ, but what is your relationship to US? In this brief sentence lies the whole secret of Brethren's misfortunes. . . . God has broken us to pieces because it has been *us* instead of Christ; and *our* meetings instead of the Church of God. We have been of late years more and more losing sight of the true Church and the true fellowship, and substituting a Church of our own and a fellowship of our own, and it has been blown upon " (*The Good Way*, p. 15).

Another brother, whose eyes had been opened to the same evils many years before, wrote thus: "What possible correspondence is there between a company of Christians, or ever so many companies, meeting simply in the name of Christ, pretending to nothing, but counting on His presence as the spring and security of their blessing when so met, and that of an immense ecclesiastical ramification, which is everywhere subject, and in all things, as to its order, doctrine and fellowship, to Mr. D.'s decrees? enforced by a ubiquitous, unseen, spiritual supervision, from which, as there is no escape, so there is no appeal? The one is as wide and as free as the gracious heart of Christ can make it. . . . The other is as narrow and sectarian, and as hard also, as the domination of man can desire it " (W. H. Dorman, in 1866). Substitute for "Mr. D." the name of whatever Exclusive teacher happens to be, at any given moment, the interpreter of "The Testimony"—(itself a highly nebulous and fluctuating entity)—and the moral picture is as correct in its essential lines as it was nearly sixty years ago.

How slow we are to learn, beloved brethren, that true fellowship is not a thing of rules and definitions, but a heart-sustaining, joyous fact. Christian fellowship is walking in the light. It is communion with divine Persons, made possible by the surpassing grace of an indwelling Holy Spirit. It is love in exercise among the saints: divine life—Christ's life (Rom. viii. 10)—in its operations between believer and believer. To suppose that it is anything which can be analysed like a drug, or measured in a theological drachm-glass, or reduced to rigid formulæ

for exclusive ends, is the saddest of sad fallacies. “ Truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son, Jesus Christ.” “ If we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship one with another ” (1 John i. 3, 7). The heart responds instinctively to the grace and grandeur of such a fellowship ; and the effort to give it a peculiar and exclusive meaning can have but one effect, to stultify the usefulness and wither the affections of those seduced by such self-sufficient and ill-balanced fancies.

Then as to Testimony. The term—usually with the definite article attached, “ *the* Testimony ”—is applied by Exclusives (in all sincerity, I am sure, yet with singular constriction of vision) to the current teaching of their accredited leaders ; and this teaching must not be put to the question. There is anathema for him who commits the offence and does not speedily repent. I am not finding fault with the ministry to which the name is given. It may be edifying and really useful, and sometimes is : but I cannot understand why it should be called *The* Testimony, when the grace of the Lord is so manifest in the ministry of countless servants of Christ outside the system. It savours of Laodicea. Others have pointed out, and I think with justice, that the testimony spoken of seldom reaches out to the larger needs of the Church of God, those in the fellowship being, as a rule, the only company thought of.

It is to be feared, indeed, that the spiritual vision of numbers of brethren—their sense of moral perspective in these matters—has become warped, their powers of judgment vitiated, by too much occupation with themselves and the ecclesiastical broideries of the system—“ daisy-picking in the fields of inspiration,” as a brother quaintly called it. Truth as to the assembly, and perhaps not a little that is only debatably the truth, have been eagerly pressed of late ; till something very like a surfeit of doctrine has ensued. Yet getting clear as to the assembly, even if clarity is ever so reached, is not *feeding* in the Scriptural sense, any more than eating the receipt of a plum-pudding is the same thing as eating the pudding.

The late F. E. Raven was, I think, the first to connect

the idea of testimony with the passage in 2 Timothy, and others have diligently followed his lead. The same disingenuousness of exposition is, I regret to say, noticeable in C. A. C.'s comments on the passage. After pointing out, not without some straining of interpretation, that the pursuit of righteousness, faith, love and peace involves "practical consistency with every part of the truth which the individual has learnt and known as Paul's teaching" (in itself an unwarrantable extension of the plain meaning of the passage), he adds, "*As in the light of the truth of the assembly . . . he finds here definite instructions in relation to his walking together with other like-minded saints.*" Now, this phrase, "as in the light of the truth of the assembly," and the thought which underlies the phrase, are entirely alien to the passage. One shrinks from making a man an offender for a word, but it cannot be too earnestly insisted that there is more in this forced interpretation than appears upon the surface. The *whole system of Exclusivism, with its cruel wasting of the Church of God, rests upon it.* It is necessary to bring the assembly into the passage if the fabric of Exclusivism is to stand, and but for the fact that the champions of this system have a theory to serve the notion would never have been heard of.

Another instance of this deceptive dealing with the same Scripture occurs in an Exclusivist pamphlet by Mr. Higgins (*Fellowship in a Day of Outward Ruin*, p. 15), where the writer, after speaking of believers answering to the Lord's desire to remember Him in the breaking of bread, continues thus: "In doing so they are surely not to hold communion with the very people they are charged in 2 Tim. ii. to withdraw from, *nor with Christians who, in disobedience, may persist in consorting with these latter.*" Needless to say, the statement printed in italics receives no warrant whatever from the passage commented on; though the unguarded reader would naturally suppose differently, and in any case the gloss is needful to enforce the teaching.

But human systems are pretty sure to rest their claims

to recognition upon some straining or perversion of Scripture; and even in the early days of my association with the Exclusive company I had been struck with the large proportion of discipline cases in which the methods employed seemed to be both faulty and partial, or, at best, without conclusive warrant in the Word of God. Pronouncements based upon more or less ingenious fillings in of Biblical lacunæ, or forced applications of Old Testament figures, have been common; as, indeed, might be looked for where small companies of professing Christians, the merest fraction of the Church of God, arrogate to themselves the powers of the assembly, and constitute themselves tribunals for dealing with any and every form of evil, supposed or real. It is a mistake which Mr. A. N. Groves and others largely avoided in the early days of brethren, having had definite light thereon; but from which, I believe, Mr. Darby never got clear; though there is evidence in his writings of exercise of mind and the clear hint, in more passages than one, that the maintenance of Paul's part of the testimony (*i.e.*, the truth as to the assembly) might break down completely before the close, and only our links with the Person of Jesus remain.

There still exists a letter penned by Mr. Groves to Mr. Darby in 1836, which marks not only the parting of the ways between these greatly honoured servants, but also, I believe, the latter's fateful and decisive committal to the principles of Exclusivism. In the course of the letter are these warning words: "Though I feel you are in principle returning to the city from whence you departed, 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, to spring up among yourselves. You will not discover this so much from the workings of your own soul as by the spirit of those who have been nurtured up from the beginning in the system they are taught to feel the only tolerable one; that not having been led like you and some of those earliest connected with you, through deep experimental suffering and sorrow, they are

little acquainted with the real truth that may exist amidst inconceivable darkness : there will be little pity and little sympathy with such, and *your union daily becoming one of doctrine and opinion more than life and love, your government will become . . . one wherein overwhelmingly is felt the authority of men; you will be known more by what you witness against than what you witness for, and practically this will prove that you witness against all but yourselves, as certainly as the Walkerites and the Glassites: your Shibboleth may be different, but it will be as real.*"

In another part of the letter the writer says : " The moment the witnessing for the common life as our bond gives place to a witnessing *against* errors by separation . . . every individual or society of individuals first comes before the mind as those who might need witnessing against, and all their conduct and principles have first to be examined and approved before they can be received ; and the position which this occupying 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 will yield. It is into this position, I fear, some little flocks are fast tending, if they have not already attained it ; making *light* not *life* the measure of communion."

Nearly a century has passed since these words were penned, and looking back across the grey vista of years how prophetic do we see them to have been ! A system which, as another had said, commenced with universal communion, and never tired of declaring that the Church of England was too broad, and Dissent too narrow, has ended in what ? Universal excommunication on a scale which has never been equalled in the Church of God. And remember, the very backbone of this system is an obsession as to " Testimony " or " Fellowship," linked with a dogma as to Christian unity to be considered hereafter.

I hope I shall not be misunderstood. It is the system I am dealing with, not individuals enmeshed by the

system. There are many in the Exclusive company whom I hold in true esteem, whose works I would fain emulate, and whose faith follow : but *that is not the system*. Even in the Papal communion there are to be found true and spiritual persons—the Bernards and Brother Laurences and Madame Guions of to-day—but inasmuch as this strange commixture of light with darkness is one of the chief reasons why the Roman system flourishes, so, I do not doubt, the existence of a similar element in the Exclusive system is the one condition which has saved it from extinction. The statement may be thought wild, but I make it in all sobriety, and it is based on an experience of nearly forty years. I will even say that I see much in common, ecclesiastically, doctrinally, and morally between this system and Rome, particularly in regard to Exclusivism's later developments. A pamphlet by J. T., a brother whose ministry is often thoughtful and uplifting, exalts the Church (or, rather, that very small section of the Church or Fellowship to which he belongs) into the place of Christ; and I am persuaded that the influence of such teaching, however pure the motive which inspires it, must be mischievous.

How mischievous a comparison of latter-day Exclusivist action with the ruling and methods of Rome will make plain. The moral features in many cases of so-called "Discipline" are identical, as I have already pointed out. The arm of Fellowship is as long as the arm of the Romish priesthood and quite as ruthless. A marked man under the Romish system (I speak of the system in its mediæval strength) was deprived of all power of appeal before his examination was begun. He was secretly cut off from "the faithful" and his mouth closed by arrest and imprisonment as a preliminary step. Under the Exclusive system a fellow-believer may be suddenly cut off from fellowship during his temporary absence from home, and on his return to his own neighbourhood the request to be allowed to meet his accusers will be steadily ignored. The defencelessness of the weak makes no difference :

a sister may be treated in precisely the same manner, as many simple ones have learned to their sorrow.

Rome's second stage of oppression was "the question." That is to say, the marked person, being regarded as guilty before even the semblance of a trial has taken place, must next confess the alleged guilt. The rack is introduced. What is the second stage under the Exclusive system? Calculating upon the sorrow and desolation produced in a sensitive mind by virtual excommunication, and still more by expulsion from the Table of the Lord, attempts are made to wear out the patience and moral fortitude of the victim by *suggestio falsis* and piously worded innuendoes, *punctuated by long silences*. He writes letters of entreaty and affection, and they are ignored. The method best calculated to arouse the flesh in a lonely, harassed child of God cut off from all fellowship with other Christians is adopted. If he complains of the treatment he is unbroken, contumelious, and his unguarded expressions, *uttered on the rack*, are quoted against him. If he is patient and says nothing, the policy of silence is persisted in until moral and spiritual exhaustion supervene. Should any of the persecutors show signs of relenting, a specially qualified brother comes forward to give another twist to the rack by suggesting fresh means of continuing the persecution.

In fact, judged by its fruits, the system (and I speak only of the system) has completely dropped away from the simplicity and grace of the Gospel—"the truth as it is in Jesus"; does not concern itself with these things very greatly, as I conceive, but rather with something vaguely termed "Fellowship," a man-invented, iron-bound anachronism, which takes their place. Restless spirits of the type forevisioned by Mr. Groves, seeking a means of imposing their wills upon gatherings or individuals, find occasion in this new thing, and flock to it as to a standard. It is the Popish pretension over again. Rome says: "Hear the Church!" (*i.e.*, the priesthood), and anathematizes as contumacious all who will not hear. Exclusivism in its latest manifestations cries: "Hear

the Fellowship!" (*i.e.*, the men who have substituted Fellowship for the Lord), and casts out as evil those who would stand by the old landmarks.

That there are brethren entangled in the meshes of the system whose walk and service might well be patterns to the godly, men whose shoe-latchets I am not worthy to unloose, does not make the evil of the system less real, any more than the piety of godly Catholics makes the system of Rome less evil. The craving for soul quiet, for mental rest, which is often so strong a passion in gracious minds, makes them at times a ready prey to a system which promises finality—promises, shall I say, some haven of Authority, where the battered bark may ride securely. The godly Catholic finds the supposed haven in the Authority of the Church; the spiritual Exclusive in the dogma of Fellowship; and both, in the measure of surrender involved, miss Christ. The Word of God presents, I believe, another and more excellent way: a way that is divinely suited to a day of ruin, and in which there is no room for ecclesiastical pretensions or the persecuting ardour which so often manifests itself when those pretensions are disturbed.

In recent years Exclusivism has taken congregational ground—an extraordinary swing back of the pendulum. The inevitable inroads of divisionism, due to a too strenuous, though (if there be any meaning in the pretensions of the system) entirely logical insistence upon world-wide unanimity in matters of discipline and Church government, has led to a modification of this erstwhile essential requisition, and the rule now is that the disciplinary enactments of local assemblies must be regarded as final; on which principle any possible victim of unrighteous local action is necessarily left without appeal.¹

¹In practice they adopt either course; for the new idea is not based upon conviction growing out of enlarged knowledge, but on mere expediency. Other gatherings may aid and abet if a brother has to be got rid of, and the local assembly will wholeheartedly acquiesce in the irregularity; though the victim will still have no voice outside his own gathering. Principles may be set aside, or two opposing principles appealed to by the same gathering in the same case—what does it matter so the end be gained?

This is tragically illustrated by some recent cases of discipline in which earnest appeals for a guiding judgment from the larger company have been systematically disregarded. Gatherings outside the local gathering have to "own what is done." In one case, a brother was suddenly thrust out for protesting too vigorously against evil—the evil a rather alarming epidemic of tattle and tale-bearing. The existence of the evil was admitted; the excommunicable offence was the outspokenness of the protest. The offenders were among his judges. His wife was afterwards thrust out because she would not acquiesce in her husband's cutting off. In another case, a brother who had quietly withdrawn from fellowship because he could not conscientiously go on with the company was publicly read out *after his withdrawal!* the Scripture used being 2 Thess. iii. 14 !¹

It is sad to speak of these happenings, but unfortunately they symptomise a state of things, and it is with the state of things I am dealing. I thankfully believe that the bulk of Exclusive brethren have no liking for these fantastic happenings; many, I am sure, are really grieved at heart: but they are under the system, and anathema is on them if they protest. A generation has risen up—the very generation of Mr. Groves's prophecy—who turn the little gatherings into inquisitors' courts in which everything save justice may be decreed. Appeal to assemblies outside the focus-point of any trouble is, as I have said, impossible; or, if made, is disallowed: and to seek to engage the conscience of a brother, who, to use the common term, is "in the forefront of the Testimony," is equally hopeless. The utterances of such leaders are apt to be non-committal and rather dictatorial, like the utterances of a minor canon in a cathedral town: while their opinions, which are mostly of a challenging nature, may not be

¹ "If any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed"; by which eccentric application of Scripture the ignorant perpetrators of this folly really took apostolic ground! Strange commentary, surely, on C. A. C.'s assertion that Exclusives "do not set up to be anything" or "claim to act as the assembly."

challenged. If, therefore, a brother, smarting under some outrage of local "discipline," seeks counsel of one of these leaders, the fact of his offence is immediately taken for granted, and browbeating of a distantly gracious type is offered as a substitute for honest investigation. Necessity for self-judgment is tacitly assumed, and the assumption (usually expressed with an unction which is far from soothing) dispenses with the need of enquiry. Doubtless a certain lack of moral courage lies at the root of this egoism of self-complacency—perhaps, also, a genuine desire not to extend the area of trouble.

Amid such conditions the "latest truth" faction in any given meeting have the ball at their feet, and easily out-voice opposing views of local brethren of maturer judgment. Like the young men at the court of Rehoboam they resent the temperate counsels of their elders, and in place of the yoke of what, in past days, was (save in quite exceptional and notorious cases) a gracious despotism, they say in effect: "My father hath chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions" (1 Kings xii. 11). The impossibility of appeal beyond the local gathering gives occasion and encouragement to this spirit, and liberty of prophesying as well as of judgment become, of consequence, indictable offences.

This new expediency, which finds in congregational principles a reed to lean upon, is, however, a poor expediency, and the reed is but a frail substitute for the principle surrendered. If individuals are oppressed and cast out by unrighteous local action, is it seemly to "own what is done"? These lines may fall into the hands of an Exclusive brother; and if so, I would press my point afresh with all earnestness. Oppression is being decreed, and you "own what is done," and because you own what is done you are reassured, flattering yourself perhaps that the trouble can spread no farther. Yet is not this short reckoning? *Does the Lord own what is done?*—surely that is the first and most essential question. Be not deceived: such comforting conclusions are as ill-founded as the confidence of Moses when he killed the Egyptian and hid his

body in the sand. The "leaven of malice" against which my voice is raised is in the system, not in individuals merely, and, believe me, it will go on working till the godly get deliverance, and that which is left drifts surely Romewards. Of this I am persuaded. Have you no misgivings? Happy, perhaps, in your personal walk with God, does it rouse no question in your mind when you find so many true servants of the Lord—pastors, teachers, evangelists, men of fervent prayer and devoted life—outside your system? men with whom you have walked in love during long and happy years, and who, though driven out, are still doing the works of God by serving the saints and bearing testimony to His saving health among the nations?

Consider what it means. Such is your system that you may not sit down at the Lord's Table with these brethren; with servants of God whose consistent walk and large-hearted labours you would probably be the first to recognise. You refuse to associate with these disciples—and why? Is it because they have fallen into open sin? Not at all. You know them to be living irreproachable lives, spending and being spent for others; toiling earnestly, lovingly for the glory of Him who is their all. Is it because they are teaching heresy or are tainted with it? By no means. What, then, is the position? The Lord in His discerning grace brings into fellowship with Himself these true disciples—you cannot. He admits them into His company: they are not worthy of yours. You raise the barrier of a self-certified holiness (cf. pp. 7 and 11) and shut them out. This is a remarkable attitude. In all essentials the teaching of these brethren is the same as yours. This you would readily admit, and yet (oh, the pity of it!—the shame—the irony!) you would not partake with them of the Lord's Supper! The Lord would meet with them as gathered to His name—and does: you would not. Does the thought of this give rise to no compunctions?—awaken no sense of shame in your heart? I am sure it does. Yet, as the victim of a system, what remedy have you? Have you *any* remedy save what

is to be found in 2 Tim. ii. 22, the verse which you so diligently misread?

That you recognise in a theoretical way the Lord's right to have His own around Himself is no doubt true, and the theory becomes practice when you receive at the Table, as I believe is still sometimes done, a member of the Church of England or a Dissenter who desires to break bread on common Christian ground. But what follows? Should that Christian continue, as naturally he intends to do, his association with the religious body to which—mark well—*he still belongs*, you assert a supposed right to deal with him on account of those associations; so that until he has definitely broken therefrom he may no more break bread with you! Thus all orthodox believers whose walk is not outwardly wicked are potentially eligible for your fellowship *until they have broken bread. Their having broken bread renders them ineligible*, because, say you, these links with system compromise you when once you have given them the hand of fellowship! That there is a certain crude logic in this reasoning I do not deny: the serious question which such extraordinary conditions awaken is: Are the principles underlying those conditions sound principles? Is the ecclesiastical pretension which lies at the back of this receiving and rejecting a pretension that stands the test of Scripture? In other words, Is there any divine warrant for ecclesiastical assumption of whatever kind "in a day of ruin."

That, indeed, is the vital question: and here let me digress for a moment to explain, though the explanation involves a somewhat sweeping admission, that the system of Exclusivism is, *as a system*, as consistent, in my opinion, as any of the systems which have sprung out of it. Nay, if the pretensions of Exclusivism are right at all, the claim of C. A. C.'s company to be *the* company is, perhaps, more defensible than any other. By "any other" I mean the different sections of *moderate* Exclusives; for, of course, Open Brethren are not in question here. The company called Open Brethren represents, historically, the sole survivors of the original company;

Exclusivism having come into existence when certain brethren separated from that company on a difficult question of discipline, and not till then. To-day we have high-church Exclusives and low-church Exclusives; extremists and moderates, split up into numerous factions; but the party whose links are with "Park Street"—with Metropolitanism, as some one has called it—is the main stem of the old separatists, the parent stock; since they alone, as it seems to me, maintain with uncompromising fidelity the principle of Exclusivism.¹ All other so-called Close communities have weakened in this respect; indeed, they are merely shoots from the stock, cut off and transplanted by the ruthless necessities of the system.

And here I may point out that, whatever doctrinal or ecclesiastical reasons may have been the ostensible causes of defection, it is clear that the underlying or basal cause was an instinct on the part of the seceders that all was not right with the system; that there was a flaw, a grit in the machinery somewhere, the effect of which was to produce uneasiness of soul; a restlessness which only blind, unqualified submission to Mr. Darby's theory of Unity, to be considered presently, could remove.

In fact, each division was in essence a *moral revolt*, unrecognised as such even by the revolters: just as Luther's first step in nailing up his thesis on the church door at Wittenberg was, though unknown to him, a revolt from the whole system of Rome. When the Lord gave temporary deliverance to beloved T. H. Reynolds and George Cutting at the time of the Glanton trouble, they quickly saw that if Exclusivism be of God, the most exclusive Exclusivism must be of God also, and, though grieved to the heart by the evil that drove them out, they returned to that communion. Had they stood aside *and waited*, I believe the Lord would have enlarged their vision and delivered them finally, as well as have used them greatly in the deliverance of others. They would

¹The innovation referred to above is, to be sure, a late departure from those principles, though that fact does not materially affect the main argument.

have seen that there is a company older than the Exclusive company ; and that brethren of that fellowship, though not always seeing eye to eye on matters of rule and doctrine, do yet walk together in love, and in the comfort and joy of the Holy Ghost.

But now let us look a little more closely at 2 Tim. ii. 19-23, C. A. C.'s " special charter in the last days," and seek to realise what it actually does teach.

" Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal. The Lord knoweth them that are His. And let everyone that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity. But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and of silver, but also of wood and of earth ; and some to honour and some to dishonour. If a man therefore purge himself from these he shall be a vessel unto honour, sanctified and meet for the Master's use, and prepared unto every good work. Flee also youthful lusts, but follow righteousness, faith, charity, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart. But foolish and unlearned questions avoid, knowing that they do gender strifes."

Regarding the passage as a whole, one notices first of all that it is addressed to *an individual* ; and, secondly, that it is addressed to an individual in his capacity *as a servant*. It is not addressed to an assembly ; it is not even addressed to one holding office in an assembly—I mean in that capacity. This is also clear from the whole epistle. Timothy was one of Paul's converts, his " dearly beloved son" in the faith (i. 2), and the apostle writes to him—not as an office-bearer in the Church, but—as a fellow-servant, an evangelist. He is to maintain the testimony of the Lord in the Gospel according to the gift and power of God bestowed upon him ; to " preach the word " ; to " endure afflictions," to " do the work of an evangelist," and to " make full proof of his ministry " (i. 6, 8 ; iv. 2, 5, etc.). Every chapter in the epistle is to the last degree personal, and therefore replete with strength and comfort to other servants of the Lord. Hence, also, even the reference to the " great house " (*i.e.*, Christendom) is con-

nected—not with Church matters : not with assemblies or the Assembly—but with *vessels*, vessels with various degrees of efficiency or inefficiency : that is, with service, counterfeit or real. If Timothy purged himself from the unworthy vessels he himself would be “ a vessel unto honour, sanctified and meet for the Master’s use, and prepared unto every good work.” Hence to bring the assembly into the passage at all, as Exclusivist commentators have systematically done, *and do*, is entirely unwarranted. It is doubtful, indeed, whether the idea would have met with such general acceptance but that it finds a place in the *Synopsis* (J. N. D.’s *Synopsis of the Books of the Bible*, v. 180, 181), where it is so embedded among gracious and helpful thoughts that the faultiness of the exposition, and the lawyer-like special pleading which characterises it, have been unsuspected or ignored. This richly gifted servant had been educated for the law, and it is helpful sometimes to remember this when reading his comments on matters of a controversial nature. Unconscious prejudices, too, growing out of remote psychological or even racial peculiarities, often obtrude themselves in our service for the Lord.

If we consider the Timothy verses in detail the untenableness of the Exclusivist position becomes increasingly plain. “ The foundation of God,” says the apostle, “ standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are His. And, Let everyone that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity.” Here evidently the maintenance of the divine foundation in a day of evil and confusion depends not upon man but upon the Lord Himself. It has this seal—*The Lord knoweth*. The assembly is not accredited with this knowledge ; the spiritual man is not accredited with it : the knowledge is in the Lord’s keeping. But a path is pointed out to each and every believer who desires to walk cleanly and holily : a path that is the complete antithesis of ecclesiastical practice and pretension : “ Let everyone that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity.” “ Depart from iniquity.” Dean Alford renders the expression “ Stand aloof from

iniquity ”; Professor Sheldon Green “ Stand aloof from unrighteousness ”; Dr. Weymouth “ Renounce all wickedness,” which limits even more definitely the scope of action. How different from the Exclusivist teaching and method! We (I do not forget that I was for long years of the Exclusive company, and therefore share the burden of the shame) we have interpreted the passage as though it read: “ Deal with iniquity ” (that is, Exclusivist conceptions of iniquity) or “ sit in judgment upon iniquitous persons ”; hence the deplorable blunders and heart-searing divisions which have arisen. In pretending to a knowledge which, “ in a day of ruin,” the Lord confines jealously to Himself, we have wrought incalculable mischief, increasing the confusion and multiplying the sorrows of His people. We have been calling good evil and evil good. The hard-natured and unspiritual have found their vocation here, and those who know the history of “ Brethren ” know the use that has been made of the usurped authority.

To the same purpose speaks the apostle in 1 Thess. v. 22, “ Hold aloof from every form of wickedness ” (N.T.). Here again the command is not to deal ecclesiastically with evil, but to hold aloof from it: and this the believer—*any* believer, in his individual capacity—can do. The process is not an assembly process: and to stand aloof is quite a different thing from casting out. In the second epistle, which deals so largely with iniquity in the last days, we meet with a parallel command, “ Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he receiveth of us ” (iii. 6). Here, again, there is no thought of repressive action; no authority to deal with evil or evildoers: but an imperative command to withdraw from such—a very different thing. Even in the case, say, of a much-offending Christian, I may do no more than this. The case of the contumelious brother, in Matt. xviii., might be cited for illustration. What is the order of procedure there? The individual against whom the trespass is committed is to use his personal influence first:

if that fails, he is to take with him two or three more. Should the offender still prove obdurate, the assembly is to be informed; and if he neglect to hear the assembly—what then? Exclusivism would say: “Deal with him ecclesiastically with a view to excommunication.” Not so the perfect Master. “Let him be unto thee as a heathen man and a publican.” “*To thee*”; that is, to the injured brother, not to the whole company. What is this but withdrawing oneself, standing aloof, according to the sense of 1 Thess. v. 22 and 2 Thess. iii. 6? How true is it that God’s thoughts are not our thoughts, nor His ways our ways! (Isa. lv. 8).

The next two verses of our chapter take up the “great house” and the vessels in it; in other words, the moral attitude of the servant to his fellow-servants in a day of manifest confusion and failure. He is told, as a matter of individual responsibility, to purge himself from “the vessels to dishonour,” in order to become a sanctified vessel, effectual for worthy service. Then, as a further step, he is to “flee youthful lusts” and to “follow righteousness, faith, charity, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart.”

I would again call attention to the divine order. First the individual purging, the withdrawing from the false and corrupt in ostensibly Christian service; secondly, the personal abstention from youthful lusts; thirdly, the pursuit of righteousness, faith, charity, and peace with fellow-believers characterised by a similar purpose of heart. *The company, observe, comes last.* The purging and separation have taken place before the thought of the company is introduced. This is the divine order, and is it not the best? Exclusivism forms its company and then proceeds to deal with evil, taking upon itself “in a day of ruin” to separate ecclesiastically between the precious and the vile. The “man of God” divinely warned that such knowledge is beyond him, though comforted in the thought that “the Lord knoweth them that are His,” purges himself from whatever is clearly dishonouring to Christ, and then seeks the company of the pure in heart.

Nothing could be more simple, beautiful, and worthy of the Lord; nothing more appropriate to a day of small things, a day of ruin. Beginning with separation from evil it leads direct to the Lord Himself; for the distinguishing feature of the company is their calling on the Lord. But again I would insist, *there is no word of the assembly here*; nor is there any dispensation to a specially favoured community to deal with evil ecclesiastically; nay, there is not so much as the whisper of a warrant to come together “as having the moral features of the assembly” (*Righteousness in the Last Days*, p. 12). Such innovations carry their own condemnation in the light of 2 Tim. ii. 19-22; and the more one considers these verses apart from human commentaries and traditional teaching, the more one marvels at the use which has been made of them. How many gentle hearts have been chilled by their shadow! Whatever may be the exact force of *ἐὰν οὖν τις ἐκκαθάρῃ ἑαυτὸν ἀπὸ τούτων*, the passage, as Philip Mauro justly remarks, “certainly gives no support to the prevailing practice established by many groups of Christians of shutting out their fellow-saints (against whom no evil in life or doctrine is charged, or whom they would not dare to call ‘vessels to dishonour’) from partaking with themselves of the bread and cup in remembrance of the Lord.” That the “pure in heart” are only to be looked for in the various Exclusive companies is indeed a perilous and pride-begetting figment, from the snare of which we do well to pray urgently to be delivered.

The company being reached, there is still a danger. “Foolish and unlearned questions avoid” (v. 23). How suitable is the exhortation in this connection! Directly you have a company of believers you have spiritual intercourse: the thought of a company goes hand in hand with the thought of conference. “They that feared the Lord spake often one to another” (Mal. iii. 16), and when believers confer together one must watch against the intrusion of foolish and undisciplined questions and avoid them. Not *divide* upon them, but *avoid* them—leave them alone. How well we know the danger! Little sects and

coterie are formed around such foolish and unlearned questions : the Biblical injunction is to avoid them.

The present-day ministry of Exclusivism has, indeed, been productive of many such questions ; some quite trivial, none of really vital importance. The pressing of these questions reminds one rather forcibly of the difficulties and dangers of skating over thin ice. Every few months there is an ominous bending of the frost-held and rather circumscribed area of teaching ; and every few years the thin crust breaks and a little group of teachers goes under, with their following, small or considerable. The dainty figure-skating (if I may pursue the simile) pleases a class of minds, and appreciable skill is often attained in the tracing of curves and arabesques and mystic letters ; but it is precarious work, at best, and on pondering results one is sometimes constrained to ask, Is this the work most pleasing to the Master? Is there no higher vocation for His servants in these strenuous days than a spiritual dilettantism which ministers a doubtful kind of self-gratification to a select few, but which leaves the wider circle of believers untouched? After all, the Gospel feast is not a sort of Exclusivist private party for spiritual epicures, but " a great supper " to which everyone is invited. I heard a Close brother declare publicly a few years ago that " the Gospel testimony has in a sense ceased," and even if the statement be true as regards Exclusive testimony the admission is of solemn augury. But I can assure my brethren of the Close persuasion that the Lord in His grace is maintaining a very precious and effectual Gospel testimony outside their company and that if they care to take the trouble they will find refreshing proofs of this among the despised Open Brethren.

At the same time, it cannot be too strenuously insisted that ecclesiastical pretensions of whatever kind are out of place. When the Church was in its pristine strength, and doubtless for a considerable time after, the stars or lights of the assembly were in Christ's hand (Rev. ii. 1) and the Holy Spirit of God was free to act among the saints in very different ways from those which mark His

operations in a day of weakness and conspicuous failure. Hence the Church, by reason of those conditions, might deal with evil; *because it was the Church which acted, and because it was the Lord and the Spirit of the Lord who influenced her decisions and ratified them.* On the other hand when the Church is broken all to pieces and her responsible lights are no longer in the Lord's hands (Rev. iii. 1), when all outward manifestations of the Spirit's power are lacking (tongues, prophesyings, miraculous gifts of healing, hyper-discernment—Acts v. 3-5; viii. 21-23; xiii. 9-11; xxi. 11, etc.), and the lowly, really spiritual ones are admonished that they have but little strength (Rev. iii. 16); then the word to the faithful is—*not* to be purging out other people, but to self-purgation; not to be judging ecclesiastically by dealing punitively with error, but in a spirit of becoming lowliness to withdraw from it. The difference is immense, and both the moral and spiritual effects of the two methods of procedure are in glaring contrast. Sign-gifts (1 Cor. xii.), connected with the *visibility* of the body, have passed away, and any sort of ecclesiastical pretension is therefore an anachronism: the Ephesian class of gifts, connected with the *vitality* of the body, remains; so that we still have pastors, evangelists and teachers; and these, thank God, will never fail, let the Church on earth be what it may. Sinners will still be called out from the world by the preaching of the Gospel, and the sheep of Christ will still be watched over and fed; for He Who is both Saviour and Shepherd remains, and it is on His faithfulness that everything for the present, as for the future, rests.

And let us not forget that the path laid down for us in 2 Tim. ii. 19-22 inevitably leads to Christ—His Word, His sanctuary, Himself: for calling on the Lord out of a pure heart supposes all these things. When the Church system has broken down we still have Christ and the teachings of Christ, and the condition of things before the system was set up. What then of error? What saith the Lord? "Let both grow together until the harvest." Don't try to root out. Rome and Exclusivism pre-eminently have

sought to do this, and sad work they have made of it—rooting out the wheat! “Extirpate—extirpate!” was the cry of Rome in the Middle Ages. To extirpate is the covert policy of Exclusivism to-day. It is not part of the Church’s mission to root out. God will see to that, and He will do the rooting out in His own time and His own way. *We are not able for it.*

To seek to build up a system which has broken down is to build without Christ, Who no longer has the stars in His right hand; it is giving authority to the unspiritual, to the ignorant and letter-bound, to those without bowels of mercies, so that scattering must follow. Mr. Groves, as I have shown, perceived this nearly a century ago, and how prophetic has his warning proved! And shall not we take instruction from the past? If we have found that in trying to build up we have only been pulling down; that in seeking to lead the sheep into safer pastures we have rather hindered that “going in and out” which is their privilege—does it not become us to acknowledge wherein we have erred, and with chastened minds to lead back, in so far as may be given us, to the old paths, which are fenced by no high pretensions, and where liberty is given to the lowly to walk in love with the lowly?

One cannot shut one’s eye to the fact that the inevitable effect of Exclusivism is to give those who cultivate that spirit a narrowed view of the ways of God, and an exaggerated notion of Exclusivist aims and accomplishments.¹ At a Gospel meeting at W—— not long since the preacher, dealing with David as a type of Christ, enforced the need of Christian devotedness in the day of the Lord’s rejection with a good deal of ingenuity; and though there was nothing of the Gospel in the address, nor evidence of special unction in the teaching, the effect produced upon an almost exclusively Exclusive congregation must have been extraordinary. The verily-we-are-the-people suggestiveness of the message was not lost upon

¹Let us not forget that the most memorable work of Brethren was done before Exclusivism was thought of; its most notable work since has, I doubt not, been done outside the Exclusive circle.

the audience, and at the following night's prayer-meeting every brother (there were seven who took part) made the preacher, or the preacher's homily, the burden of his petition. Hardly any other subject was touched upon, and then only in the most casual manner. The one theme was the ministry of the night before and its bearing either upon "the Company" or "the Testimony." The testimony of grace in the Gospel, to say nothing of the needs of the Church of God at large, might have been non-existent for all that the praying seven were able to visualise. As I walked away from the meeting, musing on this singular lack of spiritual proportion, I could not help saying, Oh that these good brothers might be given to see the value of a wider vision and a larger heart!—that they might be drawn away from themselves and the I-even-I-only-am-left spirit of a dangerous complacency (1 Kings xix. 10) to that which the bountiful God is Himself doing by other instruments—in many cases by men and women of whom they either know nothing, or regard with a misdirected and quite superfluous pity. The perusal of such a book as Stanley Arnot's *Garenganze*, or Dr. Strachan's *The Maréchale*, would, I believe, set them thinking—perhaps praying, too—to some purpose.

It is easy, of course, to ignore criticism by assuming a rôle of superiority to affectionate counsel and warning; but there are penalties which rest upon us if we persist in so doing. We cannot shut ourselves off from the children of God by human barriers without loss to ourselves. Inevitably we lose touch with that which is also, and equally, the testimony; I mean, the stimulating ministrations of the Lord's grace through others: and I do not doubt that the removal of the candlestick of Gospel witness from the Exclusive company, which even themselves admit, is one of those penalties. That shelter has been sought behind the plea that Exclusivism's special message is to the Church rather than the world savours of presumption, and seems odd in face of the havoc which Exclusivist decrees and propaganda have made among the saints. "He that winneth souls is wise," and who shall

say that the way of God is to divert from a path of wisdom a considerable section of His people? Yet the men who have been driven from the narrowing circle of Exclusivism at each division have been largely the soul-winners and men of shepherd character, the evangelists and pastors. Surely if any fact should send us to our knees it is this.

To sum up. From what has been said I find that C. A. C. and I agree on one point, namely, that 2 Tim. ii. 19-23 contains the believer's "special charter in the last days"; but also, that we differ essentially in our reading of that charter. C. A. C. finds in it definite authority for reconstructing the Church system which has broken down. I find the complete antithesis of that authority. The mystifying terms of the pamphlet show how unsatisfactory are confessions of faith, however carefully formulated; though, indeed, the overt acts of Exclusivism and presentment of Exclusivist tenets are seen to be in very close agreement when the esoteric significance of its terminology is understood. What seems so fair on a superficial reading (I say it not unkindly) is really an ironbound assumption, a monstrous pretension which has crystallised into the system whose evil fruits I have been considering. I say "fruits," for I would repeat again that it is the *practice* of Exclusivism, its overt acts, not its professions or disavowals, which are the important matters in this enquiry. While the company exercises the functions of the Church even to the cutting off of whole assemblies, it is idle to hedge behind the guarded admission, "To *have* assembly character, and to act in Christ's name, is blessed divine favour. To *claim* that we have this character, and that we so act, might be the most worthless pretension" (*Righteousness in the Last Days*, p. 17). The two pretensions here predicated—to have assembly character and to be acting in Christ's name—must have been before the writer's mind or the qualification would be meaningless. . . . The fact that brands the company is *that the pretensions are there*; and I maintain that there is no warrant for them in the passage to which appeal has been made, not the

feeblest shadow of a warrant. 2 Tim. ii. 19-23 is the standing condemnation of all Exclusivist pretensions.

It would not be difficult to show, also, that of the many New Testament passages which deal with the conditions of the last days, not one gives the least support to what is distinctive in Exclusivist formularies. The teaching is all the other way. In no passage that I can find is there so much as a hint that, as the coming of the Lord draws near, any company of believers will be in a state of moral fitness to exercise the functions of the assembly. That the assembly subsists at all times under the eye of God is, of course, most blessedly true; the epistles to the Seven Churches of Asia show this: but ruin has come in, and the abiding question is, Who can justify a pretension to build up the ecclesiastical order which has broken down?

Take the epistles referred to, Rev. ii. and iii. It is generally admitted that the conditions described in the seven letters are prophetically descriptive of Church conditions from apostolic times to the coming of the Lord. The first three, Ephesus, Smyrna and Pergamos, deal with a state of things which (speaking characteristically) has had its day; the remaining four, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea, possess characteristics which go on to the close. To speak more particularly, the special note of Ephesus is the waning of first love—the first step down-hill, so to say; in Smyrna persecution—the ten persecutions of the Roman pagan empire being the divine method of recall to first love; in Pergamos, acceptance of State patronage—the condition of things which came in with Constantine the Great. In none of these epistles is there any mention of the coming of the Lord, whether as encouragement or warning, and the wisdom of this is evident when we remember that the outstanding features of each were more or less transitory, not such as would—or could—continue characteristically to the close.

Not so with the other four; for here we have conditions which, once manifested, are found as constant features

till the assembly's history on the earth is finished. Thus in Thyatira we have Popery; in Sardis, Protestantism; in Philadelphia, devoted faithfulness amid great weakness; in Laodicea, pretension unashamed, with lukewarmness and spiritual destitution. To each of these the imminence of the Lord's return is held out as encouragement or warning.

Now, it is worthy of remark that, while two out of the first three assemblies are commended or reprov'd in the persons of their responsible lights for faithfulness or laxity in respect of prevailing evil, there is no commendation or reproof, no suggestion even of the necessity of dealing with evil, in respect of the assemblies which prefigure the Church's state in a day of ruin. Thus, the Ephesian assembly (whose star or representative light is seen in Christ's hand) is commended because it has "tried them who say that themselves are apostles and are not" (ii. 2, N.T.)—clearly a formal ecclesiastical trying or process of judgment. The Pergamos assembly, which had among them those who held the wicked doctrines of Balaam and the Nicolaitanes, are threatened, *as an assembly*, with direct chastisement from the Lord, unless they repent (ii. 14-16). Clearly they were to deal collectively with the evil which had invaded them.

When, however, we turn to the other addresses, those which synchronise with the last days and the Church's manifested ruin, a new note is struck. In Thyatira, though Jezebel had deeply infected the assembly with her idolatries, and judgment is threatened against that false prophetess and her children, "the rest in Thyatira, as many as have not this doctrine" (ii. 24), that is, the faithful ones in the assembly, are not called upon to deal with the evil; neither—a fact to be specially marked—are the stars seen any longer in Christ's hand. It is as though the unfaithfulness of those responsible lights had lost them that place of authority and strength. There is no word of judging others or of casting out; the true ones *are simply to cleave to the good which they possess*. "I will put upon you none other burden: but that which

ye have already hold fast till I come ” (ii. 24, 25). In Sardis it is the same thing. The many, who had sunk into a dead formalism, are called upon to be watchful and “ to strengthen the things that remain ”; to remember what they had heard and to act in accordance with the teaching. The others, “ a few names, which have not defiled their garments ” (iii. 4), while encouraged by the promise of special recognition by and by, are not told to separate from the “ dead ” ones in Sardis, or to deal with that condition. Moreover, the stars, which are mentioned here for the last time, are not seen as reinstated. The hand which held them in the Ephesian epistle is not even mentioned (iii. 1).

In Philadelphia, which presents, perhaps, the most cheering prediction of latter-day Christianity to be found in Scripture, there is still less encouragement to ecclesiastical pretension. The epistle says nothing about dealing with evil, nor is there a single reference to ecclesiastical functions or faithfulness, whether in the form of praise or censure. But the Lord, in full recognition of the company’s “ little strength,” and as having “ the key of David,” sets before them “ an open door ” which no man can shut—an appealing thought in view of Exclusivism’s excommunicating fervour in a day of ruin. It is no longer a question of Peter with the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and with powers of binding and loosing (Matt. xvi. 19), but of the key of David in Christ’s own hand, which none may use but Himself.

And just as the word to Peter was a word to himself alone, a personal commission and restricted to his day, so, in the day of the Church’s manifold defections, Christ alone, not even an “ angel of the Church,” has the key of David. Peter was the apostle of the circumcision, and consequent upon the rejection of Messiah the kingdom definitely assumed its character of *mystery*. It was the kingdom of *Heaven*, to be administered from Heaven, the King being there and no longer on the earth. The Lord does not say to Peter, “ I will give unto you the keys of the kingdom of God ”; and the distinction should be

weighed. The kingdom of God I judge to be the kingdom according to divine purpose, the kingdom as God willed it; which is not so much a mysterious as a manifested thing, wherein the King is recognised and no Peter with the keys required. It is the kingdom as it will be on the earth when the true David returns to reign, the kingdom whose setting up is coincident with the Church's apostacy and rejection; just as the bringing in of the Church was coincident with the rejection of the King by the Jewish nation. And who has the key in this Philadelphian epistle? Christ, not man. Who shuts and opens there? Christ, and only Christ. The key is the key of the kingdom about to be manifested, but it is no longer in the Churchman's hand, for the Church is in readiness to be cut off. Christ has the key: He Who "openeth and no man shutteth; and shutteth and no man openeth" —well for us that it is so! (Rev. iii. 7).

In Laodicea the assembly is definitely set aside, and in spite of boundless pretension the call is to self-judgment, a very different thing from sitting in the judge's seat. It is the Church's last stage: and here, remark, the most appealing call of all is *to individuals outside the circle of ecclesiastical pretension*, to any man who hears the voice of Christ, and opens to His call. "Behold I stand at the door and knock. If any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in and will sup with him, and he with Me" (iii. 20).

Here, then, to touch once more the essential facts, we have seven epistles, four of which deal admittedly with the Assembly in "the last days," the days of the Church's shame and destitution, and what have we found? We have found that, whereas the first three epistles evidently recognise conditions in which the Assembly was responsible to deal *as an assembly* with evil and evil persons, the last four epistles contain no such teaching, but the contrary. We find further that, by reason of these altered conditions, there is a transference of authority, so to speak; so that everything reverts to Christ. *In a day of ruin man is not able for the judge's seat*; his spiritual

intelligence is not to be trusted. “ *The Lord knoweth* ”; but not man. “ As many as I love I rebuke and chasten ”: “ If any man hear *My* voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, ” etc. “ I have set before thee an open door ”: “ I know thy works ”; these and many other Scriptures show how the Lord takes into His own hands matters of discipline and rule which, in brighter days, were left to the conscience and judgment of the spiritual. Unerring Wisdom, foreseeing the iniquities that would be perpetrated in the Lord’s name, when the unspiritual, vaunting unlimited judicatory powers,¹ should install themselves in the seat of judgment, provided this better thing: the Lord becomes Executor as well as Head.²

If these things are, what is the resource of the faithful in an evil day? Where is the plain, simple path, referred to at the beginning of this paper, which, while opening up the possibilities of widest fellowship with the people of God, offers a barred door to every form of ecclesiastical assumption on the one hand, and to association with evil in doctrine or practice on the other? I answer again, The path is to be found in 2 Tim. ii. 20-22, in which the man of God is presented to us—not as an office-bearer or Church light, but as a servant, a fellow-labourer with the devoted Paul. I perceive with C. A. C. the bearing of the passage on the times in which we are, and, therefore, have no objection to regarding it—using his own phrase—as “ our charter for the last days. ”

Now, this charter has, as we have seen, three stages or steps. First of all the man of God is called upon to

¹ See the letter from the Exclusive assembly at Langley Park Hall, Sutton, cited in the first edition of this work, in which the company claimed the right “ to judge of persons or questions, in this or any other matter, ” and stoutly maintained, to quote their own expression, that “ this is the ground upon which we gather ”! The amazing assumption of the claim has probably no parallel outside of Rome.

² Needless to say I fully recognise the responsibility of contending earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints. Matters here discussed are quite outside that field of enquiry.

purge himself from vessels to dishonour in order to become a sanctified vessel.

Secondly, he is to flee youthful lusts.

Thirdly, he is to follow righteousness, faith, charity, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart.

Let us suppose a case. A Christian, apprehending, as every spiritual person must, the intensely individual nature of his responsibilities in a day of ruin, dissociates himself from whatever he feels to be evil in the "great house" of profession. He purges himself according to the rule laid down in 2 Tim. ii. The step is not taken in a haughty or censorious spirit, but unobtrusively, in a spirit of lowliness; yet as one to whom the claims of the Word of the Lord are vital and paramount. Moreover, he *purges himself*, not others; there is nothing judicial or even ecclesiastical in the process; and by purging himself he becomes a sanctified vessel.

But that is not all. The first step has brought him to what might be called outward or positional sanctification: there must be practical, inward sanctification too if the vessel is to be really fitted for the Master's use. The world, with its lust of the flesh, lust of the eye and pride of life, spreads out its allurements, carnal and intellectual, and so insidious are these evils that the only safe attitude towards them is the attitude—not so much of a resister as a *fugitive*. The man of God is to flee youthful lusts. That is the second step.

The last step is the antithesis of the second. It is a pursuit, not a fleeing. The separated servant is to pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace; and he is not to pursue it alone. He who setteth the solitary in families knows how to bring together those who are earnest in this pursuit of good, the pure in heart who call upon the name of the Lord; *and thus it is the company is reached*.

Supposing there are only one or two such in a given locality. Well, the Lord knoweth them that are His. They are brought to know each other, and anon, as in the natural order of things, are found together, owning

gladly the precious uniting bond—the Lord Himself. The rest is simple. “Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matt. xviii. 20). No ecclesiastical formula is required; such formula would indeed be strangely out of place. They receive one another in the confidence of brethren, to the glory of God and in the name of their common Lord. In His name the Table is spread, and together they partake of the Supper, blessedly assured of His Presence and benediction. Could anything be more simple or suitable in a day of manifested weakness, a day of ruin?

Before the Cross, while as yet the Church was non-existent save in the purpose of God, the blessed Lord gave to the “little flock” the charter which I have quoted, “Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them.” The ecclesiastical system had not then been set up, and the provision fully answered to the amorphous needs of “the children of God scattered abroad.” We are in very much the same anomalous circumstances to-day; though for other reasons. The ecclesiastical system has broken down. The Church is in ruins. For all practical purposes we have dropped back to the conditions of Matt. xviii. 20. And shall not those conditions suffice? “Where two or three are gathered together in My name there am I in the midst of them.” Gathered to His name; Jesus in the midst: what a provision! “Where” marks the place of His Presence; “two or three” shows that He owns the very smallest company gathered to His name; “are gathered” implies a Power that gathers. The Holy Ghost is that power, Who acts by means of the Word. “Together” speaks of the fellowship of those gathered. I say “the fellowship,” for let us not forget that fellowship, rightly understood, is a most precious thing. I am not afraid of the word; but the fellowship is a fellowship of love, not an ecclesiastical proposition. “In My name” indicates the authority for so gathering; a divine authority, not a dogma or tenet. “There am I” speaks of the Person present, the Lord Himself—precious fact! “In

the midst of them " points to the Lord as Centre of the gathered ones.

To be gathered to His name is indeed all that is required of us ; but it is a great *all*. On the other side is Himself ; His promised Presence, the shelter of His name. Christ becomes again the Centre and Controller, excluding for ever the nebulous uncertain fancies which Exclusivism has installed in His place. The unchangeable Christ takes the place of man and man's conflicting ideals. We get back to the Fountain-head : to the Alpha, the Beginning (Rev. i. 8) ; to *Him Who knows* : the One Who bears the key of David ; Who opens and no man shuts, and shuts and no man opens ; to Christ the Consoler, the Shepherd, the Friend ; the patient Teacher, the infallible Guide, the gracious Wooer, Who stands at the heart's door of every lonely, harassed child of God, and says, as of old, " If any man hear My voice and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with Me." Is this not a satisfying portion, a full provision ? Oh to be delivered from all ecclesiastical pretension and to enjoy more and more of this feasting, this supping with the Beloved ! May we know what it is to go in and out of His garden of delights, leaning on His arm of strength, living by His life, and finding evermore the sweetness of His fruit to our taste !

What cheer there is in all this for the Lord's solitary ones !—those poor bewildered souls who so often find themselves adrift through the rigours of Exclusive action ! How often has one felt the desire to point these afflicted ones to the Scripture above quoted, that unspeakably gracious promise enshrined in one of the saddest judgment-chapters of the Bible ! (Rev. iii.)—how often been led out in prayer that the *waiting* Lord would reveal His blessed nearness to their lonely hearts !

When those who name Thy Name, dear Lord,
 Cast out unshamed Thy trembling sheep,
 And they who crave the healing word—
 Yet vainly crave—sad vigil keep :
 O let *Thy* way of love appear,
 And bid these lone ones know Thee near !

In Jewry once, a simple man,
 Rejoicing in his new-found sight,
 Fell under Pharisaic ban
 Of some that could not bear the Light.
 But Thou, in swift response of grace,
 Didst greet him in the outside place.

And, owning Thee as Son of God
 In freedom's Solitude of Light,
 The unbefriended path he trod
 Grew strangely, mystically bright.
 Emancipate, he learned to prove
 The holy fellowship of love.

What *was*, my soul, may be once more :
 Cast down, but not forsaken—thou!
 “ Cast out ”—but at the fast-barred door
 Stands One with welcome words enow :
 “ Spread, child, thy lone heart's *agapé*,¹
 For I must come and sup with thee! ”

At this point it may be advisable, and even necessary, to introduce a more personal note. In the earlier imprint of this pamphlet I was still in bondage to a form of prejudice from which few Exclusives, I suppose, are free—haunted, shall I say, by the curious and gloomy obsession that, whatever company I might eventually drift into, it would not, and could not be Open Brethren. Those who have grown up in Exclusivism, and perhaps only those, will understand my feeling. At the same time I realised that a kind of logical necessity was urging me in that direction; and in order to evade the issue I fell back for a time upon the fascinating conception of a community of solitaries; by which I mean of brethren who, from one cause and another, were standing aside from all companies. In short, after nearly forty years' association with Exclusive Brethren, I had come to the conclusion that the only path for the Christian in a day of much brokenness and perplexity was one of isolation, and that Scripture provided fully for such a path. Yet I am free to confess—and, indeed, rejoice in the admission—that my outlook was too narrow, and, indeed, pretentious; and that, in supposing such a path to be my last stand-by, I had un-

¹The *agapæ* were the love-feasts of the early Christians, held either before or after the Lord's Supper.

wittingly been doing a grave injustice to a large body of Christians, who, as I now know, are holding the truth in simplicity and love, and with manifest tokens of divine favour.

The fact that I have thus been led astray is of course of no consequence to any but myself; nor does it offer, *per se*, any warrant for breaking into print on the subject; but the underlying facts are so important, and affect so closely a quite considerable section of the Church of God, that I make no apology for dealing with them here. Oh that some, whose mistaken zeal for His honour has too often led to heart-shakings and scatterings, might be so far arrested by this appeal as to search the Word of God in a Berean spirit concerning the foundations on which their pretensions are built. I am sure the exercise would be profitable. I attribute my own long blindness as to beloved Open Brethren to a lack of this spirit. The teaching current among the Exclusive company assumed—and indeed asserted—that Bethesda was hopelessly at sea on the doctrine of the unity of the Church, and I embraced the teaching almost without question. This teaching had passed into a tradition; and while supplying interesting parallels with the famous passage in 2 Tim. ii., and overlapping it more or less, it constituted—and after more than three-quarters of a century it still constitutes—the second great stronghold of Exclusivism.

The disastrous controversy—or series of controversies—which followed the exposure of Mr. B. W. Newton's heresies, really raged around this dogma; and a very famous pamphlet, Mr. Darby's *Separation from Evil God's Principle of Unity*, in which the principle is formally enunciated, is generally regarded as the clearest, most authentic, and, by many, the final word on the Exclusivist side. It was the pamphlet which, too carelessly weighed, carried my own mind many years later, and which held me as a sort of last link to Exclusivism until November of last year (1923), when circumstances led me to re-read the pamphlet, and then to bring it (not without very real exercise) to the touchstone of the Word of God.

Suffer me to say in passing that I yield to none in my admiration for the author of this pamphlet, that supremely gifted and lion-hearted teacher, John Nelson Darby. Though it was never my privilege to know him—he died in 1881—I love and revere his memory. None has helped me as he has helped, whether by the depth and range of his teaching or the extraordinary influence of his example; and I should be an ingrate indeed were I to minimise my spiritual indebtedness. But the fact that I hold him in such esteem, and the further fact that I see with him so closely in most matters, carries with it no obligation to follow him in all his teachings. To take such ground would be equivalent to saying, “I am of Darby,” after the manner of those Corinthian Christians whose unseasonable boasting, “I am of Paul,” “I of Cephas,” “I of Apollos,” deservedly incurred the censure of the apostle.

When I reopened the pamphlet in question after thirty-five years, God knows it was not to criticise. I was much cast down and perplexed by reason of the frigid silence of some to whom I had written in affectionate terms. I had been seeking for long months their fellowship; had written in love, taking whatever blame I could for strained relations; but all to no purpose. I could have cried with the Psalmist: “I looked on my right hand, and beheld, but there was no man that would know me: refuge failed me; no man cared for my soul” (Psa. cxlii. 4); and it was at this crisis (my last letter to the local gathering having been officially ignored for seven months¹) that the wave

¹ It has not been acknowledged to this hour. I had offended by too plain speaking, and had thereby wounded a brother of singularly narrow mind and morbid sensibilities. His unforgiveness may be understood in the light of a remark made at an Exclusivist Bible-reading not long since: “Brotherly affection,” said the speaker, “is so tender that, once it has been intruded upon, it is hard to regain.” The remark was reproduced without comment in the published report of the reading (*Genealogical Registry in a Day of Departure*, p. 9). Think of the admission! The people who are *The Testimony*, the sole collective expression of Him Who enjoined a seventy-times-seven forgiveness, find it hard to forgive the brother who has once offended! What a flood of light it throws upon the system!

of doubt as to Exclusivist pretensions which had once before made havoc of my peace of mind again rolled in upon my spirit. In order to strengthen my heart for more endurance I sought out the pamphlet. As I re-read it, my mind better fortified from Scripture than on the first occasion, and therefore under less bondage to man—light broke in.

For some years (since 1916 to be precise) I had come to the conclusion that the imposing structure of dogma built upon 2 Tim. ii., the other mainstay of Exclusivism, was a house of cards; and that if it had any bearing at all upon the subject the teaching was all the other way: but the central dogma of the pamphlet by Mr. Darby, namely, that separation from evil is God's principle of unity, *in the special sense that is given to the dogma by the writer of the pamphlet*, received my unquestioning assent for nearly forty years—indeed, till quite recently; when circumstances, as I have said, led me to examine the pamphlet by the Word of God.

I say, "in the special sense given to the dogma" by Mr. Darby, and the qualifying phrase is important. All thoughtful Christians would probably agree that "separation from evil is God's principle of unity," or, at all events, of communion and fellowship; but it is evident that there may be more ways than one of expressing such separation, and it is just here that Close and Open Brethren part company.

The teaching of Mr. Darby's pamphlet is that there must be *separation from persons* as well as from the evil, and this is the Exclusive view. The teaching of Open Brethren is (or perhaps I should say their unformulated method of procedure takes for granted that) Scripture says nothing about separation from persons except in certain exceptional and clearly defined cases; and that the opposite conception, as being narrower than the Word of God, inevitably makes for ecclesiastical hardness and division. Now, these conceptions of doctrine and conduct are diametrically opposed to one another, and they cannot both be right. Either separation from evil in the sense under-

stood by Mr. Darby and his followers is God's principle of unity or it is not. Let us now turn to this much discussed pamphlet, and examine it, together with one or two shorter statements from the same pen which formed part of the original discussion. They are to be found in Vol. I. of the *Ecclesiastical* section of the *Collected Writings*.

“ God's unity,” says Mr. Darby, “ is always founded on separation since sin came into the world. ‘ Get thee out ’ is the first word of God's call : it is to Himself ” (p. 547). This is most true. The command “ Get thee out ” was to Abram, but *out of what was he called?* The question carried by the disjunctive is important. From what was the patriarch called to separate? Not from chosen vessels like himself; not from any company of God's people; but from idolaters; from men who were bending knees to Marduk and Ramman, to Bel and Shamash, and other false gods of the Semitic Babylonians and Sumerians. As to fact, the thought of unity has no place in the passage referred to; for Abram was called out *alone*, and at that time there was no company with whom he could unite. To say that he was called out to be united to God would be nonsense, or worse, and of course was not in the writer's mind. That he was called out to walk with God, however—to have fellowship with Him—is most true; but that is quite another thought.

To quote again. “ God is working in the midst of evil to produce a unity of which He is the centre and the spring, and which owns dependently His authority. He does not do it yet by the judicial clearing away of the wicked : He cannot unite with the wicked or have a union which serves them. How can it be then this union? He separates the called from the evil. ‘ Come out from among them and be ye separate, and I will receive you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty.’ As it is written, ‘ I will walk in them, and dwell in them,’ etc. Now, here we have it distinctly set forth. This was God's way of gathering [or gathering *out*]. It was by saying, ‘ Come out from among them ’ ” (pp. 556, 557).

Again I say—the qualification in square brackets being

borne in mind—Most true. But from what were these called ones to come out? In 2 Cor. vi. 17, the first of the two passages quoted, the separation is from Belial and infidels; in Isa. liii. 11, the other passage, it is from the uncircumcised and unclean: that is, from unbelievers. In neither case is the thought of believer separating from believer so much as hinted at.

Referring to the slow work of separation between the elect of the Jewish nation and their unregenerate brethren in our Lord's day, Mr. Darby says: "The Lord (when, as the great result, He would have one flock and one Shepherd) *put forth* His own sheep and went before them" (p. 560). Here, again, the putting forth (the term is italicised in the pamphlet) refers to no separation of saint from saint, but of an elect remnant from the unbelieving mass of the nation. The pressing of this Scripture into the controversy is as strange as the foregoing.

Nor can I think that 1 John i. 6, referred to on page 562, supports the writer's contention any better. "If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth." Upon which Mr. Darby's comment is: "Separation from evil is the necessary first principle of communion with Him. Whoever calls it in question is a liar—he is, so far, of the wicked one." Doubtless this is also true; but how does the fact affect, even in a remote degree, the question of separation as formulated by followers of this school? Strange, indeed, that such a Scripture—to say nothing of the Scriptures previously quoted (for the writer offers no others for this part of his argument) should be adduced in support of a judicial process so hurtful to charity as separation from the people of God! The possibility of such separation is indeed intimated in Scripture. "Divisions and offences" may come; but woe unto him through whom they come. They do not constitute a divine principle of unity, but are matters of divine reprobation (Rom. xvi. 17 and Luke xvii. 1).

"Separation from evil is God's very nature," says Mr.

Darby, a statement which no Christian would seek to question (p. 561). Essentially holy in His nature, God is of necessity separate from evil—cannot be otherwise. It is a fixed condition of His Being, so to say. There can be no act of separating, which, indeed, would suppose a previous association with evil, and that is unthinkable. God is always separate from evil; even (perhaps most declaratively) when it is found in a believer; but, blessed be His Name! *He does not separate from the believer*, and that is really the whole question. Peter realised this fact in a touching manner on the Lake of Gennesaret, when, in deep conviction of his sinfulness, he fell down at Jesus' knees and said, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord" (Luke v. 8). Mark the drawing power of grace at this moment! He falls down at Jesus' knees; being drawn to Him even when the fact of his exceeding sinfulness was most apparent; and this drawing was of God. The whole scene furnishes us with an absolutely different state of things from that of separation as to persons.

In man's relations with man the case is, of course, somewhat different. The believer is called upon to separate from unbelievers; and the act which separates him from the world also links him with a heavenly company. "God," said the apostle James, "did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for His name" (Acts xv. 14); and one of the purposes of the blessed Lord in coming to earth was that He might "gather together in one the children of God that were scattered abroad" (John xi. 52). It was largely the burden of His prayer to the Father just before He went to Gethsemane (John xvii. 21-23); and we know that among the gracious offices of the Spirit of God to-day is the baptism into one body of believers of every sort, Jews or Gentiles, bond or free, so that it can be said of them—wonderful grace!—"Now ye are the body of Christ" (1 Cor. xii. 13 and 27).

I repeat, then, that separation as to persons (save in one or two altogether special cases, as to which there are the clearest directions in Scripture) carries no farther in

the thought of God than separation from the world; while the "gathering out" from the world is with a view to a "gathering together," not to further scattering.

Elsewhere Mr. Darby says that "worldliness always destroys unity" (p. 560); a statement with which I wholly disagree. Worldliness does, indeed, destroy communion or fellowship, which is a fruit or outcome of practical, expressed unity, but that is quite another thing. "The flesh," continues the writer, "cannot rise up to heaven, nor descend in love to every need. It walks in the separative comparison of self-importance. 'I am of Paul,' etc. 'Are ye not carnal and walk as men?' Paul had not been crucified for them, nor had they been baptised in the name of Paul. They had got down to earth in their minds, and unity was gone" (p. 560). These Corinthian saints were undoubtedly walking loosely; in a very earthly-minded fashion, as Mr. Darby intimates: but how, one is led to ask, was this unity lost? The answer is quite simple. By party strife; by faction-making; by separating from one another over hair-splitting differences of doctrine and practice—the very thing which Exclusivism has been doing with such deadly consistency throughout its troubled history. Nevertheless (and this is the question really before us at the moment), did Paul separate from the saints at Corinth on that account? The answer is equally clear. His course was the complete antithesis of such action. Reunion by grace, not by separation, was his remedy. The principle on which the Corinthians were unconsciously acting was the avowed principle of Exclusivism: St. Paul led them back to Christ, the divine Gathering-point, the alone Healer of divisions. He reasoned with them—pleaded—scolded, if you like: but from beginning to end of the two epistles there is not the smallest hint of casting them off. I am sure he would not have said that separation from evil, in the Exclusivist sense of the term, is God's principle of unity. His mission—and nobly did he fulfil it—was to heal, not to scatter. The Psalmist's "If thou, Lord, shouldest mark iniquity, O Lord, who should stand?" (Psa. cxxx. 3) had its counterpart in the apostle's

“ I know that in me, that is, in my flesh, dwelleth no good thing ” (Rom. vii. 18); and since all the Lord's people were thus proclivous to evil, where was separation to begin?

The practice of the great apostle in the case of Corinth is, in fact, so highly instructive that I venture to dwell upon it. The condition of things in the assembly there could hardly have been more deplorable. Sectarianism was actively at work; gifts which had been granted for edification were being used for display; brethren were getting drunk at the Lord's Supper; and an incestuous person was actually in open association with the believing company. If ever there were conditions in which separation from the persons of believers could be advocated as a principle, surely these were they. If ever there was a man holy enough in his walk, and instructed enough in the ways of God to give the lead in such separation, that man was the apostle Paul. Yet how different, as we have seen, was the principle on which he *did* take action! The whole of his first epistle is a liberal lesson in the ways of grace with Christians—in this case with Christians whose deeds were evil, and whose minds were carnal. For the Pauline method was not to reject the fleshly-minded, *but to treat them as babes*. He did not turn them out of the company to starve in helpless isolation, but fed them with milk. They were not up to a spiritual diet of strong meat, so he gave them infants' food. “ I have fed you with milk and not with meat; for hitherto ye were not able to bear it: neither yet now are ye able: for ye are yet carnal ” (1 Cor. iii. 2 and 3). Surely a worthier and more gracious process than cutting off!

As one ponders the epistle one hardly knows which to admire most—the apostle's holy zeal for God; his noble repression of self; his loving tactfulness; his glowing optimism; his fearless rebuke of sin; his exquisite tenderness in dealing with the weak. In fact, what is really brought before us in successive chapters is—not the purifying power of a principle of separation, but—the healing, teaching, love-infusing, uniting power *proceeding from a*

Spirit-filled vessel; that is, from the apostle himself. The thought of cutting-off, save in the case of the incestuous person, is not even hinted at; but the power of God to deal with the condition of things is fully recognised. "I will come unto you shortly," he says, "if the Lord will, and will know, not the speech of them which are puffed up, but the power: for the kingdom of God is not in word but in power" (1 Cor. iv. 19, 20). This verse, I doubt not, is the master-key by which the emergency-door out of most assembly troubles might be effectively unlocked—*the power of God*. "The kingdom of God is not in word"—not in excommunicatory edicts or fulminations of whatever sort—"but in power." The saints who are *spiritually* strong will know how to deal with evil as it arises; and such as lack this strength have only to wait upon God in a teachable, lowly spirit till power is vouchsafed. The exercise is always profitable, and the occasional necessity for it keeps up the spiritual tone of a meeting, or makes for recovery to spirituality where that tone is in danger of being lost. On the other hand, where the written or unwritten dogmas of Exclusivism are traditionally followed, the ease with which the will of the unspiritual may operate against the most godly is realised with painful recurrence, and, instead of spiritual power, we are confronted with a stubbornness of ignorance and deficiency of moral balance that work incalculable mischief—an usurped authority in the hands of men of undisciplined minds, *who have never learnt themselves*, and are like children playing with high explosives when they seek to meddle with the disciplinary functions of an assembly.

If it be argued that the leniency of the apostle's methods was due to the fact that this was his first appeal to Corinth, and that had it been necessary to reprove them again for the same disorders his attitude would have taken quite another character, the answer is to be found in his second letter. At the time this second letter was written it may be inferred that "debates, envyings, wraths, strifes, backbitings, whisperings, swellings and tumults" (2 Cor. xii. 20) were still rife in the assembly: nay, that

there were many offenders who, as the apostle says, had “not repented of the uncleanness and fornication and lasciviousness” which they had committed (v. 21). Yet the same note of tenderness and loving forbearance is to be found in the second epistle as in the first. Paul still addresses these disorderly saints as “dearly beloved” (v. 19), and points out that the power committed to him in connection with their laxity and worldliness was for building up, not for overthrowing (*καθαίρειν*, xiii. 10); and though he tells them that if he comes again he “will not spare” (xiii. 2), we can imagine what the nature of his discipline would have been from those touchingly anxious words: “I fear, lest, when I come, I shall not find you such as I would, and that I shall be found unto you such as ye would not . . . and lest, when I come again, *my God will humble me among you* (xii. 20, 21). “Humble *me*”—think of that! What a window is opened into the apostle’s soul in that short sentence! What grace—what tenderness! One might have expected to read, “Humble you, through me”; for surely it was they, and not the apostle, who needed humbling. Think what Exclusivism, which will excommunicate for a caustic word, or a difference of private judgment on a question of discipline, would have made of such a case!

The way of Exclusivism is strikingly (though doubtless undesignedly) expressed in the recent utterance of a recognised leader of the company. Speaking at the County Schools, Sydenham, in June last (1924), Mr. James Taylor said: “It is not kindness for those who are in any way governed by self-will, that we should allow [them] liberty amongst the people of God. It is no kindness to them. It is not kindness to the people of God; but it bespeaks impotency if one is allowed to move about at large governed by self-will. God would not have it so. *He has given us the means of limiting such.*” The pretension is guarded, yet it is plain enough, and the context makes it plainer. “Joseph had that means and employed it.” How? “He had spoken roughly to them” [his brethren]. “Some of

us know what that means," adds Mr. Taylor, "and it may be, brethren, that some of us need to be spoken to roughly even now. . . . Joseph spoke roughly to them; and not only that, but *he gathered them together*, as we are told, *in custody* " !

Beloved brethren, this will never do. Impotency ! Ah, did we but know it, the impotency lies not in our reluctance to deal roughly and to bring into durance our brethren in Christ, but in the lack of that persistency of love, and lowly service of grace in feet-washing, which were so potent in other days in the wholesome work of recovery. The true Joseph may indeed speak roughly to us for our good—and who that has known the Lord in the day of His east wind but will praise Him for His keenest blasts?—but what are we that we should sit in judgment on a brother's spiritual infirmities, advocating rough words and prison bonds? When the servant who had been forgiven the ten-thousand-talent debt took by the throat and cast into prison his fellow-servant, the hundred-pence debtor, his Lord was wroth and delivered him to the tormentors : surely a solemn warning to all would-be disciplinarians, and a matter for anxious thought to such as would strengthen by voice or pen the sinister hand of the oppressor (Matt. xviii. 23-35).

Let me not be misunderstood. I am far from thinking that the author of the expressions quoted is other than a gracious man. The remainder of his address is characterised by spiritual sensitiveness and true affection ; but Mr. T. must know quite well how phrases of the type illustrated are liable to be seized upon by unproved and ill-instructed Christians, whose roots usually lie no deeper than tradition, and whose zeal in condemning others is too often stimulated by these mystical misapplications of Old Testament history. I have no hesitation in saying that every word of Christ and His apostles which bears on discipline and Church government is in direct antagonism to Mr. Taylor's utterances, and that if he had studied the needs and idiosyncrasies of Christians with as much zeal as he has absorbed the traditions of Exclusivism his outlook would have been larger and more

gracious, and he would not have committed himself in the painful manner shown. Let us not forget that inseparable from our state as Christians are the infirmities and failures arising from the flesh within us. We all fail; we all sin. In the sight of the thrice Holy One the very "thought of foolishness is sin" (Prov. xxiv. 9). Even when Christians are met together under the most solemn sanctions and privileges—for the breaking of bread, for example—it is hardly conceivable that all the members of a given company have cleared themselves previously by confession—I mean, from those defilements which we so easily contract in our daily walk. To suggest that half the gathering have done so is a generous computation. Was not leaven baked with the fine flour at the Feast of Pentecost? thereby signifying that evil was in the assembly on the very day of its public inauguration, and at the supreme moment of the Spirit's outpouring; and if such was the case then, how much more must it be the case to-day, when failure and declension are on every hand! Yet God came amongst His people then, in all the plenitude of spiritual power. There was no word for Christians, gathered as they were in the Name of the Lord Jesus, to separate from one another because of evil. To separate from the world, yes—and their separation was wholehearted and thorough—but not to separate from their brethren in Christ. Regarding a believer's state at the breaking of bread the word is, "Let a man examine himself, and so let him eat" (1 Cor. xi. 28). A sensitive soul might twist the Scripture to mean, "so let him stay away": but the idea of absenting oneself finds no place in the passage; still less does the thought of forcible exclusion by others. The Lord calls us all to the trysting-place, and are we to be less gracious than He?

Think, in this connection, of the first Supper Table, when, in the very presence of Christ, the disciples fell to striving among themselves as to which should be accounted the greatest! Could any conduct have been more unseemly, more marked by self-will, more glaringly

reprehensible? Yet the blessed Lord did not withdraw from them because of their folly. He did not even use rough words. Rather, He made their condition of soul the occasion for enlarging upon His own self-abnegating service of love, "I am among you as He that serveth"; and—think of it!—He coupled with those words the unspeakably touching commendation, "Ye are they which have continued with Me in My temptations" (Luke xxii. 27, 28). Put them away for their folly? Ah no; that is not His way. Exclusivism in its stumbling blindness might have so acted, but the grace of Christ moves in another and a grander orbit. Not a word of blame falls from His blessed lips. Rather, He draws them yet closer to Himself by words of ineffable grace, and—precious fruit of highest ministry!—the pride of their poor hearts presently disappears before a tenderness that will not be denied.

But perhaps the outstanding instance of grace operating during and after failure is the well-known case of Simon Peter. Here was a man who had lived for three years in the Lord's company, who had heard His words and witnessed His miracles, yet afterwards denied Him with oaths and curses. A rare case for discipline surely! Thank God, the future apostle of the circumcision was under discipline from Christ, not Brethren! and who does not feel his heart's pulse quicken, and the hot tears gather in his eyes, as he ponders the story of Peter's restoration? The unhappy man had made temporary shipwreck, but, thanks to the Lord's intercession, his faith survived the awful shock, and the Master's look of forgiving love broke with welcome pain his anguished heart. He went out and wept bitterly.

Rough words? Ah, no; it was the look that broke him down—yea, even while the guilt of denial was hot upon his lips: and the same tenderness is surely to be found in that post-resurrection message, "Go, tell my disciples *and Peter*," as well as in the circumstance of the secret meeting with Peter (1 Cor. xv. 5), which preceded the meeting of John xx. 19. The Lord would not con-

front His poor disciple before the others until He had assured him privately that all was forgiven. Is it not just like Him, beloved brethren? The All-gracious One, with a tenderness that speaks itself divine, meets Peter, who had so deeply wronged Him, quite alone, and in the ensuing conference probes him with love in words that must have completely and for ever reassured his stricken heart, leaving him healed and unutterably happy. The Rock-man had been sifted, and the chaff had been exposed to the world's gaze: but the Lord had seen the wheat and knew its value. He knew, also, the wherefore of the sifting, and must have approved in Peter's brokenness the end achieved, an end which justified to the full His own pattern way of restoration.

Alas, that we must turn from such a picture to the sadness of modern happenings! Mr. Darby admits the existence of evil among the saints, yet, almost in the same breath, reiterates his cry for separation! "Since evil exists," he says, "yea, is our natural condition, there cannot be union of which the Holy Ghost is the centre and power but by separation from it. Separation is the first element of unity and union" (p. 557). Here, note, he is speaking of evil among the saints, evil which, as he says, is "our natural condition." Separation (by which, as the whole paper shows, no less than the circumstances which gave rise to it, he means separation as to persons) is the only remedy: separation, not patient waiting upon God, or temperate remonstrance with the offender; but separation, cutting off, in plain words, *division*: and ever since the Bethesda trouble, which gave occasion to the pamphlet, this ruling has remained an accepted principle of Exclusivism. Any explicit statement of the fact is tactfully avoided to-day, but that this is the underlying principle of Exclusive action no one can safely deny.

The outstanding blemish in the late J. B. Stoney's otherwise precious ministry is the maintenance of this unscriptural principle. It runs like a hempen strand through the rich tapestry of his brightest teaching. "The

unity of the Spirit is exclusiveness," he writes in one place, repeating the fundamental error of J. N. D.'s ruin-working pamphlet; and, as the context shows, his use of the term refers to rejection of persons (*Letters, Second Series*, iii. 142). To support this misconception he twists a simple difference of judgment into indifference as to the truth, and then, with culpable misapplication of Scripture, seeks to bring the objects of his reprobation under the terrors of 2 John 10, 11. "The principle for exclusion," he says, "is not only that a person *holds* the wrong doctrine, but that he gives any acknowledgment to one who does. Saying 'farewell' *χαίρειν* marks, we find in 2 John 10, 11, the character of this indifference. It is from this indifference we desire to separate, and this indifference we charge on Bethesda" (*ibid.* 142).

Now Mr. Stoney was a keen Bible student, and therefore must have known quite well that the apostle in this epistle was writing about deceivers, whose heresy consisted in the denial of Jesus Christ come in flesh. They were antichrists, subverters of the doctrine of Christ; and anyone who received such persons into his house, or wished them Godspeed, became partakers of their evil deeds. In order, therefore, to justify Mr. Stoney's attitude towards Bethesda (or Open Brethren) we must affirm three things: That Benjamin Wills Newton, the author of the heresy around which all the controversy raged, was an antichrist; which is simply nonsense: that Open Brethren as a body, in heartless indifference to the Lord's honour, had been receiving Mr. Newton into their houses, or wishing him Godspeed; which is quite untrue; and that 2 John 10, 11 gives warrant for cutting off from the breaking of bread brethren compromised by such carelessness; which is also untrue.

The second of these grievances has been frequently formulated by J. B. S. and others since the days of the Bethesda trouble; but in almost every instance the indifference complained of has not been to the truth, but to Exclusivists' interpretations of the truth—a very different

thing. Truth, as one need hardly say, is inflexible, unchangeable, and commands the conscience. Exclusivists' conceptions of the truth may be—and often are—as shifting as the sands, and call for careful testing. At the time of the Ryde and Ramsgate trouble brethren were fiercely contending over a principle of unity, “ the essential and infallible unity of the body ” (*Collected Writings*, I. 567); which had been held tenaciously for seventy years, but which was completely surrendered soon after the Glanton division, when a principle of congregationalism took the field. In fact, consistency, with the Exclusive company, is consistency with the principle of Exclusivism, rather than with any special teaching of Scripture; and the result has been that the grace and fervour of former times, when love was more accounted of than light, and life than knowledge, have been slowly dying for lack of kindly nutriment. Great spiritual forces like J. B. S. and J. N. D., the purity of whose motives none need question, have sufficed to keep alive this havoc-working dogma; though, indeed—and one rejoices in the thought—rumour even whispers that uneasiness as to the foundations of the dogma has been stirring in some hearts of late. Oh that the movement may lead to wide and strife-healing emancipation and a closing up of the thinning ranks of the faithful before the Lord comes!

That there may be such a reunion of the loyal-hearted, drawn from all sections of the Church, should surely be our ardent prayer; but the challenge for our hearts is, Are we low enough before God for the blessing? Have we a deep enough sense of the claims of Him Who prayerfully desired and still desires this practical expression of our oneness, to lay aside our pride and prejudices, our knowledge and our ignorance, and unitedly to wait upon the Lord? Why should not the barriers be removed? If teaching gift lies largely with one section, and evangelising gift with another, why should not those sections be drawn together, and the reproach of ancient differences be rolled away? The greatest of all our troubles, the immeasurable Bethesda sorrow—the fateful precedent for all succeeding troubles

—should never have been—of that I am persuaded: nor *could* it have happened but for the dominating influence of one man, whose ill-balanced views on separation gave a specious plea for dividing. Need the breach be perpetuated, the wrong continue, the grief remain unhealed?

The doctrinal position remains. The teaching of Mr. Darby and his school that *separation from people on account of evil is God's principle of unity*, is clearly quite untenable in the light of Scripture. I say, "separation from people," for this, as has been shown, is the real purport of the teaching; and the phrase, as thus qualified, would form a truer title for Mr. Darby's pamphlet. All that is actually proved, however, is that separation from evil is the first essential of communion—a very different thing from what the writer set out to prove. On this point, indeed, all believers are probably agreed—the company known as Open Brethren as definitely as the most exclusive—whereas, on the other hand, the contention that separation from fellow-Christians because of evil is God's principle of unity (which is the thesis of the pamphlet and the root principle of Exclusivism) the writer does not prove, but the contrary. The contention, indeed, ignores grace, and the whole history of God's dealings with His saints. If Scripture, and not human ingenuity in the misapplication of Scripture, is to be our guide, the advocates of this principle of separation are in error, and through allowing themselves to be governed by it they have grievously offended against the generation of God's children. Countless cases of individual oppression have been defended on this ground, and division after division has been the result. That many who have followed the teaching have acted in good faith and not without a zeal for God, I gladly admit, but alas! the mischief is not abrogated so. What has been done cannot be undone; any more than the mischief wrought by Saul of Tarsus was abrogated when his honest zeal as a persecuter was found to be "not according to knowledge."

Oh that beloved J. N. D. could have seen in the moments of Brethren's first crisis, what A. N. Groves perceived so

clearly, the devastation and sorrow which must attach to any course predetermined by this untoward principle of separation! As we gaze upon the ruin we realise the colossal nature of the blunder, and wonder how a man of such transcendent gifts and spirituality can have gone so far astray on a matter that seems to most of us so simple. Yet the annals of the Church bristle with such enigmas; ecclesiastical indiscretions which stand out as warning beacons in every great crisis; reminding us that the "treasure"—rightly esteemed of highest worth—has been deposited in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God and not of us (2 Cor. iv. 7). How many who have begun with a largeness of vision that was all but universal have ended on stereotyped provincial lines, the centre of a coterie, or the founders of inconsequential sects! Look at Martin Luther, the apostle of Protestantism. After herculean labours, for which the Church of God can never be too grateful, he was swept from his strong position in a moment of no very great testing, and became a sectary—the founder of Lutheranism! Look at John Wesley, the master-spirit of eighteenth-century evangelism. He, too, accomplished great things, making a brave stand for vital Christianity in a day of incredible superficiality and dead formalism; but the code of pretentious Rules which sprang mushroom-like out of his successes, exposed the vulnerable side of him, and Wesley became a sectary—the founder of Methodism. And what of J. N. D., perhaps the most enlightened commentator of modern times? No man was more mightily used than he for the recovery of precious truths, practical, doctrinal, and dispensational; and at a time when sacerdotalism was lifting its painted face from the arid gloom of a waning Evangelicalism, his influence for a few brief years was immense, and might have been irresistible: but intellectual impatience with men who could not follow him in all his disciplinary crotchets proved his undoing; and the man who should have lived in the hearts of countless thousands of Christians as a shepherd-teacher of incomparable parts became a sectary too, and is fated to go down in Church

history as the founder of Exclusivism ! Sad and humiliating, indeed, are the biographical lessons of the past even where the brightest servants of God are concerned ; teaching us that the search for perfection in the creature is a vain search, and that the idols which men make of men are doomed to be shattered. There never was but one perfect Servant, the Servant Son of God, Whose blessed mission was to gather, not to scatter ; and, thanks to the largeness of His grace, His Church, founded upon the revelation of His divine Sonship, and reclaimed from the wastes of sin by the Gospel, is the most *inclusive* institution ever devised by love, or made possible under earthly conditions of heaven-breathed life and teaching.

Now nothing is clearer to me than this—that *the principle on which God deals with His people is grace, not separation*. Poor would have been the outlook for any of us, individually or collectively, had the fact been otherwise. Think of Israel's history in this connection !—the principle which I find to be of God is written in characters of heavenly light all over it. Take, for illustration, that portion of the history which includes God's dealings from Egypt to Canaan (itself a multifold type of the Church's history through the Christian centuries) and see how grace wrought with the assembly in the wilderness.

Even before the Red Sea was crossed murmuring had begun, and some were saying to Moses “ Because there were no graves in Egypt, hast thou taken us away to die in the wilderness? ” Yet Moses' answer, as the spokesman for God, was, “ Fear ye not : stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord ” (Exod. xiv. 11, 13). Jehovah, Whose name is Holy, did not call upon His chosen servant to separate from His people because of their faithlessness. He stretched forth His omnipotent arm, and led the murmurers safely through the waters of death. Grace, not Separation, was the principle of action.

No sooner was Marah reached than murmuring broke out afresh ; and once more was the grace of the Lord manifested. The bitter waters were made sweet by the application of the tree to which they were directed ; and

forthwith they were led to Elim, where were twelve wells of water and threescore and ten palm-trees (xv. 24, 25, 27). Then came the Wilderness of Sin, and more murmuring. This time it was the whole congregation who rebelled; tempting the Lord in words that might well have provoked Him to anger. They accused Moses and Aaron, His accredited ministers, with bringing them into the wilderness to kill them with hunger. What could have been more offensive to God, naturally speaking, or have given ampler justification for judicial cutting off? Yet how was the profane clamour of this stiff-necked people met? "I will rain bread from heaven for you." Unlimited largesse of grace was the answer. And, according to promise, quails came up at evening, and in the morning manna lay round about the camp (Exod. xvi. 13).

At Rephidim, where they murmured again, grace was still the ready response, and water was given them out of the flinty rock; nor was it till Sinai was reached, and the people deliberately placed themselves under a covenant of works, that there was any pause in the steady flow of divine favour.

Nor did the flow really abate then; although, as Law had ostensibly taken the place of grace, the manner of its manifestation was inevitably changed. The tabernacle was set up, and from that time grace flowed out from the Sanctuary in virtue of a blood-sprinkled mercy-seat and atonement daily effected at the brazen altar. Thus grace abounded even under a regime of Law, and to him who sought Jehovah in the obedience of faith by sacrifice this grace was continually available. Under law, Israel transgressed and backslided again and again; their history is one long tale of failure in those forty years of testing; and on one memorable occasion they even relapsed into open idolatry: but neither then, nor at any time, were they taught to practise separation, or urged to any sort of judicial process that would have impaired the manifested unity of the people.¹ To the eyes of the world they

¹ In worshipping the golden calf the people, we are told, "sinned a great sin," and judgment overtook them at the hands of the children

were an unbroken congregation—the assembly of God in the wilderness—so that, when a Balaam, spurred on by his Moabite master, would have cursed them, he could only testify: “ How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob, and thy tabernacles, O Israel ! As the valleys are they spread forth ; as gardens by the river’s side ; as the trees of lign aloes which the Lord hath planted, and as cedar-trees beside the waters ” (Numb. xxiv. 5 and 6).

What a comment on Exclusivist practice and propaganda as to Separation is all this !

Do I make light of evil? God forbid. Sin must be judged and put away if we would enjoy communion with the Lord ; or spiritual intercourse with our brethren : but separation from evil as God accounts of it is a deeper thing—profoundly, infinitely deeper—than separation from people. It supposes separation of heart, personal sanctification ; and its exposition is a matter of one’s daily life, having effect—not in separative decrees or edicts of excommunication, but *in the practical exercise of a grace which keeps one separate*. It is the light set upon a candlestick which cannot be hid. I am to purge myself ; not to busy myself with schemes of purging others. Purgation of others will follow, as the night the day, as I seek to set forth Christ in my ways and conversation ; whereas the policy of lopping off the barren or crooked branches—as *we* may think them—is the most ruinous and pernicious of all policies.

Surely, beloved brethren—and my appeal is specially to those whose links are still with Exclusivism—this is not the way we have learnt Christ—I mean in the secret histories of our souls, which, after all, is all that matters. His teaching, whether by word or example, is the teaching of grace ; a grace which gathers and unites, not scatters ; and if we examine honestly our own hearts, and trace its operations there, we shall recognise how much of evil (active as well as potential evil) may cling to the indi-

of Levi, who “ gathered themselves together unto Moses ” for that purpose (Exodus xxxii. 26) ; but there was no disruption of the people on that occasion—nor, indeed, at any other time in their journeyings.

vidual whom He deigns to comfort with His presence or employ in His service. If we might separate *from ourselves*, that were well; for who that knows his own heart can be aught than overwhelmed in the thought of abounding failure and unwearied pardoning love? but until this has been accomplished let us be careful how we take the rod of judgment to smite our fellow-servants.

It is a solemn thing to reject whom the Lord has not rejected; and the condition of exclusiveness which has refused Christian fellowship to gracious servants of the Lord like Henry Craik, Anthony Groves, George Muller, Dr. Baedeker, Robert Chapman, and Stanley Arnot, to name only a few out of many thousands, cannot be of God. In the judgment of present-day Exclusivism the great bulk of the Church of God in all ages would be unfit for Christian fellowship—a curious thought which suggests much. Their meetings would be accounted “believers’ meetings” only; not meetings of the assembly of God; nor would members of their communities be suffered to break bread with the Exclusive company. Were they to spread a Table outside this favoured circle, it would be a “believers’ table” only. A virile man of God like Martin Luther would be definitely rejected for his plain speaking; for, though it is notorious that some of the hardest things ever written by Christians about Christians are to be found in the literature of Exclusivism, it must ever be borne in mind that these attacks only concern *outsiders*, or potential seceders from the body. Luther had an awkward habit of uttering plain truths even to his friends—to *insiders*, as I may say: and this would soon have imperilled his fellowship.

Oh for a simpler faith and a larger vision! If the Lord in His great mercy would recover us to these I am sure the Church of God would hear less of sectarian exclusiveness, and more of the love that heals and the fellowship that binds hearts together. Beloved fellow-Christians among the Exclusive company would presently perceive the truth of what has been set forth, however feebly, in these pages. They would see that grace is the power

that gathers, and that any other theory of Christian unity must wither in the pure light of heaven. They would see that God does not proceed with His people on any principle of cutting-off or casting-out; though He may sometimes withdraw His presence and support by way of challenging the conscience. His way is the way of grace, and He chastens, restores, and encourages with wonderful patience and tenderness; walking with His people, not as with perfect children, but according to His knowledge of their varied measures of attainment and surrender.

With whom, indeed, is He to walk if separation from evil is to circumscribe the outflowings of His grace? Who is holy enough, clean enough, removed enough from the spirit and principles of this present age? Perhaps few men in modern times were more separate from evil than the author of the pamphlet we have been considering; but was Mr. Darby perfect? Is there no hasty speaking in his pamphlets?—no intemperate language?—no invective even? I am convinced that any candid reader of his polemical writings will find in them not a little that he himself must have regretted in his later years—the half-veiled threat, the stinging phrase, the flash of wounding satire, the contempt of a superior mind for an inferior, when the inferior mind has been pitted against his own. And what is all this but evil?

And if we turn to Scripture, and consider the biographies of saints as written for our admonition by the unerring finger of God, what do we find? Sinning and failure on almost every page. The father of the faithful left the Land of Promise and went down to Egypt in contravention of the divine command; yet Abraham was “the friend of God.” Jacob, whose scheming selfishness has made his name a byword even among men of the world, was counselled and sustained through all his crooked life by that mighty One who appeared to him at Luz, and with whom he wrestled at Penuel; and under that watchful training Jacob the supplanter became Israel, a prince with God. The history of the Israelites, as a pilgrim people in the wilderness, we have already glanced at. Stiff-necked,

rebellious, idolatrous, Jehovah companied with them throughout their desert journey; the Cloud of His Presence going with them and the Ark of His Testimony passing on before. In the days of the Judges, which Exclusivist teachers regard, and I think rightly, as a figurative picture of present broken conditions in Christendom, every man doing what seemed right in his own eyes (Judges xxi. 25), we have extraordinary and stimulating evidences of Jehovah's intimate relations with His people, individually and collectively, though their condition was manifestly the reverse of godly.

Forsaking the Lord God of their fathers, "they followed other gods and bowed themselves unto them, and provoked the Lord to anger" (Judges ii. 12); yet the Lord did not cut them off. He reasoned with them; reproved them; chastened them: but in the worst moments of their backslidings He was always approachable by sacrifice, and His glory abode between the cherubims. Again and again, times almost without number, He raised up men of faith for their deliverance; not always, perhaps, the men that Exclusivism would have approved; for if we consider the histories of these elect leaders, how much of the energy of the flesh do we find in them! The exiled Jephtha, who had made himself a captain "of vain men" in the land of Tob, was one of these; Ehud the Benjamite, whose crafty feigning accomplished the death of Eglon, was another; Jael, the Kenite's wife, who decoyed the weary Sisera into her tent with a treacherous "Fear not," was a third. Gideon, who lapsed into idolatry in his old age, and lusty world-bordering Samson, who chose his wives out of an idolatrous nation, might also be cited. These were all saints and servants of God, and their meannesses and deceits, their idolatries and worldliness, their evil lusts and passions, were inextricably interwoven into the very tissue of their service. Did Jehovah abandon them on that account? Never. Did He condone with the evil? Far be the thought. In perfect grace He went on with His servants *in spite of the evil*, rebuking and chastening them as occasion arose: and

this, I maintain, was no unusual manifestation of His favour, but illustrates a principle of His ways, true at all times and under all dispensations. That inflexible righteousness governs all His dealings I need scarcely insist; but *grace reigns through righteousness*; how could it be otherwise when the spring of all is Love? There may be withdrawals on account of mercies slighted; a loosening of the bands of intimacy (the word¹ so often translated "forsake" in the Old Testament really carries that meaning), but there is no thought of cutting off. Separation from evil on God's part is, of course, an abiding moral fact; but rejection of His people in whom is evil is quite another thought, and has no place in Scripture.²

There is this further thought. Once Separation is made the rallying point, Christ becomes a secondary Object; and a very precious purpose of His love is largely missed. The eye is turned from the Lord, and occupied with evil. "Where two or three are gathered together in My name [not where two or three have separated from others] there am I in the midst." Clearly this is not unity on the principle of separation. When "the kindness and love of God our Saviour" was made known to us in the rich grace of the Gospel, was it that we might presently qualify as judges in the courts of the Lord? Surely, no! Drawn by love and saved by grace, it was that we might learn how to walk together by the same rule, as members of a heavenly, peace-loving family. Heretics, after reasonable admonition, were indeed to be rejected (Tit. iii. 10); and with fornicators, covetous persons, idolaters, railers, drunkards, and extortioners, even though bearing the name of Christ, one was not so much as to eat (1 Cor.

¹ Azab. Gesenius states that the primary significance of the word is "loosing"; "to loosen bands"; "to let go," as of a beast from its bonds. The New Testament thought of withdrawing seems to answer to it exactly.

² When the glory left the Temple in Ezekiel's day (Ezek. x. 4-19) the people had really ceased to be God's people: *Lo-ammi* was written upon them, and hence cutting off, for a time at least, was inevitable. So, too, when the mass of mere profession in Christendom has crystallised into Laodicea, it will be definitely rejected—spewed out of the Lord's mouth (Rev. iii. 16).

v. 11): but the obligation to separate ends here, and if we seek to go beyond this limit we do so at our own peril and in defiance of the Word of God.

That Exclusivism has so trespassed cannot be denied. It may be urged that the "great house" of 2 Tim. ii. is defiled; that worldliness has invaded it; and that those who desire to walk with God must separate from the worldly, even though they cannot quit the house. I answer that this is not God's way, save as regards the "vessels to dishonour"; and that separation *in heart and ways* from what may be evil in a fellow-believer is a nobler, if less ostentatious and more difficult method than any merely physical withdrawing. Christians are *holy* vessels, clean through the word which has been spoken to them (John xiii.), and we are not told to purge ourselves from these.

Moreover, if worldliness is to be made a ground of exclusion, who is to measure the degree of worldliness which shall justify the excisionary process? Worldliness in some form or another enters into the thoughts and ways of most of us—perhaps of all. For *how much* worldliness must the penalty be enforced? Thoroughly worldly Christians usually end by leaving unbidden the Christian company. Conscience drives them out. "Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world" (2 Tim. iv. 10). It would seem, indeed (and the thought is unspeakably solemn), that restraining grace may be temporarily withheld in such cases, and for a time the backslider, filled with his own ways, is allowed to run riot: "Ephraim is joined to idols; let him alone" (Hos. iv. 17).

But what of the less worldly? Who is to decide here? and what is to be the standard of decision? Where is the man, or company of men, who shall hold the balance and say: "This one must go," or "that one may remain"? Except in respect of those extreme cases above referred to, where the course is clearly marked out, there is no authority from God to take the balance, and probably no competency in man to measure accurately the rise or dipping of the beam. Christian life is too complex, too subtly interpenetrated by good and evil, by triumph and failure, by

easy virtue and unsuccessful wrestling with temptation : and they who are most ready in judgment do but show their forgetfulness of the apostolic precept : “ Let us not judge one another any more ; but judge this rather, that no man put a stumbling-block or an occasion to fall in his brother’s way ” (Rom. xiv. 13).

It will, I think, be found, at least in a large number of cases of discipline, that the predisposing causes are of a purely natural kind ; and the fact is not without importance. A careful observer will, indeed, perceive that the most strenuous advocates of Exclusive principles are usually persons in easy circumstances. I do not necessarily mean rich men, but those who, by the nature of their callings, are more or less removed from the strain and nerve-racking pressure of modern life—Civil servants, bank and office clerks, and men in possession of competencies and pensions. Such persons are not much in contact with the corrosive facts of daily life—at all events, in the sense that their positionally less favoured brethren are ; and for that reason they are prone to regard with less sympathy, because with less understanding, the tried and tempted ones : and when failure occurs they become punctilious and judicial ; a hard exclusiveness being the natural outcome of a state of mind which is adventitious and legal rather than spiritual, or even humane. I believe that the roots of many a trouble which has visited Brethren must be sought here. Persons of the class indicated, while steeped in traditional teaching, are often morally blind to much that lies deepest in human nature. They fail to realise that the measure of growth and attainment in Christians is infinitely diverse : that life is inextricably bound up with recondite causes and perplexing side issues ; that remote conditions of heredity and afflictive inequalities of environment may confuse the issues at every turn ; and that if we would be just (to say nothing of merciful) we must be prepared to take account of all sorts of temperamental weaknesses, natural tastes, and personal predilections. One Christian, for example, reads Shakespeare, and seems to find help in the poet’s masterly delineations of human nature or his

profound moralising on life's phenomena : another goes a step farther, and attends Shakespearean recitals at a public hall. Where is one to draw the line? A truly spiritual man, walking in the joy of the Lord and the comfort of the Holy Ghost, would probably eschew Shakespeare altogether. But what of the Shakespeare-reader and the Shakespeare-playgoer? Are they, being Christians, to be cast out from the company of their brethren? Exclusivism says No in the case of the play-reader, and Yes in the case of the playgoer : but where is the consistency of the distinction? Above all, where is the Scriptural authority for either?

Years ago I was associated with a large Exclusivist meeting in south-east London, and among the company was a young man who went regularly to theatres, being an admirer of Ibsen and Bernard Shaw. His brother, living in the same house and engaged in public ministry of the Word, knew of this, but said nothing, so that the thing went on in secret. Quite recently—in November last—an Open brother confided to a relative of mine with refreshing candour that he sometimes takes his daughters to Shakespearean recitals. These cases illustrate how the tendency to worldliness finds expression under the two systems.

Now, what does all this tell us, unless that Exclusivism, which is often powerless to deal with worldliness in its own company, would cast out the Open brother, who, as having no scruples on the point in question, speaks of his Shakespearean *divertissements* with commendable frankness? Is this a just holding of the balance?

If it be sought to deduce from such an illustration that the standard of holiness is lower among Open Brethren than Exclusives, I say No. The standard is the same. The Biblically instructed of both companies maintain with equal earnestness that the one and only standard of holiness is the Word of God ; and that Christ, as the uniquely perfect expression of holiness in a human vessel, is to be followed with all diligence and loyalty. The difference is in the method of dealing with defaulters. Whereas the one party maintains that Christians in whatever stage of spiritual growth (the stunted no less than those who may

have attained to the full stature of men in Christ) are eligible for fellowship, and that we may not exclude them from the Lord's Table even if we would, the other party says, in effect, that the influence of these worldly ones is inimical to the wellbeing of the company, and they cannot sit down with them. The result, as I have already indicated, is that looseness of walk being more or less manifest in the one case, spiritual men of the Open company may take account of it and seek by prayerful shepherding and the force of example to win to holier paths; in the other case, the evil is covered up, spiritual deceit is engendered, and other undesirable features manifest themselves.

Doubtless the hopeless drifting of many souls, and their non-recovery to fellowship, should exercise us far more than is generally the case; and I have long thought that the fruit of such exercise would be a more sympathetic attitude towards them than is usually apparent. We forget, perhaps, that the very fact that these drifting ones *are* drifting, and are thus to a certain extent in the enemy's hands (Luke xxii. 31) is the very reason why we should not make too heavy demands upon them, nor raise barriers where grace would have us removing them. *When the prodigal was yet a great way off, the father ran.*

That the character of a spiritual man's fellowship with a worldly Christian will inevitably differ from the character of his fellowship with the godly goes without the saying. It will probably be marked by a certain aloofness or restraint (cf. pp. 27 and 28), and this will not be lost upon the subject of such treatment; just as in a family the disobedient child is made to feel his breach with home sanctions by the reserve of those about him. He will not be thrust out of the home for his disobedience; but, on the other hand, there will be no admission to the intimacies enjoyed by the others until a change of mind has been effected; and, almost inevitably, the unexpressed deprivation will touch the heart and lead to such recovery.

Now, Exclusivism thrusts from the house the wayward child, and thereby (a very solemn thought) probably gives impetus to the downgrade course of its unfortunate victim.

The opposing system, based as I believe upon a larger and healthier conception of grace, seeks the restoration of the backslider according to the spirit of Gal. vi. 1.

An old servant of God, much used in ministry, was accustomed to make this confession: "When I was a young man and unconverted, the language of my heart was uniformly this, 'All of self and none of Christ.' Presently, I got converted, and though the flesh was still strong within me, the wish was remodelled somewhat, and I found grace to say, 'Some of self, and some of Christ.' Later on, when a further stage was gained, desire shaped itself into a larger ambition, and the burden of my prayer became, 'Less of self, and more of Christ.' At length the highest plane of all was reached—how slow I was in getting there!—and in surfeit of love—*His* love—my heart was able to cry rejoicingly, 'None of self, and all of Christ.' "

That is it, my brother. For here we have the Christian under God's eye: his growth from babehood to fatherhood in the training school of grace. The last stage of progress was not reached in a year, or two years; nor, mark you, was the world let go all at once. It was driven out at last by no disciplinary warnings or edicts, *but by the surpassing excellency of a better Object*; for Christianity, as has been well said, is not a stripping system. It gives of its best before it asks anything. Progress in the Christian life is gradual, and often very slow; "for precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little and there a little" (Isa. xxviii. 10): and as the truth is built into the soul, and Christ takes possession, the habits of a self-filled past are laid aside, grace rules in the heart, and the believer walks in newness of life.

And since there is growth, let us not forget that the youngest believer, he who perhaps has got no farther than the stage expressed in the formula, "Some of self and some of Christ," and in whose affections the world may still have a large place, has nevertheless as clear a title to a place at the Table of his Lord as the oldest and most advanced saint. Grace is that title; and grace alone: nor is it for us to be cutting off or casting out whom the Lord

is forming for Himself, however little we may be able to trace His moulding hand, or the fruits of grace in the vessel. We are all poor failures at best, and any honest carrying out of this dogma of Exclusiveness or Separation really supposes Christians living as units, under the continual obsession that each has still to get rid of himself ! In fact, the Church of God is thus reduced (I mean in its practical expression) to a condition of Me-ites, from whom (unless the individual have an extraordinarily exalted notion of his own state and condition) the *me* should also be eliminated !

Here I will close. My long controversy with the system known as Exclusivism ends, God be thanked ! with this appeal. Begun, in its earlier form, as an earnest protest against what I thought to be merely local conditions, under which children of God had long been groaning, I was led on, step by step, to the conviction expressed in these pages ; namely, that the evil combated lies less in those local conditions than in the system which produced them. The evil fruit with which I sought to deal, and which has exercised acutely so many earnest souls, originates, not in individual perverseness, but in the system itself. This system, in spite of all the eager and ingenious safeguarding of well-meaning persons enmeshed by it, has supplied occasion for the oppressor of God's people ; with the result that Christians of blameless life have been driven forth and scattered, and incalculable shame and sorrow brought upon inoffending and gracious souls.

Incidentally, a grievous wrong has been done to beloved saints in another company ; of whom incredibly hard things have been said and written, and with whom communion of any sort has been resolutely refused. It must be confessed that Mr. Darby's writings on Bethesda matters make very painful reading. They leave a disagreeable taste in the mouth, however much the mind may be impressed by the arguments of the writer. In their implacability they suggest the fierce Irishman, who can only see red and who is out to crush those whom he cannot convince ; or the perfervid partisan, carried quite beyond

himself by an exuberance of hyperbolic exprobatation, so that the sense of moral values is lost, and every bush becomes a boggard.

When the apostle of the circumcision dissembled at Antioch Paul withstood him to the face, because, as he said, Peter "was to be blamed" (Gal. ii. 11). I like that phrase—"to be blamed." It expresses restraint—moderation—the healing limitations of grace. Think what Mr. Darby would have made of the offence! "Clandestine, untruthful, dishonest and profane," was his lurid description of dear old Dr. Cronin's very human lapse which led to the shameful Kelly division of the early 'eighties. Such language (it will be found in the *Letter from Pau* of April, 1879) is mere invective, not the language of grace; and it shows how even the brightest servants of the Lord may offend against charity. An aged brother named Penstone, who was at that time in the Exclusive community, and had been associated with Brethren since 1839, thus wrote of the extraordinary Pau letter: "I do not criticise in detail the letter; it needs no detailed criticism from anyone. Suffice it to say, that the language used in it is as contrary to the laws of the land we live in [*i.e.*, it was libellous] as it is to the usage and order of the Church of the living God, and surely contrary to His holy Word. Do, I beseech you, immediately entreat our beloved and honoured brother, J. N. D., *to withdraw* this dreadful and most humbling document." Dr. Cronin's offence was in breaking bread with an ex-clergyman lately received into fellowship, who had spread a table in his own house at Ryde because of the shocking condition of the meeting there. Mr. Darby had said of this meeting only a few days previously: "Never will I put my foot into that unclean place. I have known it for twenty years to be a defiled meeting"; so that the doctor's act was based upon a genuine care for the honour of the Lord. Yet the divisionists (those zealous promoters of the doctrine of unity by separation) pushed forward with their evil work; and by suppressing, at a most critical moment, a vital post-script to a second Darby letter from Pau, not only accom-

plished the doctor's excommunication, but precipitated world-wide schism. The trouble known as the Kelly Division, in which the incendiary principle of *separation from persons* is seen, as one might say, at full blast, was the finished work of these will-worshipping ecclesiasts.

Whole pages of Mr. Darby's Bethesda utterances are quite as open to censure as the Pau letter; and many paragraphs in their frenzied hyperbole are, to speak mildly, gross misstatements as to known facts. It is sad to reflect, and the circumstance must, I think, be very grieving to the Lord, that passages of the character spoken of are still issued from the Exclusivist press, and that the publishers have taken no measures to redress the wrong, whether by suppressing altogether the volumes of the *Collected Writings* containing the incriminated passages or (if too great a pecuniary sacrifice is thereby involved) by directing attention to errors of statement by means of insets where such passages occur.

It would seem that, some time between the writing of the tract on Separation and the publication of a much later tract, *Grace the Power of Unity and Gathering*, Mr. Darby became really exercised as to the justness and good taste of his Bethesda fulminations. The second tract is, morally speaking (I refer to what is essential in it, not casuistical or adventitious merely), a fairly complete abdication of the position formerly defended. Had he at that time confessed his terrible blunder, he would have gone far towards healing the breach which those hectic utterances had caused. Probably his reputation for infallibility would have been rudely shaken,¹ but how immeasurably would he have gained in the moral esteem of those who valued him for all that was really great in his character and service! At a later period, tardy confession was apparently made. "It is some comfort to learn, on the authority of 'Philadelphos,' " says W. B. Neatby, "that

¹ Dorman, writing to J. N. D. about the time of his own break with Exclusivism, says, "Further than this, I may add, there reigned in my mind up to this time a kind of absolute confidence that it was next to impossible that you should hold anything that was wrong, and I daresay I am not alone in this conviction."

both Wigram and Darby expressed, about 1871, regret for some of the violent language they had used. 'Philadelphos' unfortunately gives us no clue to the amount of this regret, nor to the ground that it covered; but the bare fact that anything was done in this direction is a cause for thankfulness." This was years after the publication of the second pamphlet, when, alas! confession was no longer of much practical value. The roads leading from Bethesda had forked too widely to leave hope of reunion; the evil had been consummated. Moreover, by a singular irony of circumstances, Mr. Darby had been charged in the interim with holding doctrines which bore a dangerously close resemblance to those for which Mr. Newton had been condemned; and this fact might, of course, have stood as a barrier to reconciliation. Impartial discussion of these doctrines will be found in Neatby's history (pp. 239-264), and I do not propose to reopen the matter here; but that there was "formal heresy" in the teaching (to use this writer's term) seems clearly proved: though I have no doubt that Mr. Darby did not mean quite all he said. "Apparently," as Neatby says, "both Newton and Darby found themselves precipitated by their system on a conclusion against which their heart and conscience cried out. They hesitated, grew confused, and expressed themselves unintelligibly" (*ibid.*, p. 254). When one thinks of Mr. Darby's scathing and remorseless attacks, not only upon Mr. Newton, but also upon godly brethren who were somewhat slow, perhaps, in making up their minds on the Newton heresy, and remembers the fierceness of abuse which has pursued them ever since, one sees a kind of Nemesis in these surprising later developments, and is irresistibly reminded of the admonition: "Considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted" (Gal. vi. 1).¹

¹ Exclusive brethren who, under Mr. Darby's leading, had precipitated division in the case of the Newton trouble, refused to go into the matter when Mr. Darby's own teachings were in question. "The position of the Exclusives," says Neatby, "was thereby reduced to an absurdity, apart altogether from the question of what Darby had taught. It was the distinctive basis of their communion to cut off

I confess with shame that I have myself offended in a similar way—by word of mouth, if not by pen—in years gone by: nor is the shame lessened when I recall the invariably gracious spirit in which my censorious strictures have been met. In recent months I have conversed with Open Brethren of all classes, and in no case have I had to listen to a hard word against Exclusives. Surely “by their fruits ye shall know them” (Matt. vii. 20).¹

If I might venture to utter a word to brethren in Christ linked with those systems which have broken off from Exclusivism and with which the names of Kelly, Low, Grant and others are associated it would be this: You have been led, dear brethren, from one cause and another to dissociate from that system—What of the new path into which you have drifted? A new company has been formed after each separation, but was there any need for this new company? I ask the question in all love. If you have separated from a system which is wrong, are you helping matters by remodelling your new company on the old lines—yes, even though you seek to provide for larger-hearted action under modified terms of fellowship? I think not. I will even say that results have apparently shown you to be mistaken. A brother who has had large experience of these different companies—a very gracious man—

‘from the Church of God on earth’ all those who had the most remote or even the most unreal and fictitious connection with Newton’s old doctrine . . . while at the same time they harboured a doctrine that two of their very ablest and most respected teachers [W. H. Dorman and Capt. Hall] had to conclude (visibly in spite of themselves and at a great personal sacrifice) to be essentially the same thing. Darby’s personal influence availed to smother the question; and in no other conceivable way could it have been disposed of” (*Hist of the P.B.*, pp. 250, 251). Common justice of course demanded that the incriminated teaching should be examined by the same methods as were adopted in dealing with the Newton heresy, but, rather than consent to this, Dorman and Hall, the faithful shepherds who had courageously drawn attention to the teaching, were driven out of fellowship! Comment is needless.

¹With the more remote past, the stormy days of the great Bethesda controversy, I have no present concern. Feeling certainly ran high in those days, and the unsavoury polemics of that period supply evidence enough that there was an extraordinary outbreak of reckless, ill-balanced, and often foolish talk on both sides.

said to me only recently : “ I don’t know how it is, but the companies which have broken off from Exclusives never seem to have found themselves.” Here and there, notably in provincial gatherings, where a gifted man of strong and engaging personality may hold together the company among whom he ministers, the tendency to drift will be hardly if at all perceptible : but I speak of what is general. The exceptions are, I believe, rare. Is there not food for reflection in this thought? The testimony of Open Brethren (you see I spell the abstract noun without a capital) has been maintained of God in spiritual freshness for nearly a century—from about 1829, to be precise. Should not such a fact be laid to heart, and antique prejudices as to Bethesda matters be sifted anew in the light of old and later happenings, as well as in subjection to the teaching grace of God? (Tit. ii. 11 and 12). May this grace be with you !

To the parent Exclusive company—the company from which, after years of sorrow and heart-searching, I now finally withdraw—I would say in all earnestness : This appeal is made to you in love. Receive it, dear brethren, in the same spirit. Do not put it from you without prayerful consideration. Your uncompromising attitude to all fellowships outside your own is no secret, and has been the occasion of much perplexity, sorrow, and, as I think, just resentment. That those fellowships are all astray, and that you alone are on divine ground—this is the high claim which you are known to cherish. It is a settled conviction, received by tradition from your elders, which none in your fellowship dares to question ; and if men of God outside the company are led, as they sometimes are, to challenge the pretension, your practice is to ignore the challenge. But is this passive attitude seemly? Is it prudent even? Does the ostrich which buries its head in the sand escape the pursuer? If, as I am assured, a spirit of unrest and enquiry is indeed abroad among you—well, I rejoice in the news. It is a hopeful sign. Do not discountenance enquiry by rough speeches or prison fore-

casts. It is easy to talk of "self-will" : but beware lest the use of the term becomes a subterfuge and your own consciences are thereby defiled. A word from the Old Testament comes to me as I write, which I venture to pass on to you. " Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths ; where is the good way ? and walk therein ; and ye shall find rest for your souls " (Jer. vi. 16). Rest after all the unrest of nearly a century of intermittent sorrow and dissension—surely that is something to be desired ! May the gracious Lord lead you into it !

The thoughts as to Church unity, Christian fellowship and present testimony, imperfectly presented in these pages, are largely the fruit of recent and independent study of Scripture, but I find that they have been held in their main features by a large circle of believers for close upon a century. I pass them on to you. I believe them to be more in accordance with the declared will of God than the " fellowship " for which you plead ; or the " separation " advocated by Mr. Darby ; or the narrow (I will even say presumptuous) conception of " testimony " peculiar to the Exclusive system. The way of unity, communion and service which I have endeavoured to set forth here is, as I thankfully believe, the more excellent way of love. It is also a way of peace, of lowliness, of self-effacement, of joy, and of how many other fruits of the Spirit ! a safe and divinely appointed way for the believer in a day of small things.

Therefore, also, it is the way of Testimony : for let us not forget that *to be spiritual*, not merely to minister high-brow doctrine, is *The Testimony*. The rest, what is it but sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal ? The spiritual man is the man who walks in the Spirit, producing fruit unto holiness ; and in a day like the present, a day of materialistic shallowness and abounding folly, this is the man whom God will use. May we be found ready to His hand ! As we walk in the Spirit we shall not fulfil the lusts of the flesh ; and the obedience of faith will be evidenced in little things as well as great—in things which make no noise or glitter in the world—the unobtrusive kindnesses, the glad

surrenders for others, and how many other graces of the Christ-controlled life !

As we walk by this rule we shall not be giving our minds (always prone as they are to legal hardness) to rough speeches, which are at best a negative service of *words*, but we shall be taking counsel of the Lord as to loving kindnesses that may be *done*. We shall find that visiting the fatherless and widows in their affliction, clothing the naked and giving food to the hungry, are more precious in the sight of God than the most approved surgical processes, or the widest attainments of Biblical knowledge—which, indeed, may but symptomise extremely subtle forms of selfishness. The danger, indeed, is two-fold. On the one hand is the monastic fallacy that bodily separation from others secures the maximum of spiritual good to ourselves : on the other hand, the scholiast's delusion that knowledge (which Scripture warns us " puffeth up ") is the peculiar possession of a fenced-off and privileged few. Be sure that God is larger in His ways than our poor thoughts of them ; and that a cheerful heart and wholesome generous mind are best attained by cultivation of that charity which hopeth all things, thinketh no evil, and rejoiceth not in iniquity.

Thus walking we shall be blessed. The confidence of the godly will encourage us ; the joy of the Lord will sustain us ; the love of the saints will encompass us ; and as we pursue this heavenly way old hardnesses will disappear ; natural roughnesses and acerbities will become less pronounced ; the sanctifying nearness of Christ will be known ; and, the heart having once opened to Him for this blessedness, His visitings will become enjoyed realities, perennial discoveries of love, a continual feast. The blessed One will come in to sup and to tarry (Rev. iii. 20), and the guest-chamber will be filled (to use the figure of the parable) with music and dancing. Bickerings will be forgotten ; the voice of strife will be no more heard ; divisions will cease ; and the joys of the Father's house will be reproduced and perpetuated, to His own glory and the strengthening and establishing of our hearts in love.

“ Love never faileth ; but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail ; whether there be tongues, they shall cease ; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. . . . And now abideth faith, hope, love, these three ; but the greatest of these is love ” (1 Cor. xiii. 8, 13).

This, then, beloved brethren, is, as I believe, that “ more excellent way ” for which I have pleaded, and for which I still would plead. May the loving Lord bring us all, writer as well as readers, more and more into this way of charity, to the gratification of His own heart and the joy and satisfaction of ours. He loved the Church and gave Himself for it ; and now, in His patient grace, is sanctifying and cleansing it with the washing of water by the Word. The gracious purpose of this service is well known to us ; to “ present the Church to Himself a glorious Church without spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing ” ; a company “ holy and without blemish ” in His sight. We—oh, wonderful mystery of love !—are members of His body, of His flesh, and of His bones ; and in this brief interval of grace He is nourishing and cherishing us (precious love-compelling thought !) with a care and tenderness that knows neither let nor limit. The day of nuptial splendour is in His heart, and the hope of His return in the clouds to claim us should be in ours. Well may we bow adoringly in the presence of a mystery so great and glorious—a mystery which embraces the choice of the heavenly Bride in Him before creation ; her calling-out in time ; and all the unspeakable joys of that incomparable destiny that awaits her (Eph. v.).

May the God of all grace, Who has called us unto His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, cause us to increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all men ; that thereby our hearts may be established unblameable in holiness before Him—not only yonder and in the day to come, but *here* and *now*, while with lamps trimmed and loins girded we wait for His Son from heaven ! (1 Pet. v. 10 ; 1 Thess. iii. 12, 13).

Now unto Him Who is able to keep us from falling, and to present us faultless before the presence of His glory

with exceeding joy; to the only wise God our Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen. (Jude 25.)

THE END.

POSTSCRIPT.

The original title of this work, "A More Excellent Way," was replaced at the last moment by the present title. While the new edition was passing through the press, the Exclusivist Press published a volume of readings and lectures under practically the same title, "The More Excellent Way"; and to avoid confusion another title had to be found. The change from "A" to "The" is negligible, though characteristic. I believe there is no copyright in titles, but a moral right is generally recognised—and respected. Had the two works been of a purely devotional character the circumstance might have been allowed to pass; but they touch matters in controversy between their respective authors, and the good taste of the appropriation is at least questionable.

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