

↗ The Other Side. ↖

IN speaking as I am about to do, it is hardly needful to say that I speak simply as an individual. The knowledge that a private letter of my own, printed without permission had or asked for, is being largely circulated for purposes which those who know me know are alien to all my convictions of what is true and right, compels me to speak out for myself, and in behalf of what I believe to be this. I desire not to withdraw the letter, nor to alter any thing that is said in it; but I do desire to give that side of things which in it I did not and was not called to give. This must be my apology for the individuality of what I now write, which must be viewed very much as if it too were a letter to a friend exposed to general view as my former one has been. It is, indeed, but the other half of that, written as I should have written, had I known the use to which it was to be put.

I believe the circular put forth by the conference at Plainfield in July last was itself but the one half of a matter to which we should have added the other half; and therefore I am the more concerned, as one whose name is on that circular, to supplement it for myself here. We thought we had guarded it sufficiently from abuse. We did state in it our refusal of the very inferences which some are now drawing from it. We urged that it should not be abused. Yet we did not, I fear, make all this as full and explicit as we might have done; still enough was said to make it plain as to how far we intended to go, and where we were compelled to stop.

Our earnest desire at the conference was, to right ourselves with regard to a matter which was pressing on us by withdrawing what had

the charge had been true of those we had for many years recognized hitherto been maintained against the so-called "open brethren." That as such, they themselves are well aware; for they had to reject the old gatherings in several places for complicity with evil, or else purge them from it, when those of whom now we speak came first into these places. This being done, we were still left in doubt as to their English connections, and had grave cause for it. Even now, Mr. Wright's letter stands where it did as the advocacy of receiving persons from under false teachers, if only they were *personally* sound in the faith. We have been assured, indeed, upon testimony we could not but accept both within and without Bethesda, that these are not their principles, and that they are practically pure; and although Mr. Wright is in a high place among them, yet the general freedom from actual association of this kind, and the explicit statements especially of leaders in this country, prevailed with us to accept the mass of testimony, assured that the Lord would not have us treat as false the witness of so many of His people.

We withdrew the charges against these brethren of complicity with evil, and were thankful and glad indeed to be able to do so. There we stand to-day.

But we explicitly stated that in doing this we did *not* intend amalgamation with them, and we stated briefly some of our reasons for not meaning this. It has been strangely inferred that because over forty years ago these brethren had been separated from on the ground of these very charges, that, now they were withdrawn, all could be as at the beginning. But forty years of separation may surely have carried us far apart. Our hearts were and are toward a real and abiding union. We long for all the beloved people of God, especially in a day when the clouds of unbelief are darkening rapidly over us, to see them all, with ourselves, united with us in a firm phalanx of opposition to all that would dishonor the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are glad to believe that in our present position, apart from all distracting questions.

we can welcome all really godly ones, and refuse only for real evil. But we could not make a leap in the dark; and more, according to the light we have, we do not believe that our brethren are really on scriptural ground in several respects, and these I shall take leave to speak of freely, desiring heartily, not the dividing, but the gathering of the sheep of Christ, but persuaded that he that gathereth not with Christ—according to the principles of His Word—*scattereth*.

Now the gatherings of “open” brethren fail, as it seems to me, signally to answer to their name. They are often exclusive to a degree which those called “exclusive” never attained. Some of them refuse entirely all Christians who, however godly, do not break loose from other ecclesiastical connections to unite wholly with themselves. Thus “he followeth not with us” is the rigid argument for “forbidding” such an one even the Lord’s supper! This is a greater sectarianism than is found in almost any sect beside. It refuses room for conscience, and scatters the known members of Christ, however godly. With such, I say for myself, I dare not go. I am sure Christ has open arms for all His own: to be ecclesiastically right, I must have mine open also.

But many—the most—do not go as far as this: the next grade are strict baptists with close communion. They will receive all that have been immersed upon profession of faith, but no others. Here is still sectarianism, though of a less offensive kind than the former case; but here I am saved deciding whether I would go: they would not receive me. If there were but two or three of my own views in the place with me, we should be forced into separation.

Other gatherings receive freely those who believe in household-baptism, but it seems to be with the tacit understanding that, time being given, this contrariety of view will cease. And it ordinarily does cease—either by conversion or withdrawal of the dissentients, so that one of their own magazines speaks of household-baptism as the second of two “heresies”

that those who leave them for the exclusives fall into: clearly, therefore, not what has practical existence among themselves.

“Our teaching and practice is the baptism of believers only,” says one of the Rochester circulars; and no toleration of other teaching is, so far as I am aware, permitted. Thus the liberty of the Spirit is hindered: a very grave error and dishonor to Him who alone qualifies and sends forth teachers,—to whom alone they are subject in things not touching fundamentals, and who has said, “He that hath My word, let him speak My word faithfully.” (Jer. xxiii. 28.) The merely human creed puts the soul into subjection to man, or forces separation from it; the Spirit is quenched; and this principle once introduced may be carried indefinitely far. The church becomes the teacher, or settles what is Scripture for those who belong to it. And then what is this “church” that settles it? A little company of perhaps two or three Christians! Here, many divine principles are broken through at once; and the result of this will sooner or later appear.

Involved in all this confusion, as is plain, is, that true unity of the Church of God is very much lost. Gatherings are found with the most divergent principles as to reception and discipline, so that those who are in full fellowship in one place may be refused at another, and bodies of open brethren may be, as it would seem, unable, in their normal condition, to have fellowship with one another.

This is surely independency of a very pronounced kind, which naturally permits and unites with the plainest sectarianism. In the epistles, we are told by one of their prominent teachers, “The churches are addressed as responsible to the Lord alone, and not to one another, except of course for any knowledge each church might have of the spiritual state of the other churches, and for consequent thanksgiving or prayer. A true-hearted servant of the Lord, however, may rightly seek, in responsibility to Him and in brotherly love, to *help* in another church,—not assuming authority, but performing an act of lowly serv-

ice." A concession which shows plainly the independency; and it is no wonder that in a list of assemblies of "open" brethren we should find the caution, "It is therefore of the *first importance*,—in every case, as occasion may require,—to obtain from well-known brethren who are competent to judge, confirming testimony as to the faithful condition of a meeting."

This leads to a clear understanding of how it is that local gatherings are being so earnestly pressed to act for themselves, apart from even any counsel-taking or communication with those with whom they have been hitherto fully identified. This, even on the plea of the Plainfield circular! Now personal responsibility one would always press, and the responsibility of gatherings as fully; but to press in this way the decision of such questions as are involved in fellowship or union with open brethren, is only (knowingly or not) to take advantage of the ignorance or weakness of an assembly to betray it into hasty and ill-considered action. Conscience is always individual. An exercised conscience is a blessed thing. But a conscience truly exercised will not suffer a man to act in haste, with partial knowledge, and without such help as may be got from those acquainted with facts or principles involved. The Lord will surely hold those responsible who trifle with the simplicity of those who are ready to "believe every word," rather than to look well to their going. At a time such as the present, all who on either side desire to act before God will find need of patient waiting upon Him and care, lest even their own faith or knowledge become a stumbling-block to others who act upon it.

The Plainfield circular has given certain definite reasons why we cannot go on to union with open brethren. If they indeed care about this on their side (which we have yet no reason to conclude that as a body they do) their way is very plain: it is only to take out of the way the hindrances that exist, or to show that they do not exist, or that Scripture is in their favor. And this should be done openly, before the

eyes of all, as we have ourselves acted. Let them show us that it is right to refuse or muzzle the household-baptists, that the individual assembly has no responsibility to other assemblies, and things of like nature; or let them frankly give them up, and meet us on the basis of the unity every where of the body of Christ, of the liberty of the Spirit in the assembly and every where, and of the refusal of no Christian except for evil in doctrine or practice:—they will find that *we* are not indifferent as to fellowship with the people of God, nor anxious to contend for any sectarian shibboleths. Surely this is the way to accomplish something true and desirable and that shall be for permanent blessing. Thorough openness in all this will beget confidence, without which there can be none; we must feel and find that in the conflict of different views our interests and our hearts are one, and that there will be no undue advantage taken of what has been done in truth and frankness, or of the desire for fellowship which exists. Mere proselytism will defeat its own ends, which are unholy, and the success of which would be its worst defeat. God is over all.

But one thing more; and that in my eyes is not a little thing. Among the various conditions which are found in a number of independent gatherings a species of clerisy evidently obtains, but the extent of which I am unable to ascertain. Bethesda, it is well known, as an independent Baptist congregation, had its “recognized pastors or elders and deacons, who, according to their constitution, acted on behalf of the whole congregation.” To this Mr. Bowley attributes much of the sorrow that ensued. The anomaly remains, and could scarcely do so without begetting some sympathy elsewhere; and this apparently exists. I have heard bitter complaints of it on the part of some who have been among them, but do not undertake to guarantee the truth of these. There is ground for inquiry at least, though clerisy, in the spirit of it, is that which suits so well the nature of man that it tends to appear in the most unlikely quarters. We have all seen it and suffered from it, the system that takes responsibility out of the hands of a “laity” (which may

not be called that) to put it into those of leaders, whom the crowd blindly follow, respect for authority, prejudice, confidence in others, taking the place of conscience and the leading of the Spirit by the Word. Those who best know it in its workings will most heartily refuse and turn their backs on it.

I speak doubtfully here; but how many grave difficulties do these things suggest for the one who really exercises himself to be "void of offense toward God and toward man"! But how little exercise is there with many! Here is an unconquerable difficulty where it exists, and from the testing which comes ever and anon to manifest this we cannot save people however much we would. "Walk before Me" is still the word, and if there be not this, to walk with one's brethren will not avail in place of it. Are the principles of which I speak worth contending for? If they are of God, can any openly reject them without loss? It is evident that between "open" brethren, (who are not "open,") and ourselves there is still a great difference. We are those truly "open" to receive all that are Christ's, and apart from positive evil; "open," too, to receive all ministry that the Spirit of God may give and in subjection to the Lord alone; and we are "open" in *all* our assemblies, maintaining the unity of the Spirit, in whatever feebleness, from end to end. "Open" brethren so-called are simply Baptists with a larger liberty in the way of ministry, and a really Congregational church order. This I say sadly, with no desire to have it so, but an earnest desire to see them purged of sectarianism and able to embrace the whole body of Christ. I am aware that there are among them many who desire it also. May the Lord satisfy this desire, and lead His beloved people into this broader path.

I add that for their own sakes, as well as for the many whose consciences are deeply affected by the lack of it, the brethren of Bethesda should at least send forth an explicit statement that they refuse those who deliberately associate themselves with fundamental error. Surely it is little enough to ask, and what no assembly of the Lord's people can

refuse—to make avowal of the principles on which they really act! Is there one the world over that would do so?

I write openly over my own signature, taking fully the responsibility of every statement. I trust it will find as open answer or else none, and that none will accept any that is not this.

F. W. GRANT.

Plainfield, Jan. 14th, 1893.