

STEP BY STEP

“TILL HE COME”

*Letters on Gathering to Christ's Name
in the 20th Century.*

**“Make straight paths for your feet, lest that
which is lame be turned out of the way.”**


Heb. xii. 13.

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“FOR GOD HATH NOT
GIVEN US THE SPIRIT OF
FEAR, BUT OF POWER,
AND OF LOVE, AND OF
A SOUND MIND.”

2 Tim. i. 7.



PREFACE.

HAVING decided to print these letters, it may be well to point out that they (like the pamphlet upon which they comment) were written in view of certain conditions and circumstances among believers in the Lord Jesus Christ who gather to His name. To some readers these circumstances may not be familiar, and to such the point of some portions may therefore not be clear.

It is hoped, nevertheless, that the truths dwelt upon may be helpful to any who sincerely desire to honour the Lord Jesus Christ by acting according to His Word in things that pertain to our gathering together to His name. May the number of those who have this sincere desire be increased as His coming draws nearer.

There may also be readers who are fearful of anything that may seem like even the most remote suggestion of "neutrality" in the fellowship of gathered believers. This mistrust is justified by the warnings of Scripture, but it should be borne in mind that God is as much dishonoured by neutrality towards good as by neutrality towards evil. If grace has been given to refuse evil from time to time, may grace also be given to "come to the help of the Lord" if He is bestirring the hearts of gathered believers to seek more practical unity in a scriptural way.

These letters contain no suggestion, either direct or implied, of neutrality towards evil. Neither is there any suggestion of a humanly devised "amalgamation" between companies of believers who may have been walking in separation from one another. It is simply entreated that we might seek to divest ourselves of thoughts and feelings which may, through our weakness, be clinging to us as the

result of the human element in past controversies ; giving place instead to AN ATTITUDE OF HEART TOWARDS GOOD AND TOWARDS EVIL, WHICH SHALL TAKE ACCOUNT ONLY OF CHRIST'S THOUGHTS AND DESIRES FOR HIS PEOPLE AS MADE KNOWN BY HIS SPIRIT IN THE WORD.

This might well be the first step in the direction of giving more visible expression to the unity which God has formed. The next step, if any, and all the rest, can be left in the hands of Him Who loved the Church and gave Himself for it. May He in faithfulness frustrate any step that is merely human in its origin, method or object, even though attempted from sincere motives. As in the "holy mount," God is not seeking the setting up of tabernacles in which the honour of Christ shall be shared with even the noblest of His servants, though we, like Peter, may feel that it would be "good *for us.*"

Even as Peter's desires were frustrated in order that "Jesus only" might be before his eyes, so, many of Christ's servants, in the twentieth century as in the first, have found. Unfulfilled hopes and saddening circumstances in connection with the Lord's people and service, have been graciously overruled by God to bring His Son more simply before our souls in His sufficiency and preciousness.

If we set Christ's honour *alone* before our hearts when we are seeking the present unity and good of His people, we can count upon having God with us in our endeavours.

Grace be with all them that love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity.



SEPTEMBER, 4TH 1909.

DEAR BROTHER IN CHRIST,

Your pamphlet entitled "Where is Collective Testimony found to-day," contains much that is true and needed, and I have felt free to hand copies to some brethren, but at the same time have warned them against accepting all that it contains, or appears to imply.

The reasons for this may appear as I write down the thoughts suggested to me while several times reading it.

I believe these thoughts are in keeping with the truth as God has made it known in His word, and would I trust thankfully accept correction if otherwise.

To take the points in the order in which they occur :— Pages 1 and 2. To "be" a testimony, whether we call it "collective" or "corporate," is hardly what is uppermost in the minds of many of your brethren.

It would be truer to say that their desire is to render so far as is possible, a *collective response to the heart of the Lord* in His will and desires for His people on earth as to their mode of gathering and principles of fellowship; and there can surely never be a day right up to the coming of the Lord, when such a desire will cease to be pleasing to Him.

Then as to "divine ground." Some may "clamour" to be thereon as you say, and may presume on this to act with unscriptural intolerance. But still the fact remains that Scripture does furnish us with a "divine ground," by which I (and many others) simply mean *divinely given*

reasons for gathering together and for acting in fellowship with some, and in separation from others.

Our earnest desire being that the gathering together—the fellowship—and the separation should each be alike governed by the Word of God.

The use of these truths in a way that you justly deplore, appears often to be largely due to an utter misapplication of the sentence, “ Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” In Ephesians iv. this “ endeavour ” is obviously the beautiful accompaniment and peaceful outcome of *lowliness, meekness, long-suffering and forbearing one another in love*. But the connection in which it is frequently used is not only out of keeping with, but *entirely contrary to*, the connection in which it is found in Scripture.

In a circular notice that has reached me, it is presented as a reason for half a well known meeting separating from the other half on a recent Lord’s day morning because of difference of judgment as to a matter of discipline elsewhere.

From such a course the “ endeavouring to keep ” and “ the bond of peace ” both appear to be absent. Indeed it seems a wresting of Scripture to use such words in such a connection.

I take pleasure in writing once more the verses in which the prisoner of the Lord beseeches us to walk “ with all lowliness and meekness, with long-suffering, forbearing one another in love ; endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace ” (Eph. iv. 2. 3). We may rest perfectly satisfied before the Lord that He never intended the last sentence to be used in the extraordinary way which is not uncommon among us.*

And can we not also be sure that acting upon these beseechings would absolutely prevent separation of gather-

* The true application of these verses is dwelt upon at greater length in later pages.

ed believers from one another except by the plain guidance of Scripture.

And further still, would it not remove the moral barriers that exist to the Lord's dealing with us in blessing and restoration, leading to the healing of division where it has already taken place for insufficient reasons, *i.e.*, reasons similar to those on account of which many are now pressing for division, and where the doctrine of Christ has not been in question?

I know well the stereotyped objections with which such a suggestion is usually met. But, oh! if brethren would only search the Scriptures as diligently to find reasons for fellowship as some do to find reasons for separation (or for remaining in separation), how much happier it would be, or rather I would say, how much more in keeping with the thoughts of Christ about His people.

Another cause that, jointly with the above, tends to work havoc with scriptural fellowship is the contention that the decision arrived at by any "two or three" that are gathered in Christ's name is absolutely binding, and must be bowed to by other gatherings without question. This is professedly derived from the Lord's words in Matthew xviii. 18, and also from the fact, happily unaffected by our mistakes, that He is in the midst (verse 20).

But it is well to remember verse 19 also, and by taking the passage (verses 18-20) as a whole, it may prevent our using either verse in a way contrary to the Lord's intentions. In reading them we see:—Firstly, that what the gathering binds or looses upon earth is bound or loosed in heaven. Secondly, that what they agree in asking shall be done for them. Thirdly, that these responses on the part of God to the actions and prayers of the "two or three" are because His Son is present in the midst.

Is it the mind of God that verses 18 and 19 should be held as absolutely unconditional? The whole tenor of His word justifies us in answering with certainty, *No*. For

it is assumed in both verses that there is a practical condition of subjection of heart, spiritual intelligence, and communion with the One Who is in the midst.

Many would admit this as to verse 19, but leave it out of account as to verse 18. But verse 18 no more means that God ratifies *all* the decisions of the "two or three," than the 19th verse means that He answers *all* their prayers. Verse 15, also verses 21 to end instruct us as to the spirit in which *alone* decisions can be arrived at that God will own.

To insist upon the *unqualified* acceptance of an "assembly judgment" on the ground of Matt. xviii. 18, is as unscriptural as it would be to insist upon the unqualified acceptance of an *individual* judgment on the ground of 1 John ii. 20. Both are conditional—as may be gathered from many portions of the Word.

In this connection I feel that the action taken in 1890 was right in the Lord's sight *only* because the teachings from which we separated were evil, and not because a certain meeting came to a judgment, "rejecting" Greenwich.

Quite apart from that we were responsible to separate as instructed in 2 Tim. ii., and on the other hand if the teachings were *not* evil, the Bexhill judgment would have been no warrant for our separating from Greenwich.

And I always felt that the cause of truth suffered by the attempts made to justify separation on a different ground to that given in Scripture.

But though I thus speak, yet I gladly own that through the Lord's great mercy the occasions are few and far between upon which necessity arises for seriously questioning the decision of a company gathered to Christ's name.

After this long digression I turn again to your pamphlet. On page 3 you ask, after pressing the importance of individual piety and faithfulness, "Of what value is any ecclesiastical position if individual and personal testimony be lacking."

I would answer the question by emphasizing the "*if*." A godly walk in matters individual *and* in matters collective is like the chewing of the cud and the dividing of the hoof in Leviticus xi. God looks for *both*. Some speak of the ecclesiastical position as though it had an importance in the eyes of God, paramount over every other aspect of christian life, which it certainly has not.

To walk as obedient children individually, *and* to make that same obedience our object in our collective conduct and associations is what the Lord undoubtedly seeks from us.

To minimise the importance of *either* cannot be according to His will.

Those who sincerely seek to honor God collectively may make many mistakes, but in Christendom there are comparatively so few who care whether they gather according to God's Word or not, that we must be careful not to slight the attempts of those who *do care*, however much those attempts may be marred by failure.

I am not contending (so far at least), for any particular view of the troubles among us, but simply stating principles which I believe are true, and some of which your pamphlet does not appear to attach sufficient weight to.

Again (page 4), is it unqualifiedly true that "the pitiful sight we present" is "*not* through our faithfulness but through our bickerings and quarrellings?" In some ways this may be true. But much of our outward weakness in numbers and gift is due (at least in the localities where my lot has been cast) to the events of 1890, already referred to; when the Lord gave grace to separate (amid much failure) from the harmful teachings that were then sought to be forced upon us. And again, we could often in a measure escape from the apparent weakness by giving up something or other that we have learned from the Word as to the Lord's desires for His people, or on the other hand, by availing ourselves of human methods and devices that His Word does not sanction.

Our wall may seem of such feeble building that even a fox could break it down (Nehemiah iv. 3), but in the midst of frequent discouragement and reproach, and fully admitting that failure is mingled with our weakness, we can simply do as Nehemiah did, and cry to God. Other instances also are found in Scripture which tend to show that the presentation of a "pitiful sight" does not necessarily result always and entirely from causes displeasing to the Lord.

In the same paragraph you suggest the question, "Does any correct ecclesiastical position exist to-day at all?"

Presuming that by "correct" you mean right in the sight of God, there can be no other answer than, *Yes*. Wherever two or three are gathered to the name of Christ and are seeking to keep His Word.*

But whether this necessitates a circle of gatherings disowning all others *in the absolute way* that some have insisted upon, I sincerely doubt. Alas, even as I pen the doubt I seem to hear some say, "then your place is outside." Well, if any are still left among us who adopt this intolerant attitude for conscience toward God, may He bless them, and give us all to understand His will better in these things.

Your allusion (pages 4 and 5) to the events of 1880 carries my conscience entirely. It is a †scriptural "looseness" that leads one to deplore that "only those are allowed to break bread who agree with certain assembly decisions often of a most questionable kind," etc.

In the events of 1880, I myself and many other young ones had no reponsible part in the division that then took place, but were practically compelled to acquiesce in that

* Involving, of course, the acknowledgment of His supreme authority by that word in their Church order, ministry and fellowships.

† This does not mean that looseness is scriptural, but refers to the fact that scriptural thoughts on these matters are by some mistakenly described as "loose."

for which we could not clearly see sufficient reason. And probably such was the case with many who went the other way. The Lord be with them wherever they are if still seeking His glory.

I do not suggest wrong motives on the part of those who led on either side, but I do feel certain that other courses than division were open to them. One prominent brother whose memory I (and many others) revere was somewhat out of health in 1879, at the time the Ramsgate trouble was pending, and when sympathy was expressed he replied, "The fact is, I feel that the thing with which I have been associated for thirty years is going to pieces and it is telling on my health."

I have often thought since that "the thing" had assumed too important a place in the heart of this beloved servant and of many others, and that this was a great cause of matters proceeding to extremes.

It is scarcely to be wondered at though, that "the thing" was dear to many. Brethren, like the disciples in John vi. 2—11 had Christ and the multitude, and were often privileged by Him to pass on, as it were, precious food to the hungry souls who were attracted in large numbers from the systems of men by the ministry of the Word.

At the end of John vi. the multitude had melted away and the disciples were placed as we are now, in circumstances that might discourage were it not for the sense in our souls (as the disciples confessed) that all is found in Himself.

Happy for us if, now that "the thing" will scarcely bear speaking of, our hearts cleave to, and rejoice in the *One* Who is in the midst still.

And may this cleaving to Him always be, *not* because of the evil or emptiness of other things, but because of the preciousness and sufficiency that are found in Him.

I had no idea of writing at such length and now feel it

best to leave any further remarks to a second letter unless you inform me that you do not wish it.

My object in writing was the hope of influencing the thoughts of one whose ministry meets the eye and ear of many souls exercised by present troubles.

I may say that your quotation of J.N.D's allusion to Paul has led me to consider what really would be the apostle's path in these matters if he were in English speaking countries in the 20th century—not for vain speculation on what is of course impossible, but with the thought that what would be right for him would be right for any other believer—and with a desire to establish scriptural conclusions thereon. This I shall seek to do in my next, if the Lord will.

For the present I remain,

Yours in the service of Christ,

QUARTUS.

SEPTEMBER 28TH, 1909.

DEAR BROTHER IN CHRIST,

In my letter of September 4th, I omitted to speak of another cause which most certainly helps to foster the "dividing" spirit among those who might well be expected to carry out Ephesians iv. 3 in practice.

I refer to the wrong use often made of Scriptures that are obviously intended for our instruction as to our relations with *unbelievers*, and our attitude towards gross sin and open departure from the faith on the part of professed believers.

Such Scriptures have often, both in meetings and conversation, been freely applied to our *fellow believers* who "follow not with us," and to matters in which others may unfortunately have differed in judgment from the speakers, but into which no question of gross sin or departure from the faith enters at all.

I will not stay to name either Scriptures or instances. Both will probably be familiar to you. And if so, you may have felt, as I have while listening to such utterances, that they are more displeasing to the Lord than many things which we condemn in the systems around us. And also, that the consequent grieving of the Spirit would account for much lack of blessing.

I return to the pamphlet which was the cause of my writing to you. On page 6 you state that J.N.D. suggested "that Paul, were he on earth, would most probably disown *every* company."

I have not read these letters of J.N.D. but will assume that his statements bear the interpretation you give them. I must also assume however, from personal knowledge of J.N.D. and his ministry, that he would intend such a suggestion to be subject to qualifications.

I only allude to the matter however, for the reason stated at the close of my first letter, viz., "To consider what really would be the Apostle's path in these matters if he were in English-speaking countries in the 20th century—not for vain speculation on what is of course impossible—but with the thought that what would be right for him would be right for any other believer, and with the desire to establish scriptural conclusions thereon."

The conclusions I would now set forth have not been lightly or hastily formed, but are the fruit of many years of exercise, during which I have always esteemed the scriptural simplicity and order of gathering to be of only less value to the soul than the Lord Himself.

At the outset three points seem clear in the light of Scripture :—

Firstly, that faced by the widespread confusion and ruin of the visible church, Paul would be as hopeless as we are of seeing it restored to its original state.

Secondly, that we can safely leave out of account any possibility of his associating himself (save under exceptional and infrequent circumstances—and then only under reserve) with any of the human systems of Christendom, or with any company that regarded it as a matter of even comparative indifference whether their principles and fellowship were according to the Word of God or not.

Thirdly, that it would be his deep concern and earnest endeavour to pursue a course of action as to collective matters that would be according to the Word of God under the circumstances.

If we admit these three points, then we may conclude that it would be of immense importance to him if he

found companies who, like himself, were conscious of the ruined condition of the visible church, and were seeking—by gathering in the name of Christ alone, and acknowledging the Word as the only authority and guide—to avoid the things which characterized and had produced that ruin.

Truly his discovery of such would cause him to “thank God and take courage.” His joy would be great at finding kindred spirits who shared his own concern that God might be honoured in these things.

Sorrow, however, would soon mingle with his joy, as he learned that among those companies there was circle after circle of fellowship, each regarding all companies outside their circle as not being gathered to the Lord’s name at all, and not having the Lord’s table, and being “off the ground of the assembly of God.”

Whichever circle he first met with he would probably (I only say *probably*, because there seems to be in recent years an upgrowing of more scriptural thoughts on these matters) have found it assumed—without any possibility or shadow of doubt being admitted—that all the others had “turned aside,” “gone wrong,” or “left the Lord’s table.”

There can be no doubt he would pray over and ponder these things in the light of God’s revealed will—always so precious to Paul.

And what if he then discovered that—mingled with godly intentions—much that was human and unworthy had so far contributed to the positions taken by various circles, as to prevent his fully endorsing that position as being *entirely* of God in any one case? (I am still leaving aside anything arising from questions of gross sin or serious false doctrine.)

What would he do? What *could* he do? Would he stand alone? To do so would involve, if continued for any length of time, a manifest disregard of the Lord’s

table, and of the command not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together. Neither would Jeremiah xv. 19, so often misapplied in justification of a voluntary isolation, warrant such a position, as the context of that Scripture shows.

Would he seek to form a fresh company? If such were his desire, he could suggest no other *reason* for gathering or *way* of gathering than is found in the Word, viz., To gather in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, seeking to act in obedience to Him by the guidance of the Word and Spirit.

This would soon become known as a "brethren" meeting, and would be no different, in principle at least, to gatherings at present found on earth where those who compose them fear the Lord and think upon His name.

Therefore I think you will agree that he would make no such attempt as I have suggested (and in this connection I notice that on page 6 you speak of aiming at righteousness, etc., "*not* with those meetings which loudly boast of being gathered on divine ground, but with those individual saints who call on the Lord out of a pure heart." This seems like advocating a fresh separation, but I am persuaded *that* cannot be your meaning).

If then it would not be a godly course either to stand alone or to form a fresh company, would he essay to join himself to one already existing?

Perhaps—as I have supposed* his having been already brought into contact and association with gathered believers at some British *Puteoli* or *Appii Forum*—it would be better to ask, Would he seek to remain in association

* If any reader feels that these suppositions are an unedifying liberty to take with the name of the inspired apostle, I suggest they might be read as applying to any servant of Christ who was seeking to walk in the truth, and who found himself for the first time in the countries where these conditions prevail among those gathered to Christ's name.

with them? I believe that, recognizing that the hand of God had led him to that place at that time, he certainly *would* desire to remain in association with them (unless he had discovered in the mean time that they were in any way linked with gross sin or false doctrine, which, I again remind you, I am leaving out of account in these suggestions).

But then at once, alas! another question arises. If he were met—as some would probably meet him—with the stipulation that his fellowship must be *absolutely exclusive* to that circle of gatherings, would he as the Lord's servant agree to these terms, and would he still be accepted if he refused to?

I believe the answer to both questions is, *No*. Not that he would disown them as scriptural gatherings on account of this difference of judgment, or deny that they had the Lord's table, for grace will bear with mistaken intolerance as it will with mistaken tolerance, while deploring both. He would not refuse them, BUT THEY MIGHT KEEP HIM OUT. Or if any gathering of the circle *did* accept him, they would be charged with disregarding the unity of the Spirit, and probably cut off themselves with cries of "independency," "contrary to the principles upon which we have always acted," and other phrases which appear sometimes to usurp the place of Scripture in the minds of many beloved brethren.

I feel sure however, that one who so often "prayed for the peace of Jerusalem" as he, would not allow himself to be thus made a subject of contention and strife, and he would not press his claim to fellowship while such a state of feeling lasted. This would leave him practically without scriptural fellowship. For though "open" gatherings of believers would doubtless receive him, yet for reasons stated earlier in this letter I cannot think he would be happy in such a fellowship. For such as he would expect the true character and responsibility of the assembly of

God to be fully recognized wherever two or three of its members were gathered in Christ's name; and also that there should be the *entire absence of fellowship with, and of neutrality respecting* those who bring not the "doctrine of Christ." Unless I am greatly misinformed, these things are not sufficiently definite principles in "open" gatherings.

I now revert to my suggestion that he would not press for fellowship at Puteoli while the state of things lasted which has been described. But would it last? Not if his earnest entreaties could put an end to it. For while, as I have said, Paul would be as hopeless as we are of restoring the visible church to its original state, yet he would regard all things as possible where Christ was the acknowledged and only centre, where the Word of God was the acknowledged and only rule, where the gospel was retained in its purity, where the Lord's Supper had its rightful place, and where, too, responsibility was acknowledged in the things which God has committed to the charge of His gathered ones. And all these things are, I believe, still true of numbers of gatherings who at present disown one another; I dare not say from *wrong motives* but I unhesitatingly say for *reasons* not warranted by Scripture. The Lord hearkens and hears wherever those who fear Him and think upon His name speak often one to another. Whoever may disown them as a scriptural gathering, He does not. Neither, blessed be His name, does He disown them because they mistakenly disown some others.

Some years ago my lot was cast in a small meeting where trial and exercise of many kinds seemed continually pressing upon us. But it had the effect of casting us upon the Lord and giving us to realize our dependence in a way we should not have otherwise learnt. During that time the providence of God took me into another locality for a short time. I came into contact there with members of a

very similar small gathering, tried in much the same ways and sustained by the same resources found in the Lord. Also like us—and I particularly noticed this, having opportunities of doing so, though I attended none of their meetings—making much of being gathered to the Lord's name and on the ground of the One Body. You will have probably guessed what I am about to say, viz., that this gathering was not "in fellowship," and that the mutual attitude of the whole circle to which it belonged, and the whole circle to which my own meeting belonged, was that of regarding each other as having "gone wrong," etc., because of a difference of judgment as to difficulties that had arisen in 1884. Had I spent the Lord's day with them and broken bread (though they might not have allowed this) and refused afterwards to repent of it as a sin, we may feel sure that unless my own meeting promptly excluded me from the Lord's table, there would have been great trouble over it.

A state of things such as this would be grievous to the apostle, because he himself was so much in communion with the heart of the great Head of the Church, whose prayer is recorded in John xvii. 21. But for the *very same reason* he would not be hopeless, as I trust you are not, and as I refuse to be, though I have been told for 30 years by one and another that "God never restores," etc. And Paul's hopefulness would not be based upon anything he could find in man, but upon what is found in the Lord, and upon the sufficiency of His Word, if sincerely acted upon, to produce under His blessing restoration from these God-dishonouring conditions.

I trust that my use of Paul's supposed presence in the world has helped to make my meaning clear on some points, but before laying this train of thought aside it is necessary to point out that even if his entreaties had no effect upon those at Puteoli and elsewhere, his epistles do not allow us to suppose that he would voluntarily abstain

for an *indefinite period* from the "assembling together" of believers, or from partaking of the Lord's Supper.

He might only be welcomed where conditions prevailed that would hinder him from having *unqualified* fellowship. But christian fellowship he *would* have, and the Lord's death he *would* remember even under such drawbacks, rather than disobey the plain commandments which he was once used of God to impress upon believers.

And yet it is contended by some that it is better to indefinitely "sit apart" than break bread, etc., with a gathering or circle of gatherings with which we do not see "eye to eye" in certain disciplinary matters. The reasons given for this cannot be called *scriptural* reasons, and appear generally—one might say always—obscure and involved. But about these commandments of Scripture there is no obscurity at all. 1 Corinthians xi. 23—26 and Hebrews x. 25 are plain, positive and unmistakeable. No uncertainty. No ambiguity. And "until He come." What a solemn responsibility rests upon us if, by setting up tests of fellowship that cannot be demonstrated from Scripture, we compel exercised souls to choose between the alternatives I have suggested in the case of Paul.

As regards Paul however, it is *only* a suggestion, for I do not believe he would be left to choose between the alternatives mentioned, but that God would bless his entreaties to bring about a state of things in which it would be unnecessary.

If you are inclined to doubt this and say that "all in Asia" who had "turned away," never, so far as we know, became reconciled to Paul, I reply that this letter deals with different circumstances to those, for it is obvious that their turning away from the Lord's apostle involved a great deal more than is involved in present barriers existing among gathered brethren. And just as I believe Paul would ultimately not be obliged to choose between these alternatives, so I have hope in God that exercised

souls of to-day may not *always* have to do so either. Our great and immediate hope is in the Lord's return to receive us to Himself, that where He is we may be also. But if He tarries yet for a little while it might well be our dearest earthly hope that at His return, believers gathered* to the name of the Lord Jesus Christ might be found walking together in practical and godly unity. We are justified in looking onward to possible earthly events, even as Paul did in several Scriptures, but at the same time we must take care that we are ready to "open to Him immediately" if "He cometh and knocketh" ere another day has passed, and thus puts an end to both the failures and opportunities of His church on earth.

(It occurs to me as I write that this readiness to open is presented in contrast with a readiness to exercise excessive "discipline" upon others of the household of God. Compare Luke xii. 36 with verse 45.)

I proceed to consider, firstly, What are the grounds of the hope above expressed? and secondly, By what scriptural means may we help to remove hindrances to God thus blessing us?

The answers to the first question are several:—

Firstly, hope is found in the very difficulties by which we are confronted. These difficulties have already led to

* A brother, seeing the proof sheets, asks "Why these only?"

My reasons for leaving the sentence as it stands are two. The first is, that outward unity, to be approved by God, must be in subjection to the authority of Christ as Lord, and this authority is virtually set aside by the humanly devised systems in which so many believers are found.

Secondly, I believe (whether others believe it also I know not), that those who are truly Christ's will, in the near future, be forced out of those systems by the rapid development of apostacy within their borders, and thus having no name but their Lord's to gather to, would be included in the above description.

Both these reasons may need much greater detail to make them clear, but space and time do not admit at the present moment.

division and seem likely to still do so. This is bringing souls face to face with the inevitable outcome of the extreme and one-sided thoughts that have largely prevailed hitherto. Many are asking themselves whether principles of action can be altogether of God, which practically *compel* us to divide, even if we don't *want* to divide, because we see no plain scriptural reason *for* dividing, and because we plainly see that no honour is brought to the name of Christ *by* our doing so.

Secondly, there is the fact that gathered brethren in some other countries well known to us, have gone on, certainly with trials, difficulties and exercises, but practically without divisions such as have taken place in English-speaking countries. They have 2 Timothy ii. just the same as we have, but they have not been so ready to apply it unnecessarily. Clearly then, a greater measure of practical unity is possible for us.

Thirdly, and this presents itself to me more forcibly than any other reason—except where false doctrine has entered or had its influence, those gathered to the name of the Lord Jesus Christ HAVE GIVEN UP NOTHING. All the trouble arises not from things being given up but from things being *added*. These added things do not involve a departure from the truth of the gospel, or from scriptural ground. Therefore it is needless to ask them to leave the ground they are upon (as we *should* need to ask those in system or otherwise unscripturally gathered), but rather to correct themselves on that ground. Neither have they sought to modify the truth of God in order to make it acceptable to the twentieth century thoughts of man. Neither have they ignored the heavenly calling of the Church in order to secure a share of political or social power. And they still acknowledge—what multitudes of believers have forgotten or deny—that the relationship of the Church to a still rejected Christ involves a path of separation from the world, even where it has a christian

vener. In other words, the foundation is sound, and if things which do not make for peace have been built into the superstructure, they are things which have arisen from failure to mingle grace with truth, rather than from any real departure from the truth itself.

The movement that led to the gathering out of believers to the name of the Lord Jesus Christ in such a distinct manner in the early part of the nineteenth century, was either a precious intervention of God in the affairs of His Church, *or* it was a tremendous mistake. I, for one, am confident it was not the latter, and it is a comfort to think that the restored preciousness and simplicity of the Lord's Supper, the revived hope of His speedy coming, the return to scriptural simplicity of gathering, worship, ministry and doctrine, and the simple presentation of the gospel as God has given it, which were the features of those days, are as much a reality and joy (to many at least) in 1909 as they were seventy or eighty years ago.

Fourthly, there is good hope from the fact that Scripture indicates means (already alluded to) which, if acted upon, would tend to remove the God-dishonouring conditions which we deplore.

This brings me to the second question, viz., "By what scriptural means may we help to remove hindrances to God thus blessing us."

I am careful to say *scriptural* means, for mere human scheming to promote unity can be of no real avail in any way that God can own.

Now the Scriptures may give many more answers to this question than I perceive, but one answer only is upon my mind and I single out Ephesians iv. 3, because its importance is so widely acknowledged among us.

If simply read and pondered in its *proper unmistakable meaning and connection* it goes to the root of the perplexing conditions that have arisen largely through misapplying it.

It might be easy to fill pages on the true bearing of this portion, but I now only point out that the opening verses of Ephesians iv. are obviously based upon the truths unfolded at the close of chapter ii. (chapter iii. being a parenthesis, as is well known).

There, in the peace which Christ has made and preached, believers have on the one hand access to the Father, through Christ, by the One Spirit, while on the other hand, that One Spirit has linked them together as fellow-citizens, members of the one household, stones in the one building of which the corner stone is Christ, and part of the one holy temple.

Therefore we are besought to walk worthy of the vocation wherewith we are called. And how? Not in the loftiness which the unspiritual mind might suppose was proper to those who were thus associated with the Highest, but with all lowliness, meekness, long-suffering and forbearing one another in love. These words are humbling though precious. Humbling, because of what we are; precious, because they describe what is of great price in the sight of God, and moreover because they remind us of the full expression of these things in Jesus on earth.

But all the graces spoken of in this verse, (Ephesians iv. 2), might be in practice even if there was no such thing as a Spirit-formed unity of the people of God on earth. So verse 3 comes in to prevent them forgetting the character of the relationships into which grace has brought them, according to the truths with which the word "therefore" (verse 1), connects these exhortations. The graces of verse 2 are incomplete without the endeavour of verse 3. And the endeavour of verse 3 cannot be carried on in a way that God will own unless it grows out of the graces of verse 2.

This endeavour is "to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." The truth of Scripture lies upon the

surface* for the youngest believer to see. Scripture is a pasture rather than a mine. When we try to go below the surface—and by the surface I mean its plain import—there is danger of the human mind getting to work, with resulting confusion. This 3rd verse then clearly means that their actions and attitude towards others of the Lord's people were to be in keeping with the aspects of the unity formed by the operations of the one Spirit, and of which he had just been writing in chapter ii. They were "one body" (verse 16) and the sense of this was to be a power in their souls. Also they were to act as men of the same city, or of the same household (verse 19) might be expected to act towards each other. And this with the all-pervading sense that they were living stones of the building which "groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord." The practical acknowledgment and expression of these things then *is* (subject only to limitations which the Scriptures enjoin upon us) the "keeping" of the unity of the Spirit.

And it was to be in "the bond of peace." Not the bond of strife: not the bond of discipline: not the bond of censure: not the bond of exclusion. These denials may seem needless and foolish, and they would indeed be so, were it not for the extraordinary connections in which this verse has again and again been used.

And if any will say that "separation from evil" is "God's principle of unity" let them hesitate before basing their thoughts upon the title of a pamphlet rather than upon the plain words of Scripture.

There is good reason to believe that the honoured and beloved servant of Christ whose pamphlet I here allude to, afterwards regretted the use of such an unfortunate title, or at least the effect it produced in the minds of some, but

* I refer, of course, to the needed instructions for our pathway, which (like the way of salvation) are clear and plain.

Hidden meanings (see Matt. xiii. 10-15) and "things hard to be understood" (2 Peter iii. 16), are another matter.

nevertheless that title is still regarded by some as an authoritative statement of the true ground of gathering.

The truth is of course that unity according to God, which is the unity of the Spirit, (while involving *among other things*, separation from evil upon the occasions, and in the manner which His Word indicates for our guidance), has no *necessary* reference to evil at all but to *good*, and that good is CHRIST, and the relationships into which we are brought in and through Him. In glory there will be no evil to separate from, but the blessed "principles of unity" will remain. Indeed only there will they find *perfect* fulfilment and expression

But the one thing in our verse that will have no place in the glory is the one thing which alone can tend to practical unity upon earth. That is the "*endeavour to keep.*" This word "endeavour" is as full of comfort as it is of instruction. If we were entreated to "*succeed in keeping*" we might well despair because it seems impossible.

But the "endeavour to keep" is a very different matter, for where it is possible that none may "*succeed,*" yet many may "*endeavour,*" and thus honour the Lord by obedience to His Word. And if the Lord is honoured, and the soul has the consciousness of His approval, the gain will be blessed indeed, even though the end we desire to bring about on earth does not come to pass.

In other words—the endeavour is in *our* hands, but the success is in *His*, and even if He sees fit to withhold success, yet His "well done" is assured if the "endeavour" is maintained with a sincere desire for His glory and in subjection to His Word.

How, then, is this endeavour to be carried out? *Not* by the methods of which the unscripturalness has already been pointed out. *Not* by denouncing such methods in the*

* It is easy to slip into harshness and intolerance in denouncing the harshness and intolerance of others. But "the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God." "Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good."

same censorious spirit that has already borne unhappy fruit. *Not* by forming a fresh company to add to the confusion. And above all, *not* by giving up Scripture as our guide in these matters, for the darker the days the more its light is needed.

Surely then, it can only be carried out by seeking to give practical effect and expression to our oneness in Christ by loving fellowship in worship, testimony and service, subject to the exceptions, limitations and safeguards laid down in Scripture, and to *those* exceptions, limitations and safeguards *only*. This is indeed "divine ground," or, perhaps it is better to say, a divinely approved "way" for believers on earth, whether in the first century or the twentieth.

These are still, I trust, our acknowledged principles, but we fail to give effect to them while it is possible for us to refuse a believer who presents himself at the Lord's table with a letter of commendation from a gathering whom we have no reason to believe would commend an evil liver or a heretic to us, or that they themselves were evil livers or heretics, or tolerant of such, "not in fellowship with us" being the only reason.

This illustrates the strangeness of some existing barriers. Can they be of God? The question is best answered by another; *viz.*, Is the exclusion warranted by His Word?^{*} I submit that the answer can only be—*emphatically*, No.

These remarks only refer to barriers arising from causes other than evil doctrine, such as the events of 1880 and 1884 (though I am aware there was a question of doctrine

* I say again HIS WORD. No substitute can be relied on.

The apparently godly and spiritual claim sometimes put forth of "having the Lord's mind" as to these matters, is self-deceptive and misleading.

The "Lord's mind" is expressed IN HIS WORD, and if any conclusions our own minds have reached (even after sincere exercise of soul), are relied on instead, we have begun to lose our way.

mixed up in the latter, but I believe the division was of an involved character,—I write subject to correction) and any fresh breaches of a similar character that might arise at any future time.

But who shall limit the Lord? If once the spirit of lowliness, meekness, long suffering and forbearance begins afresh to spread, with the consequent “endeavour,” who can tell but what, even where evil teaching has entered or been defended in years gone by, or where an unscriptural neutrality may have existed as to fellowship with it or its defenders, there may be poured out the spirit of godly judgment, leading to the adoption of a more scriptural attitude? This would naturally involve the repudiation of things from which many have been compelled to separate in order to maintain a good conscience toward God. Thus barriers, which I believe were *rightly erected*, would fall to the ground and the Lord would again have the joy of hearing *all* who gather distinctly to His name again speaking “often one to another.” But this is only a thought in passing. Whether the “little while” has this in store is not for us to know. It is for *His coming* we wait. Everything must be left in His hands, who “Himself knoweth what He will do.” We can only seek to be led step by step “till He come.”

So let us turn again to the matters more immediately before us.

Hearts, wearied and discouraged by the broken state of gathered believers, may indeed be ready to say that there is no hope of a *collective* endeavour toward a happier state of things, and therefore no practical good can result from pressing these truths upon us.

But the Word of God is ever to “him that hath an ear,” and an appeal earnestly made may arouse or encourage many *individuals* who are ready to lay aside (or have already laid aside) all thoughts about their fellow believers which are not according to the Word of God.

The present hour seems to be the Lord's time for pressing this appeal, or rather this "beseeching" to "endeavour." For we are in the presence of "troubles" which furnish instructive object-lessons of the bitter fruits of "endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit" in a way contrary to the plain meaning of the Scripture, and which must result in the erection of further needless and unscriptural barriers.

To take the most prominent question first—In this case gatherings are dividing or taking sides (involving, be it remembered—awful thought—final and absolute separation for the rest of the journey from all who differ in judgment) either in defence of a brother whose conduct is alleged to have long been a grief to many, or on the other hand, in support of an assembly notice to which many feel that for various reasons, the Name of the Lord Jesus should never have been attached.

Besides this, equally perplexing questions are, I understand, fermenting in more than one other locality.

Each of these carries its possibility of similar separations of gatherings from gatherings according to the view taken by them of the merits of each case, and this subdividing process may go on indefinitely until the Lord comes, if we still act on traditions of exclusion which go beyond the Word of God.

If, then, for the time being at least, there seem little prospect of *collective* "endeavour," in what way can *individuals* carry on *their* "endeavour" in a way pleasing to the Lord? Without quoting particular Scriptures, let me suggest what appears to be according to the whole tenor of the Word.

Firstly, let us resolve *in advance* that whatever judgment any of our brethren in Christ may arrive at in regard to these perplexing questions, we will not *speak* of them, or *think* of them, or *treat* them as having "turned aside," or "gone wrong," or having "given up the truth," because the judgment they may arrive at differs from our own.

Also that we will not *spe*ak or *think* of any gathering as no longer having the Lord's table, or as having ceased to be gathered in His name, for the same reason. This will naturally lead to the adoption of a similar attitude (still, it may be, for the present, *individual*) towards brethren and gatherings separated from us for reasons no clearer from Scripture than those found in present troubles.

Secondly, let us with meekness and grace, when occasion requires, let it be known that such is the attitude of our hearts in these painful matters. Maintaining, should it be questioned (and it quite possibly *will* be questioned), our God-given privilege to remain at the Lord's table where we now are.

Thirdly, pray to God for the removal of the barriers and seek to join with others in prayer for this definite object. Often, it may be, needing to cry to God to keep us from mistaking mere human laxity and love of peace for the "endeavour" which is according to His mind.

Fourthly—and this is most difficult of all, and impossible to the flesh—receive all accusations, if such are made against you, of "looseness," "ignorance of the truth," etc., etc., with long-suffering and loving forbearance. Remembering too, as the Lord remembers, that some whose attitude on these matters is difficult to bear with, are those who have given up or suffered much for the truth's sake in days gone by, and would probably do so again rather than *wilfully* dishonour Christ. Like the disciples in Matthew xix. 13, who displayed a severity that was not in harmony with the Lord's mind, yet the fact remained that they were gathered to Christ and He was precious to them.

Such have, I firmly believe, allowed themselves to take one-sided views of truth, through giving undue emphasis to certain scriptures at the expense of other scriptures of equal importance. Even as we are all liable to the mistake of assuming that the side of truth which is uppermost in our minds is necessarily uppermost in the mind of the Lord.

Besides this, the afore-mentioned habit of applying, in reference to sincere believers, scriptures which obviously have no such application, has helped to produce undue severity of mind towards those whom they do not agree with.

And if it be asked, "Why then not separate from such if they persist in this attitude?" the answer is, that Scripture only commands separation on account of evil doctrine or living, while merely trying conduct on the part of our brethren is to be borne with to the utmost. May God grant that the need for this forbearance may prove to be far less, and more exceptional, than appears to be the case.

But you may ask, "Of what avail would it be if individuals among us (and among others too) sought to carry out their 'endeavour' in the ways suggested? The barriers would still exist, and practical unity and fellowship among those gathered to Christ's name would still be unaccomplished." True; but at least the door would be open for *God* to come in and accomplish it. At present the door is practically closed against Him by the widespread refusal to consider the possibility, in the light of Scripture, of His so acting in blessing.

What the Lord's way of healing might be we cannot tell, but it would be such as to carry the conviction to every godly heart that "Himself hath done it," and not man.

Should the coming One tarry a little longer we know not what lies ahead of those who fear the Lord and think upon His name. Events are moving with marvellous rapidity, and for ought we know the age of tolerance may be near its end, and persecution (probably disguised under some other name) may be at hand.

You, as one who is well cognizant of what is going on in the world, will not regard this as a contingency to be left out of account. If it came to pass, it might be the means of

driving the flock close in upon each other and the Shepherd for comfort amid the storm, and thus good arise out of evil.

But far be the thought of waiting for any outward events. Rather may the Lord give us speedily to return to the Scriptures as our sole guide in these matters which lie so near His heart. Near His heart because the unity which the Spirit has formed is not only with each other, but with Himself, "for we are members of His body, of His flesh, and of His bones." And if one saint or one gathering is refused fellowship *except by the plain guidance of His Word*, He might well say to us, "Why refuseth thou Me?"

As to when and how, and to what extent that which is according to His mind in these things may yet be brought about, we can only say again, "He Himself knows what He will do." Faith can only act step by step, because only one step at a time can be seen. But these steps, if taken by His guidance, lead steadily toward that which He wills for us. And the Scriptures make it clear that His approval depends, in this as in other things, not upon the point we may have reached, but upon the direction in which He sees us moving.

If we make a sincere "endeavour," we are moving in the direction that is according to His mind, whether that endeavour attains the desired end or not. As already said, the endeavour is in our hands, but the success is in *His*.

May an increasing number be found who will consider these things in the light of the Scriptures only. Mistrusting our own thoughts, and the thoughts of man, may we seek to form conclusions that are according to God, by His help and in His fear.

I remain,

Yours in the service of Christ,
QUARTUS.

Any godly objections to the thoughts expressed in these letters will, if communicated, receive consideration, and may be noticed, if the Lord will, in a later edition, should one be published. Address—"Q," care of the Printers.