

LONDON, *October, 1894.*

DEAR ———

You are mistaken in supposing that, by leaving a meeting of open brethren, you accuse them of *holding* doctrines which have been judged and put away.

The meeting at Bethesda Chapel, Bristol, received into fellowship, *not* the person who taught blasphemous doctrines about Christ, but his friends. I quote the following extract from a letter written by one who knew the facts himself.

“A lady wished to introduce Mr. N. to teach in a meeting near Bethesda ; this meeting refused ; she left the meeting accordingly. She was introduced at B., Mr. M. knowing that she was maintaining and propagating this doctrine, Mr. Craik the other pastor having had to do with her. She went there because they admitted such persons into that meeting. At the same time, two gentlemen, who made part of the meeting which Mr. N. had formed when he was obliged to leave on account of his doctrine (those who had supported him having left him and made confession), these two communicants of Mr. N.’s, I say, were also admitted to B. It is proved true that these three disseminated Mr. N.’s tracts in the B. assembly. The lady induced a young lady to go who was the most active and intelligent agent that Mr. N. had, in order to spread his doctrines. In consequence of these circumstances, several godly brothers of B. asked that all this should be examined ; they said that they did not ask even that the judgment of the brethren should

be taken thereupon, but that they should examine the matter and the doctrine themselves. This was decidedly refused. I received a letter from Mr. C., blaming me as sectarian for making these difficulties, even when he was not prepared to receive *everything* that Mr. N. was teaching. They had many meetings of the flock and the ten labouring brothers (of whom two were really disciples of Mr. N.), Messrs. M. and C. at their head, presented a written paper to the assembly at B., declaring that this was a new test of communion, which they would not admit; that many excellent brethren did not give so decided an opinion upon Mr. N.'s doctrine; that they were not bound to read fifty pages to know what Mr. N. taught, the members of his flock being—mark this!—already admitted at B. A brother asked permission to communicate some information about Mr. N.'s doctrine, in order that the assembly might understand why they held to it that the doctrine should be judged; and this was peremptorily refused, and the paper which said that many had not a bad opinion of the doctrine, rejecting as a new condition of fellowship the examination into the doctrine, was laid down as the absolute condition of the pastorate of Messrs. M. and C., without which they would withdraw from their ministry in the midst of the assembly. Those who justified them on the ground of this paper were to rise, which was done by the assembly, thirty or forty forthwith leaving B. So that, with knowledge of the matter, they laid down as the basis of the B. assembly, indifference to the truth as to the Person of Christ; and they preferred to see about forty godly brethren leave, rather than to examine into the question, having in fact in their midst the members of the N. meeting."

Now, after reading the above, you will see that the question for you to consider is: Who were right and acted according to Scripture? Those who left

Bethesda, because they could not break bread with the followers of a teacher of blasphemies against Christ? or the meeting which received them and alleged that they could not be refused unless they were known to hold the doctrines? There being at the present time two meetings at Bristol, representing those who received such persons *on principle*, and those who refused them *on principle*, the question is just the same now as then: Which meeting held, and holds, the truth as to reception and fellowship, the Person and glory of Christ being in question?

What does the apostle say to the elect lady in the second Epistle of John, as to the reception or rejection of one who does not hold the doctrine of Christ? His words are: "If any one come to you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, nor bid him God speed: for he that biddeth him God speed [literally, greets him] is a partaker of his evil deeds." Nothing can be plainer, the elect lady would have been a partaker of his evil, *by receiving him and greeting him*. It was not necessary for her to receive his doctrines to become associated with his evil. The one who greeted him was identified with the doctrines, whether he received them or not.

This Scripture was set at nought at Bethesda, and persons who, according to Scripture, were *partakers* by *association* with Mr. N. in blasphemies against Christ, were received into the assembly; and the unscriptural principle was laid down, that association with such a person and such evil was no barrier to reception to the Lord's table.

Bethesda, and the open brethren, now admit the evil nature of the doctrines by professing to have judged them and put them away, as you have been told. But that is not the real question. False and unscriptural principles were laid down as to reception into the assembly by Bethesda, when the doctrines

concerned the Person of Christ Himself, the true centre of union; and those principles have never been judged, but are acted on to this day. Although the blasphemies cannot be defended, the principles laid down keep the door open for the spread of false doctrine,* and make the maintenance of unity, and of holiness and truth in the assembly, impossible.

The following extract from the "Letter of the Ten" shews clearly the ground taken by Bethesda.

"Supposing the author of the tract were fundamentally unsound, this would not warrant us in rejecting those who came from under his teaching, until we were satisfied that they had understood and imbibed views essentially subversive of foundation truth."

Do you think any man, who cared for his own character and the welfare of his family, would receive into his house a person whom he had seen in the company of thieves or drunkards, because he was not known to be a thief or a drunkard? The ordinary principles of morality in the world would be opposed to such a course; and yet the children of God are to be exposed to all the terrible results of false doctrine, and the spread of it in God's assembly, on the plea that the followers of a false teacher cannot be excluded until they are honest enough to confess that they hold his doctrines; a thing certain to be concealed when Satan is at work amongst the saints. But Scripture is clear enough on this point, and association with any one called a brother, who is an evil doer, is expressly forbidden, 1 Corinthians v. 11: "With such an one no not to eat."

* The following is a recently published statement of one now in Bethesda: "The Lord could, if God decreed He should, lay down His life under poison as He did under crucifixion; He had power to do it, or He could have permitted age to creep over Him, and thus submitted to death. There was nothing in His humanity that would have made such a thing out of order."

Now, if I continue in fellowship with a meeting where known immorality or false doctrine is allowed, and I beg you to remember that the Plymouth doctrines were blasphemies against Christ, I directly disobey the word of God, which commands "every one that nameth the name of the Lord to depart from iniquity." Bethesda received those who were partakers in evil, and had become so through disobedience to Scripture. By such a proceeding, and the assertion that they could not be refused, christian fellowship was lowered below morality in the world, Scripture was set aside, and association with false teachers directly encouraged.

In 1 Corinthians v. we see that the assembly is not merely a number of individuals, like any worldly association, but that it is *one*; and that the apostle held the Corinthian assembly responsible for evil in its midst, and directed them to purge out the old leaven, that they might be a new lump, as they were unleavened. They were "unleavened" viewed as in Christ before God; but leaven, or the working of evil, being allowed in their midst, they were not a new lump as to their actual state. An evil doer was in and of the company, and the whole assembly was identified with the evil in the sight of God. The assembly was *one* and viewed as one lump, and the apostle states: "A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump." They could not as individuals, disregard the ways and doings of others with whom they were breaking bread. There was a corporate state and a corporate responsibility, for they were, in principle, as the church, God's house; and they were responsible to keep the house of God clean. "Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you? If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy, for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are."

In the year 1863, I wrote "A letter on Bethesda

fellowship," and gave extracts from the writings of the open brethren to prove that they denied assembly defilement and assembly responsibility; one of the statements being: "That no individual in any church was held responsible for evil existing in it, either doctrinal or practical, simply because he was one of the worshippers." This statement clearly denies the truth of the unity and the responsibility of the assembly, taught in the first Epistle to the Corinthians.

In the year 1888, a brother in the Bethesda meeting, in reply to an inquiry, unequivocally stated that they would not refuse to receive any one at Bethesda *merely* because he or she was in fellowship with a body of Christians, who would allow Mr. N. to minister among them. If they believed such a person to be sound in the faith, and "*consistent in life*," that person would be received. But how could a Christian be "*consistent in life*" by persisting in disobedience to Scripture, to continue in fellowship with a meeting where the leaven of false doctrine about Christ is not judged, and the false teacher is allowed to propagate his views? The late C. H. Spurgeon wrote: "To pursue union at the expense of truth is treason to the Lord" (*Sword and Trowel*, p. 558). This is perfectly true, and it explains why the same grounds exist for separation from Bethesda now, as existed so many years ago. The principles held relating to reception into the assembly are unscriptural. It is not a question whether many know that this is the case. Many, I doubt not, are ignorant of what caused the separation at first, and what principles are held now. The question is: How must I act *when I do know* what took place at Bethesda years ago, and what is held now by those who commend to and receive from Bethesda?

You have been told that there is no false doctrine in the meeting you have left, and that by leaving it you accuse them of holding false doctrine which has

been judged. This is not true, and is only blinding your eyes to the real question, which is : What are the principles on which they are gathered together? Do they receive from Bethesda, Bristol, or do they not? Would they receive persons into fellowship, who came from a meeting where false doctrine about Christ, or other fundamental errors subversive of the christian faith, are tolerated? The proof of consistent conduct in a Christian is obedience to Scripture ; and if an assembly of Christians is unfaithful to Christ, and refuses to purge out leaven from its midst, the question is : Am I to stay with evil for the sake of unity with Christians, or is my duty, as a believer, to purge myself from the evil by leaving such an assembly? "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep his commandments ;" and the commandment of God is plain : "Let every one that nameth the name of the Lord depart from iniquity."

The course of the believer is therefore clear. Subjection to the word of God, and obedience, is the only path for the individual. The unity of the Spirit cannot be a unity in evil, or an agreement to differ about Christ's holy Person, or the fundamental doctrines of the christian faith. Whilst the church maintained and manifested unity on earth, holiness and truth were maintained ; but the second Epistle to Timothy gives us the description of the church in disorder, and likens it to a great house in which there are vessels unto honour and vessels to dishonour ; and if a man purge himself from vessels to dishonour, he shall be a vessel unto honour, sanctified and meet for the Master's use, and prepared unto every good work. I think you will see the importance of this question of fellowship with evil, not only in relation to the assembly, but in relation to the path of the individual believer.

Hundreds of believers have left the various religious organisations which exist on every hand, because they

are established on principles opposed to the word of God ; and if a company of Christians, professedly gathered in the name of the Lord alone, adopts principles which admit of fellowship with known evil, am I to be forced to go on with the meeting which does so, on the ground that they are God's children, and do not hold fundamentally false doctrines? If I own the unity of the assembly as taught in Scripture, I identify myself with the false principles which are allowed by, and characterise, the assembly.

The responsibility of the people of God, for sins not actually their own, runs through Scripture. We find it in the Old Testament in the history of the redeemed earthly people of God. After they were redeemed out of Egypt, the Lord said : " Let them make me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them ;" and the camp of Israel became the dwelling-place of God. Accordingly the people were commanded to put lepers outside the camp, *that they defile not the camps in the midst whereof I dwell.*" In the case of the sin of Achan we read, " But *Israel sinned*, for Achan took of the accursed thing, and the anger of Jehovah was kindled against the children of Israel." Study Joshua vii. and you will see that all Israel suffered for the sin of one. Israel fled before their enemies, and Jehovah said to Israel : " Neither will I be with you any more, except ye destroy the accursed from among you. 'There is an accursed thing in the midst of thee, O Israel : thou canst not stand before thine enemies, until ye take away the accursed thing from among you.'"

In Christianity God dwells in the assembly on earth, consequent on the accomplishment of the work of redemption, and the saints "are builded together for an habitation of God by the Spirit." Evil, therefore, must be looked at in relation to God's holiness. Judgment begins at the house of God : " Holiness becometh thine house, O Lord, for ever." The eyes of the One who walks in the midst of the churches, in

the judicial aspect which He assumes in Revelation i. 13-16, are as a flame of fire, and He judges everything which He cannot tolerate. (See chap. ii. 6, 14, 15.)

Now, I assume, that you will admit that Scripture proves that the assembly according to Scripture is Christ's body (Eph. iv. 4), and though composed of individuals, is *one*, and that the local assembly represented in each locality the body of Christ: "Ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular;" and that, forming also part of God's house on earth, it is responsible to keep God's house clean, to purge out leaven and put away evil doers. (1 Cor. v.) But I will give you an illustration from human things, as it may help to make the scriptural principle clear to your mind.

I will suppose a company started in your town, the principles of association being laid down, and business being conducted by the directors or managers on righteous principles; and suppose that a split takes place in the board of management on some question of principle, the majority adhere to the original principles of management, and insist on the conduct of the business on the original principles of integrity and morality: and suppose that the dissentients, who wish to introduce new and unrighteous principles, inconsistent with the original foundation principles of the business, separate themselves, and set up a new concern, under the same name as the original company. Outwardly there might be nothing to shew the difference, and it would be necessary to know the principles of management, and what caused the separation, before any one could judge which company had departed from the original principles of the association. When that is once ascertained, the other company would be only an imitation of the original concern, to be shunned by every one wishing to maintain integrity and righteousness among men. New directors might join the new concern, and plead

ignorance of what caused the original separation ; but so long as the second company maintained a separate existence from the original company, so long would it continue to be a counterfeit ; and the only possible way of ending the question would be the dissolution of the counterfeit, and a restoration of the directors to their place on the board of the true and original company, which had maintained the original principles of the association. The order of things might of course be reversed, and the majority might carry the day on any question, and introduce unrighteous principles, in which case the minority would have to separate in order to maintain the original character of the company. In this case the minority would represent the original firm, and the majority would be the counterfeit. You will see that this is no question of persons but of principles ; no doubt the conduct of the directors would be affected by the principles on which they do business, but I must know the principles first before I could be a judge as to which company I should do business with.

Now wherever two or three are gathered together in the Lord's name, though they do not set up to be exclusively the assembly of God, because there are many of God's children in the various sects, they cannot possibly avoid responsibility, for they take the ground of endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit, and of meeting only as members of the body of Christ. If they do not take this ground, why have they left the sects ? If they do take it, they must be governed by the principles of Scripture as to purging out leaven and keeping out evil ; and if they depart from the principles of truth they can neither do the one nor the other.

Now I have shewn that Bethesda departed from the scriptural principles as to reception and holiness, and made association with blasphemies consistent with godliness, and no barrier to reception. The meeting,

therefore, became a counterfeit of a true assembly by the adoption of false and unscriptural principles.

Now look at what took place in your town as the result of false principles. A teacher of fundamentally false doctrine was put away by those meeting in separation from evil; and what was done by those who receive from Bethesda? Why he was almost immediately received into their fellowship, and those who followed him also. This of itself ought to be sufficient to shew you the unscriptural principles on which they act.

I could give you other instances in practice, which shew the result of the adoption of unscriptural principles in other places also; but my object is not to keep you in any position where you have no faith to stand, but that you may see the principles which are at stake in the question on which you are exercised. It is alleged that those who have separated tolerate false doctrine, and in these days we must have faith to stand alone for the Lord and get His mind on all these matters. I can only deny that false doctrine is tolerated, and commit you to Him who has said: "The meek will he guide in judgment, the meek will he teach his way." "If thine eye be single thy whole body shall be full of light."

I am not aware that I ever yet urged any one to break bread with those who are termed "exclusives." It is an individual path first, and if the Lord does not call me into an outside place, and I do not follow His word in faith under the guidance of His Spirit, it were better not to move at all. But if I have light from Him, and do not follow it, there is the solemn Scripture to remember: "If thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness." Christ is the true centre of unity, and His body is on the earth, and unity can only be maintained amongst those gathered to His name by the

maintenance of the truth in the power of the Holy Ghost. There may be, and is, in many places, a low state and weakness, and brethren have much to be humbled about; but that does not invalidate the blessed fact, that, where two or three are gathered together in the Lord's name, there He is in the midst. Where this is true, those gathered cannot take independent ground, for the whole church is one, and not a number of independent churches. There is one body and one Spirit, and what is suitable to the Lord in one assembly, is suitable in every other assembly. The principles of truth which govern reception in one assembly should govern reception in all; and one assembly cannot set up to judge another assembly where the Lord is, or it would be denying that the Lord is there, and that the assembly is the vessel of His authority to carry out His will in subjection to His word. The adoption of false principles shews insubjection to the word and to the authority of the Lord, destroys confidence, and is a justification for the refusal of letters of commendation.

May the Lord Himself use what I have written to help you in the exercises through which you have been passing and make your path very plain. "The path of the just is as the shining light, which shineth more and more unto the perfect day." If you have any further difficulties, I should be glad to help you, but my letter is much longer than I intended, and therefore I will close with earnest prayer for your prosperity in the truth.

Yours very sincerely in Christ,

J. S. O.

I add to this letter a few words on letters of commendation.

It is clear from 2 Corinthians iii. 1, that such letters were given and received in the apostle's days,

and, in a day like the present, the necessity of godly care in commending and receiving must be evident. A letter of commendation supposes that the bearer is breaking bread with saints at the meeting from which he is commended, and that the meeting is gathered in the Lord's name in accordance with the principles of Scripture, holding the truth that there is one body and one Spirit, that the church is God's habitation, and other fundamental doctrines of the christian faith. Confidence in such a meeting arises from the fact that the Lord is there, and that what is due to His name is maintained in the assembly by holy and righteous discipline. No inquiry is consequently made by the assembly to which the letter is brought as to the bearer of the letter, the letter itself being a testimony to the title of the one commended to break bread with the gathered saints.

There is no such thing as excommunicating a meeting or meetings of Christians. If a letter of commendation is not received from a meeting, it is not saying that it is not composed of believers, but that something has taken place there which destroys confidence in its letter; either it is not gathered on scriptural principles, or leaven in some shape or form is unjudged, so that it is not a competent witness for Christ, or to the truth of the unity of His body. I quote the following from another :—"The assemblies were owned because each did in its locality act under the Lord and by the Holy Ghost. Such is the scriptural principle and that which we have to look for in an assembly, and the assembly is owned because it acts by the Holy Ghost under the authority of the Lord." "The church of God in one place represents the whole, and acts in its name. Hence in 1 Corinthians where the subject is treated of, all Christians are taken in with the assembly at Corinth as such; yet this last is treated as the body as such, and made locally responsible for maintaining the purity of the

assembly, and the Lord Christ is looked at as there, and what was done was done in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.”—J. N. D.

If independent ground be taken by any company of believers, this would be a denial at once of the whole structure of the church of God and of the unity of the Spirit, and also of the authority of Scripture, seeing that the conduct and acts of every assembly must be in accordance with the word of God. It is sometimes supposed that because there is liberty for the children of God to gather together, therefore every meeting of Christians must be acknowledged as an assembly of God on divine ground; but the Lord's presence in the midst is conditional on saints being gathered in His name; and if what is inconsistent with the name of our Lord Jesus Christ is admitted in principle, or wilfully tolerated in practice, it is evident that this would at once destroy the title of a meeting to be acknowledged as an assembly of God.

Nothing can be more important than the recognition of the principle that each assembly of believers gathered in the Lord's name, though there be only two or three composing it, is directly responsible to Christ, and is bound to act in His name for the glory of the Lord and as representing in principle the assembly on earth. If this principle be owned, it is clear that one assembly cannot judge or refuse the discipline of another assembly, or it would be judging the action of the Lord in the midst. I again quote another: “If I own the Lord in the midst, I must own the assembly and its acts.” “If Christ be not in the church, I do not own it at all. I may reason with an assembly because I am a member of Christ, and hence of it, and, if it is one, help it; but if I own it as an assembly of God, I cannot assume Christ is not there. It is simply denying that it is an assembly of God.”

On the other hand, a decision by a meeting in

favour of some false principle, or in excuse of evil, would be its own condemnation; as the Lord could not possibly use the assembly to sanction evil in principle or practice. It would be connecting Christ and His name and His authority with evil. May the Lord give us to know more both of the privileges and responsibilities of those gathered to His holy name in these last days.

From a pamphlet received since this letter was sent to press, it now appears that Mr. George Muller keeps all Mr. Newton's books in his lending library, and they are stated on the authority of Mrs. M. to be extensively read and greatly appreciated.

The following is the copy of an extract of a letter from Mr. Muller, dated March 30th, 1893. "If Mr. ---- honestly wishes to know what Mr. Newton's views are, let him carefully and attentively read some of his principal writings through, from which he will clearly see not only that Mr. N. is sound in the faith, but also that his teaching is of a most valuable character."

Mr. Muller having been written to as to his relations with Mr. Newton, the following letter, dated June 7th, 1893, states the result: "Mr. M. has been written to upon the points you mentioned, and he has replied that he fully agrees with every doctrine taught in Mr. Newton's books, and considers them in strict accordance with the scriptures. As to Mr. Muller being in fellowship with Mr. Newton, Mr. Muller considers his teaching so valuable that both he and Mrs. Muller have travelled from Folkestone to Tunbridge Wells in order to be present at one Bible reading of Mr. N's."

The following is an extract from one of the books which Mr. Muller stated should be carefully and attentively read to ascertain Mr. Newton's views, the

passage being quoted with approval by Mr. N., as expressing his own views:—

“Moreover Jesus Christ did not only assume the human nature but He also assumed its nature after sin had blotted its original glory and withered its beauty and excellence. For He came not in our nature before the fall, whilst as yet its glory was fresh in it, but He came as the apostle speaks ‘in the likeness of sinful flesh,’ that is, in flesh that had the marks and miserable effects and consequences of sin upon it. . . . Yea, it was attended with the whole troop of human infirmities that sin at first brought into our common nature, such as hunger, thirst, weariness, pain, mortality, and all these natural weaknesses and evils that clog our miserable natures and make them groan from day under them. By reason whereof though He was not a sinner, yet He looked like one, and they that saw and conversed with Him took Him for a sinner seeing all these effects of sin upon him.”

One text will be sufficient to answer all this shocking and irreverent blasphemy, fruit of the speculation of the human mind:—

“The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee ; THEREFORE ALSO THAT HOLY THING which shall be born of thee shall be called THE SON OF GOD.” (Luke i. 35.)

J. S. O.



NOTE.—For further information on this subject the reader is referred to “The whole case of Plymouth and Bethesda.” G. Morrish, Paternoster Square ; “There is one Body and one Spirit,” by J. A. T., Tract Depository, Westland Row, Dublin ; “Ecclesiastical Independency,” by J. N. D., G. Morrish, 20, Paternoster Square ; “Is the One Body the Ground of Gathering,” by J. N. D., Rouse, 15 & 16, Paternoster Square.