Reception: Back to the Book

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Reception

The subject of "Reception" is one which from time to time has occasioned much discussion amongst the assemblies of God's people.

There are those who believe that we should welcome to the Lord's Table all who profess the Name of Christ, whether or not they have manifested a desire to be obedient to the Word of God, as, for instance, with regard to Baptism; and this even though they may have no intention whatever of severing their unscriptural ecclesiastical associations. It is maintained that since the basis of fellowship is life in Christ, no one possessing that life should be rejected from the Supper, provided that he or she is morally clean in life and doctrinally sound in what we call "The Fundamentals."

Those who advocate this view do not hesitate to declare that brethren whose practices are not in harmony with what they hold have departed from the principles of Scripture, and that their strictness is one of the present-day barriers to blessing in our assemblies. They therefore call upon us to break down these barriers and to "open our doors, our arms, and our hearts to all the Lord's children everywhere."

It is hoped that the following reasons why many of us dissent from this view may be used of the Lord to settle the minds of some of His beloved people who are confused by the conflict of opinions upon the subject, and to establish them in an aspect of truth which ought to be "most surely believed among us." Our reasons are these:

The Case of a Stranger

1. The person desiring to break bread may be a complete stranger, or at least but little known, to the saints with whom he wishes to remember the Lord. In the brief time which elders usually have to interview such a one ere the meeting begins, it is not reasonable that they can make sure of his being really one of Christ's and of there being no cause for rejecting him. Such an investigation would be impossible, and this being the case the principle, "Lay hands hastily on no man" (1 Tim. 5. 22, R. V.), should surely govern their attitude towards him.

Unity in the Assembly

2. Even if the visitor be known to some in the assembly and they recommend him, other members of the company, who at the opening of the meeting have had no opportunity of expressing their minds, may know facts regarding him which are quite sufficient to warrant his rejection. What must be the feelings of such when they see him brought in? Their consciences will be wounded. They will possibly be stumbled. And at any rate the assembly will be divided and no longer "in the same mind and in the same judgment" (I Cor. 1. 10). Further, the Spirit will be grieved, and consequently the very object of their coming together will be hindered. Indeed, the ultimate outcome may be division in the assembly.

Inviting Friends

3. In most instances it is only because of friends inviting them that such persons wish to partake of the Feast. There has been no exercise of soul on their part about obedience to the Word, no conviction that this is "the

commandment of the Lord." They "break bread" merely as a gesture of Christian courtesy or as a matter of convenience for the time being. What they do is not the fruit of heart subjection to "the knowledge of His will," for if it were they would come to remain. How can service of this kind be acceptable to the Lord? Should not such be allowed to "occupy the room of the unlearned" (I Cor. 14, 16) until they have been instructed in "the way of God more perfectly?" To say that "Participation in the Lord's Supper is not contingent upon a state of knowledge," and that we should "make life not light the ground of fellowship," are statements which, if not qualified, may be very misleading. For what pleasure can God find in my service if it does not spring from the Spirit's teaching, which, of course, implies some measure of enlightenment?

With reference to those who invite them, one may ask, what will be the result if all in the assembly seek to exercise the same privilege? "A queer kettle of fish we shall have," as the late Mr. W. J. McClure once remarked when dealing with this point. Ere long confusion would take the place of rule and order in God's assembly.

"Occasional Fellowship"

4. When we appeal to the Scriptures we find in them no precedent for what to-day is called "occasional fellowship." Never in Acts, which covers the first 30 years of Church history, nor in the Epistles, do we read of such a thing. What we do read is that "they continued steadfastly . . . in breaking bread" (Acts 2, 42), and that Saul, after being brought into the assembly in Jerusalem, "was with them coming in and going out" (Acts 9, 28). Such reception is "as Christ also

received us," and "to the glory of God" (Rom. 15, 7), but reception of those who have "no intention of throwing in their lot with the company," but who attend as occasion suits, and then return to their own particular sect, to support principles which are entirely opposite to those of the assembly, is neither the one nor the other.

Two Circles of Communion

5. The practice of thus receiving outsiders means that in the assembly there are not only two kinds of reception, but also two circles of communion—an inner and an outer—known in some quarters as "permanent fellowship" and "occasional fellowship." Now such distinctions are not only without Scriptural support, but are diametrically opposed to the plain teaching of the Epistles, especially that of 1st Corinthians, in which unity in the assembly is so strongly insisted upon. In addition, they are likely to lead to serious complications. For instance, if after being in this outer circle for a time the individual concerned does not decide to enter into full fellowship, is he to continue to exercise the privilege of "breaking bread" at such times as he pleases, or must he suffer the embarrassment of being relegated to the "back seat?" And if he falls into open sin, how is discipline to be carried out? From what is he to be "put away?"

Questionable Teaching

6. In the various denominations there are many Christians reputed to be sound in the faith, yet holding doctrines and theories on matters of importance which we believe to be altogether unscriptural. If such are received to the Lord's Table will they not take advantage

of the liberty for ministry which obtains in our meetings to express their views there? For we cannot bring a man into the circle of fellowship and at the same time impose upon him a ban, depriving him of freedom to speak what he believes. Some of them may even do this in all simplicity, never thinking that any exception will be taken to their views by those present. But whether or not such a contingency should arise, this kind of reception is tantamount to leaving the door of the assembly open to teaching of a questionable character. And God, Who is zealous for His Truth, will not approve of such laxity. If "A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump" (Gal. 5, 9), no taint of it would He wish to be mixed with His children's food. One thinks of many Scriptures that express Divine impatience with teaching which does not accord with the Word of God. Therefore elders are responsible to see to it that so far as lies in their power the door of the assembly is closed against it.

Reception Always to the Assembly

7. Not only has Scripture nothing to say about "occasional fellowship," but it never speaks of reception to the Lord's Table at all. This may sound strange, yet it is true, for though the New Testament presents various aspects of reception, it has nothing to say about receiving to the Breaking of Bread. What it does teach is reception to the assembly, to share its responsibilities, activities, and privileges, one of which is the Lord's Supper; a very different thing, as we see in Acts 2. 41, 42; 9. 27, 28; Rom. 14, 1. Even Christians who were only on a visit in Apostolic times were received, not merely to the Lord's Table, but to the fellowship of the assembly, as Acts 15, 4; Rom. 16, 1, 2; III. John 9, etc., show.

The Pattern

Throughout Acts there is given to us the Divine pattern, which we must follow in our testimony for the Lord, if we would be pleasing to Him. According to this pattern the successive steps of obedience are:—Conversion, Baptism, Reception to Assembly Fellowship, of which last named the "breaking of bread" and "prayers" form part (Acts 2, 42). We do well to remember that this pattern has never been revised or modified to suit the times, and that the present divided state of the saints is no excuse for departing from it, as some brethren seem to think. Moreover, it has been our experience that godly souls from the religious systems do not object to being received into the assembly in accordance with it, though it may mean sitting in a "back seat" for a few Lord's Days, provided they are treated with courtesy and grace.

Back to the Book

It is of interest that many of those who hold what is at times called "The Open Table" view lay much stress on the teachings of certain "early brethren." This, however, only reveals the weakness of their position, for God has given us His Word to be our all-sufficient guide. Many of the "early brethren" lived to change their principles (though those who quote from their works seem to forget this), but that Word remains immutably the same and should be our sole criterion. Is it not time for us to get back to the Book, since its authority does not seem to have the place in ministry which it once held? For instance, in a recent article in one of our periodicals, Mr. M. Goodman, who advocates a very wide line of things, gives quotations from writings of over 100 years ago, and makes sweeping assertions of which he offers no proof: but never in over 1,500 words does he substantiate any statement or argument by the Word of God. There is not a citation of Scripture in his article from first to last. It is partly the result of such teaching that there are many assemblies where, under the plea that the Lord's Table is for all the Lord's people, anyone who takes the Christian name is at liberty to participate in the Remembrance Feast. Such laxity is fraught with peril for the future of assembly life, and therefore the warnings of Acts 20, 28-30 and Jude 4 require to be emphasized in these "last days."

Suggestions

Ere closing here are a few suggestions worthy of consideration by God's people who are in assembly fellowship:

1. That we should be loyal to our assembly, giving it our undivided interest, and seeking in every way possible to promote its harmony and spiritual well-being.

2. That we should so "adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour in all things" (Tit. 2, 10), and manifest such a loving disposition to all saints that it never can truthfully be said of us that we are formal, proud, self-satisfied, and worldly, but that the testimony borne concerning us may be that "God is in them of a truth" (I Cor. 14, 25). Thus our assemblies will have an attraction for Christians who are wearied of the unscriptural atmosphere of the denominations. Of Asa it is written, "They fell to him out of Israel in abundance when they saw that the Lord his God was with him." (2 Chron. 15, 9).

3. That without making any pretensions as to Church position, but "With all lowliness and meekness, with long suffering, forbearing one another in love" (Eph. 4, 2), we should "Hold fast the form of sound words" (2 Tim. 1, 13), which has been committed to us, and which many are selling so cheaply today.

4. That while maintaining diligence in our service for Christ we should be more concerned about pleasing the Lord than about having manifested blessing in that service. What He prizes most is obedience (1 Sam. 15, 22), and while it is our responsibility to be faithful, it is God's to give the increase. Success in His work is not to be assessed merely by present results. And for our encouragement let us remember that, provided we keep right in soul, strict obedience to God's Word cannot be a barrier to blessing in God's work.