Why I Am Among Those Known As Brethren

William C. Irvine

KEE Ministry Library · Faithful Men
kee-ministry-library.netlify.app

Why I Am Among Those Known As Brethren

The words of I Timothy 3:15 are the keynote to that Epistle. The Apostle says: "But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth."

The young Timothy had difficult problems concerning church order, discipline, and soundness in doctrine to solve, and so have we; but unlike Timothy the Christian finds not one Church, but many churches, and is often puzzled as to where he or she ought to worship.

As one who was brought up in the Church of England—a son of a Vicar—I wish to give some reasons why I am now found worshipping with those known as "Open Brethren."*

* [A passage here could not be read in the scan.]

NEGATIVELY—I am not where I am because my parents thus worshipped. That would, I submit, be a weak and insufficient reason in itself; though doubtless thousands of true Christians might find it difficult to give a better reason.

Nor is it because I expect to find perfection amongst those who profess to gather to the Name of the Lord.

POSITIVELY—I am where I am for the following seven reasons, which the reader is requested to weigh carefully with an open Bible when necessary.

I. Here I Find Loyalty to Christ and His Word

Amongst those to whom I write, the words "Thus saith the Lord" still have authority. The Scriptures are still acknowledged as the final Court of Appeal. As of Pergamos it might be said of them: Thou "hast not denied My faith" (Rev. 2:13); and as of Philadelphia: "Thou hast kept the word of My patience" (Rev. 3:10). Whatever fault may be found with "Brethren," none can charge them with disloyalty to the Word of God; though many hold them up to scorn for believing in the plenary or verbal inspiration of the Scriptures. That there has been failure in living up to the standard given therein, the present writer and those with whom he has fellowship, both sorrowfully and humbly acknowledge. Nevertheless I find here a world-wide Brotherhood in which there is no room for Modernist, Ritualist, Spiritist, Materialist or any denying the plenary inspiration of God's Word.

Should it be asked: "But surely in some churches a like loyalty is to be found both to Christ and His Word?" the reply is thankfully given in the affirmative. The reader is invited to bear in mind that seven reasons are to be placed before him, and to reserve his judgment till the close of this article.

II. Here Also Is Found an Unsectarian Position

In I Corinthians 3:14 Sectarianism is denounced and the sectarian is declared to be "carnal." Today some take a pride in their denominational position, whilst others are now seeking a general Union of churches. There is a Unity of the Spirit (Eph. 4:3) which we are to keep, but in view of the fact that those keenest on Union are usually modernist leaders, many well-taught Christians

in the churches withhold their support. C. H. Spurgeon many years ago said: "To pursue union at the expense of truth, is treason to the Lord Jesus." Rome boasts in being the one church that enjoys internal unity (which, as a matter of fact, is far from true), but as someone has well said: "A unity in error is nothing to boast in."

The Movement here described was and is a protest against Sectarianism, and is a return to the position of the early Church where all believers were brethren, and enjoyed that blessed unity of the Spirit whose bond is peace.

"But" it will be said, "there are many parties of Brethren —Darbyites, the Grant party, the Kelly party and the Ravenites; and that seeing this is so, which party should we join?" The answer is that all these and other parties are the result of Christians breaking away from the position first taken up, and that no one is being counselled to join any party whatever. In Acts 5:14 we read, "And believers were the more added to the Lord," and in 2:47 it is stated: "And the Lord added to the Church daily such as should be saved."

We may well ask again: "Is Christ divided?" (I Cor. 1:13), and ever remember that there is but "one body" (Eph. 4:4), which "body" is declared to be the Church (Eph. 1:22, 23). This "body," the "Church," is made up of all true believers since Pentecost.

Another may say: "But do you not speak of joining the Brethren?" It is true some do so in ignorance, and others carelessly—but no intelligent believer would so speak.

III. Because of Their Care in Endeavoring to Keep a Pure* Membership, and to Exercise Godly Discipline

* [A passage here could not be read in the scan.]

Recognizing that the Church is Christ's Body, and that only the redeemed are members of that Body, is the great safeguard against weakly receiving unsaved nominal Christians into fellowship—one of the greatest banes of Christendom.

In praise of the Church in Ephesus our risen Lord said: "I know thy works and thy labor, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles and are not" (Rev. 2:2). But on the contrary to Pergamos Christ said: "I have a few things against thee, because thou hast them that hold the doctrine of Balaam . . . so also hast thou them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitanes, which thing I hate" (Rev. 2:14 and 15).

Whilst it may prove impossible to keep some professors from creeping in, yet today, in too many churches, Modernists, Unitarians, and even Spiritists may be frequently found in both pew and pulpit. What Ephesus could not bear is today tolerated, and often for a false charity condoned.

All agree that discipline is necessary if one is to enjoy a healthy body; how much more so in the spiritual realm! Teaching on separation from sin and the world is still, and ever will be, much needed. For godly discipline, godly elders are essential; let us remember to count worthy of double honor those elders who "labor in the word and doctrine" (I Tim. 5:17). And also the exhortation "Likewise ye younger submit yourselves

unto the elder" (I Pet. 5:5). Pray for them, their work is both delicate and difficult; for any in fellowship teaching false doctrine or living impure lives must be dealt with at once and disciplined.

IV. Because of Their Apostolic Simplicity in Recognizing Christ as the Center of Their Gathering, and Master of Ceremonies: Their Scriptural Simplicity in Observing the Ordinances

While the words: "Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt. 18:20) may not primarily refer to the Church gathering for worship and the observance of the Lord's Supper, they do contain a Divine principle, and proclaim Christ as the one center to which Christians should gather. This principle is also seen in Psa. 40:5: "Gather My saints together unto Me; those that have made a covenant with Me by sacrifice," and was foretold as early as Genesis 49:10, where we read: ". . . Unto Him (Shiloh) shall the gathering of the people be."

In these Assemblies (or churches), not only do believers gather unto the Name (which signifies the Person) of Christ, but their worship is conducted in dependence on the Holy Spirit, to whom the worshippers look for guidance and whose control is sought. Where the flesh is kept in abeyance, and where obedience to the Spirit's promptings is observed, a beautiful sequence in song, prayer, worship, and utterance is most observable—God is glorified, Christ is exalted, the Spirit ungrieved, and the saints are built up and blessed.

Here I find in accordance with Acts 20:7 a weekly showing forth of Christ's death in remembrance of His dying love. Also in the ordinance of baptism by immersion, according to Romans 6:1-6, the believer's union with his Lord in death, burial and resurrection is set forth on every occasion of a baptism.

V. Because of Their Belief in and Practice of the Priesthood of All Believers

That all believers unconditionally are constituted priests is the clear teaching of I Peter 2:5 and 9, where we read: "Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ," and "But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood," etc., etc. This is confirmed in Rev. 1:5, 6: "Unto Him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and hath made us kings and priests unto God and His Father," etc.

These "Brethren," accepting the priesthood of all believers, meet to worship as priests, offering the sacrifice of praise to God continually as did the disciples of old, not recognizing any priestly class to lead their worship, but exercising what gifts Christ has given His Church as in Eph. 4:1-16. They hold that the gifts of evangelists, pastors and teachers have been given (as correctly translated in the R. V.):

> "*For the perfecting of the saints,*
> *Unto the work of ministering,*
> *Unto the building up of the body of Christ.*"*

* The whole context bears out this translation, and it is confirmed by many Greek scholars.

Hence the work of ministering and of building one another up in our most holy faith (Jude 20), instead of being delegated to men ordained by men, and eventuating in a one-man ministry, is a work divinely appointed to such as are gifted by the Spirit, He "dividing to every man severally as He will" (I Cor. 12:11). As one has said: "It is plain to any unprejudiced mind, that the possession of any divinely imparted gift, makes a man a minister, without anything further whatsoever." This is not, as some have erroneously said, "A change from a one-man ministry to an any-man ministry," but from a one-man ministry to a Christ-appointed and Spirit-gifted ministry; a ministry which is not dependent on scholarship,** but one entirely dependent on spiritual qualification.

** Of course the writer is not belittling scholarship, which if consecrated to God's service is an invaluable asset.

VI. Because of Their Zeal in the Gospel at Home and Abroad, Intensified by Their Living Hope in the Second Coming of Jesus Christ

From the commencement of this movement back to the simplicity practiced by the first Christians, the Hope of Christ's Coming has been, and still is, one of the great incentives to "Brethren" to live for Christ and to proclaim His Gospel near and far.

Some years ago one of the Australian papers published an article entitled: "The Great Unknown Missionary Society," seeking to bring before their readers the extensive missionary labors of these believers. Apart from the splendid work being done in so-called Christian lands the "Brethren" have nigh on one thousand (1,000)

missionaries throughout the world. They believe, as Peter has put it, that they should redeem the time, living godly and holy lives "looking for and hasting unto (or hastening) the coming of the day of God" (see II Pet. 3:11, 12).

VII. And Lastly I Worship with Them, Because of Their Understanding of What Fellowship Really Means

Fellowship as known to many Christians is but a poor caricature of what is taught in the New Testament.

Thousands of Christians know nothing of fellowship with their fellow-Christians, save in coming together in the same building for worship, service and support of their church, and the casual showing of a little sympathy in times of trouble.

Among "Brethren," as also among some better-taught Christians, fellowship enters into the very life of the believer. Not only are the things of God enjoyed and spoken of on the Lord's Day in the meeting-house; but every day, in the street, around the breakfast table, wheresoever they meet, spiritual topics are discussed and enjoyed. Also that bond of affection which should be ours, as brethren and sisters in Christ, is exercised in hospitality, in seeking one another's good and in bearing one another's burdens; so that "the fellowship of saints" has regained some of its pristine sweetness and heartiness among them.

Although there may be other Christians to whom all the above is applicable, the writer is in ignorance of them. While he sees and acknowledges much failure in himself and those with whom he meets, he has found nothing

more in accordance with the practice and life of the early Church, and hence is in fellowship with those known as "Brethren."