Articles by W. W. Fereday

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First published in Food for the Flock (Food for the Flock, Inc., Ontario, Canada).

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Fellowship in Closing Days (Part 1) (May 1962)

From Food for the Flock, Vol. 8 No. 5, May 1962.

We reproduce herewith an article which appeared many years ago. Had it been written today, the wording in a very few places would probably be a little different. But, sad to say, conditions such as those which the esteemed writer (now with the Lord) lamented and which were such a source of estrangement years ago, still continue to plaque assemblies and grieve the hearts of the spiritual. We trust that the article will be given careful and prayerful reading, and that it will lead to humiliation and to a forsaking of principles and practices which have, wherever they obtained, been a source of heartache, discouragement, and defeat. — Editor.

It is impossible to review, at the opening of a new century, the years that are past without recognizing gratefully the exceeding goodness of God to His saints. The past century has been markedly one of divine activity. If we speak of testimony, vast numbers of loyal souls have been raised up to preach the Glad Tidings of God's grace, and have gone forth waiting for no other authorization than, "I believed, and therefore have I spoken" (2 Cor. 4:13); and God has abundantly crowned their efforts with blessing. If we speak of the truth itself, the Spirit has been graciously removing from our eyes the mists of centuries, with the happy result that many precious truths, long lost sight of, have been restored to our joy and blessing. We can but adore and praise our God that multitudes of His saints are now rejoicing in the assurance of a present salvation, the indwelling of

the Holy Spirit, and the return of the Lord from Heaven. Many have been led to see even “greater things than these,” viz., that all the redeemed on earth form one body in virtue of their union by the Spirit with Christ in glory; that the assembly is the present dwelling place of God’s Spirit; and that the Lord’s Supper is a precious privilege that may be enjoyed on the first day of the week, without human authority or presidency (1 Cor. 12:12-13. 1 Tim. 3:15. Eph. 2:22. 1 Cor. 11:23-26. Acts 20:7).

What practical power these truths exercised amongst those to whom they were first restored! What self-renunciation, what separation from the world, what “love to all the saints,” what holy zeal in the spreading abroad of the testimony! Alas, that the fine gold should have become dim! Yet failure has characterized the history of man from the beginning. The remnant restored from Babylon furnishes us with a sad analogy of what has happened in our own days. In Ezra’s day, their faith was so simple and real that they judged God’s altar to be a better protection than walls and gates; their relish for God’s Word was such that they would gladly stand in the street all day to hear it; and their obedience was such that Ezra had but to point out ordinances in God’s Word, and they would observe them, even though they had lapsed for centuries (Ezra 3:3. Neh. 3:3).

Yet in Malachi’s day, less than a hundred years later, God had to reprove them for indifference, sacrilege, immorality, and various other forms of evil (Mal. 1:2-3). The same humiliating declension may be seen in the history of the early Church. The charming picture presented to us in Acts 2:4 soon faded away, and we

hear the devoted Apostle saying about thirty years later, “All seek their own, not the things which are Jesus Christ’s,” “The mystery of iniquity doth already work,” etc. (Phil. 2:21. 2 Thess. 2:7).

These pages are intended especially for those who have separated themselves from the organized bodies of Christendom in obedience to God’s Word, and Who profess to own the all-sufficiency of the name of the Lord Jesus, and the presence and operation of God’s Spirit. Our true place is in the dust before God. We have not been faithful to our trust. Instead of being “the first blessings” in Christendom, as one has said, we have been and are a stumbling-block to many by our inconsistent lives, our sectarian spirit, and (worst of all) by our open divisions. All this is frankly admitted by many, and godly souls have exercised and chastened themselves before God about it for many years. There is a growing conviction that we have missed the mind of the Lord somewhere, and that we have adopted some line of action that is essentially destructive. Seven general divisions in twenty years (to say nothing of local breaches) are sufficient to prove this to the dullest mind. To blindly pursue, for twenty years more, if the Lord leaves the Assembly here so long, the course that we have pursued during the last two decades, will render Christian fellowship practically an impossibility for any of us.

The question then is, what is there in our principles that is so essentially destructive? After much anxious consideration before the Lord, I give it as my judgment that it is the notion, not peculiar to any one party amongst us, of a defined circle of fellowship. The custom of listing up such assemblies as have received the

imprimatur of acknowledged leaders, and describing them as “in fellowship” to the non-recognition of all others, is undeniably sectarian. Nothing is easier to the human mind than to slip into sectarianism. The habits and training of centuries have affected us all more than we are aware. Besides, we naturally like to be connected with an outward and visible organization; like the two and a half tribes, we like “a great altar to see to” (Josh. 22:10). But our work of organization has falsified our whole position for us. We are not “the Church” in any exclusive sense, but simply souls, few or many, who have separated themselves from iniquity that we may give practical effect to the word, “follow righteousness, faith, love, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart” (2 Tim. 2:22). It is because we have attempted a great deal “more,” and have built up a “visible body,” that God has made a breach upon us again and again. As early as 1838 the following proposal was made by the late Mr. W: “How are meetings for the communion of saints in these parts to be regulated? Would it be for the glory of the Lord, and the increase of testimony, to have one central meeting, the common responsibility of all within reach, and as many meetings subordinate to it as grace might vouchsafe? Or to hold it to be better to allow the meetings to grow up as they may without connection, and dependent on the energy of individuals only?” Here we have a definite proposal (however well meant) to organize and systematize the operations of God’s Spirit according to the pattern of “bodies” around us. Alas! How soon the idea took effect, if not exactly on the lines laid down by the esteemed writer. The “visible body” was formed, central authorities manifested themselves, and the testimony was ruined.

(The conclusion of this article, which we hope to publish next month, will discuss some of the specific evils of a “circle of fellowship”).

Fellowship in Closing Days (Part 2) (June 1962)

From Food for the Flock, Vol. 8 No. 6, June 1962.

W. Fereday

A “circle of fellowship”…stands condemned, in my judgment, on the following grounds:

It is sectarian: It is a unity that falls short of “the unity of the spirit;” a “with us” that is unknown to Scripture, and which breeds the most improper feelings in the heart toward those not included in it (Eph. 4:3; Luke 9:49, 50). With what recklessness are the most serious charges hurled by those in the different circles against each other, in the earnest endeavour to prove that their own particular circle is the only true one!

It dishonours the name of the Lord: Such is our present condition, that His peerless name is not sufficient to secure us an entrance into the different companies of saints; for the names of men have to be used instead, or in addition. It is painfully common for saints to say, “I am in fellowship with So and So,” and to be received on that ground.

It involves us in independency; Within each circle the deepest interest is taken in all that transpires, and the discipline of every affiliated assembly is universally owned. But it is a most exceptional thing for any work of God’s Spirit outside of the circle to receive the smallest recognition from those within; it is still more exceptional for the discipline, however godly, of any “unaccredited” assembly to be recognized in any way,. Thus it

frequently happens that persons who have been put away from one “circle of fellowship” are welcomed triumphantly into an antagonistic circle.

It destroys faith; i.e., in ecclesiastical matters. It is impossible for the rank and file of God’s saints to adequately weigh the evidence produced by each party in defence of its position, with the result that, in the majority of cases, the word of a favourite leader is accepted as a quietus for the conscience. (Should the fellowship of the Church of God depend upon a right understanding of controversial pamphlets?) It is a well-known fact that frequently saints belonging to opposite parties are quite unable to tell each other, in private conversation, why they worship apart. Where is faith in this? “Whatsoever is not of faith is sin” (Rom. 14:23).

It neutralizes conscience: In 1 Timothy 2, which chapter all agree furnishes us with special instruction for the last days, each individual saint is called upon to separate himself from iniquity, and to “follow righteousness, faith, love, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart.” This lays each one under responsibility to pick his way carefully through the ruin, and charges him to discriminate as to the company he keeps. (Pastoral counsel may come to the aid of the inexperienced in the practical carrying out of this principle;,… but this is quite a different thing from that which is objected to … usurped authority over the conscience.) This course, when rightly followed, keeps the conscience in constant exercise before God. The “circle of fellowship” idea leaves no room for this.

Each person is furnished with a printed list of meetings to which he may go, nay, to which he is required to go

when in their locality, whatever may be their condition. The holder of the list, knowing the serious consequences that would result from going outside its limitations, invariably pockets his conscience, closes his eyes to the disagreeable facts when they came before him, and walks submissively according to his human rule.

It involves us in fellowship with evil: Alas, how much evil has been tolerated for the sake of unity! If a party leader falls into bad ways, or into unsound doctrine, what happens? As a public rupture would probably be the result of attempting to reach such an one with scriptural discipline, the offense is frequently screened and palliated, and a whole confederacy of assemblies is banded in permanent fellowship with evil. It was regarded as a greater sin for Dr. C. to break bread outside the “circle” at R. than to have worshipped with an assembly which was notoriously… “unclean.” To have fellowship with such evil might not be considered desirable; but to go outside the “circle” was an unpardonable offense, involving the most extreme punishment.

I am conscious that the foregoing constitutes a heavy indictment; but is it heavier than it is just? Has not party strife rent the hearts of thousands of God’s saints, destroyed the usefulness of many valuable servants of Christ, and wrecked the happiness of multitudes of Christian homes? “Shall the sword devour forever?” Is it not time for us to discover the root of these evils, and judge it as sin before God?

Many godly souls feel the gravity of all this, but the question is frequently heard: “In view of the fact that the various defined circles exist, and will doubtless continue

to exist, what is to be done?" Before giving an answer to this question, it is important to clear the way a little. We must cease to be frightened by mere names. For more than 50 years, saints have been accustomed to the terms "open" and "exclusive brethren." (In more recent years many other strange designations have come into use. — Editor) These titles, when they originally came into use, were understood to mean that the one class of brethren was lax, and the other stringent in dealing with evil. But the titles have long since ceased to be descriptive of those to whom they are applied. On the one hand, we sometimes see "Exclusive" brethren stoutly defending heterodoxy, and at other times excusing moral depravity, when the offender happens to be a favourite leader; on the other hand, we frequently find "open brethren" firm in their rejection of evil doctrines and ways, and sometimes even carrying their zeal so far as to reject really godly people, solely because they do not apprehend their ground of meeting. All this being true, we must cease to concern ourselves with names, and deal with facts.

To return to our question… The answer is really very simple. Let us judge, as sin before God, our recognition of parties hitherto, laying aside the prejudices with which others have filled our minds, and let us recognize the work of God's Spirit wherever we see it. When our fellow-saints come to us, let it no longer be a question as to what "circle of fellowship" they belong, but let us seek to ascertain how they stand personally in relation to Christ and His Word. Further, when we find a company of saints professedly gathered to the Lord's Name, let us inquire if they are morally and doctrinally pure… If we are able to satisfy ourselves in these

important respects, let us thankfully own them… irrespective of names and parties. I suppose no one would pretend, on the one hand, that any one party includes within its borders all the godly; nor, on the other hand, that all those in other parties are unfit for Christian communion. This being so, we can only follow out the holy requirements of 2 Timothy 2:22 by a policy of careful discrimination on the right hand and on the left.

Will any assert that new principles are here being advocated? Far from this being the case, the principles here laid down are the old ones —those that “brethren” learned from God at the beginning of their testimony. It is because we have so grievously departed from our original simplicity that God, in His governmental dealings, has permitted so much sorrow and shame to come upon us… By all the distress that has come upon us, God has been calling us back to the simple ground from which we have (perhaps unconsciously in many cases) departed.

Shall we not hear His voice? The Spirit might well say to us, as to the Galatians: “Have ye suffered so many things in vain?” (Gal. 3:4). Though we shall never again have things as they were at the beginning of the Church’s history, nor even as they were three quarters of a century ago, we may still receive much gracious blessing from the Lord, for His Spirit remains with us yet, unchanged in power and grace. But ere we can receive fresh favours from His hand we must confess our sinful departure from His truth, our ungracious treatment of one another, and our failure to perform our mission to the Church at large. “To the Lord our God belong mercies and forgivenesses, though we have

rebelled against Him" (Dan. 9:9). "To this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at My Word" (Isaiah 64:2).