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Are Christians Who Are Gathered To The Name of the Lord Jesus a SECT?

That a number of Christians in any locality, learning the will of the Lord as revealed in the Holy Scriptures as to the mode and purposes of their gathering themselves together, are found acting in obedience thereto, in contrast to adherence to the mere tenets and traditions of men, does not constitute them a sect.

The Origin of Present-day Testimony

Originally Christ Himself separated His followers from the apostate religion of Judaism, and this separation continued under the guidance of the Spirit of God in the formation of churches under the ministry of the apostles. Those who, together with Gentile converts, became obedient to the faith, are mentioned as “the sect” that was “everywhere spoken against” (Acts 28:22). This criticism, and the aspersions that were cast upon them, were to their honor in the sight of God.

The Formation of Sects

Gradually, owing to the rise of false teachers, and to other influences which led believers away from apostolic teaching, a system of clerisy developed, and, under the power of ecclesiastical domination, churches were combined into vast religious organizations. The result was that what is known as Christendom became characterized by a condition of things far removed from that which was instituted by Christ and had continued under apostolic teaching.

“Faint Yet Pursuing”

This general drift away from “the faith once for all delivered unto the saints,” and the growth of ecclesiastical organizations, did not, however, prevent numbers of true and faithful followers of Christ from obedience to the Word of God, either by the maintenance of a steadfast adherence to it, or by separation from the humanly devised system of ecclesiasticism. While its huge structure maintained its domination as the area of Christendom extended, there were communities of believers who sought still to follow the Scriptures of truth.

A Partial Recovery

When eventually in mediaeval times, there was a break away from the then existing ecclesiastical systems, organized denominations were formed under the effort to adopt a purer form of religion. There was not, however, a complete return to obedience to the faith on the part of those denominations. On the other hand, there are very clear traces of the existence, both before and during that period, of isolated companies of Christians who gathered in simplicity and dependence upon the Spirit of God, and in independence of unscripturally organized denominations. (See accounts in “The Pilgrim Church” by E. H. Broadbent and in other records.)

Divine Plan for Collective Testimony

The Word of God makes clear that the divine intention was for local churches to be formed and developed, each on its own independent basis, maintaining the truths of the faith, and spreading the light around them and in the regions beyond, the Holy Spirit Himself being

sufficient for all spiritual requirements for the fulfillment of the Word of God.

Advancing with Increasing Light

Despite every effort to prevent the spread of the knowledge of its truth, copies of the Scriptures continued to multiply, and the true faith therein contained became more generally available. The various forms of organized clerisy were ever antagonistic to this, for the Word of God bears no uncertain testimony against such organization. This opposition could not, however, altogether prevent people from adhering to the will of God as it became known, even when the measure of liberty granted to them was small. Where such freedom became general, under the liberating influence of the gospel and the spread of the light, churches, or assemblies, of believers guided by the Word of truth in separation from the traditions of men, became more numerous.

Scripturally Gathered Assemblies

In the early part of the nineteenth century the return to Holy Scripture in this respect became MORE PRONOUNCED, and, in several places, independently one of another, that is to say without affiliation or centralization believers found themselves drawn together and formed into churches under the operation of the Spirit of God.

Not a Sect

This did not consist of the formation of a new sect or denomination; it was a continuation, on a more extensive scale, of that adherence to the faith which, as we have seen, existed in one place and another from the

first century of the Christian era. The absence of a local center or an ecclesiastical council or synod, the adoption of the Holy Scriptures as the sole guide, and the freedom from the humanly formulated creeds, should have been sufficient to prevent such churches from being regarded as a sect.

Not "The Plymouth Brethren"

The testimony thus given attracted particular attention in Plymouth, England, and, for reasons beyond their own control, and utterly opposed to their wishes, they became known as "Plymouth Brethren." The appellation was by no means self-styled, and has always been repugnant to them. That prejudice should dub them by that name does not constitute them a sect. Moreover, the New Testament itself has been sufficient to produce such communities in other lands, where nothing was known of what took place in Plymouth, let alone the fact that collective obedience to the Scriptures had already taken place in other places in the British Isles before such a community was formed in the said town.

Not "The Brethren"

It is true that, in the recognition of this by other Christians, the local appellation of "Plymouth" has been largely dropped. Nevertheless, such churches have been and are still spoken of by the denominational title of "The Brethren." They reject it equally with the other appellation. No such title appears outside their places of assembling. But, again, the general use of a misnomer does not actually make such assemblies a sect.

No Ecclesiastical Union

Undeniably, certain circles or parties have been formed amongst these communities, and there have been attempts (some more or less successful) to form an ecclesiastical bond of union among them under the leadership of some prominent personage. But the failure of such to result to what is set forth in the church Scriptures into all truth has, in itself, become key to such attempts. Nor have such unhappy adventures prevented abstinence from such formations, and adherence to the Word of God, on the part of a very great number of other assemblies. Apart altogether, however, from these movements, the use of the appellations "Plymouth Brethren" or the "Open Brethren" is entirely unjustifiable.

Similarity Necessarily Exists

As we have pointed out, the Word of God is sufficient under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. TO FORM SUCH AN ASSEMBLY ANYWHERE, AT ANY TIME. The similarity of the mode of worship and of the exercise of spiritual gifts in such gatherings (AND THEY EXIST ALL OVER THE WORLD) affords no ground for looking upon them as a sect. Had they an ecclesiastical, localized government, a council or set of councils, and were they formed into ecclesiastical association or federated churches, they would, IPSO FACTO (by the act itself), be a sect. But that is not the case.

No Denominational Title

Suppose, for instance, that in some region where such scripturally formed assemblies have not existed up to the present, and where believers have not heard of the so-called "Plymouth Brethren," or "The Brethren," a company of people who have received the light of the

Word of God meet together just as assemblies of which we have spoken have done, knowing no other name than that of Christians, or disciples or believers, is a denominational title to be given to them? What are they to be called? Are they to be called "The Brethren," because they do, under the guidance of the Scriptures, what those who are miscalled "The Brethren" elsewhere are doing? The idea is grotesque. Are they to be looked upon as a sect because they are obedient to the Word of Truth? And yet THE FORMATION OF SUCH CHURCHES IS CONSTANTLY TAKING PLACE, and there are countries where Christians, meeting together like this have not received a denominational title.

Responsibility in Testimony Is Ever Local

It is easy, of course, to use certain failures amongst these communities, and certain unscriptural conditions that have existed in one place or another, as arguments against them, and as supports for the use of a sectarian appellation. But individual or local failure affords no ground for regarding these churches in general as a sect.

Attention!

It is needful, too, on the part of such assemblies themselves, to bear in mind the necessity of avoiding phraseology which un intentionally assumes that they are sectarian. The use, for instance, of the personal pronoun "we," with reference to such churches, is reprehensible. For whom does the "we" stand? One assembly may be in a low spiritual condition. Another may have received error. Another may be divided. And these evils have existed, and do exist, in isolated instances. But it is folly to tar all with the same brush, or

regard that as characterizing all such communities which attaches only to certain units.

Fellowship versus Affiliation

If a denominational title were accepted, it would be difficult for one assembly in the fellowship thus formed to escape identification with the failures of other assemblies therein, but when such a title is refused, it is made clear that each church is responsible for its own conduct alone before God. There is indeed necessarily a close fellowship between assemblies which seek thus to carry out the will of God, but that does not constitute the aggregate a sect. FELLOWSHIP is one thing: AFFILIATION is another.

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Leading in Prayer

It has doubtless been frequently observed how varied is the nature of the prayers addressed to the Lord in a prayer meeting. How happily the assembled saints will recognize a prayer which is indited by the Spirit of God, the prayer which is prayed "in the Holy Spirit", Jude 205 cf. 1 Cor. 14.15, and thus unite with fervent outpouring of the heart to the Lord! And how much is wrought by the power of God in response thereto!

Not all prayers prayed in public are of this character, however. There seems to be quite a variety of ways in which the Lord is addressed. There is, for instance, what may be termed The Innuendo Prayer. This takes place when a brother desires to give some kind of hint to one or another of those present concerning a matter to which he has felt inclined to take exception or draw attention. Addressing the Lord, he would at the same time seek to give a reminder that something needs rectifying in the assembly, or in the life of an individual. This mode of leading people in prayer is dishonouring to God. If there is something wrong, there is a divinely appointed mode of dealing with it, but to mention the matter, or give a hint about it in prayer for the company to hear, is underhand, and should be rigidly avoided. It may savour of cowardice, there being a shrinking from dealing with the matter privately and faithfully in the spirit of grace and love. The hint may amount to a mere innuendo, but it must be exceedingly distasteful to the Lord. The one who adopts it evidently wants a fellowbeliever to hear what he has to say, rather than the Lord. There is The Protracted Prayer. This is a kind

of prayer which, by reason of its exhaustive character, wearies those who are seeking to follow. Some prayers are protracted to such a length that if the feelings of those present were uttered it would be found that they had been really longing for the "Amen". This kind of prayer is contrary to the Lord's instructions for those who are gathered together. His command was, "After this manner therefore pray ye". Then follows what has been called "The Lord's Prayer", which is really the disciples' prayer. It contains seven requests. In the original the whole prayer contains 67 words. The instruction "After this manner" shows not only that it was not intended to be uttered by way of constant repetition, but that united prayer in the gathering is to be characterized by suitable brevity. The record of the prayers in the New Testament confirms this desirability of brevity in public prayer.

To take up a number of subjects that come to one's mind in the course of a prayer is one thing; to supplicate concerning those matters with which the Spirit of God has burdened the heart, is another, and this latter makes all the difference. Moreover, when a number are assembled, long prayers tend to quench the Holy Spirit, in preventing others from taking part who might be led of the Lord to do so were there time. This tends to mar the power of a Prayer Meeting. A remark by Spurgeon is appropriate. He gives advice as follows: "Never appear to be closing and then start off again for another five minutes. When friends make up their minds that you are about to conclude, they cannot with a jerk proceed again in a devout spirit. I have known men tantalize us with the hope that they were drawing to a close, and then

take a fresh lease two or three times. This is most unwise and unpleasant".

Then there is what may be termed

The Expository Prayer. This consists of incorporating into the prayer an exposition of Scripture, something partly intended for the edification of the hearers. While a prayer should be scriptural, and many helpful prayers contain brief quotations from the Word of God, helping us to address Him in the spirit of worship, as well as in supplication with thanksgiving, yet we should refrain from introducing a number of truths from Scripture as if we were unfolding portions thereof. Our oral prayers are not designed of God to impart expositions from the holy page, to those whom we are leading.

Again, there is what we may call

The Colloquial Prayer. Now holy familiarity with God is a very blessed thing, and a divine intimacy often characterizes the prayer of one who is in the habit of holding much communion with God in private. But it is quite another thing to lead saints in prayer in a manner which savours of an ordinary conversation carried on by one person with another. The tone of such prayers neither is reverent nor is it helpful to those who have a proper regard for the majesty and dignity of Him whom we are addressing. By all means let us avoid a kind of religious drawl or an ecclesiastical monotony of tone, but let us be on our guard also against the sort of utterance that gives the impression that we are carrying on a kind of chat or familiar colloquial discourse.

In this connection we would draw attention to the evil of the employment of certain endearing terms in addressing the Lord in the presence of fellow-believers.

The use, for instance, of such phrases as "Dear Lord", "Loving Father", is scarcely consistent with the relation existing between the Lord and ourselves. There is nothing to endorse it in Scripture. Such expressions do not tend to give the impress of spirituality; they often offend the ears of those who, while they love the Lord, are deeply and rightly imbued with a spirit of reverence.

There is also

The Repetitive Prayer. By this we refer to a tendency to repeat constantly, that is to say, in every two or three of the utterances, the mode of address with which the prayer may well begin, such as "Oh God our Father", or "Oh God". It has been well said that God's Name is not to be a stop-gap to make up for our want of words, as if we must carry on our utterances in one continuous flow, without pausing for a second or two. Why prepare for the next utterance by again addressing the Lord in the way in which we did only a sentence or two previously? This mode of repetition is not helpful to those who are following the prayer.

In conclusion, let our prayers always be addressed to Him, and not be intended to instruct our hearers. Let what we say be addressed ever in a humble and lowly spirit, marked indeed by earnestness, by the pouring out of the heart, Psa. 62. 8, but always in the realization of the character of Him in whose presence we are. Let our prayers be characterized, too, by definiteness. God knows our own hearts, but for the sake of those who are seeking to join with us our prayers need to be free from vagueness and confusion. At the same time we do well to avoid endeavouring to please those who are with us by adopting fine phrases and unduly eloquent expressions.

It is a solemn and responsible thing to lead God's people in prayer. Only by the leading and help of the Holy Spirit can we do so acceptably to the Lord.

The Importance of New Testament Church Principles

In the Holy Scriptures God has provided for us "the faith which was once for all delivered unto the saints," Jude 3, not once upon a time, as if the provision of the faith was a passing event, leaving something else to be provided later, but "once for all," indicating its completeness, its finality and its permanent authority. The Lord Himself confirmed this authority as being binding and decisive by constantly appealing to the Scriptures. When, for instance, a certain lawyer questioned Him on a matter of the greatest importance, He said, "What is written in the law? How readest thou?".

What was taught by Christ and His apostles, as set forth in the New Testament concerning His will as to the principles of the formation, the gatherings, the worship and testimony of an assembly, was designed to be both sufficient and obligatory during the whole of the present period until His return. Changed conditions in Christendom, which in large measure have constituted a departure from the New Testament teaching, only make that teaching stand out the more conspicuously as the mind of God for the unprejudiced believer. Altered circumstances were never intended to involve any departure from the Word of God. The Scriptures are of such a nature as to need no modification. It has been found possible for those who desire to be obedient to Christ to carry them out through all the centuries of this period.

It is of paramount importance for us to discern and follow the will of the Lord, and that not only in our

individual capacity, but in our association with other believers in church life and practice. At the judgment seat of Christ the Word of God will be the criterion by which we shall either receive a lasting reward for our adherence to its teachings, or suffer irretrievable loss for failure to fulfill them.

The teachings of the New Testament concerning a local church or assembly are clear for all who desire to know and follow the will of God instead of the traditions of men. The claims of the Word of God demand our adherence to it and our acceptance of that alone which is in accordance to it. To follow any teaching contrary to the doctrines of Scripture is to challenge its accuracy and to deny the prerogatives of the Spirit of God and the Lord Christ.

It is therefore the responsibility of each believer to identify himself with those who are seeking to assemble in accordance with the teaching of the New Testament. Our fidelity to the Lord must not depend upon the fidelity of our fellow-believers. We should be steadfast enough to be true to Him and to His Word even if others may fail to act consistently.

Where any assembly is marked by failure or faithlessness on the part of some of its members, it is ours to set an example by remaining faithful, and this example will meet with the Lord's approval here and will receive its reward in the coming day.

The genuine acknowledgment of Christ as Lord will keep us faithful in our adherence to the Scriptures in the recognition of the presence and work of the Holy Spirit in regard to worship. The fulfillment of the will of the Lord should be our consuming ambition, and this will

mean a repudiation of the traditions of men and of human additions to the faith, as well as of all that undermines its teachings as set forth in the Scriptures of truth.

The craft of Satan is ever at work to beguile us from allegiance to our Lord. What need then there is to receive the exhortation He gave to His disciples when He warned them against mere profession of faith! It is quite easy to imagine that we are rendering service to Him while all the time His revealed will is being ignored. He said, "Not everyone that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven, but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven," Matt. 7:21. Let us beware of substituting our own preferences for what He has enjoined upon us, lest, in setting aside His authority, whether in private life or in our church capacity, we are after all found wanting.

The Lord still walks amidst "the lampstands," the local assemblies, as He did as recorded in Revelation 2-3. He discerns the ways of His people and knows all that is going on in each assembly. Blessed are those to whom He will be able to say, "Thou hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name," Rev. 3:8.

True obedience neither procrastinates nor questions.
Francis Quarles

The Mistaken Term "The Brethren"

The appellation "The Brethren," as applied to companies of believers who seek to be guided by the Scriptures alone in the principles of their gatherings, is an utter misnomer. It is, or should be, repudiated by those who are so called. No doubt the term "Plymouth Brethren" had an innocent enough beginning, and arose from the fact that in their evangelistic labors and the testimony they gave they were spoken of as "brethren from Plymouth." The mistake arose in generalizing the circumstances of a particular locality and in applying to other believers besides those at Plymouth a term which was meaningless and applied without the consent or agreement of the believers there themselves.

The appellation is false in more respects than one. It is contrary to the teaching of Scripture, which, in the spiritual sense of the word, includes all believers and gives no justification for any such denominational terminology. Further, it suggests, what is quite unfounded, that the assemblies of those to whom the term is applied are amalgamated into a denominational union, an ecclesiastical system, whereas the New Testament teaches, as a foundation principle relating to assemblies, that each one stands on its own separate basis in dependence on the Lord alone and in subjection to the guidance and ministry, not of some union or organization, but of the Holy Spirit, who indwells each company as His local temple. That principle is maintained by the various assemblies of those who are simply seeking to adhere to the Scriptures of truth as the all-sufficient guide concerning the will of God, and

as “the faith once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3, R.V.)—“once for all,” that is to say, as the final revelation of the mind of God for His people. The very adherence of such assemblies to the teaching of the New Testament causes them (or should do so) to repudiate the imputation that they constitute a sect misnamed “The Brethren.” It is significant that no such denominational notice board is ever used outside the buildings where such assemblies meet.

An Unfounded Supposition

The term is also contrary to fact in that it presupposes that, at some time or other, those who, in different places, and apart from any mutual association, gained an understanding of what the New Testament teaches, and saw the importance of obeying it instead of following the traditions of religious systems, accepted the term “the Brethren.” In any case it came to be applied as a nickname. The fallacy of such an appellation has been to a large extent successfully exposed, though perhaps inadequately.

The fact is that, by a very marked movement of the Spirit of God, Christians in several places, without knowing what was similarly and simultaneously taking place elsewhere, came to see the absolute necessity of becoming obedient to what the Scriptures teach, in contrast to the denominational systems, which were simply an aftermath of the breakaway, in medieval times, from popery, and which stopped short of discerning and following the whole counsel of God as revealed in His Word. To abandon forms of error is one thing; to accept the truth in its fulness is another.

Freedom from Human Dictates

Moreover, the work of the Spirit of God in opening the eyes of believers in different localities and at different times has gone on for over a century, without being directed by the dictates or teachings of some central authority. It is a significant fact that not only in Britain, but in America, Australia, New Zealand and countries on the Continent, as well as elsewhere, owing to the teaching of the Scriptures, whether by direct and independent reading of them, or by individual teachers apart from any society, assemblies such as those who are miscalled “brethren” have been formed without becoming associated with similar gatherings in other places, as in the earliest times, as recorded in the New Testament.

Dishonor to the Holy Spirit

They cannot help what others call them, but that any in such companies should tacitly accept this unscriptural title is greatly to be deprecated. Its use is dishonoring to the Spirit of God and a falsification of the actual position of any Scripturally formed assembly. The flippant or jocular way in which the appellation, or some modification of it such as “the P.B.’s” or “the Plyms,” is sometimes used, is also to be deprecated. The work of the Holy Spirit in enabling believers to gather according to the Scriptures, to be formed into local assemblies by His power and with the recognition of His rights and prerogatives to provide spiritual gifts for the care of each company, and to control and guide their worship, is all too sacred to permit of the use of such terms. There are those who do so who have never discovered the truth from the Word of God, and are ignorant of what the Scriptures teach as to assembly principles and of the way in which they are being maintained. Such epithets

are part of the misunderstanding or taunts which those who are faithful to Christ have to endure, but let them never be accepted or used by any members of such assemblies themselves.

That some local companies of believers are in such a low spiritual state that their character and conduct give the lie to their profession is undeniable, but this affords no justification for the use of the term "the Brethren," as if they were a degenerate sect, and as if what might be sadly true of any local and individual company was to be regarded as a general characteristic of all such assemblies. The fact which has been mentioned, that each assembly stands on its own separate and independent basis, makes the denominational appellation a complete misrepresentation. What is characteristic of one gathering can never be necessarily characteristic of all such. Another Misunderstanding Again, that a company of Christians ascertains the teaching of the New Testament in regard to baptism, and its teaching regarding the "breaking of bread," that is to say, "the Lord's Supper," as appointed for the first day of the week, and practices these ordinances as therein inculcated, has, in some quarters of denominationalism, given rise to the false idea that the fulfillment of these two ordinances especially characterizes those who are mis-termed "the Brethren." That view is not very general but it is existent. It serves, however, to exemplify the fact that faithful adherence to the Word of God is sure to meet with misunderstanding and prejudice and, upon occasion, what is tantamount to a scoff. That kind of thing should, however, only be the means of a continual and steadfast testimony, given in such a way that it will enable other Christians to search

the Scriptures on these matters and carry them out in loyalty to Christ. Only so can any assembly meet with that approval which the Lord has expressed in His commendation to the assembly in Philadelphia, "Thou hast a little strength, and hast kept My Word, and hast not denied My Name" (Rev. 3:8).

One who was closely in touch with the revival of the early part of the last century makes known the facts of the movement, in contrast to the imputation which is implied in the misconception concerning the term "Brethren." After mentioning how this revival began among believers by their reading the Bible together and ascertaining truths respecting the Second Coming of Christ and the assembly, he says, "They cast away all traditions, and read the Bible without note or comment. Many of them were men of understanding and learning, but they laid aside all tradition and commentaries, and resolved, by the help of God, to search for themselves. As they searched the Bible they could discover nothing around them like what was depicted in the Scriptures, and that startled them. They looked at all the sects, but they saw no facsimile of the description contained in the epistles."

New Testament Teachings

They found in the New Testament that believers met together to partake of the Lord's Supper without an authorized minister to consecrate or distribute the bread and wine. They were led therefore to meet together as believers as was done in the earliest times. They saw that in every local assembly there were divinely raised up elders (called overseers), always more than one, to care spiritually for each assembly and that

it was not according to the teaching of the New Testament that a single ordained minister should conduct a meeting for worship and the breaking of bread, but that a local assembly was a body in which spiritual activities were carried on by the various members, whereas in denominations many gifted persons are unable to exercise their functions.

They decided therefore that they must follow the Scriptures instead of the traditions of the systems of Christendom, which failed to recognize the rights and prerogatives of the Holy Spirit. This attempt to carry out the principles of truth was not made without great cost in many ways, for there was not a sect that was not opposed to it; every one was against this strange company, and thus it was at the cost of many friendships that the separation was made.

That this revival of adherence to the Word of God has given rise to the unfounded appellation "The Brethren" is a device of the spiritual foe, whose aim has been thereby to prevent earnest believers from following the Truth.

Young Men - Foreign Fields or Home Assembly?

Those who have already been raised up and are discharging the duties of oversight should watch the lives of young men, with a view to discerning what the Spirit of God is doing in them to prepare for the continuance of such responsibilities. And let younger men seek help from God to live and walk according to the Scriptures, in holiness and righteousness, in absolute devotion to Christ, in separation from the world, so that if the Holy Spirit should give them the privilege of continuing the testimony of an assembly and acting as overseers, they may be ready for recognition by the assembly, according to 1 Thessalonians 5:12, 13.

We can be thankful to God for calling and preparing numbers of men for the work of the gospel in this and other lands. But it is from existing assemblies that such are commended to God, Acts 13:1-3; 16:1-3, and commendation is given by those who are stewards of God, caring for the assembly life and testimony, tending the flock, Acts 20:28. It should be borne in mind that these overseeing brethren were formerly young men whom the Lord was preparing for the carrying out of such responsibilities. Let assemblies pray for the raising up of such, especially in days of abounding error and departure from the teaching of the Word of God. The missionary calling may be more attractive than that of an overseer in a local assembly, but those who, being exercised in heart about it, seek to respond to the call and prepare themselves accordingly, will receive present help from the Lord, and reward in the day to come.

There are evidences that here and there God is raising up young men who are manifesting qualifications for the deeply responsible work of spiritual care of assemblies. This calls for thankfulness, for constant prayer for all such, and for the provision of others. Only thus can the testimony of assemblies on scriptural lines be really effective, through the power of the Holy Spirit.