

THIRD (ENGLISH) EDITION.

# Fellowship

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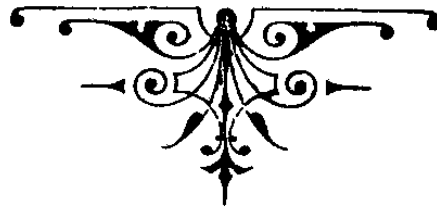
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# Closing Days.

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# FELLOWSHIP IN CLOSING DAYS.

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IT is impossible to review, at the opening of a new century, the years that are past without recognising gratefully the exceeding goodness of God to His saints below. 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 who have gone forth waiting for no other authorisation than, "I believed, and therefore have I spoken" (2 Cor. iv. 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 mist of centuries, with the happy result that many precious truths, long lost sight of, have been restored to us, 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, or even more frequently, without human authority or presidency (1 Cor. xii. 12, 13; 1 Tim. iii. 15; Eph. ii. 22; 1 Cor. xi. 23-26; Acts xx. 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 characterised the history of man from the beginning. The remnant restored from Babylon furnish 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 so hearty, 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 iii. 3; Neh. viii. 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. i. ii. iii.). The same humiliating declension may be seen in the history of the early Church. The charming picture presented to us in Acts ii., iv. 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. ii. 21; 2 Thess. ii. 7).

These pages are intended especially for those who have separated themselves from the organised 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 of 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. Six 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 consider-

\* "Are there no principles which we have accepted as truth, and which have worked disastrously? Is there not a reason for testing afresh by the word our ecclesiastical principles, as, e.g., those of fellowship and discipline, in view of the course to which they have led? If 'by their fruits ye shall know them,' is a test recognised in scripture, is not the fact of three divisions in five years (1881—5) enough to beget suspicion that all is not right here? Especially when we find the plea of unity urged constantly for division, and most efficacious (strangely enough) in producing this." "I believe we have often driven the thought of unity to an extreme, and that the endeavour to keep the unity of the Spirit has been pressed in such a way as to make it a cause of division itself, instead of unity." F. W. GRANT.

ation before the Lord, I give it as my judgement 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 of. Besides, we naturally like to be connected with an outward and visible organisation; like the two and a half tribes, we like "a great altar to see to" (Josh. xxii. 10). But our work of organisation 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 ourselves 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. ii. 22). The following words may well be weighed: "I never felt my testimony to be the ability of the Holy Ghost to *rule a visible body*. That I do not doubt, but I doubt its proper application now as a matter of testimony. It does not become us. My confidence is in the certainty of God's blessing and maintaining us, if we take the place we are really in. That place is one of the general ruin of the dispensation. . . . When there is an attempt at *displaying the position and the unity*, there will always be a mess and a failure. *God will not take such a place with us. . . . I only therefore so far seek the original standing of the Church as to believe that wherever two or three are gathered in His name, Christ will be*; and that the Spirit of God is necessarily the only source of power, and that what He does will be blessing through the Lordship of Christ. These provide for all times. *If more be attempted now, it will be confusion only.*"—J. N. D.

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. Wigram: "How are meetings for 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 organise and systematise the operations of God's Spirit, according to the pattern of the "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.

A "circle of fellowship" that does not embrace all Christ's members, at least in principle, stands condemned, in my judgement, on the following grounds.

1. 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 towards those not included in it (Ephes. iv. 3; Luke ix. 49, 50). For 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.

2. 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; 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.

3. 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; and it is still more exceptional for the discipline, however godly, of any "unaccredited" assembly to be recognised 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.

4. 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? "Whatever is not of faith is sin" (Rom. xiv. 23).

5. It *neutralises conscience*. In 2 Tim. ii., 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.\* This course, when rightly followed, keeps the conscience in constant exercise before God. But 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 disagreeable facts when they come before him, and walks submissively according to his human rule.

6. 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 offence is frequently screened and palliated, and a whole confederacy of assemblies is landed in permanent fellowship with evil. It was regarded as a greater sin for Dr. Cronin to break bread outside the "circle" at Ryde in 1879 than to have worshipped with an assembly which was notoriously "rotten" and "unclean." To have fellowship with such evil might not be considered desirable; but to go outside the "circle" was an unpardonable offence, involving the extremest possible punishment!

I am conscious that the foregoing constitutes a heavy indictment; but is it heavier than 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 for ever?" 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*

\* Pastoral counsel may come to the aid of the inexperienced in the practical carrying out of this principle; indeed such counsel should be sought; but this is quite a different thing from that which is objected to above, usurped authority over the conscience.

*frightened by mere names.* For more than 50 years, saints have been accustomed to the terms "open" and "exclusive brethren." These titles, when they originally came into use, were understood to mean that the one class of brethren were lax, and the other stringent, in dealing with evil. But the titles have long 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; and 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, "What is to be done amid the general confusion of parties?" 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 recognise 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 to, 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 enquire if they are morally and doctrinally pure, and also if they are careful to prevent evil being imported amongst them from elsewhere. If we are able to satisfy ourselves in these important respects, let us thankfully own them as a divinely gathered company, 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 Tim. ii. 22 by a policy of careful discrimination on the right hand and on the left.

Will any assert that new principles are 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 suffered so much sorrow and shame to come upon us. Let the following quotations be carefully considered: "What I felt from the beginning, and

began with, was this: the Holy Ghost remains, and therefore the essential principle of unity with His presence, for . . . . ' *Wherever* two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.' When this is really sought, there will certainly be blessing by His presence." (J.N.D. in 1846). "It is my joy and my privilege to find myself in the midst of brethren who know one another in Christ, and to rejoice in the blessedness of brotherly communion in all the weakness in which it may be found at present; but I could not recognise an assembly that does not receive all the children of God, because I know that Christ receives them." J. N. D. in 1840). "If they ('Brethren') become sectarian in their position before God, they will be utterly useless, and I am persuaded, immediately broken to pieces. *You are nothing, nobody, but Christians*, and the moment you cease to be an available mount for communion for every consistent Christian, you will go to pieces, or help the evil." (J. N. D. in 1833).

These are the true principles of the Church of God. 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. iii. 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 forgiveness, though we have rebelled against Him" (Dan. ix. 9). "To this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word" (Is. lxvi. 2).

W. W. FEREDAY.

N.B.—Some may perhaps regret that I have quoted human writers so much in the foregoing. It was necessary to do so, in order to show how far we have departed from the principles that we once professed to be divine.



## ON RECEPTION.

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W. KELLY: "We receive every Christian walking as such, without reference to their connection with Nationalism or Dissent; we rejoice to have communion with them, whether privately or publicly. They may join us in worship and the supper of the Lord. They are as free as any of us to help in thanksgiving, prayer, or a word of edification, if so led of God; and this without stipulation either to leave their old associations or to meet only with us. Where is this done save only with 'Brethren'? With us on the contrary, if any godly Churchman or Dissenter thought fit to come when we remember the Lord together, he would be quite in order if he did any or all of these things spiritually; and this, not from any permission on our part, but as a matter of responsibility to God and His word."

*"Scripture knows nothing of keeping outside a godly walking member of Christ."*

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F. W. GRANT: "My own ground is simply this: that a person *cannot be rejected unless for wickedness*. I refuse this ecclesiastical thought that is going around to make ecclesiastical position wickedness. I believe wickedness is wickedness, the state of soul in which people are away from God, and *I believe that nothing short of wickedness should be that for which we exclude from the table of the Lord*. If people are deliberately in association with blasphemy, I treat that as wickedness, and the people as wicked persons, and nothing less."

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