

PRINCIPLES OF GATHERING

J. N. Darby. Letters, Vol. III p 459

As regards the second question: the principle of meeting is the unity of the body, so that a person known as a Christian is free to come: only the person who introduces him should have the confidence of the assembly as to his competency to judge of the person he introduces. In London and elsewhere the name of the person introducing is given out; or if many know him, that is mentioned and they are responsible. Looseness is so prevalent now among the denominations that more care is needed; but I hold that every known Christian has the same title as myself; and membership of an assembly I totally reject. But I do not accept running out at a person's fancy: they may have been sinning or walking disorderly; and a person breaking bread is thereby subject to the discipline of God's house, if called for, just as if he had been constantly there. Nor do I accept any condition from them, as that they are free to go anywhere: the assembly is to follow God's word, and can bind itself by no condition. Nor do I impose any; because as the assembly is bound by the word and can accept none, so is the person subject to the discipline of the assembly according to the word.

I have never changed my views at all. The practice is more difficult because of the growing looseness in doctrines and practice of all around. But if an assembly refused a person known to be a Christian and blameless, because he was not of the assembly, I should not go. I own no membership but of Christ. An assembly composed as such of its members is at once a sect. But the person who brings another is responsible to the assembly, and should mention it; for it is the assembly which is finally responsible, though it may trust the person who introduces another in the particular case. If it were a young Christian, or one of little maturity and weak in the faith, I should like to know what sure ground there was before allowing him to break bread, on the same principle as in all other cases.

Yours truly in the Lord.

[Date unknown.]

J. N. Darby — Letters, Vol. II pp. 10-12

DEAR BRETHREN,—I write for both, because I hardly know who is in the place, indeed for all as to my heart's desire; and you will not be astonished at my being interested in the assembly there. I have heard from one, and also through another, only one side of course of the circumstances; and consequently I say little of them. N., indeed, alluded to the question raised, but not to circumstances. I shall refer chiefly to principles; for you will feel that we are all, as of one body, interested in the position taken, and still more in the glory of Christ and our brethren's welfare.

The question is as to reception of saints to partake of the table of our Lord with us: whether any can be admitted who are not formally and regularly amongst us. It is not whether we exclude persons unsound in faith, or ungodly in practice, nor whether we, deliberately walking with those who are unsound and ungodly, are not in the same guilt — not clear in the matter. The first is unquestioned; the last, Brethren have insisted on — and I among them — at very painful cost to ourselves. There may be subtle pleas to get evil allowed; but we have always been firm, and God, I believe, has fully owned it.

The question is not there; but suppose a person, known to be godly and sound in faith, who has not left some ecclesiastical system — nay, thinks Scripture favours an ordained ministry, but is glad when the occasion occurs; suppose we alone are in the place, or he is not in connection with any other body in the place — staying with a brother, or the like: is he to be excluded because he is of some system as to which his conscience is not enlightened, nay, which he may think more right? He is a godly member of the body, known such: is he to be shut out? If so, the degree of light is title to communion, and the unity of the body is denied by the assembly which refuses him. The principle of meeting (as members of Christ walking in godliness) is given up, agreement with us is made the rule, and the assembly becomes a sect with its members like any other. They meet on their principles, Baptist or other — you on yours; and if they do not belong to you formally as such, you do not let them in. The principle of Brethren's meeting is gone, and another sect is made — say with more light, and that is all. It may give more trouble, requiring more care to treat every case on its merits, on the principle of the unity of all Christ's members, than to say, "You do not belong to us, you cannot come"; but the whole principle of meeting is gone. The path is not of God.

I have heard (and I partly believe it, for I have heard some rash and violent people say it elsewhere) that the various sectarian celebrations of the supper are called tables of devils. But this proves only the unbrokenness and ignorance of him who says it. The heathen altars are called tables of devils because, and expressly because, what they offered they offered, according to Deuteronomy 32: 17 to devils, and not to God. But to call Christian assemblies by profession (ignorant of ecclesiastical truth, and hence meeting wrongly) tables of devils is simply monstrous nonsense, and shews the bad state of him who so talks. No sober man, no honest man, can deny that Scripture means something totally different.

I have heard — I do not know whether it be true — that it has been said that Brethren in England act on this ground. If this has been said, it is simply and totally false. There have been new gatherings formed during my absence in America which I have never visited; but the old ones, long walking as brethren, have always received known Christians; and everywhere, I have no doubt, the newer ones too; and in every country. I have known individuals to take up the thought — one, at any rate, at Toronto; but the assembly always received true Christians. Three broke bread in this way the last Lord's Day that I was in London.

There cannot be too much care as to holiness and truth: the Spirit is the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit of truth; but ignorance of ecclesiastical truth is not a ground of excommunication when the conscience and walk are undefiled. If a person came and made a condition to be allowed to go to both, he would not come in simplicity in the unity of the body. I know it to be evil, and cannot allow it; and he has no right to impose any condition on the church of God. It must exercise its discipline, as cases arise, according to the word. Nor, indeed, do I think a person regularly going from one to another systematically can be honest in going to either; he is setting up to be superior to both, and condescending to each. This is not, in that act, a pure heart.

May the Lord guide you. Remember you are acting as representing the whole church of God; and if you depart from a right path as to the principle of meeting, you are separating yourselves from it to be a local sect on your own principles. In all that concerns faithfulness, God is my witness, I seek no looseness; but Satan is busy, seeking to lead us one side or the other — to destroy the largeness of the unity of the body, or to make it mean looseness in practice and doctrine. We must not fall into one in avoiding the other. Reception of all true saints is what gives its force to the exclusion of those walking loosely. If I exclude all who walk godlily as well, who do not follow with us, it loses its power, for those who are godly are shut out too.

There is no membership of Brethren. Membership of an assembly is unknown in Scripture. There it is members of Christ's body. If people must be all of you, it is practically membership of your body. The Lord keep you from it: that is simply dissenting ground.

I should, if I came to -, require clear evidence what ground you are meeting upon.

Kingston, April 19th., 1869

J. N. Darby — Letters [Cartas], Vol. II pp. 349-351

MY DEAR BROTHER—Not quite at the end till I turn round towards England again, the Lord sparing me and holding me up.

I have just made ninety-six hours of railroad, without stopping, and am all well. My mind fully turns to England when I have done in these parts.

Were I young, with (humanly speaking) life before me, there would be ground for staying, for the work is opening. It is in many respects on a new footing, and the question of this position and the truths of Scripture as to the full position, and the walk too, of the Christian is raised everywhere. But I am not young, and cannot think to carry out the work myself; and God, I trust, will raise up instruments, as He has a few. It is not His mind, I believe, to be out of weakness. In the state of the church it becomes us to take part in her sorrows.

As regards your first question, I think there is a mistake as to the position of the assembly, both in the sister and also of the brother who objected, perhaps in all. When a person breaks bread, he is in the only fellowship I know — owned members of the body of Christ. The moment you make another FULL fellowship, you make people members of your assembly, and the whole principle of meeting is falsified. The assembly has to be satisfied as to the persons, but, as so receiving to break bread, is supposed to be satisfied on the testimony of the person introducing them, who is responsible to the assembly in this respect. This, or two or three visiting, is to me the question of adequate testimony to the conscience of the assembly.

At the beginning it was not so, that is, there was no such examination. Now I believe it a duty according to 2 Timothy 2. Nobody comes in but as a believer. This again makes the distinction of member of the particular assembly. Still I do not think a practice such as this sister's is satisfactory. I admit fully every case must stand on its own merits, and so be dealt with. Where breaking bread is intermitted, it is all well to mention it, though this be in some cases uncalled for, where the assembly knows about

it and is satisfied; but if persons break bread, they are as subject to discipline as if always there, because it is the church of God which is in question, though represented by two or three: Christ is there. If it is merely an occasional coming as a stranger, the person not being known, it is well to mention the fact.

What is not satisfactory in such cases is, first, it is accepting the person by the assembly as if they had another fellowship besides membership of Christ, which I do not recognise at all. And, secondly, I should fear there was a reluctance to take honestly the reproach of the position, the true separated position of saints, and [the wish] to be able to say to others, I do not belong to them, I only go as a believer. I only go as a believer, but then I accept the position. Waiting for them to get clear is all well. A true believer has TITLE at the table; but if they meet as members of Christ's body, they are all one body as partakers of one loaf.

I do not admit them. I own their title, wait upon their want of light, but would not allow them to put me in the position of a sect (and "full fellowship" means that) making allowance for their ignorance, and waiting upon it. They do not come really to break bread with us on the ground of the unity of the body, if they think they are not one with us in coming; for if we are true and right, they are not one with the body of Christ, the only principle of meeting I know at all.

I repeat, in the present state of the church we must have much patience, as their minds have been moulded in church membership; but I ought not to falsify my own position, nor sanction it in the mind of another. If the person is known to all, and known to be there to break bread, all mention is needless; it is a testimony to the unity of the body. If an occasional thing, the person who introduces is responsible.

I remember a case, where one growing in truth came to help sometimes in a Sunday-school, and from the other side of London, and asked the brethren if he might not break bread when there — time even did not allow of him to get back to his Baptist service — and he enjoyed the communion of saints. Brethren allowed him gladly; and, if my recollection is right, his name was not given out when he came afterwards. Very soon he was amongst Brethren entirely, but his fellowship was as full when he was not; and had he given occasion, he would have been refused in discipline, just as if there every Sunday.

The other question is for me a more delicate one, because it is a question of the state of the soul, as of the church, when darkness covers it. Many, many souls cry Abba Father (that is, have the Spirit of adoption), which are clear in nothing, save that their confidence is in Christ and His work only; and as doubting is taught in the church, and a plain full gospel unknown and even rejected by teachers, this state is the natural consequence; and it often requires spirituality to discern the real state of a soul, if really under law, undelivered or legalised by teaching. Hard cold knowledge of doctrine is not what I seek. Then there is the danger of throwing back a soul just when it wants to be encouraged. Doubts brought in by conflict, when a soul can really say Abba, are not a ground of rejection, though it shews a soul not well established. Yet a soul exercised, but not yet resting in Christ's work, is not in a right state for communion. So with young converts — it is far better for them to wait until they have peace, only carefully shewing it is not to reject them but for their own good. I should not look for understanding deliverance, but being personally able to say, Abba, Father. The intelligence of deliverance is the consequence of sealing. But if a man be not sealed, he is not in the Christian position. "If any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his." Peace through forgiveness is, as to Christ's work, the evidence of faith in Christ's work, and that work received by faith is the ground of sealing. Then one is delivered; but the

intelligence of this is another thing. Israel out of Egypt was brought to God — delivered. Through Jordan they entered in, were circumcised, and ate the corn of the land. But a sealed person alone is in the true Christian position; and this is founded on the sprinkling with blood, that is, faith in Christ's work, by which we have redemption, not in the knowledge of deliverance. This is its effect.

San Francisco, August 1875

From “The Brethren”—Commonly so-called

by Andrew Miller

It is also said, we know, that the Exclusive Brethren — as the protesters against Bethesda's course were now called — will receive persons to the Lord's table from the church of England where much error is held, but refuse the most godly saint from a Bethesda gathering. This is true and often most painful and distressing to those who have it to do. Nothing but fidelity to Christ and His word could give them firmness in the face of the appeals that are made, and the subtle pleas that are urged. The explanation is this: strange as it may appear, the Neutral Brethren, as they were now called, professedly assembled on the principle of the church of God as before the division, and owned the presence of the Holy Ghost in their midst. Several things might be noticed which appear to us inconsistent with this position; still, as this was and is the ground taken, the gatherings must be dealt with as one body. By acknowledging the presence of the Holy Ghost in this way they profess to be one body though many members: therefore, in receiving a single member from a body that professes to be a unity, the whole body, sound or unsound, is, in principle, received. (See 1 Cor. 12.) But in the church of England and in the various forms of dissent, no such position is assumed. They meet on the ground of a particular system; it may be Episcopacy, Presbytery, or Independency; and the members of the different systems remain as so many individuals, and ought to be dealt with as such. The ecclesiastical position of such is entirely different from that occupied by the Bethesda gatherings so-called, and each individual must be dealt with according to the ground he professedly takes. There may be much sympathy and friendliness amongst the denominations, but there is no such thought as unity; nevertheless, to refuse a godly Christian from the church of England because he may think the Establishment right would be to make light or intelligence a title to communion, denying the unity of the body and form a sect. It is a question not of degrees of light, but of holiness and truth.

Pp. 90-92

The Latest Sect.

W. Kelly.

(*Bible Treasury*—Vol. 20, p. 300-302, 368. —July 1895.)

It may not be generally known, though familiar to many readers, that a portentous effort has been recently made in an ecclesiastical way, which is not without instruction if only for warning. It emanates from those professing Christians, who fell back on compromise when the question of a true or false Christ was raised not quite 50 years ago, and ecclesiastical independency was adopted as the means of appearing united, notwithstanding real division.

As nobody who looked beneath the surface could be satisfied with an expediency so hollow, the inevitable reaction has come; and conscience at length confesses from among themselves that these easy-going assemblies are "lawless." Throughout a considerable part of Great Britain this cry has been heard from men who ought to be credible witnesses of the facts among their old associates; as others outside them had long testified that so it was and must be on their principle, or rather on their total lack of it in any divine sense.

It seems that three canons are set up as the new distinctive standard. First, they are strict Baptists, refusing to receive any member of Christ's body who has not conformed to christian immersion as believers. Secondly, they require that every one allowed to partake of the Lord's Supper shall have previously broken off all ecclesiastical association in order to stand in their ranks. Thirdly, they claim to appoint elders over their associates, as the expression of rule in the flock of God on earth.

Now on all three points these retrograde innovators convict themselves, however self-confident, of not being guided of God.

First, it is as certain as some other facts in scripture, that the twelve apostles, though charged by the risen Lord to baptise unto the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, were not baptised with that baptism themselves. Some, perhaps all, were baptised by John; but this was no equivalent, as Acts 19 proves incontrovertibly. Nor was their own baptism during our Lord's lifetime christian baptism; for this is based on His death and resurrection, and instituted after that. To these we may add other disciples before Pentecost, of whom we hear of above 500 brethren who saw the Lord risen at once 1 Cor. 15: 6), and how many more we know not. But we do know that the Holy Spirit baptised them at Pentecost into one body. Thus signally even from the beginning must letter hide its diminished head before spirit; as of old the Lord said, even under law, "I will have mercy and not sacrifice."

Still more does the principle of grace apply in these days of Christendom's moral ruin, when the great majority of the members of Christ must be owned to be christened as infants, which they regard as valid baptism even when confessed to be irregular in some respects, and would conscientiously object to be re-baptised as unscriptural. Any company therefore that insists on this rigid view is of necessity a sect or party; for it sets up a rule which the Holy Spirit rejected at Pentecost, and deliberately excludes (without and against scripture) thousands of members of Christ who object to their rule as not of God.

Hence, when souls were deeply exercised 60 or 70 years ago through the light of scripture and in the hope of the Lord's coming, it was learnt that God had provided for the difficulty of jarring views on what was after all but an administrative sign, however important in its place. For baptism is essentially individual, as the Lord's Supper is

plainly collective or ecclesiastical. Baptism is never once tied to the assembly, but might be at the shortest notice, by the wayside, or in a prison, or along a river. Therefore long ago some of us found ourselves on the ground of that liberty which is due to individual conviction, and only opposed to the fanatics on either side, who would force the question into the assembly and break it up in honour of their predilections. These considerations are evident, which may help: that baptism, believer's baptism, is initiatory; that it is an individual confession; and that, as scripture demonstrates, none ever thought of getting baptised after recognition in the assembly though room may be left for the scruples of a troubled conscience. But this is not the only principle, learnt and acted on then, which has of late been forgotten in the haste and contention of a later day, There are frequent irregularities in baptism; as many feel, who are not novices, yet decided against more than "one baptism." To insist rigidly on letter, especially as things are now and have long been, and to make it an assembly question, is to err grossly, and fall into a sect, or "heresy" in the scriptural sense of the word.

Secondly, while there is a path graciously provided in a day of ruin for those that call on the Lord out of a pure heart, farthest from it are such as assume to be "the" church in fact, even though they may verbally avoid the pretentious claim. And what can one think of Christians whose bond of union, or test, is the acceptance of discipline in a local case, at best dubious if not mistaken and unjust! If ever so just, it would be sectarian to make it a test as is done. The more truth Christians profess to have, the guiltier they are if they forget and ignore the members of Christ who in general know scarce anything of the church, of their own relationship to it, and of their consequent duties. It becomes those who know these things in their measure to act in a spirit of lowly grace toward such as know them not. And so those acted who first and most deeply learnt from the scriptures how the children of God should walk in the midst of Christendom fallen and departed from His will, broken up into sects (misnamed churches), great or small. For themselves they fell back on the truth of God's assembly surviving the failure, claiming true-hearted obedience, and open to all that are Christ's, were they but two or three gathered to His name.

This is in no way to become a sect, because it abandons sectarianism for the ground of His church, and contemplates in faith and love all members of Christ's body, save such as are or justly ought to be under discipline. But the self-same principle demands our owning and receiving in the Lord's name all godly-walking saints who desire to remember Him, notwithstanding their ignorance of the church and consequent inability to judge denominationalism. Hence it was ever felt a privilege to welcome all saints walking with God according to their measure, unless they were tolerating plain heterodoxy preached in the place they frequented. (For if they held it themselves, there could be no question). This were ungodliness, at least as pronounced as any other iniquity.

Some excellent brothers who detest laxity have wavered as to this open-hearted attitude toward saints in the denominations, especially from 1849 and since. Such hesitation however is groundless. Largeness of heart is as right as laxity is bad. The neutrality which characterises a party then and subsequently has to be met on its own ground, to which 2 John distinctly applies, with other scriptures. But this is no reason for swerving from a first principle of scripture and denying to saints of God that to which grace entitles them, as no less members of Christ than ourselves. The denial is itself a false and sectarian thought, unless it be for fundamental evil, and betrays ignorance as to the one body, in defence of which it is mistakenly invoked. It is the more manifestly unsound, because not a few already received know little or nothing of the body and are therefore weak in fulfilling their responsibilities. It is lack of spiritual

intelligence, because it awards to true thoughts or fidelity what is really due to the relationship of Christ's members, and therefore puts an unintended slight on His name and the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 11: 17). You are not intelligent, if you set up knowledge and attainment, instead of Christ, as the title.

But this new-fangled party goes to the utmost in unitedly rejecting Christ's members at large, and claims for itself exclusively all part and lot in God's church now on earth. No saints do they receive unless they are decided to follow themselves. They are self-condemned, being despisers of Christ's members, who may be more intelligent and spiritual and separate to the Lord in every way, but are rejected in principle because they utter not their Shibboleth. Nothing more ignorant, nothing more presumptuous; and the more so, as they are on the same ground of indifference to Christ's truth and glory as the leavened lump which was known for more than 40 years ago for its openness to evil.

Thirdly, their attempt to invest elders with authority is a mere sectarian assumption. According to scripture apostles chose elders in each assembly, as the Holy Ghost led them, either directly, or, as in the case of Titus, one commissioned by an apostle to appoint elders in a definite sphere. Never do we find any minister without such a commission doing such a work; still less do we hear of the assembly choosing elders.* Calvin, Beza, and others have laboured to draw up the latter brief; but it is labour lost. Scripture not only does not indicate the least trace of such a practice, but excludes the theory by the proof that such local charges required apostolic authority, direct or indirect. But there is ample provision otherwise for edification and order as every Christian may read in Rom. 12: 3-8; 1 Cor. 12; 1 Cor. 16: 15-16; Eph. 4: 7-16; 1 Thess. 5: 12-22; Heb. 13: 7, 24; 1 Peter 4: 10, 11; 3 John 5-8. The Holy Spirit, sent down to be with us for ever, fails in nothing, to glorify the Lord and care for His work in every needed way. No doubt, the pretension to imitate the apostles in ordaining, without their power or authority, is in no way peculiar to the new party, but just a falling into the prevalent tradition of Christendom; but here it is the more reprehensible, because they assume to reject all such errors, while in fact they only retrograde less excusably. The only right walk, in the present broken state of Christendom, is in obedience with all humiliation. For ought we not to feel that sin brought about the scattering, which is only increased by, the claim of all authority or power we have not?

- The assembly might choose men in whom they confided to administer in temporal things; but as the Lord gave gifts in the work, so He chose; while the apostles He authorised could authorise for a local charge.

NOTE TO "THE LATEST SECT."

(Bible Treasury—p. 368, col. 2.— November 1895)

As a leader of this movement declares that they do not "appoint" elders, the writer in the B.T. feels bound to accept and repeat the disavowal. It is not denied that they claim to have "elders," and insist strongly on their authority, as one of their cherished and distinctive tenets. Others who make a similar claim, though not with the same pretension, have a solemn form of appointment, which probably led one to suppose it in their case virtually, if not formally. It looks rather like self-appointment.

Now it is indisputably according to scripture that the apostle did "choose" elders church by church (Acts 14: 23), and that Titus was apostolically commissioned to "appoint" or establish elders city by city in Crete. This was "God's way for His people

having bishops." It was not a question only of such qualities as 1 Tim. 3 lays down, but of adequate authority appointing them. Scripture only recognises as presbyters men thus inaugurated, Whatever their qualities, they were only eligible for elders without or before that; but elders scripturally they were not till so chosen. It is well to know, honour, and obey those who have the requisite traits, as we hear enjoined in 1 Cor. 16, 1 Thess. 5, and elsewhere. But they were not called elders, nor ought to be so, until duly established as such. Clearly therefore to dispense with this is not subjection to scripture. The brethren of the new movement offend against God's word in pretending to "elders" in their midst without the essential title of a valid appointing authority.

Not to appoint, then, would be right, if they did not claim to have "elders" scripturally entitled to rule. To appoint now is altogether invalid, because they have not the requisite apostle or his delegate so charged. Hence to claim "elders" according to scripture without the due appointing power is contrary to scripture and presumptuous. The paper on "Bishops and Deacons," in the little vol. of Addresses is an evasion as to this and inconsistent also; for it asserts in pp. 90, 91 what refutes p. 93.

A gift from the ascended Christ made one responsible to exercise it, evangelist, pastor, or teacher. Gifts as in 1 Cor. 12 and Eph. 4 needed no appointing authority; but, if scripture is to decide and govern, the local charge of an elder did. It is therefore evil to set 1 Tim. 3 or any other text against Acts. 14: 23 and Titus 1: 5. The one may be "the only instance where we have the apostles pointing out elders." But this one is as conclusive to faith as ever so many. And why use men's mistake about Timothy to enfeeble the certainty that Titus was delegated to appoint elders in Crete? Does either one or other give licence now to claim "elders" without analogous appointment? To do the work without that claim is what we see of old at Corinth and Thessalonica; it is accordingly sanctioned of God as the right, humble, and comely way when we have neither apostle nor delegate to appoint. So Christians have long learnt and practised; whereas the device of the new movement on their own showing is baseless pretension as well as retrograde. They might and ought to have known better, but for self-importance, which hinders true intelligence of God's mind, never more needed than in a day of ruin. To dispense with due appointment is as wrong as to unduly appoint.

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