

## **Fifteenth Letter to a Friend.**

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My Beloved Friend,

The year 1848 was a testing time for all who professed to occupy the ground of Brethren. In the summer of that year, a question was raised as to whether we were really gathered on the ground of the unity of the body, or merely as independent or fragmentary congregations, having a measure of acquaintance and sympathy, but no common ground of responsibility in fellowship and testimony as those who were members one of another, united to the living Head in heaven, and to one another, by the Holy Ghost. It was at Bristol that this profoundly interesting question was raised; and from thence it extended to every place, on the face of the earth, where there happened to be an assembly of Brethren.

As you are doubtless aware, there was a congregation of Baptists who met for worship at a chapel called "Bethesda," in Bristol. There was an associated body meeting at "Salem" chapel; but I shall speak of both under the one name of Bethesda, and further I shall do so as briefly as possible, inasmuch as my sole object is to bring out the great principle at stake, and not, by any means, to dwell on persons or places which can only possess an ephemeral interest.

Well, then, some years previous to the time above referred to, this Baptist congregation was received into fellowship with Brethren — received as a body. The whole assembly, professedly and ostensibly, took the ground occupied by Brethren. I do not mention names or descend into minute details; I merely give the great leading fact, because it illustrates a most important principle.

It has been my conviction, for many years, that this reception of a congregation was a fatal mistake on the part of Brethren. Even admitting, as I most heartily do, that all the members and ministers may have been most excellent people taken individually; yet I am persuaded that it is a mistake, in any case, to receive a whole body as such. There is no such thing as a corporate conscience. Conscience is an individual thing; and unless we act individually before God, there will be no stability in our course. A whole body of people, led by their teachers, may profess to take certain ground, and to adopt certain principles; but what security is there that each member of that body is acting in the energy of personal faith, by the power of the Holy Ghost, and on the authority of the word of God? It is of the very last importance that, in every step we take, we should act in simple faith, in communion with God, and with an exercised conscience. Indeed I cannot but believe that one special cause of weakness in the various assemblies of Brethren is that numbers have come on the ground who are not in the power of the truth in their own souls, and they act as a dead weight and a hindrance. But, most clearly, it is a grave mistake to receive a whole body of people into communion where there is no opportunity of testing the spiritual state of the individuals composing that body.

We had a very striking illustration of this in London, in the year 1853. A congregation of Baptists desired to take the ground occupied by Brethren; and they did so. But hardly had they taken the step, when the brother who had built the chapel and gathered, by his preaching, the congregation, perceived the mistake. He immediately called the assembly together, and told them that both he and they must act on their individual responsibility before the Lord. In pursuance of this statement, on the following Lord's day, the chapel was locked, and the people were compelled individually to consider their ground and their proper course of action.

Now, some would pronounce this a very bold step; but it was a noble step; and the sequel proved it to be a right step — the only right step. In the course of a few weeks — weeks, no doubt, of profound exercise of soul and deep painful searching of heart — that whole congregation — with two or three exceptions, and those, I believe, of a doubtful character — not in a body, but individually applied for fellowship, at the various assemblies of Brethren, and each case was taken up on its own merits, and tested by the word of God. Then the brother to whom the chapel belonged kindly lent it as a convenient meeting place for Brethren. Of course, he had, during the time the place was closed on Lord's day morning, carried on his individual work of preaching and teaching, as he does to this day; and, blessed be God, since that time, that dear spot has been made the birth-place of hundreds of souls, and a blessed feeding place for the lambs and sheep of the beloved flock of Christ. May it continue to be so till He comes!

How very different was the case of Bethesda! A testing time came. Deadly error was taught at Plymouth — error touching the position and relations of our Lord Jesus Christ — error which placed Him (I shrink from penning the words) under the curse and wrath of God all His days and that not vicariously, but in virtue of His association with Israel and the human family.

I cannot bear to go further into the terrible doctrine taught at Plymouth, or to transfer to this page the expressions in which that doctrine was presented. I have no desire to use strong or stern language in reference to individuals; but I must say to you, my beloved friend, that I consider the doctrine quite as bad as Socinianism itself; at least the former as well as the latter leaves us without the Christ of God. It is useless to talk of distinctions, for if we have not the Christ of the New Testament, we have no Christ, no Saviour at all. Arius or Socinus may deny the deity of our adorable Lord and Saviour; Irving may deny His pure and sinless humanity; a Plymouth teacher may present Him in a position and in a relationship which would make Him need a saviour for Himself — may God pardon the very penning of the lines! May He pardon the man who taught such horrible doctrine. They all deny the Christ of God. They blaspheme His person and His name. Their doctrines are to be held in utter abhorrence by every true lover of Jesus.

Well, then, dearest A., this deadly error was taught at Plymouth; and, moreover, the holders and teachers of this error were received at Bethesda. A few faithful members remonstrated, protested, and entreated that such doctrines should be judged, and its teachers put out of communion. It was all in vain. Ten of the leaders wrote a letter — the well-known "Letter of the Ten" — well known, I mean, to those of us who were called to wade through those deep waters. In this letter, which was adopted by the great bulk of the congregation at Bethesda, they refused to judge the doctrine. They said, "What have we at Bristol to do with doctrines taught at Plymouth?" In a word, they committed themselves, plainly and palpably, to the ground of neutrality and indifference, as regards our blessed Head: and independency, as regards His beloved body.

Such was the ground set forth in "The Letter of the Ten" — a document prepared by ten intelligent men, adopted by some hundreds of christian people, and which, I believe, remains to this day unrepealed and unrepented of. It is true that, after the sad mischief was done, and fifty or sixty of the Lord's people had left Bethesda rather than sanction such a wretched principle or ground of fellowship, the leaders held what they called seven church meetings for the purpose of examining the tracts in which the error was taught, and one of the leaders said that "according to that doctrine, Christ would need a saviour for Himself." But the "Letter" was never withdrawn — never repented of; and hence it remains to this day as the studied and deliberate statement of the real ground of Bethesda fellowship, which is, to my mind, simply indifference, as to Christ, and independency, as to His body the church.

I purposely refrain from giving the names of persons and from entering into any details as to the conduct, manner, or spirit of individuals. As regards all these things, we can believe there were faults on all sides. I must confess I have no taste for dwelling upon such things. And further, I may assure you, my friend, that I am not conscious of a single atom of bitter feeling toward any individual. I am writing after an interval of 27 years, and I desire to confine myself to the great principle involved in the whole case of Plymouth and Bethesda. I have not depended upon hearsay in the matter. We all know how things may be coloured and exaggerated in the heat of discussion. But there can be no question of colouring, exaggeration or heated discussion, in reading the Plymouth tracts which contain what I must designate abominable doctrine or in reading the "Letter of the Ten" which sets forth the miserable principles of neutrality, indifference, and independency.

The fact is, Bethesda ought never to have been acknowledged as an assembly gathered on divine ground; and this was proved by the fact that, when called to act on the truth of the unity of the body, it completely broke down. And not this only; but had the members of the congregation been more animated by true loyalty to Christ they would have risen as one man to expel from their borders every trace of the doctrine which blasphemed their Lord. I am quite prepared to believe that numbers were totally ignorant of what they were about; that they meant well and had no true apprehension of what was involved. But if an ignorant pilot is urging the vessel upon the rocks, it is poor consolation to those on board to be told that he is a most blameless well-meaning man.

Such, then, dearest A., is a very brief and condensed statement of the real ground of what is called "The Bethesda question." Of course, Brethren everywhere had to face it. There was no getting out of it. It had to be looked at straight in the face. To many it proved a terrible stumbling-block. They never could see their way through it. For my own part, I felt I had just the one thing to do, namely, to take my eye off completely from persons and their influence, and fix it steadily upon Christ. Then all was as clear as a sunbeam and as simple as the very elements of truth itself. I have never had a shadow of a doubt or hesitation as to the course adopted in the main, or as to the great underlying principles; but I can quite understand and make allowance for the difficulties of souls just setting out on their course, when called upon to encounter the Bethesda question, particularly when I remember how hard it is, generally speaking, to get a thoroughly dispassionate and unprejudiced view of it. But this I must say, as the result of a good deal of experience and observation, I have invariably found that where a person was enabled to look at the matter simply in reference to Christ and His glory, all difficulty vanished. But, on the other hand, if personal feeling, affection for individuals, anything merely natural, be allowed to operate, the spiritual vision is sure to be clouded, and a divine conclusion will not be reached.

There is one thing which seems to act as a terrible bugbear to many, and that is the cry of "Exclusivism" raised against those who, as I believe, seek to maintain the truth of God at all cost. A moment's calm reflection, in the light of scripture, will be sufficient to show that we must either go thoroughly in for the principle of exclusivism, or admit that, on no ground, for no reason whatsoever, should we ever exclude from the Lord's table one who may really be a member of the body of Christ. If any one will maintain this latter, he is plainly at issue with the apostle in 1 Corinthians 5. In that chapter, the assembly at Corinth was distinctly taught, by the inspired apostle, to be an "exclusive" assembly. They were commanded to exclude from their midst and from the table of their Lord, one who, notwithstanding his grievous sin, was a member of the body of Christ.

Now, is not this the very heart's core of the principle of exclusivism? Unquestionably. And, further, my friend, let me ask, must not the assembly of God, of necessity, be exclusive? Is it not responsible — solemnly responsible to judge the doctrine and the morals of all who present themselves

for communion? Is it not solemnly bound to put away anyone who, in doctrine or walk, dishonours the Lord and defiles the assembly? Will anyone question this? Well then, this is "exclusivism" — that terrific word!

The fact is, very many confound two things which are quite distinct in scripture, the house of God and the body of Christ. Hence, if any one is refused a place at the table, or put away from it, they speak of "rending the body of Christ," or "cutting off members of Christ." Was the body rent, or a member cut off, when the sinning one was put away from the assembly at Corinth? Clearly not. Neither is it in any such case. Thanks be to God, no one can rend the body of Christ or cut off its very feeblest member.

God has taken care that "there shall be no schism in the body." The strictest discipline of the house of God can never touch, in the most remote way, the unity of the body of Christ. That unity is absolutely indissoluble. A clear understanding of this would answer a thousand questions and solve a thousand difficulties.

But then it is often said, when a person is put away or refused, "Do you not consider him a child of God?" I answer, No such question is raised. "The Lord knoweth them that are his; and let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity." We are not called upon to pronounce as to a man's secret relations with God, but simply as to his public walk before men. If an assembly denies its responsibility to judge the doctrine and walk of those "within," it is not an assembly of God at all, and all who would be true to Christ should leave it, at once.

Hence, therefore, my beloved and valued friend, we can see that "exclusivism," so far from being a dreaded bugbear, is the bounder duty of every assembly gathered on the ground of the church of God; and those who deny it prove themselves to be simply ignorant of the true character of the house of God, and of the immensely important distinction between the discipline of the house and the unity of the body.

And here you will allow me just to answer a question which is not infrequently put; it is this, "Do the Brethren consider themselves the church of God?" They do nothing of the kind. They are not the church of God. There are thousands of the beloved members of Christ scattered throughout the various denominations of the day. I am prepared to recognize, in the person of a Roman Catholic priest, a member of the body of Christ, and a gifted vessel of the Holy Ghost. I may marvel how he can stay where he is, for I believe the Romish system to be a dark and dreadful apostasy. But then I do not believe in any one of the religious systems of Christendom. Not one of them can stand the test of Holy Scripture. Not one of them is the church of God. No; nor is one of them on the ground of the church of God.

And here, my friend, is just the difference. I do not believe that the Brethren are the church of God; but they are on the ground of the church of God, else I should not be amongst them for one hour. They occupy a position which ought to command every saint of God in Christendom. What should prevent all Christians from coming together on the first day of the week to break bread, in the unity of the body of Christ, and in dependence upon the guidance and power of the Holy Ghost? Is not this what we find in the New Testament? And, if so, why should we not follow it? Do I want to see the church restored to its pentecostal glory? By no means. This was the delusion of poor Edward Irving. I never expect to see the church restored; but I long to see Christians departing from error and iniquity, and walking in obedience to the precious Word of God. Is this expecting too much? Nay, I can never be satisfied with anything less.

And do not imagine, dearest A., that I want to puff up "The Brethren." Nothing is further from my thoughts. I believe the ground they occupy is divine, else I should not be on it. But as to our conduct on

the ground, we can only put our faces in the dust. The position is divine; but as to our condition, we have ever to humble ourselves before our God. A friend once said to me, "Do you know that the Rev. Mr. is delivering a course of lectures against the Brethren?" "Tell him," I said, "with my kind regards, that I am doing the very same just now. But there is this immense difference between us, that he is lecturing against their principles, while I am lecturing against their practices. He is attacking the ground; I, the conduct on the ground."

And yet, it is not that I consider the Brethren any worse than their neighbours; but, when I consider the high ground they take, the conduct and character ought to be correspondingly high. This, alas! is not the case. Our spiritual tone, both in private life and in our public reunions, is sorrowfully low. There is a sad lack of depth and power in our assemblies. There is excessive feebleness in worship and ministry.

I cannot, nor do I want to, go into details in the way of proof or illustration. I content myself with the statement of the broad fact, in order that our souls may be exercised as to the real cause of all this. I fear there are many contributing causes. I believe the vast increase in our numbers, within the last twenty years, is, by no means, an index of an increase of power. Quite the reverse. No doubt, we have to be thankful for the increase — thankful for every soul brought into what we believe to be a right position. But then we need to be watchful. The enemy is vigilant, and he will seek to introduce spurious materials into our midst in order to bring discredit on the ground, and cast dishonour on the Lord. In the various denominations around us the inconsistencies of individuals are in a measure hidden behind the bulwarks of the system. But Brethren stand fully exposed, and their failures are used as an argument against their ground. The grand point for us all is to be humble and lowly, dependent and watchful. Let us remember those precious words to the church of Philadelphia, "Thou hast a little strength, and hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name." Yes, dear friend, this is it, "My word" — "My name." May we remember it! May we be kept very little in our own eyes, clinging to Christ, confessing His name, keeping His Word, serving His cause, waiting for His coming!

Here I must close my letter, and my series of letters. I only hope I have not wearied you. I certainly have run on much further than I intended when I began. But then you never told me to stop, so that if I have overtaxed you, you must, in measure, blame yourself.

The Lord bless you, beloved brother, most abundantly, and make you a blessing! So prays,  
Your deeply affectionate C. H. M.