

Sectarianism and Eclecticism

Taken from 'Assembly Principles' by F. B. Hole

For some time now, believers have endeavoured to gather together in the Lord's precious name. But experience has shown them that certain dangers constantly threaten to turn them from the truth. One of these dangers is sectarianism.

Sectarianism

It is very easy to slip into sectarianism (the adherence to a particular set of views and qualifications for membership). Those who have sought to gather in the Scriptural way have necessarily found themselves outside of today's religious organizations and, consequently, externally separated from the great mass of their fellow-believers who adhere to such organizations. How easy then to become entirely separated from them in heart and affection! How easy to lapse into becoming a select community, compact and self-contained and with no interest in anything lying outside the community boundaries!

This danger of sectarianism has been increased by the great knowledge of Scripture so graciously given to those who have gathered in practical obedience to the Word of God. Consequently, the natural tendency has been to use this great knowledge in the same way as the early Corinthians believers used (or: abused) their gifts. They used their gifts for themselves instead of for the profit of the whole body. Great Scriptural knowledge may be misused in the same way: to give credit and distinction to the community possessing it instead of using it for the good of all saints. Then, such knowledge becomes the badge of a sect and the community becomes sectarian and light becomes darkness. Then light (or what passes for being the light at any given time) becomes the test of communion, and willingness to become a member of the community is the all-important thing.

Then, all thought of receiving saints (not disqualified by evil behaviour, doctrine or association, or complicity with either) simply as members of Christ is ruled out and we find ourselves back on sectarian ground, only with much more exactness in our mode of meeting and in our Scriptural knowledge, but for that very reason, the more condemned by our sectarianism!

Saints who gather in obedience to the truth are often accused of being a mere sect and a small one at that! Being only a very small part of the Church, they may find it impossible to refute the charge. But, let them flee from sectarianism both in their spirit and in the principle of their gathering, regardless of what others accuse them of.

Eclecticism

A point should be raised due to the rise of eclecticism. Among the ancient Greek philosophers the eclectics were those who refused to subscribe to any recognized philosophic system but preferred to select certain ideas from various systems and then weld these selected ideas into systems of their own. We will use this word to describe Christians who pick out and bring together the most desirable persons to form a select company. Is it Scriptural to gather out a select company of more desirable and spiritual people from the less desirable and less spiritual people?

Anyone who is well-informed about the Spirit-led divine movement that began in the early 1800's (which we have mentioned several times)¹ knows that it resulted in the clear recovery and teaching of the truth as to the nature, character, present privileges, responsibility and future destiny of the Church of God. Also, saints were gathered out from many unscriptural systems so that they might assemble in practical recognition of, and in obedience to the truth thus recovered. If any argue that it was the aim of these brethren to gather together all the most select and spiritual to be found in Christendom into one body, their contention must fail in the presence of the still available abundant writings of that period.

But, what does the Bible say? We believe that Scripture indicates that the only path approved by God for the last days of any dispensation is to return as far as possible to the original principles and practices which characterized the dispensation at its beginning. The history of past dispensations illustrates this principle, as we will see. God always sets up that which is according to His Mind. Hence, any deviation from His principles involves their corruption. On the other hand, man's inventions begin crude and are improved by change.

Thousands of years ago, God made His Mind known through Moses and all was perfect as far as it went. Israel, however, constantly disobeyed. Many prophets were sent to recall them to the things that God had established at the beginning. For instance, Jeremiah prophesied, "Thus said the Lord, Stand in the ways and see and ask for the old paths where is the good way, and walk in it and you shall find rest for your souls" (Jer. 6:16). But Israel refused and consequently went into Babylonian captivity. Later, under Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah, many Jews returned to the land. The Persian King Cyrus opened the door for any Jew by saying, "Who is there among you of all His people? His God be with him and let him go up to Jerusalem" (Ezra 1:3). Now, this proclamation had a selective effect. Those "whose spirit God had raised" (Ezra 1:5) were the ones who responded and went up. Undoubtedly these were the

¹ Editor's Note: This godly movement that began world-wide in the early-to-mid 1800's became known as the brethren-movement and it rapidly grew. The writings of its God-gifted and godly men such as J. N. Darby, William Kelly, C. H. Macintosh, F. W. Grant, etc; are still widely circulated and read even in denominational circles. Even though often called Plymouth Brethren, these brethren (small "b") refuse any titles or names that are not true of all believers. They simply consider themselves to be brethren in Christ who are gathered to the name of the Lord Jesus Christ (Matt. 18:20) and who are seeking to obey the truth of the Church and the truths of the entire Word of God.

most godly Jews but the movement was not deliberately eclectic but simply a return to the land and to the knowledge and practice of the Law as given through Moses (Neh. 8:1-13; 9:3; 10:29).

The returned remnant soon spiritually deteriorated in a subtle way. They did not return to idolatry or disregard the letter of the Law. Rather, while venerating the letter, they evaded the spirit of the Law. They became filled with a proud self-satisfaction at possessing the Law. This deplorable state was exposed by the prophet Malachi. Even then, there were a few who "feared the Lord" (Mal. 3:16). These were a remnant within the remnant but God told them to "remember the Law of Moses, My servant, which I commanded unto him in Horeb for all Israel, with the statutes and ordinances" (Mal. 4:4).

This remnant-of-a-remnant was referred back to all the words of God originally given through Moses and reminded that all the Word was for all the people of God and not only for themselves. This was the last word from God in the old dispensation. From it, it is clear that the path of God's will at the end of a dispensation involves a return to the principles that marked it at the beginning, even if only a few will do it.

The same thing is found in the New Testament, especially in the closing epistles of Paul, Peter and John. Among Paul's farewell instructions to Timothy was, "Keep by the Holy Spirit Who dwells in us, the good deposit entrusted" (2 Tim. 1:14, JND). He also tells Timothy that all Scripture is our only safeguard (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Peter writes, "I stir up your pure minds by way of remembrance that you may be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets and of the commandments of us, the apostles of the Lord and Saviour" (2 Pet. 3:1-2).

John speaks of "that which was from the beginning" and says, "Let that therefore abide in you which you have heard from the beginning. If that which you have heard from the beginning shall remain in you, you also shall continue in the Son and in the Father" (1 John 2:24). He also warns, saying, "Whosoever goes forward and abides not in the doctrine of the Christ, has not God" (2 John 9, JND).

In general, it will be the more enlightened and the more godly saints who will discern and respond to God's original will and purpose for His Church. Those who will discern and obey the instructions of 2 Timothy 2:16-26 will undoubtedly be among the most spiritually minded believers, but that is incidental and not the essential feature of such a movement. The basis of the movement of the early 1800's was and is separation unto righteousness, faith, love, peace, in association with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart. Righteousness begins by giving God and His Word their proper place of supremacy and authority. Faith embraces all the revealed will and counsel of God. Thus, the movement we are discussing is not basically an attempt to weld together a certain spiritual class of believers (although such may occur in practice). It is a movement according to the holiness of God so that there may be something definite that can be seen and appealed to. Its scope of obedience is to the whole revealed Word of God, and such obedience is practical righteousness.

In view of all the above, when meeting with a few saints to the Lord's name, are we to regard ourselves as an eclectic company banded together by loyalty to certain religious procedures or decisions, or to a testimony that we believe has been entrusted

to us, or by a superior mental condition which we think has made us more spiritual than others? Or do we meet as a few saints who value the Lord's name and desire to acknowledge His authority and desire to walk in practical obedience to the whole truth, thus taking true assembly ground while awaiting His return? Now this is not a question of mere theological or academic interest. Very important practical issues depend on it. Our behaviour and actions of an assembly character are much influenced by our answer. Misunderstandings on this point have been the cause of many sad mistakes in the past.

The matter of discipline well illustrates the differences between the two positions in the above question. There is considerable instruction on discipline in the Epistles where discipline of varying degrees of severity is commanded, culminating as a last resort in some cases in excommunication (which is really the admission that all proper discipline has failed to stop the evil).

From the beginning of the Church's history, there has been weakness in its midst. The epistles show us that the churches founded by Paul were not models of all that an assembly should be but contained many "babes," many who were "carnal," many whose hands were hanging down and whose knees were feeble and whose feet were likely to be "turned out of the way." Also, there were "unprofitable and vain talkers," men who preached Christ "of envy and strife" and even Judaizing teachers who tried to bring saints back into the bondage of the Law and of Judaism. Thus, it is not surprising that today, whenever saints gather together on assembly ground, a similar state of affairs is soon manifested in their midst. What is to be done?

The answer is simple for those who stand on eclectic ground. Anyone who doesn't agree with their eclectic association is thus undesirable and to be put out if possible. For instance, a brother can not agree with a certain ecclesiastical action or decision and he protests against it. As a result, he cannot be allowed to remain in fellowship even though, having relieved his conscience by his protest, he is prepared to do so. Or someone else is unable to accept some much-advocated teaching as a sound and balanced setting forth of Scriptural truth. Since the eclectic association is committed to this teaching, there can be no rest until he is removed from the "within" to the "without." *Thus, excommunication, whether directly or by many underhanded and devious ways, becomes the remedy for all ills in an eclectic system. If you are not completely of their system, your place is outside.* This is both extremely simple and has the outward appearance of great holiness. It calls for no exercise. It doesn't try anyone's patience. There is no expression of the grace of Christ. It appeals to man's sense of his own importance and it allows freedom to the will of everyone who is a part of the eclectic system. It is therefore not surprising that eclecticism has become well established in many minds and that some seem incapable of appreciating anything else.

However, the question is not so easy for those standing on assembly ground. The very basis of their position is that the principles of the assembly are to govern them. Now, the assembly is the place where the Lord administers and the Holy Spirit operates (1 Cor. 12:4-11). It is the place where the inspired Word of God rules and directs. In Acts 15:13-29 (JND) we read, "Simon has related . . . with this agree the words of the prophets, as it is written . . . wherefore I judge . . . it seemed good to us, having arrived at a common judgment." The assembly is the place where God's will as

expressed in His Word is the only thing that counts. Hence, it is never permissible to enforce a discipline that is more rigorous than Scripture directs. The question is not "What suits our company?" but "what is suitable for the house of God to which we belong and what is according to the principles in which we desire to walk?" That question can only be answered in the light of the Word of God.

All this calls for much exercise so that Scripture may be rightly applied. Our patience will often be tried because we will find cases for which we have no clear Scriptural instructions. We will then have to wait in prayer on the Lord so that His will may be known, rather than taking the law into our own hands and acting without Him. Grace will continually be called for. All will be made to feel their own nothingness and mere self-will will be rebuked. After all, authority to use discipline in God's house only comes from God Himself. As gathered unto the Lord's name, we have authority (Matt. 18:18-20), but we can only act in His name when we are directed by His Word.

Eclecticism has often rushed in and acted where those who tremble at God's Word have feared to tread because they didn't have authority to do so. The eclectic-company or its cause had to be defended so they felt that drastic action was needed and if they had no authorization from the Lord, they used some passage with remote or obscure application to the case. Thus, again and again, that which has been called the discipline of God's house has only been used to support personal or party ends – a very grievous sin! By such acts, eclecticism betrays itself as being just plain sectarianism in a very pretentious disguise.