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THE PERILS OF EXCLUSIVISM

1. Introduction

The vision that first stirred the hearts of such men of God as Anthony Norris Groves was one of true catholicity. His principles were reaffirmed in the well known letter he wrote to J.N.Darby from Milford Haven in 1836, which G.H.Lang described as 'the most authoritative statement of what were the original principles of fellowship of the Brethren, given by him who first suggested them.' The positive attitude of love for all Christians because they belonged to Christ, characterises the letter, as it characterised the early days of Brethren. It is always a tendency of the human heart, however, to settle down when the first flush of power of any movement is past: then everything must be tied up, formulated, and rules and regulations can all too easily take the place of the power of the Spirit of God.

The article by Professor F.F.Bruce is a masterly survey of the first Christian church after Pentecost. It reveals the way in which a community of believers can experience the powerful working of God, and yet, at some subsequent time suffer serious loss through the influence of adverse elements. Any of the mistakes that came to mark the Jerusalem Church can similarly affect local churches today: uniformity, conservatism, legalism, exclusivism, all came to have a place in Jerusalem. Yet this had been the community with a direct experience of the power of God made manifest in its midst! There is a parallel between the Jerusalem church and the Brethren movement in the way in which the early days of wide vision and spiritual power have so often given way to the very things among Brethren that came to mark Jerusalem.

This tendency to sectarianism came to a head in 1889 in the break-away movement of which Mr. C.A.Oxley writes. It is sad that churches, so few in number in the world, should arrogate to themselves names, promises and spiritual status that rightly belong to all the people of God. A recent issue of their young people's magazine said, in answer to a question, that the 'royal priesthood' of 1 Peter 2 was composed of those only who belonged to 'the churches of God' (by which term they meant themselves). Despite all the millions of Christians in the world as a whole, only these few are spiritually competent to serve God. That is a serious attitude to adopt. One wonders what conception these good people have of God? Mr.K.G.Hyland puts his finger on the right spot when he says: 'What mental image have we of Him?'

The Needed Truth movement is insular, and Brethren might have been saved from such influences, but for the fact that many who went with the break-away group afterwards returned without abandoning

everything of their sectarian views, which thus have influenced open assemblies. To this day there are places where those influences have prevailed through the years. This is partly reflected in the article by Mr. Hyland, though people can act in the way he describes, in restrictive practices, without necessarily knowing anything at all about the Needed Truth group, or without consciously wanting to propagate such doctrines.

The Separatist spirit is to blame for many of our ills. Extremists will tend to develop peculiarities if only because they have cut themselves off from the main current of spiritual life and thought in the Church of God. To regard every other community as engaging in 'human religion' is tragic. Here we have the positive help of K.G.Hyland in emphasizing the moral law and its place in Christian life. He rightly stresses the importance of the incident in Matt. 12:1-8, where human need took priority over ceremonial enactments.

Our responsibility today is to maintain the high ideals of Christian love and fellowship that are revealed in the New Testament. We are to beware of getting entangled in ecclesiastical technicalities or we may find our freshness of spirit choked and our communion with God broken. Professor Bruce shows us what happened in Jerusalem, and draws some lessons therefrom; Mr. Oxley shows how far men can go when dominated by a spirit of Separatism from other Christians; while Mr. Hyland warns us of the deadly effects of legalism in small details in church life, calling us to the more excellent way of life 'under law to Christ'.

G.C.D. HOWLEY.

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"In spite of their emphasis on Christian unity as a principle, the Plymouth Brethren tended from the first to split into separate groups, and within these groups there are several sub-divisions."

Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church.

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"It takes very uncommon grace to write convincingly where one feels strongly, without seeming to lack in charity towards those who differ."

Arthur Rendle Short.

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