

The Step I Have Taken

Letters To A Friend On Taking His Place with So-Called "Brethren."

by Edward Dennett (edited 1974, R. P. Daniel.)

EXPLANATORY:

The following letters, by permission of the friend to whom they are addressed, were not sent until they had been printed. When his loving remonstrance first arrived, I intended to reply immediately, but since I received many similar letters and personal inquiries, I have published my answers; first, to explain the step I have taken; secondly, to remove misconception; and thirdly, to publicly withdraw my pamphlet against so-called "brethren," referred to in the letters.

The grounds of this withdrawal is that I discovered that some sources of my information, used when writing the pamphlet, were untrustworthy. More authentic information caused me to interpret the circumstances in a completely different manner. Also, an examination of the statements that I had used, when viewed *in their context*, convinced me that I had given them a meaning not intended by their writer. Further, a prolonged reconsideration of some of the views that I had condemned, led me to conclude that they were Scriptural. Under these circumstances, I simply obeyed the directions of the Word of God and the dictates of conscience in confessing my error, and I hope that the publication of these letters will help nullify the effects of my pamphlet.

If the Lord should condescend to use these letters in guiding believers into a right path and position, I could not be sufficiently grateful. May they be used for His glory in the welfare of His saints.

E. D., BLACKHEATH, 1875.

PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION:

April, 1875

In sending out the third edition, I wish to call attention to the first sentence in the preface. I want to make it clear that the friend to whom the letters are addressed, is not in any way responsible for the statements made or for the conclusions drawn.

Being thankful for the wide acceptance given to my feeble efforts to call attention to forgotten truths, I commend it anew to the blessing of God.

E. D.

LETTER ONE:

BLACKHEATH, January, 1875.

MY BELOVED BROTHER,

Your letter was so full of gentle and loving remonstrances, and our friendship has been so intimate, that I owe you a detailed explanation of why I have changed my position. Since many others also asked why I, who wrote a pamphlet against so-called "brethren,"* have so changed my views as to become identified with them, I trust that you will not object to my answering them through these letters to you.

*EDITOR'S NOTE: These Christians referred to as "so-called brethren "(often known as "Plymouth Brethren") refuse such "names" as setting them apart from other Christians. They simply meet as Christians, gathered to no other name than the Lord Jesus (Matt. 18: 20). However, the above phrase is used herein as a matter of convenience to distinguish these believers from those in the various denominations.

First of all, let me recall our past association. About six years ago, our friendship was formed, which has continued and grown deeper with time, proving that the blessing of the Lord was on it. Its very beginning was a prediction of its nature and character, for it sprang out of fellowship in what we, at that time, held to be the truth. Nominally, we were Baptist ministers, but in spirit and in practice, we were so outside of the Baptist denomination that we were disliked.

Why? Because we had been freed from the restraints of theology, and simply prized the Scriptures as the true Word of God. Having been taught something of dispensational truths; the distinctive position of the Church of God; and teaching the believer's perfect standing before God through death and resurrection with Christ; the heavenly nature of our calling; the personal indwelling of the Holy Spirit; the return of the Lord for His saints before the millennium; and the Messiah's glorious millennial (1,000 years) reign, etc., we found ourselves out of harmony with our fellow ministers to where we were afraid to ask them to preach in our pulpits, lest they should contradict our own teaching. In honest dissent from all denominationalism, we could not support our societies, and thus stood clear of the political proceedings of so many of the denominational gatherings. The consequence was that you and I, when present, were alone in these meetings, and we were strongly suspected of having a tendency toward "Brethrenism." Our position was well known, and our isolation was nearly complete.

As a result, we gave ourselves more fully to the Lord's work, striving to shield our people as much as possible from "denominational influences," to train them to study the Scriptures for themselves, and to build them up in the truth of God. The Lord graciously blessed our work. He encouraged us by many tokens of His favour. Indeed, to the end of 1872, we both had much cause for gratitude for scarcely a month passed without people brought to Christ by the preaching of the gospel.

How often we poured out our hearts together before the Lord in gratitude for His great mercy in using us for His glory! In all our prayers, our one desire was to become vessels "sanctified and fit for the Master's use" (2 Tim. 2: 21). Our prayers were heard, for I see the answer to our cries in the experiences of the last two years. Our desire was to continue with our people and to have increased blessing on us and on our labours in their midst. We prayed for greater dedication, but we were shutting our eyes to the fact that our position was not according to the mind of God (and there were things in my teaching which also were not Scriptural). Hence, if our prayers were to be answered, it could only be by separating us from everything, whether in position or in teaching, that

was evil before the Lord. He answered us according to His own thoughts of love, and not according to our desires.

Yours affectionately in Christ,

Edward Dennett.

LETTER TWO:

BLACKHEATH, January, 1875.

MY BELOVED BROTHER,

How merciful is the Lord to conceal from us the future. I am afraid that if we had seen the path before us, our prayers would have died on our lips. How did the Lord answer our prayers? In both cases, it was by sickness. I was the first to be smitten, in October, 1872. Having somewhat recovered, I struggled on with my work until March, 1873. This period of weakness was the most fruitful period of my ministry in the conversion of souls. It was, therefore, my earnest desire to remain at my post, but the Lord was to send me away into the desert for a long season of heart searching in His presence.

Becoming very ill, I was sent to the Continent for a six months rest, which was extended to 13 months before I returned. Although the Lord had now separated me from my people*, I joyfully recall how they ministered to my need throughout this time. May the Lord abundantly repay them because they did it as unto Himself in the person of His servant, and "supply all their need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4: 19).

*This phrase, "my people," is used in these letters simply as expressive of old associations, not as justifying it now. E. Dennett.

Before I discuss my exercises during my stay in Switzerland, let me look forward a few months. Not long after I left, your health also failed. You likewise went to the Continent where we unexpectedly met at Lausanne. You know how I was impressed with these "coincidences" in the Lord's dealing with us! Thus, I suggested that we consider whether there had been something in our position and teaching which had brought the Lord's loving chastisement on us, and that it might be the Lord's design to correct us and lead us into a fuller understanding of His truth, and into a position more according to His Mind.

This question came from much previous self-examination and self-judgment. It is natural to the child of God that trial should bring heart searching. Thus, no sooner had I reached the Continent than, in my daily walks and during my sleepless nights, the question continually before me was, "What is the Lord's purpose in this affliction?" or, "What does He wish to teach me?" I resolved not to rest until I knew the meaning of His chastening hand. Hence, I examined and re-examined my past methods of work, the truths I had taught, and the position I had occupied. Let me briefly detail the results of my investigation.

First, I considered my book against "the Brethren." Soon after it was issued, I had regretted its publication because, although I believed all that I had written, I sincerely admired what I knew of the "brethren," so-called. I admired their separated walk, their simplicity of life, and their love for the Word of God and the Person of our blessed Lord. I was sorry that I had hurt them; and that, by my book, I had shut myself out from all fellowship

with them. Further, I questioned whether I had been fair in criticizing detached quotations; whether, in fact, I had honestly sought to determine their real meaning and then to test them by Scripture. Consequently, long before leaving England, I ceased to advertise my book. With more authentic information on many of the points on which I had dwelt, and having been forced to renounce, after searching the Scriptures, some of the doctrines which I had therein advocated, I was compelled not only to withdraw the book, but to confess that I could no longer agree with all its statements. I further resolved that, at the first opportunity, I would state this publicly and express my sorrow for its publication.

Next, I examined my *practice* in the light of my teaching. Had I been consistent? I had to admit some important discrepancies. I had preached for many years that believers should be gathered *as believers* on the Lord's day, to "break bread." I also knew the evil of pew rents. Apart from their unscriptural character, I had noticed that poor believers had to sit where they could, however uncomfortable it might be, because unbelievers who could pay, could choose their pews. I had frequently stated my convictions on these points, and thus had satisfied myself with my testimony.

Here was failure. I was responsible for the truths which the Lord revealed to me. Hence, I was responsible, in faithfulness to God, to carry them out in action. I had neglected this, but now, God has given me grace to confess my error and to seek strength for faithfulness on my return.

After this, I tested the *doctrines* I had preached by the light of Scripture. Here also, I discovered grounds for regret. I had taught the mortality of the Lord's human body, in the sense of it being under the *necessity* of death. I was not aware of the errors with which this doctrine had been associated or I would have shrunk from it with horror. Further study showed me that the Lord's human body was mortal, *but only in the sense of it being capable of dying, and not in anywise as being under the necessity of death!* To maintain the latter would be an attack on the very foundations of the Lord's atoning sacrifice on the cross.

The coming of the Lord for His saints also occupied my attention. We had maintained that, while His coming would be pre-millennial (before the Lord's 1000 year reign over the earth), there were intervening events before the "rapture" of saints. Hence, the Church would have to pass through the great tribulation and thus be on the earth during the Antichrist's reign. I devoted the whole winter to this subject. I searched the Scriptures with other Christians, and finally concluded that the Church would not be in the "tribulation" — the time between the Lord's coming to the clouds for believers (the "Rapture") and His return to the earth to reign (His appearing). For instance, I saw that Matthew 24 does not apply to the Church.

With great delight, I realized that the believer is privileged to daily expect the Lord's return. I long had had a secret conviction that unless this were so, many of the exhortations of Scripture as to "waiting" and "watching" had little force, and that such an expectation must exert, in the power of the Holy Spirit, a most blessed and sanctifying influence on the believer's soul.

My change of view on this subject helped me to modify several other points. It brought into clearer light the "nature" and "calling" of the Church; the contrast between the earthly hope of the Jew and the heavenly hope of the believer, and between the "kingdom" and the "Church." All this led to the readjustment of related truths. But, I did not go further at that time.

Although during the winter, at Bible readings and in conversations with friends, I found it difficult to defend the "church practices" with which I was associated, I stuck to my position. With the above exceptions, I had not altered any fundamental principle — anything, at least, that affected my continuing at the post I had held for so many years. If I had any thoughts about changing my position, the prospect of soon returning to my beloved

people scattered them and re-established my confidence. Thus, when we finally started home, the only fear I had was whether my health would enable me to resume my long interrupted work.

Yours affectionately in the Lord,

Edward Dennett

LETTER THREE:

BLACKHEATH, January, 1875

MY BELOVED BROTHER,

Upon returning to England, I again began my ministry. Because I was still weak, my beloved people kindly allowed me to preach only once on Lord's day; and through the tender mercies of our God and Father, I was able to do this with comparative ease and much joy. Perhaps as never before did I realize so much of the presence of God and of the power of the Holy Spirit in preaching the Word. The reason, no doubt, was that never before were so many prayers offered that the Lord's strength might be made perfect in my weakness.

Regardless of all these happy experiences, the Lord was about to make me retire from my work. Scarcely had I settled down before indications appeared that it was not His will for me to continue at my post. You are acquainted with the peculiar path by which I was led, so you know that I didn't take the step of my own will, but was forced to act by influences from without. I called a meeting of believers and read to them a paper that contained the leading truths which I held at that time. A part of this paper follows: it will help explain the change which I was led to make. After some personal references, I proceeded as follows:

"I am said to have taught so-called "Plymouth" doctrines last Lord's day. It so happens that on two previous occasions, I expressed exactly the same views, and, as far as I know, not a single complaint was made. But, the important question is, 'Did I proclaim truth or error?' Because the Catholics hold the divinity of the Lord Jesus, am I to reject this most true and blessed doctrine? But, I confess that I do largely agree with the doctrines usually associated with so-called 'brethren.' When I began my ministry here, over 13 years ago, I was a great student and read many books. But, the Lord gradually showed me that, with the Holy Spirit as Guide and Teacher, the Bible is all-sufficient for the instruction of the man of God (John 14: 16-17,

Thus, my books became fewer and fewer. Now, the Scriptures are my chief companion and my only textbook for the pulpit."

"The result was that I had to reject most of the views that I had been previously taught, and I had to confess that many of the doctrines of so-called 'brethren' were according to the mind of God. For instance, I saw that it is right to meet simply as Christians on the Lord's day, to break bread. Again, in regard to dispensational truth, although I had differed from them on some important points, I agreed with them in their general outline, as for example, in the pre-millennial return of Christ, in the first resurrection of believers, in the rapture of the saints; and in their association with Christ in the glories of His millennial reign. I also agreed in the restoration and conversion of the Jews and in the conversion of the world, not by the preaching of the Gospel *before* the second coming of Christ, but *after* the Lord's return, when God 'will turn to the peoples a pure language that they may all call upon the name of the Lord, to serve Him with one consent' (Zeph. 3: 9). I also agree with them, speaking

generally, in their teaching on the standing and walk of believers, separation from the world, and the indwelling Holy Spirit. I have differed with them on other points. If I had not, I hope I would have had grace to unite with them. If I had been fully convinced of the ground they take as to worship and ministry, it would have been my pleasure to seek to glorify God by obedience to His will."

"I will go farther. I often have said in talking to friends, that under some circumstances, I would rather be with so-called 'brethren' than with other Christians. Even now, if I were in a place where no definite truth was taught, I would seek the privilege of fellowship with them in the breaking of bread."

"I have often expressed regret that I ever wrote my pamphlet against 'brethren' because I soon found that Unitarians, clergymen, and other ministers with whom I had not the least sympathy, were using my book to help their cause. I felt, therefore, that I was in the wrong camp, and must have been in error. It also was referenced in newspapers and reviews to support views that I entirely rejected. Hence, I express my deep sorrow that I ever published it, even though at the time, it contained my sincere convictions. In these days of worldliness and error, I would far rather see Christians with so-called 'brethren' than in the Establishment (the Church of England) or with many Independents and Baptists. I take this opportunity to say that I do not now agree with the statements and views that my book contains."

Such, dear brother, was the substance of the paper that I read on that occasion. I then announced that since my teaching had been called in question, I would resign from my pastorate. I returned home with more joy of soul than I had experienced for some time, for I felt that the Lord had opened a door for me to declare plainly all the truth that I held. I was sure that, whatever might be the trials of faith connected with the separation from my people, He Who had spoken so plainly to me, would give me grace to be faithful; strength for the testimony to which I might be called; and ability to follow on, although the character of the path I was entering was entirely hidden.

Yours affectionately in the Lord,

Edward Dennett

LETTER FOUR:

BLACKHEATH, January, 1875

MY BELOVED BROTHER,

The effect of the meeting that I described in my last letter was unexpected and wonderful. I felt like a bird that had just escaped from a cage, so great was my liberty and freedom of soul. Further, truths that were not clear in my mind, were, by the influence of the meeting, solidified, and they glistened like newly discovered treasures. Hence, when I was urged to remain with my people, with the assurance that I could preach all that the Lord had revealed to me, I could not do so, even though I yearned over the souls that had been given me in the gospel. The ties that Christian fellowship had formed, drew me very close to many believers. Also, temporal maintenance, humanly speaking, depended on my continuing at my post. But all these things could not draw me back or make me recall the words I had spoken.

Having uttered the truths given in my paper, I felt that I must follow them. I began to long after a position that could bear the test of the Word of God. Further, having expressed in public my regret for the publication of my book, I felt that I also should tell those against whom it was written. Accordingly, I wrote a brief letter to Mr. William Kelly — one well-known among so-called "brethren" — stating what I had done and expressing my sorrow that I had published my pamphlet.

This done, I was free from all entanglements. So, I determined by God's help, to bring Scripture to bear on everything connected with my position, that I might be gathered aright in my future path; for as yet, the exact position I should take on my separation from my people, was uncertain. My only desire was to know the will of the Lord.

The first thing I examined was "ministry" as practiced by "Dissenters."* For years, we both have been known as Dissenting ministers, although we were unwilling to accept the name. Why? I can answer only for myself. After I had confessed Christ, I had a great desire to "enter the ministry." I was young and uninstructed, and according to the practice of our denomination (Baptist), I looked to one of the colleges for the needful preparation. Recommended by two ministers, (although I had only preached once, and not in their hearing), I was accepted for the usual four years. I studied hard, *but not the Scriptures*, although these had a secondary place to the other studies.

*EDITOR'S NOTE: A "Dissenter" was a person who left the Anglican Establishment (Church of England), or in a more general way, any of the "state" Churches, and met as Baptists, Independents, Congregationalists, etc. Mr. Dennett was a Baptist minister.

I was prepared for a B.A. degree at the end of the third year, but while waiting for final examinations, I caught typhus fever and was unable to proceed to my degree. After months of weakness, I recovered through God's blessing. About six months of study remained. At the end of three months, I was invited to preach on probation at the end of which, the "church" met to discuss my merits as a preacher. Then, *by vote*, I was unanimously elected to be their pastor.

I won't here discuss the *method of preparing* young men for the ministry, although it is full of many evils, and completely unwarranted by Scripture. I will confine myself to one question, "is there any Scriptural authority for the election of a 'minister' by the vote of the church?" This was the question which, with Bible in hand, I sought to answer.

I first turned to Acts 6, where we *do* find something like the "election" of church officers by the believers in fellowship (v. 5). But, note several things. First, although they were chosen by the multitude, it was by the direction of the apostles, and the appointment was confirmed, if not made, by the apostles (v. 6). Secondly, although they were chosen by the multitude, the word used to indicate ' the act of their choice, indicates simple selection, not vote by ballot.* Thirdly, the "officers" chosen were not elders or bishops, but were appointed only to attend to the daily ministration of relief to widows — of serving tables (vv. 1-3). Afterwards, Stephen preached the word in the power of the Holy Spirit, but no one contends that this resulted from his appointment to serve tables. Thus, nothing in this chapter bears on the election of "pastors" or "ministers."

*EDITOR'S NOTE: Here, and in following paragraphs, I have left out the Greek words in the original book since they would help very few people.

I then examined Acts 14: 23, which is more to the point. We read there that Paul and Barnabas "ordained elders in every church." "Elders" and "bishops" are the same in the Scriptures. These two terms indicate the same

office, and the office of the Dissenting minister is held or claimed to correspond to this. If these "elders" were appointed by church vote, then there may be justification for the practice of Dissenters.

The proof that the words "elders" and "bishop" indicate the same office is found in Acts 20: 17, where Paul "sent . . . for the *elders* of the church." In addressing them, he says in verse 28, "Take heed, therefore, unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers (bishops)."

Turning back to Acts 14: 23, let's see what are the exact words used. Literally, it is, "Having appointed them elders." Until now, I had believed what I had been taught, that the word translated "appointed" ("ordained" in the King James translation), meant 'appointed by the vote of the church' — that is, to "hold up the hand" — and, hence, that the church first selected these elders by vote, and then, the apostles confirmed or ratified the choice that the church had made.

Conceding for a minute that this might be the meaning of the word used, I ask you, dear brother, if this is the usual method for interpreting language? The context shows that the participle translated "having appointed" refers only to the action of the apostles, and that the pronoun rendered "them," refers to the disciples in every church. It is evident, therefore, that, whatever the word "appointed" may mean exactly, *we are here told of something that the apostles did for the churches*. But, if you insist that the word does convey the meaning of "voting by the church," I would reply at once, on the authority of this passage, that if the church voted, *there could be no valid appointment apart from the presence and action of the apostles!*

But, *is this the meaning of the word "appointed" or "ordained?"* The same Greek word only occurs in two other places in the New Testament; once in the same form, and once compounded with a preposition of "time," which leaves the meaning of the word unchanged. In 2 Cor. 8: 19, the apostle Paul speaks of a brother whose praise in the gospel was throughout all the churches, and says, "And not that only, but who was also *chosen* (the word translated "ordained" in the former passage) of the churches to travel with us with this grace . . ." Here, the churches did the appointing, but we have nothing except the word itself to indicate the *method* of appointment. However, this is not the appointment of an elder, but only of one sent by the assemblies to act with the apostle in the handling of their gifts — an entirely different thing!

The other passage is Acts 10: 40-41, "Him God raised up the third day and showed Him openly; not unto all the people but unto witnesses *chosen* (the same word) before by God . . ." Does not the use of the word here, prove its meaning? Used in connection with God, it is impossible to attach any idea to it beyond that of *selection or appointment*. Therefore, this passage should control our interpretation of the more doubtful former passages.

I repeat, then, that the word "ordained" is used only in one place in connection with the appointment of elders or bishops (the office claimed by Dissenting ministers), and even in that place, *the action in the word is applied to the apostles, not to the churches*. Therefore, can any unprejudiced mind still believe that the Bible gives any warrant for the election of "ministers" (elders) by church vote, or that there is any idea contained in the word "ordained" beyond that of simple appointment?

Hence, the elders in the verses referred to, were appointed by the apostles. This was the conclusion that God's Word compelled me most reluctantly to admit. Nor could I gain any comfort from Paul's direction to Titus, to "ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed you" (Titus 1: 5). First, the word "ordain" is not the same as discussed above, but means "to establish;" and secondly, what Titus did, he did only under the direction and authority of the apostle.

These are the results of my investigation. My conclusion is that the method of our appointment is without Scriptural authority. If you would like to pursue this subject further, let me recommend

"Lectures on the Church of God," by William Kelly. But you will find that the Scriptures are amply sufficient to show the correctness of the above conclusions.

Yours affectionately in the Lord,

Edward Dennett.

LETTER FIVE:

BLACKHEATH, January, 1875

MY BELOVED BROTHER,

For the sake of clarity, I will summarize the conclusions of my last letter before proceeding. We saw that:

1. Scripture contains only one instance of an absolute appointment by the church. However, the appointed man was not an elder, but simply a brother who was delegated by several assemblies to go with the apostles to help administer the assemblies' gifts (2 Cor. 8: 18-19).
2. There is only one instance of selection of "church officers" by the church, and the job of these "officers" was to "serve tables." Although they were selected by the church, they actually were set apart to their office by the apostles (Acts 6).
3. There is no instance whatever of the selection of *elders* by vote or otherwise, by the Church. In every case, they were appointed either by the apostles or under the apostles' direction and authority (Acts 14: 23, Titus 1: 5, etc.).
4. The conclusion from these facts is that unless we have apostles or apostolic authority, we have no Scriptural warrant for the appointment of elders or bishops.

You may tell me that in 1 Tim. 3 and Titus 1, we have those apostolic directions and authority which are required. But, these "directions" were not sent to the churches but to individuals — those very individuals, Timothy and Titus, who were acting under the direction of the apostle, and thus needed the instructions given there. It is most significant that, in Titus, the qualifications for the bishop (elder) follow the direction given to "ordain elders in every city." Thus, the very placement of these instructions show that, instead of being *our* authorization to appoint elders, the church, by so doing, is taking upon itself a function which was only connected with the apostolic office. Therefore, we must conclude that the method of appointing Dissenting ministers is unscriptural.

I am convinced that there are hundreds of godly men in "dissent" who would be thankful to see this conclusion. While they have accepted the traditions of "dissent" on this subject, they have found it hard to reconcile them with their belief in divine wisdom.

Suppose, now, a "church" without a minister. What does it do? First of all, notable men will be asked if they know of anyone who would *please the church*. Applications also will come in from "moveable" ministers. In due time, a selection will be made of one or more candidates who will be asked to come and preach on probation for several weeks. Then, the church will meet, and the merits of the candidate(s) will be discussed. Finally, with the aged believer and the babe in Christ all being judges on the same level, judgment is passed on the spiritual qualifications of the candidates. Then, a vote will be taken. If there is a majority in favour of a candidate, the invitation to the pastorate (although he has only been tested as a preacher) will be sent, and the candidate accepts or rejects the invitation as he pleases.

All this was in my mind when I was re-examining this subject. Perhaps it helped me to come to an unbiased conclusion. I say "unbiased" because my own position was involved. I concluded that the minister, as appointed among Nonconformists, is completely without the approval of Scripture.

Thus far, I have gone under the assumption that there is similarity between the office of a Dissenting minister and the office of the elder or bishop of Scripture. But I soon saw that there is little or no similarity between these two things, *for, in Scripture, there always is the most absolute distinction between office and gift*. While there was appointment to the *office* by the apostles, *the possessor of a gift used it in sole responsibility to the Lord, and never was appointed to use it either by the apostles or by the assembly*. See Rom. 12: 6-8 and 1 Peter 4: 10-11. Consequently, it is never said in the listing of the gifts in Eph. 4: 11-12 that the Lord gave "elders," although apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers are all named. *Elders were appointed for rule, so they held an office, but the possessors of gifts received their gifts for the building up of the saints, and were bound to use them to this end, in obedience to God from Whom their gifts had come*.

But this can not be among Dissenters because, in opposition to the plain distinction of Scripture, the use of gift is connected to election to office. Hence, a Dissenting minister is said to be an elder or bishop. He also is called a pastor. Likewise, he is a teacher; and he is also supposed to be an evangelist — *to be, in fact, a sum-total of all the gifts and offices*, except that of a deacon. Is it not strange that we have been so long content with such a system?

I found another difficulty — that of "one-man ministry." If all the rest had been clear, this would have been an insurmountable problem. I found that there is not a single verse that speaks of *an* elder or *a* bishop of the church; nor is the word (in either case) ever found in the singular, except in the pastoral epistles where the *qualifications* of the office are detailed. In Acts 20: 17, "He . . . called the *elders* of the church"; Acts 14: 23, *Elders* in every church"; Phil. 1: 1, "With the *bishops*"; Titus 1: 5, "Ordain *elders* in every city"; 1 Peter 5: 1, "The *elders* who are among you"; etc.

Thus, it is impossible to justify from Scripture, the Nonconformist method of appointing *one* elder or bishop to "preside over a church." In fact, the practice isn't even seriously defended, for I remember dining with some Congregational ministers when one of them began to condemn the practices of so-called "brethren." Interrupting, I asked, "Are you sure of your own position? Show me your Scriptural justification for one-man ministry." He replied, "That easily can be done." But, on being pressed, the only passage he could find was, "The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches" (Rev. 1: 20). The others were equally helpless. This example shows not only how indefensible the practice is, but also, *how easily we are led to take solemn and responsible positions without the guidance of the Word of God*.

Surely, if we desire God's glory, we shall seek to be separated from evil of heart and position and to make God's Word the lamp unto our feet and the light unto our path, both for our daily walk and our church practices and

associations. To set up anything in the house of God that doesn't have the direction and approval of Scripture, is practical disobedience to the Lord as Head of the Church!

I am sure that you will agree with these conclusions from Scripture, for I remember in times past, how we longed for some change so that, together, we might carry out our work unhindered by any authority other than the Scriptures. We often said that if any thing should occur to separate us from our people, we could not conscientiously offer ourselves for the pastorate of any of the ordinary denominational "churches." The fact was that we had learned much more than we were willing to confess. Hence, we were dissatisfied and uncomfortable amid the usual "church" methods and activities. We already were outside in spirit, and we only needed to understand our responsibility before God for what He had taught us, to be outside in practice.

Yours affectionately in the Lord,

Edward Dennett

LETTER SIX:

BLACKHEATH, January, 1875

MY BELOVED BROTHER,

The examination detailed in my previous letter was carried on between the announcement of my resignation and my actual leaving. Therefore, apart altogether from the truth I taught, which had been questioned, my conclusions as to the office I held, forced me to stick to my decision. If I would be faithful to the Lord, I had no choice but to turn a deaf ear to the many pleas for me to continue with my people. All my interests, humanly speaking, were bound up with my continuing, but I dared not place such considerations ahead of the plain indications of the Word of God. Hence, I preached to my beloved people for the last time on September 27th. At the close of the morning sermon, I told them that "I could not now, with a conscience void of offence towards God, remain, for since I had announced my retirement, I had gone afresh to the Word of God, and I felt compelled to say that I could no longer uphold our practices as to ministry and worship."

Four days later, I headed for Scotland to be in quiet for settlement of further questions in my mind. I shall not easily forget our conversations on the unusual "coincidences" in the Lord's dealings with us. Not only had we occupied the same position in relation to denominationalism, but we were both afflicted, both sent away to the Continent, both returned last spring desiring to remain with our people, and for different causes, were both compelled to resign our posts. Without any mutual arrangement, we both preached our farewell sermons on the same day, and within a week, we found ourselves together in a strange city. May the Lord give us grace and strength to be obedient to all His will!

But, to go on. Since I could not accept a pastorate among Dissenters, the question then was, "With what Christians should I be identified?" You will remember that I already believed that Christians should be gathered together on the first day of the week to break bread. Therefore, my attention was again directed towards so-called "brethren," for I knew that, regardless of the generally admitted Scriptural character of this practice, they were the only Christians (except some individual congregations) who gathered weekly around the Lord's table.

Therefore, the first thing that I determined to examine more thoroughly was their *theory or ground of worship*. It is in direct contrast with that of Dissenters. At my pastorate, the worship, so-called, was all under my direction, and the plan into which we fell was much the same as that of chapels in general. We began with prayer and singing; then had two Bible readings divided by singing and prayer; then came the sermon; and we concluded with singing and prayer.

I never believed that this was worship. Individual believers often realized and enjoyed the presence of the Lord, for faith can always count on His aid. *But, few of us ever thought that we were worshipping as an assembly*, for we knew that our "assembly" was not composed of only God's people. Also, the majority of the believers who met with us, never looked for any operation of the Holy Spirit while so met, except through the minister. Hence, if the minister was full of the Holy Spirit, he was the means of ministering "rivers of living water" to God's children; but, if not, there was almost a complete lack of blessing. Thus, the spiritual state of any such congregation is determined largely by the spiritual state of its minister *because the system makes everything depend on that one man!*

Let's look at what I found to be the principle or ground of worship as understood by so-called "brethren." They are gathered together to the Name of Christ, around His table, to break bread, according to His command, every Lord's day (Matt.18: 20, 1 Cor. 11: 23-26, Acts 20: 7, etc.). They simply gather around the Lord Himself, in dependence on and in subjection to Him as Lord, knowing that He, in faithfulness to His promises, is present in their midst when they assemble "to show the Lord's death till He come" (1 Cor. 11: 26).

Next, and this is of primary importance, they believe that the Holy Spirit, having been sent down from heaven after the ascension of the Lord Jesus, *dwells now in the Church of God. Thus, He is the power for both worship and ministry*. Many Christians believe that the Holy Spirit dwells in the individual believer, and this is a most blessed truth. However, the truth contended for is *that He also dwells in the Church*.

The following verses may help. In writing to the assembly at Ephesus, the apostle Paul says, "in Whom you are built together for an habitation of God through the Spirit" (Eph. 2: 22). Here, Paul is not speaking of the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of adoption in believers, for he says, "you are *built together* as an habitation of God through the Spirit" — that is, *together*, they formed the dwelling place of God. Paul tells us that "The house of God . . . is the Church of the living God" (1 Tim. 3: 15). In writing to the Corinthians, Paul also says, "You (the word is plural) are the temple of the living God" (2 Cor. 6: 16). In 1 Cor. 6: 19, we find the other truth, that the individual bodies of believers are the temple of the Holy Spirit.

We thus have the solemn truth *that the Holy Spirit is now on earth, dwelling in the Church of God* that, as the Lord promised, the Comforter is come to abide with us forever (John 14: 16-17). Therefore, whenever believers are gathered together to the Name of Christ, seeing that God regards every such assembly as a local expression of the whole Church, they know, on the testimony of Scripture, that the Holy Spirit is in their midst, guiding and controlling all for the glory of God through Christ Jesus.

Lastly, so-called "brethren" teach another thing (in common with most Christians, except as to its application), that, since the veil is now rent, we have "boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus." Therefore, our place of worship is above — within the veil (Heb. 9: 11-14, Heb. 10: 1-22) — where Christ, our High Priest, has already entered to appear in the presence of God *for us* (Heb. 9: 24), as the "minister of the sanctuary, and of the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, and not man" (Heb. 8: 2).

Several consequences flow from these fundamental principles. First, believers are gathered together, not as agreeing on certain doctrines or as belonging to the same denomination, but simply as members of the body of

Christ. Anything short of this fails to express the Church of God, *for there ought to be a place at the Lord's table for every believer who is not under Scriptural discipline*. In making this statement to you, dear brother, I admit that we *aimed* at this, but I could never succeed for some with whom I was associated had a strong objection to any breaking bread with us who were not members of other "churches." They did not acknowledge that to be a "member of Christ" *was the title to the Lord's table*.*

*EDITOR'S NOTE: For a detailed discussion of the Scriptural qualifications of this "general" statement, see Letter Eight.

Secondly, when gathered as the members of the body of Christ, the priesthood of all believers is recognized because the Lord Himself is the Centre of the gathering. I often had read 1 Peter 2: 5, which says, "You also, as living stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God by Jesus Christ." I thought that the apostle had some reference to the use of our priesthood *when assembled*. I knew that every believer could act as a priest in private, but I also saw that if one man was appointed to pray *for* those assembled, that was, in practice, a denial of our common priesthood and a subtle form of clergyism. I am sure that many Dissenting ministers would confess that they often have felt the necessity of being the mouthpiece of the congregation, an intolerable burden.

On the other hand, when gathered together around the Lord in the power of the Holy Spirit, and when bowing together in common adoration, the Holy Spirit opens the lips of one and another as He wills, to pour out before the throne of grace the feelings that He Himself has placed in our hearts. In this way, having a High Priest (not one of ourselves) over the house of God, and knowing the Holy Spirit within us and in our midst as the power for worship, we "draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith," etc. (Heb. 10: 19-22).

Thirdly, when gathered on this ground for worship, the only recognized Minister is the Lord Jesus Himself within the veil. It is only through Him that our worship and praise ascend to God the Father. Thus, our eyes are directed to Him. Everyone is made to feel that, as the Lord alone is the Centre of the gathering, He also is the only Mediator of the worship which is rendered in spirit and in truth as His redeemed ones rejoice together before God in the perfect salvation which God has worked out for them through the gift and work of His well-beloved Son. In summary, the difference between the two principles is this. So-called "brethren" are gathered together as members of the body of Christ, to His Name, and as recognizing the presence and power of the Spirit of God. On the other hand, Dissenters meet as agreeing on certain views of truth or ecclesiastical position, in unconscious denial of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. (Their human arrangements necessarily preclude the action of the Holy Spirit according to His sovereign will, except as He, in tender mercy, may be pleased to work by such arrangements for the blessing of souls.) In other words, the Scriptures teach that believers should be gathered together as members of Christ, in dependence on the power of the Holy Spirit Who is present in their midst, but Dissenters meet *as dissenters*, looking for blessing through the minister whom they have appointed. Reduced to their simplest elements, the two principles resolve themselves into a belief either in the presence and action of the Holy Spirit or into a practical denial of this precious truth.

I hardly expect that you, dear brother, will be prepared to fully accept these statements, but I assure you that I find them to be Scriptural. If, however, I have overlooked any passage pertaining to this matter, I will be thankful if you will point it out, for the one thing that I desire is to find the mind of God on this subject. Hence, my prayer is, "Give me understanding according to Thy Word" (Ps. 119: 169).

Yours affectionately in the Lord,

Edward Dennett

LETTER SEVEN:

BLACKHEATH: January, 1875

MY BELOVED BROTHER,

The question of "ministry" as held by so-called "brethren" next occupied my attention. I again found that the truth on this subject is connected with the Holy Spirit in the assembly. When this fact is clearly understood, many difficulties are cleared up.

I found that so-called "brethren" maintain that the Holy Spirit should have liberty to minister by whom He wills in the assembly: and that whoever possesses a gift, whether great or small, is responsible to use it unto the Lord. Accordingly, I searched the Scriptures to discover if these two principles expressed the Lord's mind.

I turned to 1 Cor. 12 and 14. Never in my own ministry had I read or explained these chapters to my people because I felt that they did not agree with existing practices. I tried to believe that they applied to a state of things which had passed away. Perhaps this is the general belief among Dissenters, for I have reasoned, and have heard others reason that "the New Testament was not yet in existence. Therefore, these 'diversities of gifts' were given for the temporary building up of the Church, until they should receive the mind of the Spirit from the New Testament Scriptures." But, is this so? I felt that everything depended on the answer to this question. Thus, I sought more carefully and prayerfully for light and guidance.

You know that in explaining and applying truth, we always attach great importance to the question "For whom was it originally intended?" For example, the directions given to a Jew cannot always be applied to a Christian. Thus, I looked at the beginning of 1 Corinthians to see to whom it was addressed, and I found the following: "Unto the Church of God which is at Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, *with all that in every place call on the Name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours*" (1 Cor. 1: 2). It is very evident from this "address" that the instructions of this epistle were not meant to be confined to the local assembly at Corinth. *Rather, they were intended for all believers.* When I thought of the permanent character of Scripture, I had to believe that these instructions were intended for believers in every place for all time.

This conclusion was strengthened by a passage in Ephesians where we have a listing of gifts, and *prophets*, who figure so largely in 1 Cor. 14, are included. Then, we are told that these gifts are given "for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying (building up) of the body of Christ, till we all come in the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4: 11-13). We obviously are not yet come in the unity of the faith. *Hence, God intended the continuance of gifts and the consequent continuing application of the instructions contained in 1 Cor. 12 and 14.*

Thus, "the liberty of the Holy Spirit to minister by whom He wills" is a Scriptural truth. Otherwise, it would be impossible to understand such a statement as, "Let the prophets speak two or three and let the others judge. If anything be revealed to another who sits by, let the first hold his peace. For you may all prophesy one by one, that all may learn, and all may be comforted" (1 Cor. 14: 29-31).

Many hastily conclude that a "prophet" is one who foretells or predicts things yet future and unknown. They then ask, "What place is there for prophets in the Church of God since the revelation of God's will and purpose is complete in the Scriptures?" But, the true definition of a prophet is "one who communicates the mind and will of God to those to whom he is sent." Samuel and Elijah were both prophets, yet they had very little to do with predicting future events. Rather, their main work was to bring God's will, already revealed in the Law, to bear on

the hearts and consciences of their nation. So it is with New Testament prophets. Their job is to apply known truths to the hearts of the saints. Therefore, there is continual need for their ministry.

The same thing is seen in another epistle. in Rom. 12: 6-8, Paul says, "Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy (let us prophecy) according to the proportion of faith; or ministry (let us wait on our) ministering; or he that teaches, on teaching," etc. These exhortations were addressed to the local assembly at Rome, but if that assembly had been under the pastoral care of one man, there could have been no opportunity for obedience to those instructions in the use of the various gifts named. Rather, the apostle contemplated the fullest liberty for the Holy Spirit to minister by whom He would. Indeed, this is a necessary consequence of Paul's words, "To one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom; to another, the word of knowledge by the same Spirit; . . . to another prophecy . . . but all these, work (operate) that one and very same Spirit, *dividing to every man severally as He will*" (1 Cor. 12: 8-11).

Few dispute that such was the order in the early Church, but it is a common argument that all gifts ceased with the end of the apostolic age, so these directions as to gifts have no application for the present time. I have partly anticipated this objection by showing the continuing application of the Scriptures in 1 Corinthians, but I would complete my answer by two considerations.

First, if this objection were demonstrably true (which it isn't), it would not affect the principle of gathering. Our duty would still be to gather on Scriptural ground, leaving room for the use of gifts when the Spirit's power was restored to us; or if never restored, still to meet around our Lord in adoration and praise, submissive to His will in our lack of gift.

Secondly, if all gifts have been withdrawn, as is argued, we are not at liberty to cover up our condition of weakness by substituting human arrangement. If the Lord has so chastened us, we are not at liberty to set up ministers and church officers according to the desires of our own hearts. No, dear brother, we cannot suppose that this liberty is ours; and the very fact that it is *claimed*, only shows that the belief in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in the assembly is fast dying out of the minds of believers.

The remainder of the subject may be dealt with in fewer words. Since there should be liberty for the Holy Spirit to minister by whom He wills, then it is a simple consequence that *gift is the measure of responsibility!* I say gift and not office, for the possessor of the gift is responsible to the Lord alone for its use for the saints. Thus, for instance, if you have the gift of exhortation, God expects you to use it without waiting for the approval of the Church by electing you to an office.

The passage already cited from Romans 12: 6-8, proves this. Paul writes, "Having, then, gifts" (not office), let them be used. 1 Cor. 12 and 14 teach the same thing, as does Eph. 4: 8-13, where we are clearly told that the Lord gave gifts unto men, and, as in principle, in the parable of the talents of Matt. 25: 14-30, He looks for the increase. We have the same principle stated in 1 Peter 4: 10-11: "As every man has received the gift, even so minister the same one to another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God." Thus, the Lord holds *all His servants — all of us — responsible for the use of our gifts to build up His people. I repeat that this is totally impossible under the "church government" of Dissenters. In fact, their ecclesiastical policies despise prophesying, and consequently, quench the Spirit (1 Thess. 5: 19-20). Thus, dear brother, I have to agree with the Scriptural character of "ministry" as practiced by so-called "brethren."*

I have heard the objection that "however Scriptural it may be, it doesn't work, and that teachers are sadly lacking among so-called "brethren," so we must adopt other plans. I am not as yet prepared to pass judgment on the first part of this objection, and I have no desire to do so because I am satisfied as to the Lord's will

regarding ministry, as revealed in the Scriptures. I am fully assured that His way for ministry, as in all things, is better than man's way. I also am not in a position to say whether the second part of the objection is true. However, I know that those believers who are with so-called "brethren" are far better instructed than those who are in Dissent. I am confident, dear brother, that you will agree with me in this also, for one of the greatest difficulties that we had in our attempts to instruct the Christians under our "pastoral care" has been their lack of acquaintance with the Word of God, owing mostly to their habit of taking their "views" from their favourite preachers.

Be this as it may, I am content to rest my conclusions on Scripture alone, for we have no other guide. If we once allow ourselves the addition of human wisdom, we open the door to all the corruptions which have afflicted and weakened the Church of God. Keeping to the Word of God, I have a sure and infallible guide and, at the same time, a means for testing every "church system" that seeks my allegiance. I also have the sword of the Spirit with which to fight the Lord's battles in this day of darkness and departure from the truth.

Yours affectionately in the Lord,

Edward Dennett

LETTER EIGHT:

BLACKHEATH: January, 1875

MY BELOVED BROTHER,

When I had settled the questions of "ministry" and "worship" as held by so-called "brethren," I felt the need to be clear on *the question of discipline* before making any practical move. There are many Christians, and we were among them, who believe that the Lord's table is open to all believers. This, of course, is basically true, or it would not be the *Lord's table*. *However, are there any limitations given by the Lord Himself, in His Word?* Different answers are given to this question. In the Anglican Establishment, there is no attempt to use discipline. Any parishioner, except in one or two specified instances of gross sin, has the right by its laws, whether he is saved or not, to be a "communicant." Since the one or two exceptions seldom come to the "altar rail," there is essentially no restriction in the Establishment.

With Dissenters, the practice varies. The Congregationalists or Independents often are as unrestricted as the Episcopalians. All who consider themselves believers are invited to the "Communion Service." This also is the case with some Baptists, although it is not their common rule. In fact, they are divided into several classes. Some make baptism the condition of communion; some, membership of a church; but almost all profess to exclude those who are walking disorderly. But, as far as I know, *doctrine is never a matter for consideration*. Take *the Association of Baptist Churches in London*, to which we belonged. One very prominent member has denied in writing, the total sinfulness of human nature; another has taught the non-eternity of punishment, but this does not affect their standing as members. We both deplored this. On one occasion, we stayed away from a meeting because we feared that, in God's sight, by going, we might be endorsing the views of the brother at whose chapel the "Association" was meeting.

Turning to so-called "brethren," I found that there had been a division on this very subject. Hence, I had to very carefully examine this subject by the Scriptures. My question was, "Does the Bible teach that false doctrines —

doctrines touching the Person and work of the Lord — disqualify one from the Lord's table?" To put it another way, "should we have fellowship with the teachers and holders of false doctrine?"

In answering this question, I won't quote from the Old Testament, lest its application be denied (although the *principle of separation from evil teaching* is taught there). Instead, I will turn to the epistles as more applicable to the Church of God.

Turn to Gal. 1: 8-9. Here, evangelists who preach another gospel are in view. What was this other gospel? It was the addition of ritualistic observances to faith in Christ as the means of salvation — a "gospel" that is common at the present time. If there is no discipline for false doctrine, these "Galatian" preachers should have received the right hand of fellowship, as they almost everywhere do now. But, what does Paul say? "I would that they were even cut off who trouble you" (Gal. 5: 12).

At the end of Galatians, Paul states the principle that is continually binding on the Church: "As many as walk according to this rule" (the true doctrine of the "cross of our Lord Jesus Christ," Gal. 6: 14-15), "peace be on them and mercy, and upon the Israel of God" (Gal. 6: 16). The inference, then, is that we are *not* to have fellowship with those who do *not* walk according to this rule. (in fact, back in Gal. 1: 8-9, Paul says that such false preachers should be "accursed" Ed.)

Paul also says, "if any man teach otherwise and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness.... *from such withdraw yourself*" (1 Tim. 6: 3-5). Read also the still stronger statements of 2 Tim. 2: 15-21 and 2 John 9-11. The epistles to the seven churches of Rev. 2 and 3 also are full of similar teaching. Look at the portion addressed to the "church at Ephesus." Our Lord, in approval, says, "You have tried those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars" (Rev. 2: 2). On the other hand, He condemns Pergamos and Thyatira for tolerating false doctrine in the church (Rev. 2: 14, 20).

These passages convinced me that it was the Lord's mind that there should be discipline for false doctrine. The reason is obvious. If one who "walks disorderly" has to be put away from the fellowship of the saints, much more must the teacher of false doctrine be put away, because "a little leaven (sin) leavens the whole lump" (1 Cor. 5: 6). So, if a disorderly walk leavens, much more does false doctrine.

If a believer fails into drunkenness or other kinds of open sin, he brings dishonour upon His Lord, but the believers with whom he is associated are not likely to follow his obviously poor example. On the other hand, if a saint is led into false doctrine, he will begin to teach it, and many will become contaminated (leavened). I will give one example of this from my own knowledge. A certain minister adopted "views" that discredited the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Many of the believers connected with him, followed him in these evil doctrines. For some time, the godly remnant were powerless. But, the minister, too confident of his own influence, was not content with the support he was receiving. So, he proposed that his doctrines should become the *basis* of their gathering. This opened the eyes of some who had been silent, but when the question was put to a vote (the church charter declared that the majority should settle such questions), the minister's proposal was defeated by only *one vote*. Thus, the "leaven" was stopped, since the minister was forced to resign. But, had that minister remembered the true character of leaven — that it works silently — the whole lump soon would have been leavened, as indeed, it already had become in God's sight before action was taken.

It is a fatal doctrine that evil teaching may be tolerated! The condition of the Church today is the result of this terrible laxity. Instead of being established in the truth, saints are asking, "What is truth?," for human opinion often is their only standard.

Having become satisfied as to the *principle*, I reluctantly had to review the "Bethesda controversy" which split so-called "brethren" into two groups; one commonly known as "open brethren" and the other as "exclusive brethren." (Open brethren, so-called, hold more or less lax views on discipline for false doctrine, and thus are "open" to receive those associated with false doctrine. Ed.) Some years ago, I examined only one side of the case. Now, I also investigated the other side and talked with some who were acquainted with it from its beginning.

I concluded that the whole difficulty arose over the question of discipline for false doctrine and over whether the action of one assembly in carrying out discipline should be respected and maintained by other assemblies. For example, suppose that a teacher of false doctrine is put out of fellowship in one locality. Is it right to receive him in another? The case should present no difficulty because, with the smallest amount of spiritual intelligence, any believer should see that if the assembly at Liverpool were to reverse the action of the assembly at Manchester in a matter of discipline, it would thereby deny the truth of the unity of the body of Christ. It also would declare that what was rightly done by the saints in one locality, might be undone in another.*

*EDITOR'S NOTE: At this point, Mr. Dennett recommends several pamphlets dealing with the "Bethesda matter" that are no longer in print.

I do not contend that mistakes have never been made in the *application* of the true principles of discipline. This does not fall within my ability to decide. My job was to decide whether the *principles* were based on the Word of God. I wish that all who are concerned about this subject would divest themselves of all extraneous considerations, *and simply confine themselves to the examination of the principles of discipline in dispute, asking but one question: "is it Scriptural or not?"* Until a person is settled as to this, he cannot decide on the merits of the "Bethesda controversy."

I want to remove one difficulty from the path of inquirers. One is often asked, "Can it be right to exclude such and such men from assembly fellowship? Look at their holy lives and their devotedness. Do you pretend to sit in judgment on their qualifications for the Lord's table?" Such questions are common, and to some, very important. *But, these questions simply have nothing to do with the matter! The only question we have to decide is whether discipline is to be maintained according to the Word of God.* If so, it becomes simple obedience to the Lord, and not "passing judgment on other believers." The apostle John tells us, "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God *and keep His commandments*" (1 John 5: 2). So, we show love to the saints, not by admitting them to the Lord's table against God's expressed will, but by keeping God's commandments. Let me counsel all believers by the means of this letter to you, dear brother, to keep their eyes off men, and fixed on the Lord. Then, they will find that the path of discipline for false doctrine, although sometimes very "narrow," is the path of obedience to God.

The teaching of this principle of "discipline" will stir up the most determined opposition, for whatever helps to keep the Church of God as the "pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Tim. 3: 15), according to the divine purpose, is sure to excite the hatred of Satan. In no way can Satan accomplish his ends more successfully than by destroying the boundaries between truth and error. You, dear brother, are acquainted with Church history. Is it not true that the weakness and the corruption of the Church has always resulted from indifference to maintaining the truth regarding the allowance of "leaven" (sin) in both teaching and life? The fact is, if you once stop administering Scriptural discipline, all assurance as to the truth is soon lost in the conflict of confusing opinions of men.

Whatever the opposition that this principle of discipline may stir up, no one has a right to charge "sectarianism" of those who maintain it. A "sect" is made up of those who meet or associate together because they agree on a

certain truth or doctrine, or hold to a particular form of ecclesiastical policy. Thus, Congregationalists, Baptists, Wesleyans, State Churchmen, and Presbyterians are all sects.

In fact, they often speak of themselves as different *sections* of the Church. But when believers simply are gathered together, as members of Christ, around Him as Head, in obedience to Him as Lord, and seek in dependence on the Holy Spirit to do all things in subjection to the Word of God, and to maintain the discipline which it calls for, etc., they are in no way a "sect" *because there is a place at the Lord's table for every believer who is not disqualified by the Lord Himself because of an ungodly walk or false doctrine.* This, I think, will be clear to every unprejudiced mind.

Yours affectionately in the Lord,

Edward Dennett

LETTER NINE:

BLACKHEATH: January, 1875

MY BELOVED BROTHER,

You won't be surprised to hear that when I reached the conclusions indicated in my previous letters, I felt that I must take my place with so-called "brethren" to be consistent and honest before the Lord. But, I did not find it easy to act out my convictions. I shrunk from surrendering my position. I shrunk still more from breaking the ties that had bound me for many years in loving association with many dear Christian friends. I could not bear the thought of grieving some, like yourself, with whom I had enjoyed such close fellowship.

I was also frightened at the prospect of the storm that I knew that the step would produce in certain quarters. Moreover, when I remembered the strong antagonism which I had held against so-called "brethren" in the past, it was not easy to confess to all the world the mistake I had made. I also received many letters full of kind but urgent pleas and warnings against the "delusion" which supposedly had possessed my mind. Others told me plainly that if I united with so-called "brethren," I soon would lose all independence of thought and action, as well as become a partaker of the evil deeds of those whose teachings were supposedly subverting the very foundations of the gospel. So, you will understand some of the difficulties which disturbed me in this final step.

God enabled me to look away from men, and under His constraining love, I went and asked to break bread (remember the Lord) with the saints at Blackheath. That permission was granted. As a believer, a member of the body of Christ, on this ground alone, and not on the ground of any doctrine or doctrines whatsoever*, I took my place at the Lord's table with the believers who are gathered on that ground in obedience to their Lord (2 Tim. 2: 22).

*EDITOR'S NOTE: This point has been discussed in both Letters 6 and 8 but to avoid misunderstandings, a few extra remarks may help. Mr. Dennett is not inferring that so-called "brethren" allow or should allow fundamentally false teaching and/or false principles and evil conduct. All *these things would Scripturally disqualify a person from "fellowship,"* and we are to see that the Lord's own discipline as to His Church is carried out. However, Scripture no where demands agreement on every verse or subject as a condition for fellowship. As a well known example, take water baptism. At many "churches," unless one agrees with all the rest as to a

certain method of baptism, he is refused permission to "break bread." That is *gathering to a doctrine*, which Scripture never makes a "test of fellowship," unless the doctrine is fundamentally false. We should gather to Christ, not to a certain set of doctrines (teachings).

I have no desire to dwell on the "misrepresentations" (not to use a stronger word) that followed upon this step I have taken, since I expected it. Instead, they have helped me to understand many portions of Scripture — those that speak of bearing our cross after Christ, and having persecutions or tribulations. I did not understand these verses as well when my position and profession of faith in Christ met with favour rather than opposition. Besides, I remembered the open opposition I once held against so-called "brethren." Thus, I am quieted in the hope that my adversaries also may have their eyes opened and be found sitting with me around the table of our Lord.

Before I close, I would like to speak about results. On the very first Lord's day, I found to my joy that there really is a distinction (for which so-called "brethren" have always contended) between worship and meetings to hear sermons. It was a blessed experience to realize that the Lord was in our midst, according to His promise (Matt. 18: 20). It was a new found joy to enter into this truth as we communed together in the broken body (as shown forth in the broken bread) and in the precious blood (as displayed in the wine) of our blessed Lord. Our hearts were, of necessity, occupied with *Him* — with what He was down here; with what He was on the cross; with what He is now at the right hand of God; and with all that He was and is to God the Father. Thus, as we bowed in adoration within the veil, truly our fellowship was with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ.

In saying this, I do not deny that *individuals* may realize the Lord's presence, even in a significant way, in mixed "churches," for the Lord is always present to faith. But what I contend for is this, *that unless we are gathered to His Name, we have no title to expect the Lord's presence in the midst*. His Own words are, "For where two or three are gathered together unto My Name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt.18: 20). Thus, the *condition* for His presence in the midst of the gathering is that they be gathered together to His Name — a thing possible only for believers!

Oh, my brother, I wish that you and all the saints could see this blessed privilege of gathering together, know the happy liberty of soul that the assurance of the Lord's presence in our midst inspires, and know the joy of heart wrought in us by the Holy Spirit as we joy together in God through Jesus Christ. I am convinced that if you once enjoyed this experience, your only wonder would be that you had been satisfied so long with mixed assemblies.

Another thing that soon attracted my attention was that the Word of God was given its proper place. Its authority was maintained as supreme. One of our great difficulties in "Dissent" had been to obtain any real and practical recognition of this principle because lax views were so prevalent on the question of inspiration. Besides yourself, I never met a Dissenting minister who held the *absolute* verbal inspiration of the Scriptures. Consequently, everyone felt more or less at liberty to sit in judgment on the revelation which God has made to man, instead of allowing it to judge man and his ways.

Under such conditions, there can be no certainty of mind as to any truth. Thus, congregations will receive in succession, without any hesitation or doubt, ministers with different and opposed "views." In one chapel, there have been three ministers in the past 12 years. The first taught that the death of Christ was nothing but self-sacrifice. The second taught the accepted view of the atonement, but denied the total depravity (sinfulness) of man. The third taught, to some extent, dispensational truths. Yet, with these differences, the people never thought of saying that any of these three men was in error. They would tell you which one they *liked* best, and that was all!

A sadder state of things can hardly be imagined, and it all comes from an incorrect knowledge of the true character of the Word of God. Therefore, it was with great pleasure that I found the authority of the Word of God continually enforced, and that the duty of complete subjection to it was commonly recognized.

"But, what of the doctrines?" is a question that I know you will ask. Without seeking to answer fully now, I have learned one lesson. Do not take the statements of enemies, or detached sentences as correctly representing the teachings of so-called "brethren" (or, of anyone). The common view of their doctrines is entirely false, through misconception, no doubt. The fact is, *the mind of the writer should govern the interpretation of a passage, even though a faulty style, or laxity of expression might seem to permit another meaning.* But theological controversy often proceeds on an exactly opposite principle — that the mind of the writer is just what his words can be made to mean!

I do not say that so-called "brethren" have taught no error, for they are as able to make mistakes as others. But, I do maintain that, even if some error is taught, I am not responsible to attack it (although I should attempt to point out from The Word of God what I believe is the truth), unless it *is of* such a nature as to call for discipline because, as I have said before, we are not gathered on the ground of doctrines at all, but as members of the body of Christ, as those who have been perfected forever by the one offering that He made on the cross (Heb. 10: 14).

I would like to ask one question. "Are there, or are there not definite directions in the Bible as to the Assembly of God? Are we or are we not taught God's will concerning the ground on which the members of the body of Christ should be gathered for worship, for maintenance of the unity of the Spirit, for ministry, etc.?" If not, then it is left for all to do what is right in their own eyes. But if there are instructions concerning these matters, then God requires every believer to obey His Word. "if you love Me, keep My commandments" (John 14: 15) still applies to all, and no amount of confusion in things about us excuses the weakest or young believer from seeking to stand perfect and complete in all the will of God.

God's path is narrow and difficult, but if everyone who is anxious for the glory of God and to bear a faithful testimony in these days of darkness, would only begin to separate himself from everything that either is not authorized by, or is condemned by the Word of God, he would soon find that "unto the upright there arises light in the darkness" (Ps. 112: 4). Thus, seeking to do God's will, he would know if the doctrine was of God (John 7: 17), and would be guided in the power of the Holy Spirit into all truth (John 16: 13). Dear brother, who knows better than yourself the need for taking our stand only on the Word of God? Why is it then, with evil increasing on every side and assaults being made on the very foundations of our faith, that even godly men hesitate to be completely separated from evil and to commit themselves entirely, in their church associations as well as for individual walk, to the guidance of the infallible Word of God? Such neglect is merely a false holiness that deals with outward experiences, and abandons the Church of God to the will and ways of man. The Church is the body of Christ, and as such, our Lord "loved it and gave Himself for it; that He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the Word, that He might present it to Himself a glorious Church, not having spot or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish" (Eph. 5: 25-27)! Shouldn't we, then, seek to have fellowship with our blessed Lord in regard to His own body, the Church, of which we, through grace, are members? My prayer is that God may so open the eyes of His people that they will come out and be separate from all that is contrary to His will, and that they will be found with the few who are, in the face of much difficulty and opposition, upholding His honour by bearing testimony to the authority of His word in this evil day.

Yours affectionately in Christ,

Edward Dennett