

Letters As to the Principles of Gathering
(Collected Writings of J. N. D., Vol. XXXI, p. 577)

Dear Brethren:

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

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

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

I have heard (and I partly believe it, for I have heard some rash and violent people say it elsewhere) that the various sectarian celebrations of the supper are called tables of devils. But this proves only the unbrokenness and ignorance of him who says it. The heathen altars are called tables of devils because, and expressly because, what they offered they offered, according to Deuteronomy 32: 17 to devils, and not to God. But to call Christian assemblies by profession (ignorant of ecclesiastical truth, and hence meeting wrongly) tables of devils is simply monstrous nonsense, and shews the bad state of him who so talks. No sober man, no honest man, can deny that Scripture means something totally different. I have heard — I do not know whether it be true — that it has been said that Brethren in England act on this ground. If this has been said, it is simply and totally false. There have been new gatherings formed during my absence in America which I have never visited; but the old ones, long walking as brethren, have always received known Christians; and everywhere, I have no doubt, the newer ones too; and in every country. I have known individuals to take up the thought

— one, at any rate, at Toronto; but the assembly always received true Christians. Three broke bread in this way the last Lord's Day that I was in London.

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

May the Lord guide you. Remember you are acting as representing the whole church of God; and if you depart from a right path as to the principle of meeting, you are separating yourselves from it to be a local sect on your own principles.

In all that concerns faithfulness, God is my witness, I seek no looseness; but Satan is busy, seeking to lead us one side or the other — to destroy the largeness of the unity of the body, or to make it mean looseness in practice and doctrine. We must not fall into one in avoiding the other. Reception of all true saints is what gives its force to the exclusion of those walking loosely. If I exclude all who walk godlily as well, who do not follow with us, it loses its power, for those who are godly are shut out too.

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

Ever beloved brethren,

Affectionately yours, J.N.D.

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