

Observations and Counsel for the Assembly

(This is a reprint of a paper believed to have been originally written around 1850 from France. The author is assumed to be J.N.D. It was reprinted in Mr. Kelly's 'Bible Treasury', 1884.)

"This is a time of trial for the beloved brethren who are gathered to the name and for the name of the Lord Jesus, because the pretensions and the energy of man are highly manifested. It is not an easy thing to be content with being simply what we are in reality before God. Times of "revival" reveal the thoughts of many hearts; but to learn in a day of grace to abide in peace, and know that God is God, is completely above the education of the flesh.

The spirit of the age affects many Christians, who labour to restore the "old things" for the service of God, instead of being broken before Him by the feeling of their own fall. I do not at all doubt their sincerity, but I fear that they have not judged themselves, that they know not the actual state of the ruin that surrounds them; so that they cannot have an adequate confidence only in the living God, as in the God of all resources in the midst of this scene where man has failed in everything.

We ought never to be afraid of the whole truth. To confess openly what we are in presence of what God is, such is always the path of peace and of blessing. If it be thus when even two or three only are found before God, there will not be disappointments, nor fallen hopes. If the wells dug in the days of Abraham have been filled and stopped up with earth, we have nevertheless to do with a God who can make water issue out of the rock, even when struck, and cause it to flow in the parched desert to refresh His people, thirsty and fatigued.

I do not envy the labour of those who dig canals in the sand for the streams which after all may take another course.

The active ways of God, in all times of blessing, consist in reproducing the glories of the work of the Lord Jesus. The darker the long night of apostacy becomes, the more distinctly the light of life shines. The word of the remnant is, "Sanctify the Lord God in your hearts." He is the only gathering point. Men make among themselves confederations, having many things in view; but the communion of saints cannot be known unless every line converge on this living centre.

The Holy Spirit does not gather the saints around simple views, true as they may be, on what the church is, on what it has been, or on what it may be on the earth. He gathers them always around this blessed person who is the same yesterday and to-day, and for ever. "Where two or three are gathered together unto my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt. 18:20). We are certain that Satan and the flesh will seek to resist this work and this way of the Lord, or to overthrow them.

We have need to be guarded from boasting, as is the case in these days; we need to be kept peaceful in the presence of God: there is so much independence and self-will almost everywhere. "We shall do great things" is the most unbecoming cry that can be heard at this time, when the light has made evident how little has been done.

God has made us know His truth as that which delivers us. "Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free." This liberty is not that of the flesh, because it penetrates our hearts with all the reality of a separation well known to God who is holy. Thus one gets straight into His position with one's heart broken and humbled. If anyone talks of separation from evil without being humbled about it, let him beware lest his position be simply that which at all times has formed sects, and has also produced heterodoxy in doctrine.

As to our service, we have seen our precious Lord and Master in profound abasement wash the feet of His disciples, giving Himself as an example, — to whom ? To us assuredly. Now I know no service at the present time which is worthy of Him and agreeable to Him, if not done in humiliation. This is not the time to speak of a place for ourselves. If the church of God so dear to Christ is in this world dishonoured, dispersed, ignorant and afflicted, he who has the mind of Christ will always take the lowest place. The true service of love will seek to give according to the wants of, and will never think to put shame on, the objects of the Master's love because of their necessity.

The men taught of God for His service come forth from a place of strength where they have learnt their own weakness and their own nothingness. They find that Jesus is everything in the presence of God; and Jesus is everything for them in all and through all. Such persons in the hand of the Holy Spirit are real helps for the children of God; they will not contend for a place of distinction, or authority among the scattered flock. Communion of man with God with respect to the church is shown by a frank disposition to be nothing in it, and thus one will be happy in one's heart in spending and being spent.

In our personal remembrances we have lessons to learn with fear and trembling. May the thoughts of power never occupy our hearts too much. "Power belongeth unto God." For about twenty years there has been a time of excitement, men seeking power everywhere and crossing seas to find it. Many thought of the church; but it was rather the church in power. They have felt and said that the power was lost; how regain it? From that time, they became occupied anew with earthly things, as if they could work deliverance here below.

Many recollect how at that time Satan could put man forward and the result has been the same everywhere. Whatever the form that such efforts adopted in those days of confusion and excitement, they were invariably agreed to let all go on perceiving their deception (for all failed in their objects, and the results were only sects). There were mortal marks of hostility against the Lord Jesus; or if His name were left untarnished, they prepared nevertheless the way for the terrible result of annulling the presence of the Holy Spirit who alone can glorify Jesus.

The Great Shepherd will not forget the labour done in His name with a happy heart for His dear sheep, poor and necessitous. An unfading crown of glory and abundant praise in the day of His appearing, will be the portion of those who meanwhile act thus. God will own all that He can own and none will lose His recompense. I am not surprised at the disappointments which have followed all the efforts men have made in the church to introduce some formal system of ministry, authority, or government. God cannot allow men to come and arrange the ground on which in these days He is pleased to find and bless His saints. We know very well what is the path of the

flesh, which is completely indifferent about the fall of the church; it is to occupy a place among men where God has not granted it.

There is great instruction in the conduct of Zerubbabel related in the book of Ezra (iii). The son and heir of David takes his place with a remnant returning from captivity. He is content to labour in Jerusalem without a throne, without a crown. In building the altar of the Lord and the house of God, he simply served God in his own generation. Heir of the place that Solomon had formerly occupied in the days of prosperity and glory, he speaks neither of his birth nor of his own rights; yet is he faithful in all the path of separation, grief, and the struggles he is obliged to pass through. May the Lord render us more and more peaceful and confiding in Himself in these days of trial. "When I am weak, then am I strong," is a lesson Paul had to learn by a very humiliating process. If we speak of our testimony on the earth, it will soon be evident that it is all nothing but weakness, and, like the seed which is lost by the wayside, the testimony will end all the same for our shame. But if the living God has by us on the earth a testimony to His own glory, then the feeling of weakness will only draw us more directly to the place of power. An apostle with a thorn in his flesh learns the sufficiency of the grace of Christ. A little remnant is gathered and assembled, having nothing in which it can boast in the flesh; but it is thus that it is suited to remain faithful to the name of Jesus when that which seemed to be something before men has failed.

Neither anger nor prudence nor pretensions of man can do anything in the state of confusion in which the church is now. I freely confess that I have no hope in the efforts that some are making to insure themselves an ecclesiastical position. In an earthquake when the house is undermined from its foundations, it matters little for a man to see how he can make his dwelling agreeable. We shall find it better for us to remain where we are set by the first discovery of the ruin of things in the hands of men, and with our faces in the dust. Such is the place that belongs to us if right, and after all it is the place of blessing. In the Apocalypse John learns the actual state of the churches, falling at the feet of Christ. He was afterwards taken to heaven in order that thence he might later on see the judgments on the earth; but evil in the church can never be well known save when one is humbled at the feet of Jesus.

I have read of a time when several gathered together in such a grief of spirit that for a long time they could not utter a single word; but the floor of the meeting room was moistened with their tears, Were the Lord to grant us still such meetings it would be wise to frequent these houses of tears. "They that sow in tears shall reap in joy" (Ps. cxxvi. 5). It is not only for all earthly remnant that that is true, but it is also written for us. I should willingly make a long journey to join persons thus afflicted, but I should not take a single step with a view of receiving, at the hands of the most excellent of men, power to overthrow all to-day, and to reconstitute to-morrow.

All that we can do is to walk with vigilance, but peacefully, thinking of the interests of the Lord Jesus; as to ourselves having nothing to gain and nothing to lose. The path of peace, the place of testimony, is to seek to please God. We need to be very watchful over ourselves, lest, after having been preserved from the corruptions of the age by very precious truths made known to us in our weakness, we should be caught in the net of presumption, or launch out into insubordination—a thing that God never can own or tolerate. "Giving diligence to keep the unity of the

Spirit in the uniting bond of peace." The word of God is the same to-day as ever. All that has happened has not changed His purpose which is to glorify the Lord Jesus. If we are humbled before Him, all that belongs to the glory of Christ will be to us of great moment. And what do we wish more?"

[* *Note from B.T. Editor, William Kelly*: "The date of this paper (now first translated, it would seem, from the French) is unknown, so far as I can ascertain; but it seems to have appeared many years ago. This it would be of small moment perhaps to note, save to silence the evil imputations of such as misinterpreted a Letter on Separation; which, when it appeared by oversight a second time! a long while after it was first printed in the Bible Treasury, was said to be inserted as if a new paper bearing on recent difficulties!! It is, alas! natural that those who stoop to party and personalities should fall into gross and groundless evil-speaking. There are these who love the truth for Christ's sake and believe in the Spirit's gracious power to give it effect in due time. Therefore is this paper, just found, now inserted. May the Lord use its wise counsels for the good of all who are humbled enough to profit thereby."]

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