

I.

EVILS OF DIVISION: HOW BROUGHT ABOUT

The great curse of the church of Jesus Christ is division. Christ foresaw that strifes and divisions would be the weakness of the church and the curse of the world. The church of Christ is the light of the world, the salt of the earth. Whatever weakens its power and destroys its influence, injures the world and ruins man. Jesus Christ foreseeing this, in the prayer in which he poured out his soul to God, besought earnestly that his disciples "might be one," that all who believe on him through the words of his apostles "may be one, even as I and my Father, are one." He prayed they might be one, "that the world may believe that thou hast sent me." It is clear that without that oneness among his children, the world could never believe that he was sent by the Father, that is, that he was the Christ the Son of God. Without this belief that leads to the acceptance of him, as Lord and Savior, and the obedience to God, through him, no man can see God in peace.

The apostles in their teachings, everywhere and at all times, condemned and warned against division and strife within the churches as the cause of weakness and inefficiency, of corruption and defilement—that unfitted them for temples of the Holy Spirit, that disabled them from

saving their own members and from proving a savor of life to the world.

Christ warned, “a house divided against itself cannot stand.” Paul said, “Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment” (1 Cor. 1:10). He asks, “Is Christ divided?”

The church is the body—the spiritual body of Christ, and if Christ is not divided against himself, the members of his body cannot be. When his people divide and strive, they divide the body of Christ, himself; they rend his spiritual body, and sever its members from each other, and serve his spiritual, worse than his murderers did his fleshly body. His enemies pierced that body, but his children sunder the spiritual body in twain and sever it, member from member, part from part, and leave it torn and lifeless without power to save itself or others. In every letter written by the apostles the sin of division is condemned—the danger is signaled and Christians forewarned against it as the sure premonition of death. The Master and the apostles not only warn against a danger so threatening, and so fatal and fearful in its results, but they give directions how to avoid division, and the way to promote and maintain unity. The Savior prayed, that his disciples might be one, and he gave clear directions as to how they should remain one.

“For I have given unto them the words which thou gavest me; and they have received them, and have known surely that I

came out from thee.”—“I have given them thy word, and the world hath hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth. Neither pray I for these alone but for them also which shall believe on me through their word” (John 17:8-20).

The apostles also admonished them to speak the same thing, and the oneness of the word, which guides and directs all, secures the unity of the body, growing out of and guided by the word of the living God.

Notwithstanding the prayer and warning of the Savior, the entreaties and exhortations of the apostles, and the specific directions of Jesus and the Holy Spirit to maintain unity, the professed followers of Christ have been divided into striving parties from the beginning, often resulting in war and bloodshed. Many efforts, through the centuries, have been made at union, which have proved abortive.

About the beginning of the present century an effort was made to find ground on which all sincere worshipers of God could stand in unity, and work together in harmony and love, for the honor of God and the salvation of man. The ground or fundamental basis of union, was, that all should lay aside all theories and practices based on human authority and standing in the wisdom of men, and in all religious service take the word of God as the only guide, and do only the things required in the teachings of Christ and the apostles. It was expressed in the adage, “where the Bible speaks we will speak, where the

Bible is silent we will be silent.” If they were not to speak in matters of religion without Bible authority, much less could they act without Scripture direction. This meant, no one could teach or practice anything in religion not clearly taught in the Bible. All would do what the Bible required, and would ask of no one to do or submit to what it did not require. This bound all to the word of God—to what was commanded by the Lord. It bound them to do all that was taught, it bound them to reject everything in religion, not taught in the word of God. This would bring unity through the word of God, as the Savior taught it must come. For a time, the effort at union on this basis seemed to work well. Men and women from all churches of christendom and from no church, came together on this basis, and laying aside all theories and practices not required by the word of God, diligently sought to learn what that word required, and guided by the things taught in the Bible, they walked in harmony and love and success without precedent in modern times, crowned their labors in calling men and women to Christ.

Of late years, this unity of faith and harmony of action have been much disturbed. Divisions and discords, threatening the disruption of church and Christian fellowship, have entered in and have well-nigh destroyed the peace, and much weakened the effort of those seeking to unite all worshipers of God in the unity of the faith, and in the bonds of love. This is a dire and fatal disaster to befall an effort so full of promise of good to man, and of honor to the Lord and Master. Can we find the cause of this disaster?

From the beginning there have been two classes in the church. One disposed to strictly construe the Bible and to

cling close to its teaching. This class, in all questions that arise, ask, What does the word of God require? And they restrain their practices and service within the requirements of the Divine word.

The other class, interpreting the word of God more liberally or loosely, ask, Is it forbidden? What is not forbidden, they claim the right to practice. A little thought will show the one class walks by the requirements of the Bible. The other walks in the wisdom of men. These do the things suggested by that wisdom, unless it is specifically forbidden by the word of God. The practices of one class necessarily spring from God and his holy word. No practice can be accepted with this class, that does not come from God, and that is not required by his holy word. God is the author of all religious service with this class. The other class looks largely to its own wisdom, and the wisdom of men for authority and for guidance in things of religion, and anything man's wisdom approves may be used in religion unless specifically forbidden in the word of God. These paths rapidly diverge. And those walking in these diverging paths cannot walk together. They cannot live in unity and harmony.

These diverse ways of regarding the services of religion, led to the first division among Christians. They have in all ages of the church, led to divisions. In the days of Luther, the question of infant baptism was raised. He asked, Where is it forbidden? and because not forbidden he retained it. The same question came up with the Campbells, father and son. They adopted the rule to practice only what was required. The son said to the father, Infant baptism is not required in the Scriptures. He responded, It must go then. Under Luther's rule, he and

Melanchthon were forced to advise Philip of Hesse, that bigamy is allowed, because not specially prohibited.

Under this rule many gross and hurtful perversions of the truth, as well as many sinful and corrupting practices may be brought into the church because they are not specially prohibited in the Scriptures. This principle of interpretation releases men from a close adherence to the will of God as revealed in the Bible, and gives wide license to the introduction of human wisdom as the rule in the church and the life of a Christian. The substitution of human wisdom for the will of God subverts the church from the ends for which it was instituted.

II. OPINIONS AS A BASIS OF SERVICE IN THE CHURCH

The introduction of this rule, that what is not forbidden, is permissible in religion, will be found to be the root of the divisions among the disciples, who started out to restore union among Christians, by bringing all to the word as the only rule of faith and practice among Christians. As example, of the influence and use of this principle, we make the following quotations from a prominent paper among the disciples:

What a violent contrast to the simple but comprehensive condition of Christian fellowship enunciated by Alexander Campbell and his coadjutors and taught in the New Testament, is the Plymouthian and Sand Creek efforts, based on the same false and foolish philosophy, to forge men together in the bonds of identical opinions, mostly if not entirely about matters of no vital importance! If the fathers of this reformation emphasized one thing more than another it was the importance of the distinction between *faith* and *opinion*. They pointed out to their contemporaries that faith united men to God and to one another, but that opinions, when sub-

stituted for faith, severed them from both, and became the occasion of endless strife and bitterness. The New Testament teaches that faith in Christ and its manifestation in obedience to his commandments are the terms of Christian fellowship, and that nothing else is to be insisted on as necessary to salvation or the enjoyment of Christian privileges. Additions to these simple conditions of church membership and Christian fellowship, by insisting on the speculations of creed-makers and the crotchets of egotistic dogmatists, and that everybody shall think and act as they do in regard to all the secondary questions of church politics, have ever been the sources of sectarian strife and division in the church of God.

It seems almost like the irony of fate that men should arise claiming to be the loyal successors of these reformers, who are planting themselves squarely on the Plymouthian ground of opinionism and externalism, in absolute reversal of the most fundamental distinction of these reformers; and in defiance of “the book” with which they profess to be supremely “satisfied” are fomenting strife and counseling division over questions of opinion—yes, opinion—nothing but opinions—not one of which stands vitally related to the Christian faith—opinions about expedients and methods and things incidental

and circumstantial and wholly external to the kingdom of God—fads and fancies and preferences about suppers and organs and pastors and missionary societies—things which under the head of ways and means have their practical value, but in comparison with the fundamental principles of the kingdom of heaven scarcely rise to the dignity of decent importance—about such matters as these, or *opinions* concerning them, it is proposed to disrupt the churches and to build up a new denomination on the old creed of opinionism! We are not yet prepared to go back to the sectarian flesh-pots from which we have been delivered, and every attempt to Plymouthize this movement by making opinions tests of fellowship will prove a disastrous failure.

It is said in the above extract, that the fathers of this reformation emphasized the distinction between faith and opinion, that faith united men to God and to one another, while opinions, when substituted for faith, “severed them from both, and became the source of endless discussion and strife.” It is well to have clear but simple definitions of two terms. *Faith* is a firm conviction resting upon clear and satisfactory testimony. *Opinion* is an impression resting on human judgment, without clear and satisfactory testimony. In religion, faith is a conviction based upon a clear revelation of the Divine will. And we must “walk by faith.” That is, we are led by faith in God to do what the word of God clearly requires us to do. Whatever is clearly revealed in the word of God, is matter of faith. What is

not clearly required therein is matter of opinion. “What ever is not of faith is sin” means when we do anything as service to God not clearly required in his word, we sin. To bring things based on opinion into the service of God, is to substitute opinion for faith, and thus, as stated above, separate man from God and his fellowmen, yet the above was written to excuse, if not to justify, those who bring matters of opinion into the service of God, and to condemn those who oppose their introduction. The writer insists on the right of any one to introduce into the worship and work of the church, things that do not rest on faith, things that have no basis in faith, things unknown to, and unrecognized and unauthorized by the word of God. He rightly describes them as “fads and fancies and preferences about suppers and organs and pastors and missionary societies.” A *fad*, in current use—is a whim of fashion that has a temporary fashionable run. He puts these fads of fashion and fancies and preferences for suppers, organs, etc., on the same footing with pastors and missionary societies. He says these all rest upon the “opinions, nothing but opinions, of men—not one of which stands vitally related to the Christian faith, opinions about expedients and methods and things incidental and circumstantial, and wholly external to the kingdom of God.” Now the writer thus classifies these practices—and condemns bitterly division and strife in opposing them. The introduction of these “fads and fancies and preferences,” based upon mere opinion and nothing but opinion, and that have not a shadow of basis in faith, nor the shadow of authority in the word of God, is not condemned by this writer. He only condemns opposition to them.

Those who wish to introduce into the church or service of God any “fad, or fancy, or preference,” based upon opinion and nothing but opinion—are to be allowed to do so. They are to be permitted to act on their opinion, to introduce whatever their fancies or preferences desire, and to make their opinions the rule and authority for practices in the church of God—and all who differ in opinion must submit and be silent. Granting for the present, that the opposition to these things is based only on opinions, then we have two sets of opinions in the church. One class, is to be tolerated. Some are permitted to introduce whatever “fads, fancies and preferences” of opinion those who hold them may desire. Others have opinions that these “fads and fancies and preferences” are all wrong. These must hold their opinions in restraint, they must not act on their opinions, they must submit to the opinions of those who would introduce their “fads, fancies and preferences.” These “fads and fancies and preferences” of one class become the rule of the church—the opinion of others must be over-ridden and suppressed. And the tyranny of opinion which is so deprecated has full sway. Members in a church, with two different rules of action, cannot work together in harmony. Hence the Holy Spirit admonishes all to walk by the same rule.

“Now the God of patience and consolation grant you to be likeminded one toward another according to Christ Jesus: That ye may with one mind and one mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 15:5, 6).

“Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye

“speak all the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment” (1 Cor. 1:10).

“Fulfil ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves” (Phil. 2:2, 3).

“Finally, brethren, farewell. Be perfect, be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace; and the God of love and peace shall be with you” (2 Cor. 13:11).

“Finally, be ye of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous” (1 Pet. 3:8).

If one man’s opinion is ground for action in church affairs, another man’s is likewise, and every man’s is. As we differ in opinion, then we must adopt diverse and different rules of action. And different rules of action in a church will bring conflict in action. It will necessarily produce strife and confusion and lead to division. It cannot possibly be avoided. To represent that Alexander Campbell advocated that men make their opinions, mere “fads, and fancies” of opinion, ground of any service is to mistake his whole teaching. A favorite expression of his, was, “opinions must be held as private property.” They are not to be brought into the public, not even proclaimed publicly—much less to be introduced into the church and

their approval or toleration forced on others. As example of this, Aylette Rains had the opinion that all would finally be made happy. This was an opinion of his, without evidence, to be held as private property, not to be taught, but the things clearly taught in the Bible, seen and read of all men, were the matters of faith. These were to be taught. Rains was received into the fellowship of the church; he held his opinions as private property—did not teach them, taught what is clearly taught in the Bible, and in doing this he said his mind grew away from these opinions and he lost sight of them.

The plea of Alexander Campbell was, that the opinions of men were not to be brought into the church of God and were not to be made the basis of action. If a man held the opinion that men might so change under some circumstances, the ordinance of baptism, as that affusion would be acceptable to God, for baptism, let him hold the opinion as private property, let him neither practice nor teach the opinion, but practice and teach just what the Bible teaches, and in this teaching and practice of the Bible he is to be fellowshipped. A man might have the opinion that Calvinism is true, or Arminianism. He could hold either, or both, if it were possible, as private property, but he could not teach or enforce either on the church, or on any of its members or bring either into his teaching or into the church—to affect the faith, the action, or the peace and harmony of the church of God. These things were too fully and clearly elaborated to admit of intelligent controversy.

III.

FAITH AND OPINION

The writer makes the classification—“fads and fancies and preferences about suppers and organs and pastors and missionary societies.”

The position of the writer clearly is, that the “fads, fancies and preferences” based wholly on opinion are to be tolerated in the churches of God, in the worship, the organism and the work of the church. It instances fairs and festivals, the organ, the pastor, the missionary society, and rightly calls them, “fads, fancies, preferences, based wholly on opinion.” He says these are all outside of the church and its scriptural provisions, and are based upon the opinions and nothing but the opinions of those introducing them, and are to be admitted on the ground that they are mere matters of opinion, and liberty of opinion must be tolerated. It is the opinion of others that these are all wrong. These must be allowed the same liberty to act on their opinion as those who think them right. Those holding antagonistic opinions cannot act harmoniously while each is acting on his own opinion. One person has an opinion that the fair or festival is a legitimate way of raising money for the church. Another has an opinion that it is not, but to raise money in that way and to bring it into the church, is to violate and set aside the law of God, it is to bring that which is unclean in the sight of

God into, and to profane his sacred temple. Liberty of opinion as advocated, says we must let the former of these hold his festivals and bring his money into the church of God. But all principles of justice demand the other must be equally entitled to liberty of opinion, and be equally authorized to act on his opinion, and his opinion requires him to oppose bringing that into the church of God which he believes is offensive to God and which desecrates and profanes the temple of God and corrupts the church of which he is a member. He would sin to stand and see the church corrupted without an earnest effort to save it. Contention and strife unending must result. The organ is introduced under plea of liberty of opinion, no one who fellowships the church using it, and especially no one who engages in the song service of the church, can otherwise than worship with and countenance the organ. A man has an opinion that it is a sin to introduce and use it. Its introduction deprives him of his liberty of opinion, and deprives him of his right of serving the Lord in his appointments. So too, of the pastor as distinct from the elders. It is a matter of opinion with some that it is permissible. Others differ in opinion. Others are of the opinion that such a pastorship is wrong and hurtful to the true interests of the church, and subversive of the order of God. Both cannot have liberty of opinion, in the sense that they make their opinions the basis of action for themselves or for the church. One will have his opinions tyrannized over by the other. It will be none the less tyranny of opinion that a majority, great or small, imposes its opinion on the minority. One man has as much right to liberty of opinion as any other or number of others. And this doctrine that liberty of opinion involves the right to act on those opinions where our actions come in contact with, or affect the actions and opin-

ions of others, is the very thing that will continually gender causes and occasions of discord and division. That this is not what Alexander Campbell meant by liberty of opinion, is evident, to any who will think. He argued that Methodists and Baptists could never unite with Presbyterians, as such. The Methodists hold the opinion that the name Methodist and the polity and order of the Methodist church are more effective in reaching the world than any other, and hence are acceptable to God. The Baptists hold the opinion that this is not true, but the usages of the Baptist church and the name Baptist are allowable because they baptize, and others in their esteem do not. The Presbyterians likewise think their government through the elders justifies the name, and it is pleasing to God.

Now one of these can never surrender his opinions to the others in these matters, hence these parties can never unite on the ground occupied by any one. They are all based on opinion. But he claimed that each should hold his opinions as private property, which means each should cease to teach or act on them, or to advocate or hold them in such way as to interfere with the opinions or affect the actions of others. But all should hold their opinions as private, enforce them on no one—and should act only on the requirements of faith. The things taught plainly in the Bible are matters of faith. On these all can agree, and acting on them, all can act in union and harmony.

It is a matter of opinion that we may call ourselves Baptists or Methodists. If we act on this opinion, it at once forms a Baptist party, a Methodist party, and a Presbyterian party. It is matter of faith that the followers of

Christ are Christians—all can unite on this, and the churches are churches of Christ or God—all believe this, all can unite on it. But this union in faith can be accomplished only by holding our opinions to ourselves, as private property—and not making them the basis of action for ourselves or others, especially in points in which our actions come in contact with or affect the actions of others, or in matters in which many act together, and each insisting only on what is taught plainly in the word of God. These positions and arguments constituted such an essential element of Mr. Campbell's plea, that all familiar with his writings must recognize them as constituting the basis of his plea for union of all in matters of faith, excluding all opinions of men. Every man has the same liberty of opinion. And one man cannot act on his opinion in his church relations without forcing his opinions upon others—and when he does this, these others suffer from tyranny of opinion.

All Christians can unite on the name Christian, for the followers of Christ, and the church of Christ for his church. God's word sanctions it. It is a matter of faith—not of opinion. All followers of God do approve and agree in free-will offerings, voluntary gifts, from willing hearts of God's children to sustain the cause of God. It is of faith. God's word approves this. But when you ask them to accept means drawn from others through fleshly enticements, given for the sake of fleshly enjoyment, this is not of faith. The Scriptures do not authorize it. All agree the elders as pastors should have the oversight of and teach the congregation. This is matter of faith—God's word teaches it. The one man hired to act as pastor, has no authority or precedent in the word of God. It is based on opinion. It breeds discord. Singing and making

melody in the heart is of faith—God’s word requires it. The organ is not a matter of faith, God’s word does not require it. Whatsoever is not of faith is sin. To use the organ in the worship is to enforce the “fad, or fancy, or preference” of opinion into the worship of God, and is to force this opinion on others who oppose it. Those who differ in opinion as to the propriety, to say nothing of the right, to use the organ, are made to suffer the tyranny of opinion. Their opinions will be over-ridden and subjected to the opinions of others.

If all practices, based on mere opinion, whether it be a “fad, or fancy, or preference,” are prohibited from the service of the church, if all hold their opinions as private property—and never intrude them upon the church or others, no one will ever suffer from tyranny of opinion. All can unite in matters of faith, and can submit to the laws of God. Union and harmony would then prevail, and strife and discord cease among brethren. But if one man or woman has the right to act in matters in which many or the whole church are concerned, on his opinion, every other one has the same right. Every one has an opinion and a “fad, or fancy, or preference” based on that opinion. And each one introduces it into the church or into its work or worship. What an overgrowth of human “fads, fancies and inventions” will fill and overrun the church of God and leave no place for the ordinances and service of God. What a variety of weeds and briars and thistles and thorns will cumber the garden of our God—and will choke out the seed of the kingdom, the word of God. The church of God “was builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit.” Every institution is imbued with the spirit of its author. Every fad and fancy and invention of man is imbued with a spirit peculiarly its

own, received from its author. When this is introduced into the church of God, the spirit that it received from its author, is brought with it into the church of God. Instead of the church being the dwelling place of the Spirit of God, “the temple of God,” “an habitation of God through the Spirit,” it is made the hold and home of spirits of every hue and character—a hold of every foul bird and unclean beast. Nothing could more quickly and effectually defile the temple of God than to throw open the doors of the church to the admission of every device and invention and opinion of man to be brought into it. It ceases to be composed of a brotherhood of Christians united in the bonds of love, animated by one spirit, walking by the same rule, with one mouth and one voice glorifying God. It becomes at once a loose, latitudinarian, conglomeration of diverse and diverging parties and sects, holding every shade of error, and every grade of unbelief, engaged in unending strife.

The great end and aim of the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth, the planting of congregations of Christians, were to bring the world back into a loyal obedience to the Lord God of heaven and earth. In doing this to unite in one body in Christ Jesus all who believe in him as the Savior of men, that they united together as one body under Christ, the living head, might work together for the redemption of the world from sin, and rebellion against God, and for the restoration of the rule and authority of God over the earth.

A united army, redeemed by the blood of Christ, battling for the honor of God and the salvation of men, is what he provided for and demands of his children. They can be one, he has warned them, only by following his

footsteps, doing his will, without opinions or ways of their own, just as he, without will or preference, came to do the will of him that sent him.

“If we walk in the light as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth from all sin.”

In doing what he commands us, adding nothing there-to, taking nothing therefrom, we have fellowship with one another, with all the redeemed of earth, and we are cleansed from all sin by the blood of Christ.

This is a sample of the material contained in
*Christian Unity: How Promoted, How Destroyed,
Faith and Opinion*
by David Lipscomb

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