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"Not slothful in business: fervent in spirit."

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## Ecclesiastical.

### THE CIRCULAR LETTER

TO THE CHURCHES OF THE CENTRAL ASSOCIATION.

Dear Brethren,—

It is the design of this Letter to urge a close conformity to the Scriptural standard of admission to Church membership. Let us consider *what that standard is, the consequences of departing from it, the causes of that departure, and the difficulties to be overcome in maintaining the standard.*

#### FIRST. THE SCRIPTURAL STANDARD OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP.

The outward rite of joining the church of Christ is baptism. But this ceremony is symbolical of the inward qualification, the outward sign of the inward grace. The essential qualification for church membership is "a new creature," "a new heart," "a new man." John refused to baptize the people unless they brought forth the fruits of repentance; Matt. iii. 8. Before they became united to the church by Baptism they were believers; Acts. viii. 12. As believers they had the justifying faith of Paul; Gal. iii. 11. And the practical faith of James; Isaiah ii. 24. And the Apostles addressed the members of the church as well beloved, 3 John i. 1; as brethren, James i. 2; as the elect, 2 John v. 1; 1 Pet. i. 2; 1 Thes. i. 4; as saints, Paul, unto the Church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called (to be) saints, 1 Cor. i. 1, 2; Rom. i. 7; Eph. i. 1; Phil. i. 1; Col. i. 2. The members of the primitive church then were believers, brethren, beloved, elect, saints. And what do these terms mean but genuine, active, living, and life-giving piety?

Nowhere do we find the Apostles addressing the Church of Christ as approved except in the character of true christians. And before they admitted candidates to church membership they required credible evidence of sound conversion. And nothing is more important than that this principle be maintained. A departure from it has been the source of untold evils in the christian world, and it is this which distinguishes, or should distinguish us as a people. Like the straitest sect of the old Catholics and Puritans we hold that "pure religion and undefiled" is indispensable to baptism and church membership. That so far as church ordinances are concerned we should demand, not "first the form and then the power," but first the power and then the form, not first the profession and then the possession; but first the possession and then the profession. We profess to grade our piety not by the standard of nominal christianity, but by the scriptures. Hence the universal expectation that Baptists should be the holiest people is not unreasonable, and the reproach incurred when we fail of being so, is not undeserved.

If credible evidence of conversion in candidates for church membership was required in primitive times, it should still be sought. But such is the change of the relations between the church and the world, that an act which then amounted to strong evidence of sincerity, is now no more than the feeblest presumption. At that time when all the inveterate hatred and combined power of the world, was arraigned in direct, open, deadly, and uncompromising opposition to Christianity, it required great sincerity and decision of character to say in a public assembly, "I am a christian." Whoever did so had anticipated the consequences beforehand, and counted well the cost. He had come to the conclusion that rather than be ashamed of His Lord he would forsake all that was dear to him in this world. He took his life in his hand when he declared, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." Hence such a profession was at that time a credible evidence of piety. To confess the Saviour then was to incur the determined hostility of the world; but times are so changed that to confess Him now may secure worldly patronage. The Christianity then current was at a discount, that now current bears a premium in the world's market. He who has a small capital to invest in trade may increase it by saying, "I am a christian" and being initiated into an influential church. He who has no stock, and no credit may easily create both by going through the usual ceremonies of joining a church. We say, then, that now something more than a mere verbal profession is requisite, to constitute credible evidence of piety.—What is it then, in this age of nominal christianity, that is necessary to constitute good evidence of sound conversion?

1. A mere profession though it has but little force as evidence of piety, may yet be admitted as a portion of that evidence. When an individual rises in the congregation and de-

clares his determination to serve the Lord, such an act, on his part, creates a presumption in his favor, and should dispose a church to consider other proofs of conversion which may be adduced. But in too many cases no further evidence is demanded. Hence our ecclesiastical difficulties.

2. Another point in the evidence of sound conversion is the relation of christian experience. If this experience be scriptural it has considerable force as evidence. The church at Jerusalem would not receive Saul among them till they had been told how he had met the Lord in the way, Acts ix. 27. And if the christian should be ready always to give a reason of his hope, much more so, when he is about joining himself to the Church of God, 1 Pet. iii. 15.

3. Another evidence of genuine piety is activity in the cause of the Saviour. The church in Jerusalem were informed of the labors of Saul, "and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus," Acts ix. 27. Church members should "maintain good works." Titus iii. 8. The absence of this fills the vineyard with idlers, and the army with cowards.

4. As a fourth point in the evidence of conversion we notice a willingness to consecrate of our substance to sustain the institutions of the gospel. A spirit of avarice is inconsistent with membership in a church.

5. Similarity of religious belief is highly important in the members of the same church. Though some diversity of opinion must be allowed on minor points, on all vital questions the church should require conformity to the articles of our common faith.

6. Another point in evidence of fitness for church membership is a spirit of christian humility. We are to "try the spirits." No one who has the right spirit would obtrude himself unworthily upon any church, nor would he wish to join without giving ample evidence of fitness, and submitting himself to every test which the Word of God prescribes or his brethren require. The spirit of a candidate is one of the most important points to be considered in receiving a candidate for church membership. A spirit of humility is in the sight of God, "of great price."

Such are a few of the tests which should be carefully applied in modern times, to establish credible evidence of scriptural piety. Let them be faithfully applied and our churches would soon be restored to their original purity.

#### SECOND. THE CONSEQUENCES OF A DEPARTURE FROM THE TRUE STANDARD OF ADMISSION TO THE CHURCH.

By admitting the unconverted into the church numerous evils would evidently follow. The church would be so corrupted that though possessing the form of godliness they would deny the power. In times of special excitement, all might flock to the house of God; but when this subsided the love of many would wax cold. With a portion of the church members unconverted we might expect to see a revival followed by heart-sickening declension. Where divine love is absent strife and animosity would spring up among certain members of the church. The wolves in sheeps' clothing would worry the flock and "bite and devour" one another. Many of the unconverted portion refusing to make any sacrifices for the support of gospel institutions at home and abroad, the burden of the many would rest upon the few. The piety of such a people would not be sufficient to guarantee their harmonious cooperation in the work of the Lord. Discipline would be impossible, because the unconverted members would know that the "sword" if applied, would easily cut the slender thread of their profession, which gives them a nominal and, perhaps, a self profiting union with the visible church of Christ. In such a church, even a revival might be perverted to evil consequences. If Baptist Churches forsake the gospel standard of church membership—holiness of character—their temporary success will only hasten their final overthrow. Mutual jealousies will spring up between different churches, and between the members of the same church. The divine favor will be forfeited and our candlestick "removed."

#### THIRD. THE CAUSES OF DEPARTURE FROM THE BIBLE STANDARD OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP.

In considering the cause of the departure from the bible standard of admission to church membership, we believe that one great evil lies in the secularization of the churches themselves. It cannot be that the offence of the real cross has wholly ceased in the world. A profession of christianity always involved the same uncompromising principle of holiness that it did in primitive times, and would also be opposed by the world. A modern Baptist writer truthfully remarks, "It is not the world that has become modified in favor of the church, but the church in favour of the world." (Primitive Piety Revived by Dr. Fish, page 154.) The church and the world should be as different as light and darkness. It may be possible for churches to be more anxious to swell their numbers of membership than they are to grow in grace and abound in spiritual gifts and good works. Our letters to the Associations sometimes speak of glorious revivals and large accessions to their ranks, for which they are inexpressibly grateful; but close by saying that they have sent only a paltry sum for the glorious cause of God, that "money is scarce" and "charity begins at home." A genuine revival would produce different results.

It may occur that persons are sometimes urged prematurely into the church because they are wealthy or influential without a due regard to their piety, and thus a power become recognized in the church which the bible does not warrant, and which experience, alas often, too sad, will condemn.

Occasionally the labors of an itinerant revival preacher are blessed, the pastor, or the church, or both yield up their responsibility of the keys for the time being, and in return the doors are widely opened by their zealous brother, and a multitude of members are sometimes indiscriminately hurried in, for which the church may afterwards repent at their leisure.

Missionaries very properly desire to make a good report to their employers. But those missionaries would greatly err, who should prefer to report a large number of spurious additions; rather than a smaller number of genuine conversions. It is better to rejoice over a "few names" written in heaven, than that many "devils are subject" to the power of God.

May not even pastors too be strongly tempted to aim at swelling their list of baptisms, and presenting a large increase in their letters to the Association, rather than that their flocks should abound in the fruits of a noble christian benevolence. Every christian is glad to know of any real addition to the kingdom of Christ; but he is saddened to think that some reported additions and conversions are in the circumstances, not such as the angels in heaven could rejoice over, Luke x. 20.

It is true that though every precaution were used, unworthy members might still find their way into the church of Christ on earth, as in the case of Simon Magus. But this fact should only make the servants of the Lord the more faithful in placing every scriptural guard at the door of the sheep-fold. In the temple of God there is only one foundation—Christ, and only one material for the building—the "living stones." Let us "take heed, how," and what we build on that foundation; 1 Cor. iii. 10. The day is coming which will try our work. Yea it has already come in part. If portions of that temple built by us are crumbling under our own hands, how will they abide the day of God's fiery indignations?

#### FOURTH. THE DIFFICULTY OF RESTORING THE BIBLE STANDARD OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP ONLY INCREASES OUR OBLIGATION TO DO SO.

We take it for granted that as churches of Christ in receiving members to communion we have in too many cases departed from the gospel rule. The state of some churches presents convincing proof of this. True we may not be worse than other denominations in this particular; but we ought to be infinitely better. In personal religion, in brotherly love, and in active benevolence we ought to be exalted above our present state, as high as the heavens are above the earth. Where are now the burning zeal and the fiery energy of the primitive churches? Quenched! alas, quenched! by the cold floods of worldliness which have largely come in through the widened gates of admission to membership in the church. In removing this evil we shall doubtless encounter the most formidable obstacles. But removed it must be if we wish prosperity. The difficulty increases the necessity of accomplishing it.

It would be no easy task to disencumber the church of the useless members who now hang as dead weights upon her activity, or keep up intestine broils and discords within her sacred enclosure; but this work must evidently be done before the church on earth shall occupy that position to which she is destined in the promises of God. Would that the ancient law of battles could be applied to the church militant in our times. "What man is there that is fearful and faint-hearted, let him go and return unto his house lest his brethren's heart faint as well as his heart." Deut. xx. If such a proclamation could be made and the churches sifted it would be a bright day for them all. But this work must be left to the prayerful efforts of God's people, and especially to Him who sits as a refiner's fire, to purify the sons of Levi.

How can a church that is corrupt, purify itself? How can it begin and, in time to come, carefully guard the door of admission, against all such as "cannot give scriptural evidence of their union with Christ?"

The duty involved in these questions is imperative. Would that every church and minister could be thoroughly aroused to its importance. Would that all were as uncompromising in its observance, as they are pained by the consequences of its neglect.

But these questions also suggest a difficulty. True that difficulty would not have existed if the duty had not been neglected. The difficulty is the want of piety in so many members of the church. This difficulty must be met. It can only be overcome by prayer. The encouragement is twofold. God hears prayer, and there are still praying souls in the churches. There are pastors and private members grieved at the afflictions of Joseph. Mourning in secret for the church of God. And if God will always hear His people, he will especially hear for His church, the purchase of His blood and the object of His peculiar care.

Let the divinely appointed means for the holiness of the church, be prayerfully used, and spiritual prosperity will follow. When the power of godliness is felt in the heart of each member, then the influence of the church for good will be seen. When our hearts shall burn with pure love to God, then will the same blessing flow out through the gospel and its truths, through the church, her ordinances and members till a lost world shall be converted to the Saviour. Then will additions to the membership of the church be additions to her real strength. Then shall Zion shine; the forces of the gentiles shall be given to her, and kings shall come to the brightness of her rising.