

THE ASSEMBLY MESSENGER

Proclaiming the Timeless Truth of the Church to a New Generation of Believers

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Dear Reader

From time to time articles are sent to us for use in the Assembly Messenger. This is one of those articles — an article by Will J. Missen of New Zealand, a very well known and beloved teacher of the Word both in North America and down under, now with his Lord for about 20 years. He speaks from 2 Timothy. As you may recall when we took up 2 Timothy 2:20-21 in issue 98-23, we spoke of three groups: vessels for honor fit for the Master's use; vessels for honor who don't separate from vessels to dishonor; and vessels for dishonor. The vessels for dishonor aren't clearly defined. In the context of 2 Timothy where departure from the truth is most evident, they seem to indicate sinning Christians, although they *might* also include unsaved professors. But the Greek word for "dishonor" is *atimia* and is only used seven times (Vine), and only in 2 Timothy and Romans 9:21 *could* it refer to an unsaved person. But in the next verse (Rom.9:22) the *unsaved* are clearly defined as "vessels of *wrath*." Vine states that "dishonor" in 2 Timothy 2:20 has the thought that the vessels have no particular honor attached to their use (see "shame"). That is how the vessels for dishonor are taken in this article. Let's see what brother Missen has to say in this review.

Ecclesiastical Separation, Is It Scriptural? (WJM)

From time to time the question is raised among us as to what is the correct interpretation of 2 Timothy 2:21. That brethren may have different thoughts as to the meaning of various passages of Scripture we readily admit, and where nothing of a fundamental nature is involved, Philippians 3:15-16 shows the attitude we should take.

We do not believe, however, that this passage falls within that category. It admits of only one interpretation and one which, as we shall see, has been agreed upon by all translators and commentators of repute among the children of God. Moreover, it is a passage of importance where Church truth is involved. It is one of the key passages giving scriptural authority for separating under given conditions from other Christians, and for occupying the place we do in relation to others in Christendom. It is very noticeable that those who oppose the scripturalness of the position taken by those known as "exclusive brethren" consistently attempt to undermine the authority of this passage by endeavoring to make it refer to "condition" and not to "position." That a right condition is most necessary among the people of God, all will agree, and there are many scriptures which teach this, but it is not good exegesis to take portions of the Word that refer to the *position* that the saints should occupy, and apply them to their *condition*.

This epistle [2 Timothy] gives special instructions for these last days (3:1) when Christendom has become a "great house" with vessels to honor and to dishonor. The Holy Spirit, through the apostle Paul, gives instructions to Timothy (and so to us) as to his (and our) conduct in these difficult times. In chapter 2:15 (KJV) we have instruction of a positive nature: "Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the Word of Truth." Exhortations are then given where the following words are used: "shun" (v.16), "depart from" (v.19), "purge from" (v.21), "flee" (v.22), "avoid" (v.23), "turn away" (3:5). At least three of these express *positional separation* — "depart from," "purge from" and "turn away." Taken all together, all of the passages show that there must be a cleansing from the evil in our own lives, and also complete separation from it as to our associations.

In the JND Translation, verses 20-21 read as follows, "But in a great house there are not only gold and silver vessels, but also wooden and earthen: and some to honor and some to dishonor. If therefore one shall have purified himself from these in separating himself from them, he shall be a vessel to honor, sanctified, serviceable to the Master, prepared for every good work." In a footnote to the words "shall have purified himself from these in separating himself from them," we read: "*ekkathare apo*." *Ekkathare* is only found in 1 Corinthians 5:7. There it was getting rid of it out of the lump; here he has to purge himself from among them (the vessels). Hence we have *apo*, which, with *ek*, is rendered by 'separating from.'

As all know, our brother John Nelson Darby was one of the ablest Greek scholars of his day. He has given us a *translation*, not a paraphrase. It is permissible to paraphrase in exposition, but never in translation, and to call our brother JND's rendering of this verse a paraphrase is to impugn his reliability as a translator. The connection with the similar use of the word translated "purge out" in 1 Corinthians 5:7 and the added *apo*, "away from," show plainly to any unbiased mind the true force of the passage, that is, "purge out away from," rightly rendered "purify from in separating from." Anyone wishing to study this matter further may consult the "Graphic Scheme of the Greek Prepositions" as given in the Newberry Bible, where the force of *ek* and *apo* is plainly seen.

We may well ask, however, whether other translators of note understood this to be the true force of the expressions in Greek. We note a few. Tyndale's 1526 translation reads, "But if a man purge himself from such *fellows*." Rotherhain's translation gives, "If therefore anyone will for pureness sever himself from these." In Weymouth's translation we read, "If therefore a man keeps himself clear of these."

F.W. Grant translates in the *Numerical Bible*, "If therefore one shall have purified himself from these," and his notes show that he understood the force of the words to be *separation*. Here, then, at once, comes the application of the rule that we must separate ourselves from iniquity. One must have purified himself from these, the "vessels to dishonor."

William Kelly's translation reads thus, "If one therefore purge himself from these," and his comment also shows what he understood to be import of the words translated, "purge himself from." "At bottom it is evidently the same principle of separation from evil, which in 1 Corinthians 5 is applied to put the evil-doer out. In 2 Timothy "it is a far more developed case where the well-doer, having striven without effect to correct the evils sustained within, is bound to purge *himself* out A godly man has no option, but is bound to hear the divine word and to purge himself from these vessels to dishonor." (Bible Treasury, Vol. 16, pp. 169-171)

Thus there is agreement all around as to the meaning of the passage.

Some years ago, when we were under deep exercise as to whether our ecclesiastical position was of God and could be sustained from Scripture, it was this passage that finally settled us. We looked it up in all the versions possible, and studied the meanings of the words used in the Greek, and came to the conclusion that the passage means exactly what our brethren from whom we learned the truth of God said it meant — separation from vessels to dishonor. We believe there is thus a divine warrant for our position of separation.

If this and other passages, such as Hebrews 13:13 do not speak of separation, then "brethren" (so-called) had no authority to come out of the systems [the denominations] over 170 years ago, for it was on such scriptures as these that they acted. If they were wrong in coming out in that day, we are wrong in maintaining the position today. But they were not wrong. They stood for God and He used them as "His mouth" because they "took forth the precious from the vile." See Jeremiah 15:19-20. We who have inherited this spiritual legacy still have a scriptural basis for our position. Let us see that our condition corresponds to it so we may be found walking in separation to Christ and from that which is displeasing to Him in our lives and associations.

"But youthful lusts flee, and pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace, with those that call upon the Lord out of a pure heart" (2 Timothy 2:22 JND).

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

While not a signed letter as we normally request, comments have been made, issues raised, and questions asked which we believe may be of general interest to our readers and which necessitate a reasonably long reply.

The Early Brethren of the So-Called “Brethren Movement”: Their History

It certainly is a historical fact that about 170 years ago, a few believers left the established churches to simply meet as Christians gathered only to the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. God had shown them that the established “churches” (denominations) all around them were not meeting according to divine principles, nor was the priesthood of all believers and spiritual gift allowed to be shown forth in practice, since the clergy-laity system (see Newsletter 97-8) prevailed everywhere. As these energetic, spirit-led men studied, preached and wrote, many others around the world came to see these truths and also left the churches of men to simply gather to the Lord’s name. Each local gathering saw that they were *interdependent* with every other local gathering, and a part of and the representation of the one true Church or Assembly, comprised of every believer from Pentecost to the Rapture.

The Walk and Practice of these Early Brethren

It is thought by some that because God blessed these early brethren who gathered to Christ’s name alone, what they did or practiced some 150 or so years ago should be our norm today. No Scriptures are given for such an assertion, for there are none: it is merely an opinion. But is it a good assumption? Let’s look at some points to consider.

1. We do not get proper Christian practice from any man or group of men, however gifted and respected, including J.N. Darby, William Kelly and F.W. Grant, *but from the Word of God*. We can’t emphasize this too strongly because we so often defend our beliefs by quoting what our favorite writers have written or described as their practice. This is only proper if we have searched the Scriptures to ensure that those things are true. However, we do respect and carefully weigh what such godly and spiritually gifted men of the past have said and done.
2. God doesn’t recover all His truth at once, or to any selected handful of men. The above godly and gifted early brethren didn’t always agree. They also modified their views on a number of issues as time went on. When these early brethren came out of the “churches” of men, it was much like the believers in the early chapters of Acts. They didn’t immediately leave that which God was replacing. Certainly Mr. Darby’s 1881 letter on *reception* is much more cautious than some of his previous ones. But, regardless, we also should modify our views as we learn more from God’s Word.

In this regard, can we say that all the truth as to the Assembly and practice as to matters such as reception, were recovered in the 19th century? Did God give further light to those godly and gifted giants among the so-called “brethren” who lived after Darby and Kelly? Strong statements are made by those advocating looser reception and its various off-shoots, that men like A.E. Booth, S. Ridout and F.W. Grant went far beyond Scripture in teaching and practice as to the Assembly in matters such as separation and reception, etc. We don’t think so, although they were as subject to over-reaction as anyone else. But in writing the Assembly Messenger, we have made it a point to seldom quote these brethren, but simply to go to the Scriptures for the proof of our ministry.

3. We must view all writings concerning the *application* of principles in the context of who the author was writing or speaking to, and what were the general conditions prevailing at that time in the local assemblies and in Christianity as a whole. What was the particular letter or article attempting to correct? Often we don’t know. Those writers of the past might be aghast at the uses to which we put their material some 120-170 years later.
4. Men like Darby and Kelly wrote relatively early in the movement of which they were a part, which returned to us a good measure of the truth and practice of the Assembly as God intended it. In the beginning of the Assembly as seen in the early chapters of Acts, as we said earlier, there was not a clean break with what had been in its day where and how the Lord’s people had gathered. This was true even with the highly corrupt condition of Judaism. Eventually, when Hebrews 13 and 2 Timothy were written, a clean

break was demanded: the transition was fully over and opposition and other sin was more and more showing its ugly head. As to the history of the so-called “brethren” movement when Assembly truth and practice were rediscovered, the early writers lived more in Acts-days, as it were, whereas we live in Hebrews 13 and 2 Timothy days. They lived in Philadelphian days; we live in Laodicean days (although we don’t have to be Laodicean in practice, as we have recently seen).

5. We need to be careful not to use only letters, excerpts or other writings on any subject that supports our own views, when other writings are available from the same author which give another side of the story.

A Screening Process?

It is thought by some that the early brethren had no screening process as to who was received among them and, in fact, any screening process would have been in conflict with God's Word. We do not know what screening process those early brethren had in 1828, but we do not agree with the thought. It would allow to the breaking of bread, for example, every Charismatic or Roman Catholic who presented himself, who was a true Christian, regardless of their serious doctrinal and moral sins taught or allowed in their midst.

We have sought to carefully show in the Assembly Messenger that when all Scripture is brought to bear on reception, God *has* a screening process in these days of departure. Reception has four primary requirements — a believer; freedom from moral sin (as defined in Scripture); doctrinal sin; and wrong associations. We are to depart from *adikia* — unrighteousness (2 Tim.2:19), often translated *iniquity*. We believe these are *stringent* requirements, but we believe they are *God's* requirements, not ours. These are summarized in the tic-points below:

- Life in Christ — only for Christians
- Persevere in the apostles' doctrine (Acts 2:42)
- Freedom from a course of serious moral sin (1 Cor.5; 2 Tim.3)
- Freedom from doctrinal sin (Gal.5:9; 2 Tim.2:18; Rom.16:17-18)
- Freedom from wrong ecclesiastical associations (1 Cor.10:18; 5:6; Josh.7; Lev.21:16-24; Ezra 2:61-63; Hag.2:11-13; 2 Cor.6:14-18; 2 Tim.2:19-22; 2 Jn.9-11). God sees us associated with the position we take and people we link up with.
- Departure from unrighteousness (2 Tim.2:18-19) — all that is contrary to the Word.
- Walking *only* with those who pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace, calling on the Lord out of a pure (undivided) heart (2 Tim.2:22).

Occasional Reception from Denominations and Other Such Groups

We believe it would be comparatively rare for a believer to come in among us on an occasion today, desiring to break bread, who met the above requirements of Scripture, but we believe we have to be prepared to honestly and sincerely evaluate every case on its own merit and *never* automatically refuse one simply because he or she is not normally among "us." But we would refuse one who comes, seeking to use "us" for his personal convenience, who doesn't agree with the position we believe to be scriptural, has no desire or intention to be taught the truth as to these matters or to be under the discipline of the assembly, and has every intention to return the next week (or so) to what he *does* agree with, never or seldom to be seen again.

It is suggested that it is wrong to "develop theories why those still attending denominations can never be received to the breaking of bread." It is admitted that many denominations allow doctrinal or moral evil in their midst. But the main concern seems to be that we consider "the denominations themselves to be defiling iniquity rather than just error." See Issue 97-7. We ask, "When is disobedience to God's Word, whether it involves our personal lives, our family lives or our practical assembly walk ... or our sincere convictions ... simply 'error,' something really not very vital?" The things that Paul wrote on the Assembly are "the commandments of the Lord" (1 Cor.14:37).

Scripture says, "Do not let your mouth cause your flesh to sin, nor say before the messenger of God that it was an *error*. Why should God be angry at your *excuse*?" (Ecc.5:6 NKJV). So, is *denominationalism*, which inherently denies the vital doctrines of Christ as the only true gathering-Center and the unity of local churches, simply in itself an error? Does the longevity and universality of a sin downgrade it from evil to simply an "error"? Is the clergy system, which is an integral part of most denominationalism, which effectively denies the priesthood and gift of all believers, and the leading of the Holy Spirit to use whomsoever He wills (1 Cor.12:11), merely an error, especially when God says He *hates* it (Rev.2:6)?

What do you think *God* thinks about these things? It is good to be forced to prayerfully think through these things with an open Bible, comparing Scripture with Scripture.

Legalism

In many comments, there seems to be an undercurrent of counteracting *legalism* — one of those broad but usually undefined terms that bring up images of something horrible and wrong. We will define *legalism* as an individual or assembly forcing views, *not defined in Scripture*, on all, as a rule of conduct for all, a man-made *law*. That is clearly wrong and we reject it wherever found. But it is *not* legalism to seek to maintain the truth and practice of the Word of God, walking a path of Scriptural separation from that which is not according to His Word.

BC and RPD