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Isaac Errett, Our Position

Isaac Errett

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OUR POSITION: A brief statement of the plea for a return to the Gospel and the Church of Apostolic Times, urged by the people known as Disciples of Christ. By Isaac Errett, Editor of the "Christian Standard."

CHAPTER I.

In answer to numerous inquiries and requests, we deem it advisable to set forth, in brief and direct terms, a statement of the position and aims of the Disciples in their plea for a restoration of primitive Christianity. It will not require large space, as our design is not to argue, but simply to state our position. Under three heads we can easily present all that needs to be said:

- I. That in which we agree with the parties known as evangelical.
- II. That in which we disagree with them all.
- III. That in which we differ from some, but not from all of them.

First, then, let us state that much is held by us in common with the parties known as evangelical; nay, there is scarcely anything recognized by them as essential or vital, that is not as truly and as firmly held by us as by them. --290-- We are one with them in holding to and advocating the following items of doctrine:

1. The divine inspiration of the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.
2. The revelation of God, especially in the New Testament, in the tri-personality of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
3. The alone-sufficiency and all-sufficiency of the Bible, as a revelation of the divine character and will, and of the gospel of grace by which we are saved; and as a rule of faith and practice. 4. The divine excellency and worthiness of Jesus as the Son of God; his perfect humanity as the Son of Man; and his official authority and glory as the Christ--the Anointed Prophet, Priest and King, who is to instruct us in the way of life, redeem us from sin and death, and reign in and over us as the rightful Sovereign of our being and Disposer of our destiny. We accept, therefore, in good faith, the

supernatural religion presented to us in the New Testament, embracing in its revelations,

(1) The incarnation of the Logos--the eternal Word of God-- in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

(2) The life and teachings of this divinely --291-- anointed Lord and Savior, as the highest and completest unfolding of the divine character and purposes, as they relate to our sinful and perishing race, and as an end of controversy touching all questions of salvation, duty and destiny.

(3) The death of Jesus as a sin-offering, bringing us redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins.

(4) His resurrection from the dead, abolishing death and bringing life and immortality clearly to light.

(5) His ascension to heaven and glorification in the heavens, where he ever liveth the Mediator between God and Man--our great High Priest to intercede for his people; and our King, to rule until his foes are all subdued and all the sublime purposes of his mediatorial reign are accomplished.

(6) His supreme authority as Lord of all.

5. The personal and perpetual mission of the Holy Spirit, to convict the world of sin, righteousness and judgment, and to dwell in believers as their Comforter, Strengtheners and Sanctifier.

6. The alienation of the race from God, and their entire dependence on the truth, mercy --292-- and grace of God, as manifested in Jesus, the Christ, and revealed and confirmed to us by the Holy Spirit in the gospel, for regeneration, sanctification, adoption and life eternal.

7. The necessity of faith and repentance in order to the enjoyment of salvation here, and of a life of obedience in order to the attainment of everlasting life.

8. The perpetuity of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, as divine ordinances, through all ages to the end of time.

9. The obligation to observe the first day of the week as the Lord's day, in commemoration of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, by acts of worship such

as the New Testament teaches, and by spiritual culture such as befits this memorial day.

10. The church of Christ, a divine institution, composed of such as, by faith and baptism, have openly confessed the name of Christ; with its appointed rulers, ministers and services, for the edification of Christians and the conversion of the world.

11. The necessity of righteousness, benevolence and holiness on the part of professed Christians, alike in view of their own final salvation, and of their mission to turn the world to God.

12. The fullness and freeness of the salvation offered in the gospel to all who accept it on the terms proposed.

13. The final punishment of the ungodly by an everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his power.

These thirteen items certainly present a broad basis of agreement in conceptions of divine truth which may rightfully be termed catholic. It would be passing strange that a people who hold heartily and unequivocally to these fundamental truths and principles should be regarded as unevangelical, did we not know the inveterateness of religious prejudice, and the inevitable lot of all who plead for religious reformation to be misunderstood and misrepresented. Time, however, wears away this prejudice, and as our opponents come out from the mist into a clearer view of the positions they have attacked, they try to believe that we have changed wonderfully from what we were, and are now ALMOST orthodox! They can thus gracefully concede to us the present possession of truth without seeming to confess their own --294-- error in having misapprehended us in the past. But we pause not for controversy on this. It is not of so much importance to know who was right or wrong in the past, as to be sure who is right NOW. We have simply to say that we stand now where we have always stood on the points above stated. We presume not to say that no one among us has ever said anything subversive of any of the truths or principles we have enunciated; for in the controversies of fifty years it must be expected that some unripe or erratic minds would give utterance to some halftruths which are necessarily errors. Nor do we say that even the soundest advocates of our plea have not sometimes been tempted to indulge in partial views and ungrounded utterances. They must have been more than men had they escaped the operation of those laws of mind which govern it in breaking away from extremes, or when absorbed in the discussion of particular points of doctrine. The ultimate result is ultraism in a greater or less degree. But we do say, and wish to be emphatic in saying, that from the first day that this plea for a return to primitive Christianity began, until this day, there --295-- has been no doubt and no

controversy among its leading advocates, and none among the mass of its intelligent adherents, on the thirteen points we have named. Not only have they accepted these teachings, but they have been ready at all times to advocate and defend them against all unbelievers and errorists.

We do not say this with any view to crave a place among the evangelicals. For ourselves we look with increasing indifference on conventional standards of orthodoxy. It is a small thing to be judged by men. We desire to be found standing in the ranks of the honest advocates of truth, whether that advocacy lift us to the approval of the multitude, or sink us under the heaviest ban of the popular will. The frowns of men can not kill, their smiles can not save. Better to share the cross of Jesus than the approval of the multitudes that condemned him. Let us not, therefore, be misunderstood. We write not to soften any angularities in our plea, or to win it favor by any compromise with the opposition. But where there is agreement, for the truth's sake we desire to be understood; and at a time when there is so much need for the united sympathy --296-- and labors of all who love our Lord Jesus Christ, it is important to avoid all false issues and urge no differences that are not real and serious.

We shall be better understood when we state the points of difference.

CHAPTER II.

Particulars in which we Differ from all Others, and in which consequently the Peculiarities of our Plea most Strikingly Appear.

1. While agreeing as to the divine INSPIRATION of the Old and New Testaments, we differ on the question of their equal binding AUTHORITY on Christians. With us, the Old Testament was of authority with JEWS, the New Testament is NOW of authority with CHRISTIANS. We accept the Old Testament as true and as essential to a proper understanding of the New, and as containing many invaluable lessons in righteousness and holiness which are of equal preciousness under all dispensations, but as a BOOK OF AUTHORITY to teach US what WE are to do, the New Testament alone, as embodying the teachings of Christ and his apostles, is our standard.

2. While accepting fully and unequivocally the Scripture statements concerning what is usually called the trinity of persons in the Godhead, we repudiate alike the philosophical and theological speculations of Trinitarians and --298-- Unitarians, and all unauthorized forms of speech on a question which transcends human reason, and on which it becomes us to speak "in words which the Holy Spirit teaches." Seeing how many needless and ruinous strifes have been kindled among sincere believers by attempts to define the indefinable, and to make tests of fellowship of human forms of

speech which lack divine authority, we have determined to eschew all such mischievous speculations and arbitrary terms of fellowship, and to insist only on the "form of sound words," given to us in the Scriptures concerning the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

3. While agreeing that the Bible furnishes an all-sufficient revelation of the Divine will, and a perfect rule of faith and practice, we disagree practically in this; WE ACT CONSISTENTLY WITH THIS PRINCIPLE, and repudiate all human AUTHORITATIVE creeds. We object not to publishing, for information, what we believe and practice, in whole or in part, as circumstances may demand, with the reasons therefor. But we stoutly refuse to accept any such statement as authoritative, or as a test of fellowship, since Jesus Christ alone is Lord of the conscience, and his Word alone can rightfully bind --299-- us. What he has revealed and enjoined, either personally or by His apostles, we acknowledge as binding; where He has not bound us, we are free; and we insist on standing fast in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, carefully guarding against all perversions of said liberty into means or occasions of strife.

4. With us, the Divinity and Christhood of Jesus is more than a mere item of doctrine--it is the central truth of the Christian system, and in an important sense the Creed of Christianity. It is the one fundamental truth which we are jealously careful to guard against all compromise. To persuade men to trust and love and obey a Divine Savior, is the one great end for which we labor in preaching the gospel; assured that if men are right about Christ, Christ will bring them right about everything else. We therefore preach Jesus Christ and him crucified. We demand no other faith, in order to baptism and church membership, than the faith of the heart in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God; nor have we any term or bond of fellowship but faith in this Divine Redeemer and obedience to Him. All who trust in the Son of God and obey Him, are our brethren, however wrong they may be about --300-- anything else; and those who do not trust in this Divine Savior for salvation and obey his commandments, are not our brethren, however intelligent and excellent they may be in all beside. Faith in the unequivocal testimonies concerning Jesus his incarnation, life, teachings, sufferings, death for sin, resurrection, exaltation, and Divine sovereignty and priesthood; and obedience to the plain commands he has given us; are with us, therefore, the basis and bond of Christian fellowship. In judgments merely inferential, we reach conclusions as nearly unanimous as we can; and where we fail, exercise forbearance, in the confidence that God will lead us into final agreement. In matters of expediency, where we are left free to follow our own best judgment, we allow the majority to rule. In matters of opinion that is, matters touching which the Bible is either silent or so obscure in its revelations as not to admit of definite conclusions we allow the largest

liberty, so long as none judges his brother, or insists on forcing his own opinion on others, or on making them an occasion of strife.

5. While heartily recognizing the perpetual agency of the Holy Spirit in the work of con- --301-- version-we repudiate all theories of spiritual operations and all theories of the Divine and human natures which logically rule out the word of God as the instrument of regeneration and conversion, or which make the sinner passive and helpless, regarding regeneration as a miracle, and leading men to seek the evidence of acceptance with God in supernatural tokens or special revelations, rather than in the definite and unchangeable testimonies and promises of the gospel. We require assent to NO THEORY of regeneration, or of spiritual influence; but insist that men shall hear, believe, repent, and obey the gospel--assured that if we are faithful to God's requirements on the human side of things, He will ever be true to himself and to us in accomplishing what is needful on the DIVINE side. Our business is to preach the gospel, and plead with sinners to be reconciled to God; asking God, while we plant and water, to give the increase. We care little for the logic of any theory of regeneration, if we may but persuade sinners to believe, repent, and obey.

6. While agreeing with all the evangelical in the necessity of faith and repentance, we --302-- differ in this: We submit NO OTHER TESTS but faith and repentance, in admitting persons to baptism and church membership. We present to them no Articles of Faith other than the one article concerning the Divinity and Christhood of Jesus; we demand no narration of a religious experience other than is expressed in a voluntary confession of faith in Jesus; we demand no probation to determine their fitness to come into the church; but instantly, on their voluntary confession of the Christ, and avowed desire to leave their sins and serve the Lord Christ, unless there are good reasons to doubt their sincerity, they are accepted and baptized, in the name of the Lord Jesus, and INTO the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. They are thus wedded to CHRIST, and not to a set of doctrines or to a party.

7. We not only acknowledge the perpetuity of baptism, but insist on its meaning, according to the Divine testimonies: "He that believeth and is baptized SHALL BE SAVED." "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, FOR THE REMISSION OF SINS, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." We therefore teach the believing penitent to seek, --303-- through baptism, the divine assurance of the forgiveness of sins, and that gift of the Holy Spirit which the Lord has promised to them that obey him. Thus, in a hearty and scriptural surrender to the authority of the Lord Jesus, and not in dreams, visions, or revelations, are we to seek for that assurance of pardon and that evidence of sonship to which the gospel points us.

The Lord Supper, too, holds a different place with us from that which is usually allowed to it. We invest it not with the awfulness of a sacrament, but regard it as a sweet and precious feast of holy memories, designed to quicken our love of Christ and cement the ties of our common brotherhood. We therefore observe it as part of our regular worship, every Lord's day, and hold it a solemn, but joyful and refreshing feast of love, in which all the disciples of our Lord should feel it to be a great privilege to unite. "Sacred to the memory of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ," is written on this simple and solemn family feast in the Lord's house.

8. The LORD'S day--not the Jewish Sabbath--is a New Testament observance, which --304-- is not governed by statute, but by apostolic example and the devotion of loyal and loving hearts.

9. THE CHURCH OF CHRIST--not sects--is a Divine institution. We do not recognize sects, with sectarian names and symbols and terms of fellowship, as BRANCHES of the Church of Christ, but as unscriptural and anti-scriptural, and therefore to be abandoned for the one Church of God which the New Testament reveals. That God has a people among these sects, we believe; we call on them to come out from all party organizations, to renounce all party names and party tests, and seek only for CHRISTIAN union and fellowship according to apostolic teaching. Moreover, while we recognize the seeming necessity for various denominational movements in the past, in the confusions growing out of the great apostasy, we believe that the time has now fully come to urge the evils and mischiefs of the sect spirit and sect life, and to insist on the abandonment of sects and a return to the unity of spirit and union and co-operation that marked the churches of the New Testament. We therefore urge the word of God against human creeds; faith in Christ against -- 305-- faith in systems of theology; obedience to Christ rather than obedience to church authority; the Church of Christ in place of sects; the promises of the Gospel instead of dreams, visions and marvelous experiences as evidences of pardon; Christian character in place of orthodoxy in doctrine, as the bond of union; and associations for co-operation in good works instead of associations to settle questions of faith and discipline.

It will thus be seen that our differential character is found not in the advocacy of new doctrines or practices, but in rejecting that which has been added to the original simple faith and practice of the Church of God. Could all return to this, it would not only end many unhappy strifes and unite forces now scattered and wasted, but would revive the spirituality and enthusiasm of the early church; as we should no longer need, as in the weakness of sectism, to cater to the world's fashions and follies to maintain a precarious existence, Zion could again put on her beautiful garments and shine in the light of God, and go out in resistless strength to the conquest of the world. To this end, we are not asking any to cast away their confidence in Christ, or to part

with - -306-- aught that is Divine; but to cast away that which is human, and be one in clinging to the Divine. Is it not reasonable? Is it not just? Is it not absolutely necessary, to enable the people of God to do the work of God?

CHAPTER III.

Points in which we Agree with Some, but not with All.

1. In regard to immersion, we agree with all immersionists. The meaning of the Greek term; its literal and metaphorical uses in the New Testament; the incidental allusions to the primitive practice; the testimonies of the ecclesiastical history as to the primitive practice; the testimonies of the leading reformers, such as Luther, Calvin and Wesley, and the admission of a host of lexicographers and critics by practice affusionists, but compelled as scholars to admit the truth as to the meaning of the word and the primitive practice; these have led us to the definite and fixed conclusion that immersion is that which Christ ordained. Moreover, as an effort to restore the primitive CATHOLICITY of the church is a prominent feature in our work, we could not be blind to the fact that immersion is catholic, while sprinkling and pouring are not. The advocates of affusion, while stoutly contending for it as scriptural, nevertheless admit that immersion also is baptism. Some do this --308-- on philological and historical grounds; but even the extremest advocates of affusion, while disputing the philological and historical arguments for immersion, still admit that it will be accepted, on the ground that the FORM is not essential to the THING. So it happily turns out that, by various routes, we can all reach an agreement respecting immersion as baptism, and respecting immersion ONLY. We therefore hold to that which bears the stamp of catholicity, and reject that which lacks it.

2. Touching the SUBJECTS of baptism, we are also in accord with Baptist bodies, and at variance with Pedobaptists. Here, again, are we on catholic ground. There is no controversy as to the baptism of BELIEVERS in Christ; the dispute relates entirely to the baptism of such as do not or can not believe. Infant baptism lacks the stamp of catholicity; believers' baptism has it. 3. As to the DESIGN of baptism, we part company with Baptists, and find ourselves more at home on the other side of the house; yet we can not say that our position is just the same with that of any of them. Baptists say that they baptize believers BECAUSE THEY ARE FORGIVEN, and insist that they shall have --309-- the evidence of pardon before they are baptized. But the language used in the Scriptures declaring what baptism is for, is so plain and unequivocal, that the great majority of Protestants, as well as Roman Catholics, admit it in their creeds to be, in some sense, for the remission of sins. The latter, however, and many of the former, attach to it the idea of regeneration, and insist that in baptism regeneration by the Holy Spirit is actually conferred. Even the Westminster

Confession squints strongly in this direction, albeit, its professed adherents of the present time attempt to explain away its meaning. We are as far from this ritualistic extreme as from the anti-ritualism into which the Baptists have been driven. With us, regeneration must be so far accomplished before baptism that the subject is changed in heart, and in faith and penitence must have yielded up his heart to Christ--otherwise baptism is nothing but an empty form. But FORGIVENESS is something distinct from REGENERATION. Forgiveness is an act of the Sovereign--not a change of the sinner's heart; and while it is extended in view of the sinner's faith and repentance, it needs to be offered in a sensible and tangible --310-- form, such that the sinner can seize it and appropriate it with unmistakable definiteness. In baptism he APPROPRIATES GOD'S PROMISE OF FORGIVENESS, relying on the divine testimonies: "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved." "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." He thus lays hold of the promise of Christ and appropriates it as his own. He does not MERIT it, nor PROCURE it, nor EARN it, in being baptized, but he APPROPRIATES what the mercy of God has provided and offered in the gospel. We therefore teach all who are baptized that if they bring to their baptism a heart that renounces sin and implicitly trusts the power of Christ to save, they should rely on the Savior's own promise--"He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved."

4. In regard to the beginning of the Church of Christ, there is general agreement among leading theologians and ecclesiastical historians to date it from the day of Pentecost succeeding the resurrection of our Lord from the dead; but this is not the view accepted by any of the religious parties as such. Pedobaptist churches --311-- generally teach that the Jewish and Christian churches are the same, the latter being merely an enlargement and improvement of the former. Baptists confine the Church of Christ to the New Testament, but many of them are disposed to date it from the ministry of John the Baptist. With us, it is held that the first church of Christ was planted at Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost referred to, of which we have account in Acts ii; that the Jewish institution, with the authority of Moses as lawgiver, passed away when Jesus bowed his head on the cross and said, "It is finished"; that the lawgiver, the covenant, the laws, the subjects, the promises of the new institution, are different from those of the old; and that from that time onward the terms of salvation, the rules of life, the laws of association, the spirit and genius of religion, are to be learned from Christ and his apostles, and only from Moses and the prophets as these point to those and prepare the way for them. The Bible, therefore, takes on very simple and easy divisions. The Old Testament is introductory to the New. The four gospels present the knowledge of Jesus, and the evidences on which our faith in this Divine Redeemer should rest. The Acts -- 312-- of the Apostles show how the gospel of salvation was preached and accepted--how sinners were made Christians, and were

associated in churches as a spiritual brotherhood. The epistles were addressed to CHRISTIANS, furnishing a knowledge of Christian duties, rights, privileges, dangers, trials, and hopes, and preparing them unto all good works. The Apocalypse is supposed to deal with the fortunes and final destiny of the Church of Christ.

5. In point of church government we agree in the main with Congregationalists and Baptists; but not altogether. The distinction of CLERGY and LAITY is not known among us. All Christians are royal priests to God. Preachers, teachers and rulers are not a caste in any sense. For the sake of order and efficiency we have elders or bishops, deacons, and evangelists; yet in the absence of these our members are taught to meet, to keep the ordinances and encourage each other to love and to good works, and may baptize, administer the Lord's Supper, or do whatever needs to be done to promote their own growth and the salvation of sinners. Nevertheless, as soon as suitable gifts are developed, persons are chosen to act as elders and deacons, and to serve in any other -- 313-- ministry the church may need. The details of government and discipline are left largely with the elders, they being responsible to the church for their doings.

We have no ecclesiastical courts, properly speaking, outside the individual churches; but it is becoming somewhat general now to refer difficult and unmanageable cases to a committee mutually agreed on by the parties concerned--their decision to be final. Our District, State and National assemblies are not for the discussion or decision of matters of doctrine or discipline, but for co-operation in good works.

6. As it relates to the question of UNION, when this movement began, the plea for the union of Christians was peculiar to it. The growth of that sentiment, however, has been so extensive of late years, that it can no longer be said to be peculiar. One important feature of it remains with us as peculiar still. While there is a general confession of the evils of sectarianism, and a general desire to see a union of Christians brought about, no definite basis or plan of union has been presented. Here all are yet groping in the dark, and most are dreaming of attaining to a desirable UNITY with- --314-- out actual union--thus preserving their pet denominationalisms, and at the same time flattering themselves that they are getting away from sectarianism. We have, however, from the first, presented and practiced a definite plan of union. The presentation of this feature of our plea belongs to another chapter.

CHAPTER IV.

In closing this sketch, we wish to fix attention on our attitude to the Union question. There is now a very general acknowledgement of the evils and mischiefs, if not of the actual sin, of sectism. It has not always been so. When this plea for the restoration of

primitive Christianity was first made, its prominent features was [sic!] a denunciation of the folly and wickedness of sects among Christians, and a plea for a restoration of the catholicity of the apostolic churches. This plea had but few sympathizers then. It was met with suspicion, with doubt, with indifference, with cavil and disputation, with storms of denunciation as an undesirable and utopian scheme. There was a united opposition on the part of the denominations generally, because they saw that this doctrine struck at their very roots as denominations, and was directly antagonistical to everything that belonged to mere sect life. Within the last few years, however, a great revolution of public sentiment on this question has developed. It is no longer necessary to argue, in most com- --316-- munities, the DESIRABLENESS of Christian union; that is freely conceded-- nay, more, it is eloquently and ably argued and illustrated by tongues and pens in the various evangelical denominations.

Still it must be confessed that the union movement is in a nebulous state. The subject is handled by most writers in a gingerly way. There is painful evidence that the best minds are cramped by their ecclesiastical associations, and are groping after some scheme of union or of sect-affiliation, that will avoid the sacrifice of party idols, and enable sectarians to secure the blessings of a broader fellowship by paying down but part of the price.

The different phases of this movement may be thus stated: 1. The Broad-church phase. This, if we understand it--as it reveals itself in England--would leave all questions, even the most vital and fundamental, such as the Divinity of Christ and the inspiration of the Scriptures, open to all who, in a general way, will assent to the requirements of the Church of England, or any other State establishment, subject to whatever mental reservations may be necessary in each case; and thus have a National Church --317-- ample enough and liberal enough in its provisions to meet the wants of all. While we see much to admire in the lives and labors of the gifted men who lend the influence of their powerful names to this scheme, we confess to a sort of disgust whenever we stop to think of the sordid POLICY which leads such men to cling to an establishment with whose doctrines and ritual they have no sympathy which would not die out in a day if their LIVINGS were not in question. It is, to say the very least, ungenerous to seek to subvert the very life of the institution on which they are dependent for the bread which gives strength to the hand that strikes the deadly blow at a mother's heart. It is not to the credit of the rationalism of this age that so many of its advocates are meanly subsisting and fattening on the spoils of a religion which they disbelieve, and allowing themselves to cling mercenarily to a false position. The cause of God has nothing to hope for from a source so meanly selfish and corrupt. 2. The UNITY phase--the abstract unionists. These regard UNITY as desirable, but UNION as impracticable. They advocate a moonshiny sentimentalism of catholicity of SPIRIT which they are well assured cannot --318-- be realized in LIFE. They propose that the

sects remain undisturbed in their separate organizations and interests, and merely be put on their best behavior toward each other. The highest aim they propose is a CONFEDERATION of sects for general purposes, in which all agree, leaving all local and rival interests and opposing doctrines to adjust themselves as best they can. How far short this is of any scriptural model, need not be argued here. We can not forbear quoting the language of Isaiah, as finding a not inapt significance here, albeit the original design of it was altogether different: "Say ye not, a confederacy, to all to whom this people shall say, a confederacy; neither fear ye their fear, nor be afraid. Sanctify the Lord of hosts himself, and let him be your fear, and let him be your dread." 3. The Organic Union phase. This finds varied expression. With some it is simply the organic union of kindred sects on common denominational ground, or the making of one big sect out of several smaller ones; leaving further attempts to the subduing influences of time. With others, it is an earnest and avowed attempt to unite the leading evangelical denominations in one, simmering down their --319-- creeds into a few articles of concentrated orthodoxy such as all orthodox Christians can accept, and such as will serve at the same time to fence out all who are suspected of a want of orthodoxy.

From one point of view, we sympathize with all these phases of the union movement. We are glad of every utterance which tends to break down sectarian barriers; of every step which condemns the folly and weakness of denominationalism. It is perhaps needful that just such preparatory measures should be adopted to open the way for something better. It is in the right direction, and the public mind, once led as far away from the old denominational landmarks as these leaders will conduct it, can not well go back into the sectarian fastnesses of the past. But as a CONSUMMATION, none of these proposed measures is devoutly to be wished. "They do but skin and film the ulcerous place." They fail to reach the roots of the disease, and they timidly propose no more than a temporary expedient.

Let us now state the doctrine of Christian Union as taught and practiced by us.

1. It frankly avows not only the folly, but the SIN of sectarianism, and teaches that, just --320-- as any other sin, it must be abandoned. It proposes no compromise whatever with denominationalism, but insists that party names, party creeds, and party organizations, being in direct contravention of the teachings of Christ, must be forsaken. It distinguishes between sects going away from the Church of God into Babylon, and sects coming back from Babylon, seeking to find the Church of God. With these latter it has much sympathy, and offers for their imperfect yet important and salutary movements in reformation, many apologies. Still it insists that the return from Babylon to Jerusalem is incomplete so long as rival and jarring sects are found in place of the one catholic apostolical church of primitive times.

2. It insists that unity and union are practicable; that in the first age of the church our Lord and his apostles did establish one grand spiritual brotherhood, and did embrace in it men of all classes and nationalities, however diverse or antagonistical their sentiments, tastes, and habits may previously have been; and that the Christless condition of society at that time presented much greater obstacles in the way of such a union than any that are --321-- found now among the professed followers of Christ. The difficulties should therefore be manfully met in the face and overcome.

3. It proposes simply a return, "in letter and in spirit, in principle and in practice," to the original basis of doctrine and of fellowship. Seeking after this it finds,

(1) That all who put their trust in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, and for His sake left their sins and renounced all other lordships, were at once accepted as worthy to enter this fellowship. FAITH IN THE DIVINE LORD AND SAVIOR WAS THE ONE ESSENTIAL CONDITION OF ENTRANCE. None could enter without faith--infant membership was therefore impossible. None who had faith could be refused admission--no other test was allowed but that of faith in and submission to Jesus, the Christ. We therefore proclaim, in opposition to all big and little creeds of Christendom, THAT THE ORIGINAL CREED HAS BUT ONE ARTICLE OF FAITH IN IT, NAMELY: That Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. All doctrinal tests but this must be abandoned.

(2) That all such believers were admitted into this fellowship by baptism, upon the authority of Jesus Christ, into the name of the --322-- Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. We have said in a former chapter, that there ought to be no stumbling here if there is indeed a desire for union; since all admit that immersion is baptism, and nothing else is admitted by all. It can only be the stubbornness of the sect-spirit that prevents union in that which all can accept. The only real difficulty here in the way relates to those who have received pouring or sprinkling in adult years, and have conscientious scruples about repeating, as they would regard it, an obedience already rendered. These, however, are exceptional cases, and would soon adjust themselves if it were once settled that nothing should hereafter be practiced but that which all agree to be sufficient.

(3) That among those baptized believers there was no spiritual caste--no distinction of clergy and laity; but all were brethren, and none was to be called Master or Father. The order of the church must harmonize with this. Nothing must be insisted on as of Divine authority, or be made a test of fellowship, for which there is not a THUS SAITH THE LORD, in express precept or approved precedent.

(4) In all matters where there is no express --323-- precept or precedent, the law of love should lead us to that which will promote edification and peace.

(a) In matters merely inferential, unanimity is to be sought, but not forced.

(b) In matters merely prudential, the majority should rule, care being had, however, not to transcend the limits of expediency by contravening any Divine precept; and regard always being had to the prejudices and the welfare of all.

(c) Where Christ has left us free, no man has a right to judge his brother. The largest liberty is here allowed, limited only by the spirit of the apostolic teaching: "If meat cause my brother to stumble, I will eat no meat while the world stands."

Such is, in brief, what we propose as a basis of union. We have no desire for mere organic union any faster than a supreme love for Christ leads to unity of spirit, and prepares men for the voluntary sacrifice of all but Christ.

We have no faith in the practicability of uniting sects on any merely sectarian basis, however liberal. It can not be Christian union unless it is union in Christ--in that which Christ enjoins, neither less nor more. The --324-- present unwillingness, with all the prevalent union sentiment, to abandon sectarian names and interests, proves how unavailing all attempts at a union of parties, as such, must prove. We do not, therefore, propose the union of sects; but call on all the people of God in the various sects to come out from them and unite in the faith and practice of the New Testament. We propose in this way to subvert sectarianism--calling the lovers of Jesus out from sects, and leavening those who refuse to come with the doctrine of the New Testament until they too shall be ready to give up the sect for Christ.

CHAPTER V.

OBJECTIONS TO OUR POSITION.

There are some objections to the plan of union on which we are acting which deserve attention.

I. That while we profess to repudiate everything sectarian and to advocate only that which is catholic, we do practically establish a sectarian test--admitting none but those

who accept our INTERPRETATION of the meaning of baptism. An affusionist is not allowed to have his own interpretation, but must bend to ours.

This, if true, would be a serious objection. But, in truth, it is not, with us a question of INTERPRETATION at all, but of TRANSLATION. We propose to unite with all believers in Christ Jesus ON THE WORD OF GOD--to accept what it teaches, and do what it commands. As the word of God was not originally spoken or written in English, we must have it translated in such words as will faithfully convey "the mind of the Spirit." What we must insist on is, that BAPTIZO is not fairly represented in English by pour, or sprinkle, or wash, but by dip, plunge, immerse. --326-- This being so, a faithful translation leaves no necessity for party interpretation as to the thing required to be done. We repeat, therefore, that we impose our interpretations on none; we simply ask that the word of God be faithfully translated. The question is philological.

If it be said that there is doubt as to the proper translation of the original term, we reply: No more doubt than can be raised over any other term that men may choose to dispute about; not so much as may be plausibly urged against many other leading terms in the New Testament, and none that can present a serious obstacle to union, provided the SPIRIT of union is in the ascendant. This will be apparent in the light of the following statements:

1. All the lexicographers of note give dip, plunge, immerse as the literal meaning of BAPTIZO.
2. Ecclesiastical history clearly proves not only that immersion was the primitive practice, but that it continued to be the general practice for over twelve centuries.
3. The Greek Church has always practiced it, and continues to practice it to this day.
4. The Western or Roman Catholic Church --327-- freely admits that the original practice was immersion, and does not pretend to base its present practice on the meaning of the word, or the authority of Scripture; but claims that the CHURCH has authority to change the ordinances. Both affusion and infant membership are maintained on the ground of TRADITION, by the Roman Catholics, it being freely admitted that they are not to be proved from Scripture alone.
5. Affusion and infant membership obtained a footing among the Reformers AS AN INHERITANCE FROM ROME, and not on the ground of Scripture

authority. They imported them from Babylon as the fruits of their religious training, found themselves in possession of them, and were put to it to find some authority from Scripture to justify them.

6. Luther, Calvin and Wesley all admitted frankly that immersion was the apostolic practice. Calvin justified sprinkling, on the ground that the church had the authority to modify the FORM somewhat, retaining the SUBSTANCE; but, he added, "the word baptize signifies to immerse, and IT IS CERTAIN that immersion was the practice of the ancient church."

7. Immersion was that which the rubric of the Church of England required at the time the --328-- Presbyterians came into power in England and formed their Directory for Public Worship. They changed it so as to read that sprinkling was not only lawful, but sufficient, and carried it by the casting vote of the Moderator--no one presuming to deny the lawfulness of immersion.

When we add to these considerations what we said in a previous number--that immersion can be accepted by all as valid baptism--it will be seen that we are neither attempting to impose an interpretation on any, nor to tyrannize over the conscience of any. We insist on that which the word of God enjoins, and which all can accept without a sacrifice of conscience.

II. It is objected that the creed which we submit is too broad- -it will let in heretics of various stripes, and the church will soon be loaded down with an intolerable burden of error.

To this we reply:

1. That the question to be met is not, is this good policy? or, What will come of it?--let such inquiries be put when nothing more sacred than mere expedients are in question--but, Was this the primitive practice? Is this - -329-- what the apostles taught? It is beyond controversy that, in preaching the gospel and turning sinners to Christ, the apostles knew and were determined to know nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified. It is equally certain that they received sinners to baptism upon their avowed faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God. It is not impious on our part to question the wisdom of heaven's arrangements and ordinations? How dare we impose either doctrinal or practical barriers where they imposed none?

2. The human inventions by which it has been sought to keep out heresy and heretics have not been successful. They have made more heresy than they have cured or prevented, and, in place of preventing the increase of parties, have

been the fruitful sources of division. If sometimes they have kept out those who were unsound in the faith, have they not also kept out many of whom God would accept--kept them out because they could not accept the traditions of men? The practical result of human tests is not seen in a united nor yet in a pure church, but quite the reverse.

3. If men are ever persuaded to love and trust in Jesus as a Divine Savior, they can --330-- readily be brought right about all else. The normal development of the love of Christ as the sovereign power in the soul will conquer and annihilate errors much more readily than the assertion of merely human authority or a formal assent to church dogmas. The early converts to Christianity had many errors in possession, as is evident from the New Testament history; but the apostles evidently trusted that they would outgrow them as rapidly as they advanced in the knowledge and love of Christ. They therefore left them as undisturbed in their possession SO LONG AS THEY DID NOT SEEK TO IMPOSE THEM ON OTHERS, or so long as these errors did not subvert their faith in Christ. The apostles were jealous of everything that would move men's confidence away from Christ or supplant His authority; they were tolerant in all beside. Let us here quote the words of another: "Put Christ in your temple, and whatever ought not to be there will depart at his bidding. Is your congregation disturbed by the presence of birds or beasts that defile it? Open the door to Him and give Him full possession, for He alone has the power to drive them out. Is the temple of your heart infested with the --331-- beasts of selfishness, which show their presence in the works of the flesh? You can not expel them by your will alone. Put Christ in your temple. "There are yet those who are vainly trying to cleanse the temple of its falsehood by a scourge of small cords of doctrine spun out of their own brain. There are those who are seeking to expel from churches organs, festivals, etc., by the force of their own personal menaces; and there are not wanting those who are seeking to cleanse their own lives by their low keeping in their own strength. Put Christ in your temples, and whatever ought not to be there He will drive out." (Alex Procter)

4. It may be possible to unite men in the faith and love of Jesus, the Christ, so as to have one common brotherhood in all the earth, inspired by a common faith, and hope, and love; but it is not possible to establish a catholic brotherhood on any creed of man's devising. The really catholic church--the only true Catholic Church--that of the first and second centuries--had no human creed.

III. It is argued that there is much beyond the Divinity of Christ taught in the Scriptures, --332-- and that, if Christians are to be properly instructed, the truths of the Bible must be faithfully taught.

Answer:

1. Unquestionably. These truths, disciples are to learn AFTER THEY COME INTO THE CHURCH, but they are not tests by which they are admitted. Teachers should fully instruct the church in all that the Bible teaches, but the members are not bound to receive such instructions any further than they see them established by Scripture testimony. But if the teacher becomes heretical--what then? Let the church cease to employ him in that capacity.

2. There is a class of speculative questions which can not enter into the teaching of the pulpit, and which can have no proper place in a creed, because they are not questions of FAITH, but of OPINION; yet their discussion may, in a philosophical point of view, be valuable. All these questions should be relegated to the schools of philosophy where they belong, and there should be freely discussed without danger of ecclesiastical interference.

IV. It is objected that the clashing interests of the various systems of church government will not allow of union.

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We reply that when the spirit of Christ shall become superior to the pride of sect, no question of church polity will be allowed to divide Christians. Church government does not stand among the terms of salvation. If, as is generally argued, the Scriptures give us no definite form of church government, and therefore these various forms have grown up according to necessity, it is evident that they can COME DOWN again according to a new necessity; and he is not acting as a Christian who would allow anything not Divine to stand in the way of the union of the people of God. We do not care to discuss this question more particularly now, because we are satisfied that when all other grave difficulties shall have been overcome, this one will not long be allowed to stand.

V. We can never unite in non-essentials.

True; and it would not be worth much if we did. That is just the line we draw. In essentials--in that which is plainly taught and ordained as the will of God, we must be one; in non-essentials--in all that Christ has not taught and enjoined--we must be left free, guided only by that law of love which will ever lead us to seek the things that make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another.