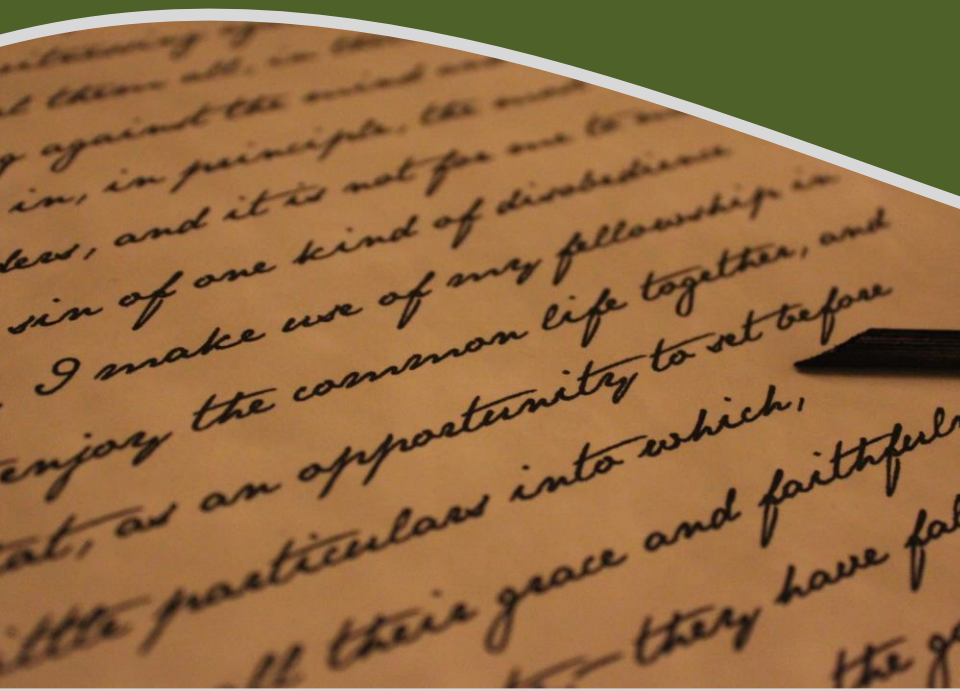


BEARING WITNESS TO THE ORIGINAL PRINCIPLES OF THE EARLY BRETHREN:

As Found in a Letter Written by A. N. Groves
to J. N. Darby in 1836
(Updated Version)



Including Some Excerpts from his Journal

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Assembly Bookshelf
Sacramento

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and Concluding Thoughts by B.P. Harris
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PREFACE

Because some readers find the grammatical style, language, and syntax of the early 19th Century difficult to understand, we have attempted to update this letter from A. N. Groves to J. N. Darby with the language, syntax and grammar of the 21st Century. In some places this required the wholesale conversion of sentences, rewritten with equivalent words and terminology; and in other places, an additional sentence or two, added for clarification. This does not mean we changed the general tenor of the letter; it simply means it has been updated to facilitate greater ease of understanding (We tried to limit our changes as much as possible, even if, in some cases, it meant keeping some awkward syntax.)

However, in ventures such as this, it becomes a danger for one to inadvertently insert one's own prejudices and biases into the text. Please be assured this danger was duly recognized and an honest and forthright attempt was made to prevent this from happening. For this reason, the original letter, as written in 1836, is also provided at the end of this updated version, so the reader can compare the two and decide for themselves if our attempt to modernize this important letter was done without any prejudice or bias.

The section entitled "Concluding Thoughts," was not written by A. N. Groves. We include it with the hope that it will give context to our brother's prophetic insight. The principles he bore witness to are as applicable today as they were in his own day. We hope it challenges us to reexamine the biblical basis of our assemblies and the "raison d'etre" of our gatherings.

B.P.H.
Sacramento, CA

The Letter of A. N. Groves written to J. N. Darby

(Updated Version)

Milford Haven, March 10th, 1836.

My Dear D__

As stormy weather threatens a little delay, I did not want to leave England without first writing to you a few words in response to your notes, as well write to you as a few words about some other points that interest me.

I have ever regretted having had so few opportunities of seeing and conversing with you since my return to England. Such fellowship might have allowed us to depart, on the whole, more happily than now; yet, please be assured that nothing has alienated my heart from yours, or lowered my confidence that you are still being motivated by the same open and generous *purposes* that won and captured my heart as well.¹ And even though I feel you have departed from our original *principles*, (which I know you had hoped would allow our original *purposes* to be realized), and, though I fear you might be in danger of returning back to the narrow mindset of the religious *system* you

¹ One of the main purposes that animated them both was their desire to see the unity of the Spirit practically manifested among all God's children on earth.

left,² I still feel your heart remains committed before God to our very first *principles*; and, with but a simple reminder or two, I feel your heart will be able to see all the evils of all the systems³

² A. N. Groves did not use the phrase “religious system” in this sentence; he simply used the word “system,” as, indeed, he did throughout this letter. However, in most cases we expanded the word to “religious system,” “man-made religious system,” or “man-made traditional system.” In one case, we even changed it to “denominational association.” We did this because he used the word “system” in its broadest sense. To him, it not only meant the different denominations within the Church, but also the many different Christian organizations within the Church that were formed to facilitate the Lord’s work, not only at home, but also abroad. However, he viewed the systems as having this common bond, their adoption of man-made traditions in contradistinction to the dictates of God’s Word. But, he always tried to see beyond the man-made traditions, wherever and whenever he could, to the Christians, themselves, within those systems.

³ It should be noted that in this time period, “evil,” as used in the original letter to Darby, did not just refer to the moral sins of the flesh, such as drunkenness, adultery, licentiousness, and the like. It also referred to those hidden sins and moral failures of the soul that one will always find when man-made traditions are introduced into the Church. It referred to such hidden sins and moral failures as pride, envy, jealousy, narrow sectarian spirits, clerical mindsets, or doctrines thought to be in error, for instance, doctrines like infant baptism, etc. (of course, it excluded those doctrines having to do with the essentials of the Faith). **A. N. Groves would never condone any evil doctrine or evil having to do with outward sins of the flesh—all for the sake of unity.** In fact, in his journal he states a true Christian should never remain under the ministry of one who is a perverter of truth; rather a true Christian should leave. Because of this, and in order to prevent any misunderstanding, I have changed the word “evil” to “error” in many cases, although, I have left it as evil in not a few places.

(from which you profess to be separated), actually springing up among yourselves.

I do not believe you will be able to recognize this evil so much by the workings of your own soul,⁴ but you will see it plainly manifested by the spirit of those who follow you, those who have always been taught that their way is the only true way. And because they have never experienced the deep suffering and sorrow that you, and those earliest connected with you experienced, they will not realize that even in a religious system where much darkness might prevail, real truth and love can exist.⁵ As such, they will tend to have little pity and sympathy for those Christians within those same man-made religious systems.

Moreover, when that lack of pity and sympathy is coupled together with the growing conviction within your midst, that fellowship, or union together, is based upon one's agreement in doctrine and opinion, rather than being based upon *life* and *love*, you will find yourself once again in a system governed by human authority and man-made opinion (even though that will never be admitted). You will be known more by what you witness *against*, than what you witness *for*; and in the end, you will find yourself witnessing against everyone else but yourself. You may be able to pronounce the Shibboleth⁶ correctly, but in

⁴ I believe A. N. Groves is saying this because in his heart he still believed Darby was open and generous as before, and simply needed to be reminded of this.

⁵ I believe he is referring to the time when Darby was still a curate in the Church of Ireland, ministering in love to those in his care.

⁶ Shibboleth was a word that meant "stream." It was used in the dispute between Jephthah, the Gileadite, and the tribe of Ephraim, as recorded for us in Judges 12:1-7. In the account, those wishing to cross

reality, you will be no different than the Walkerites or the Glassites,⁷ who, also having a narrow-minded attitude, believed their way was the only true way.

the Jordan were asked to say Shibboleth, as is recorded for us in verses 5 and 6. "And the Gileadites captured the fords of the Jordan opposite Ephraim. And it happened when any of the fugitives of Ephraim said, "Let me cross over," the men of Gilead would say to him, "Are you an Ephraimite?" If he said, "No," then they would say to him, "Say now, 'Shibboleth.'" But he said, "Sibboleth," for he could not pronounce it correctly. Then they seized him and slew him at the fords of the Jordan. Thus there fell at that time 42,000 of Ephraim."

The point being made was this: even though they might not sound like the Walkerites and Glassites, and even though they might be able to speak just like the early brethren, and even though they might be able to fool some brethren, the fact of the matter will remain, they are no different than the Walkerites or the Glassites; they have the same sectarian spirit.

⁷ The Walkerites were a sect that was founded in the year 1804 by one who had been a cleric in the Church of Ireland – the Rev. John Walker, while the Glassites (sometimes spelled Glasites), were a sect that was founded almost 75 years before in 1730 by a Scottish minister by the name of John Glas. This short dissertation below, found in *The Primitive Church Magazine* in the year 1864, will shed some light on these two sects.

“The two most sectarian bodies of Protestants in the kingdom are, I suppose, the Glasites or Sandemanians, and Walkerites or Separatists. Whilst these two bodies hold much divine truth, and, no doubt, some errors in common, yet they decline to hold any religious fellowship with each other, or with any other sect whatever. The Glasites "deem it essential to Christian fellowship that, in the minutest peculiarities, the members should be agreed. In doctrinal matters they do not materially differ from other evangelical Christians. Among their characteristic

Now, I know some of those with you, like brother W__⁸ and others, claim I have changed my principles. I have not. In fact, they are ten times more precious to me now than they were all those years ago when I first discovered them in the Word of God, especially since I have now practiced them in many different situations within the confused state of the Church. Those principles have allowed me to view every Christian and group of Christians with the *standing* God gives them, without

practices and observances are, the weekly celebration of the Lord's supper, love feasts—the kiss of charity—plurality of bishops, or elders in the congregation—mutual exhortation—the use of the lot—abstinence from things strangled, and blood—and washing the feet of the faithful. Not only do they hold it unscriptural to join with others in the Lord's supper who reject these peculiarities, but they will neither unite with them in prayer, nor hold any spiritual communion with them whatever. They are good and kind members of society; but, as Christians, they shut themselves up from holding fellowship of any kind, or in any degree, with the other avowed friends of Christ. I once knew an excellent lady who was excluded from a Glasite church, because she gave a subscription to a Bible Society, that being interpreted as an act of religious fellowship. Both the Glasites and Walkerites admit that there may be disciples scattered among the other sects; but hold that they are not warranted to recognize them as such, until they come out of the religious world, and join the Church of Christ, which, according to the Glasites, is the Glasite denomination, and according to the Walkerites, is the Walkerite denomination, for neither of these denominations will acknowledge the other as a church of Christ, though there is scarcely a hair's breadth of difference between them, either as it regards faith or practice. Much as I respect both these bodies for their conscientious adherence to the Word of God, I deeply regret their extreme exclusiveness.” *The Primitive Church Magazine*, vol. XXI, (Elliot Stock, London, 1864), pg.268

⁸ It seems, in all likelihood, this refers to G. V. Wigram.

ever having to countenance any of the error that might be in their midst.

I always understood our principle of fellowship to be this—the possession of the common life, found in the common cleansing of the blood of Christ (for the life is in the blood); these were our early thoughts, these were our first principles, and they still are to me. I have not abandoned them as I have matured in my Christian life.

However, this transformation, which has occurred in those little bodies (assemblies) who follow you, who witness against all that they judge as error rather than witness for the glorious truth I just mentioned, has caused your witness, in my humble opinion, to fall from that of our glorious standing found in heaven to one of the earth.

What I mean is this: back at the beginning, we were all concerned about how we, ourselves, might effectively manifest forth the common life we had received from Jesus, knowing that only his life could speak and minister to those who shared that same life. And when we found that life in others, and when we were persuaded it was genuine, we invited them, on the basis of that Divine life, to come and share with us in the fellowship of the common Spirit—all in order to worship our common head, the Lord Jesus Christ. And, since Christ had received them, we also received them to the glory of God the Father (whether their thoughts on other matters of the Church were narrow or enlarged). And not only that, we ourselves were free, within the limits of the truth, to fellowship with them in *part*, even though we knew we could never do so in *all*—we knew we could not share or fellowship with them in all their ways or services.

In fact, as we *received* them for their possession of that common life of Jesus, we never *rejected* them because of any denominational association, nor did we ever refuse to recognize

certain *parts* of their religious system, simply because we disallowed *much* within that same religious system.

We did this because we felt that if this intercommunion or fellowship could be established, we might effect our original purposes. We felt it would be upheld by God, as the Christ-like means of witnessing against any darkness that might be found, all according to the example of the Lord given to us in John 3:19: “This is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil, neither will they come to the light lest their deeds should be reprov’d.” We felt that, as we walked in such light, this desire of Christ would come to fruition. Granted, this openness of ministry might be the more difficult means of witness (than one of simply of preaching against error with words, or keeping oneself separated from others), but it possesses more power over the hearts of men and provides a better opportunity to bless them. I know, dear brother, you know this, because of your own experiences in this type of witness.

However, the moment we abandon this principle of receiving all who Christ receives because of our possession of the common life of Jesus, and rather, adopt a position of separating ourselves from other brethren, with a mindset that only preaches against their errors with words (that is, errors or doctrines that have nothing to do with the essential doctrines of the Faith), then, at that moment, every Christian, or every group of Christians, will become suspect. The first thought in our mind will become, “What needs to be set straight in our brother’s life, or what false interpretation needs to be corrected.” No longer will it be enough to examine whether or not they are Christians, rather a standard will be set up where all their conduct and principles will first have to be examined and approved before they can be received. This mindset will *inevitably lead to the*

most bigoted and narrow-minded in our midst becoming the judges of all. Why? Because it's not in *the nature of a bigoted and narrow-minded conscience to yield.* Thus, those among us with an open and enlarged heart will find themselves forced to yield to the strictures of narrow-minded consciences.

Toward this position or mindset, dear D__, I feel some little flocks are racing, if they have not already attained it. They make *light not life* the measure of communion or reception. And if that was not enough, I am told by our beloved brethren, C__ and H__,⁹ that if I do not accept this narrow-minded standard of witnessing against error, if I do not follow this *peculiar way of separating myself* from other Christians or systems where such evil might be present, I will be accused of unpardonable schism. And why is this so? Simply because I might join in fellowship with other systems or bodies? I suppose no one expects me to fully know the ground of *their* actions, but I thought I knew *yours*, at least your *original* one.

Was this not our ground, was this not the principle we laid down at first regarding any separation from existing bodies, was it not simply this: we would only feel ourselves bound to separate from any individuals or religious systems, if and only if, 1) they required us to do something our consciences would not allow, or, 2) they kept us from practicing something our consciences required? Was this not the extent of our separation?

Were we not, in those early days, free to join and act with any Christian, or group of Christians, as long as those same groups did not require us to violate our consciences either by requiring us to do what we felt we could not do, or restrict us

⁹ The first reference might refer to R. C. Chapman, or, perhaps Henry Craik. The second reference might refer to William Hake, although, as far as I know, there is no way to know for sure.

from doing what we felt we should do? And in this freedom, did we not also feel that brethren should not force their own liberty on others who were hesitant, nor seek to take away the liberty from those who were already free? Did we not feel constrained to follow the apostolic rule of not judging other men's consciences by our own consciences in regard to certain liberties? Did we not feel this way because we remembered it was written, "Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat, judge him who eats; for God has received him?" And so we felt we should not force our liberty on the one who was hesitant (Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat.), nor take away the liberty of the one who was free. (Let not him who does not eat judge him who eats).

Now, no doubt, it is true, a violation of one of these two cardinal points will end up dividing me *in some measure* from every man-made religious system. Why? Because with the former, a person will demand me to do something the Lord does not require me to do, and with the latter, a person will prevent me from doing what I feel the Lord commands me to do. But the important point to remember in all of this is that which divides me is not my witnessing against THEIR evils, but my *obedience* or *own proper* duty to God. Every man-made traditional system will always, by definition, be narrower or wider than the truth of God's Word, so I will always have to stop short or go beyond its requirements, but in all this I would INFINITELY RATHER BEAR *with all their errors*, than be required to SEPARATE from THEIR GOOD!

These, then, were the principles of our separation and intercommunion with other Christians, and/or Christian groups; we had resolved never to try to get them to accept what we accepted, or see what we could plainly see, further than they

FELT they could in their own consciences. We resolved never to try to get them to accept our views either by condescending frowns or smiles—a frown when they would not agree with us, or a condescending smile, when they would acquiesce to our views; and this was resolved for one simple reason, we saw we had no authority from God to act in such a manner.

Additionally, nothing in our experience ever led us to feel such would be the best means of promoting their blessing, or of bringing about our desired goal of Christian unity and uniformity of judgment. In fact, we found that adopting such an attitude actually created an *outlet* for the *proclivities* of the *flesh* (all under a guise of spiritual authority and zeal for the truth).

But in all these matters, we always desired our way might be bright as light, and our words might drop noiselessly as the dew, and if, at the last, our brethren remained “otherwise minded,” we would simply seek God, and pray that He, Himself, might be the One to reveal it to them one day.

But, instead, what is now developing in your midst is a mindset that is no different than that which you once opposed; it is almost as if when weak, you could be generous and open, but now that you have gained strength and grown, you are allowing the same spirit of sectarianism to spring up within your midst. The idea now binding you together is this: “Is a fellow believer one of us?” That has become your overriding bond; whereas, before, the overriding bond was simply this—the oneness of life—the oneness that was based upon the power of God’s life residing in the soul of every believer.

I know it is said (dear Lady Powerscourt told me so), that as long as you continued to minister to those within the Church of England (obviously, in those areas where you did not have to compromise your conscience), they bore your testimony most patiently; but after you abandoned that principle of

communion, and, instead, decided to reject them, they pursued you with unswerving resentment. Moreover, I was told that their resentment and opposition to you was actually used for the purpose of proving that our original position, or ground of acting, was wrong, and that your new principle of narrowness is correct.

But the only thing I see in this change of position is this: before abandoning these principles, you had the ability to witness in those systems against the same things that even they (having the same Divine life within them), were able to see as error. And, you only had to separate yourself from them SO FAR as you had to—from those things that were clearly contrary to the mind of Christ. And by ministering in this manner, you forced them to become the judges of themselves, condemning those errors in their midst by their own judgment!

Did this not help them grow, dear brother? It allowed their own heavenly affections to surface (caused by your ministering to them in love in areas where you could), while, at the same time, it allowed you to keep yourself free from the dross of the error that was still in them, and, of which, you could not in clear conscience countenance.

But the moment your position changed and you separated yourself not only from their error, but also from their *good*, the moment you produced a complete rejection of them (because of the errors of their system), without any discrimination between their good and the evil, you no longer had their consciences or their hearts with you. They felt you had set *yourself* up over them as *judge and jury* (even though you were just a brother, like them, in the Father's house). They felt that you began to act more like a father, than a brother in a father's house, and that you began to exercise the Father's power, without the Father's heart of mercy. Therefore, it halted their

progress; it hardened their willing heart, and it caused them to take your verdict to a higher court, to make an appeal directly to God, the Judge of us all, not only for themselves, but also for their systems.

There is no truth more established in my own mind than this: if one wishes to have the most power in leading fellow believers out of error and into truth, one must stand before those brethren as one who is *genuinely* filled with the desire that they grow in grace (rather than being one who simply stands before them always judging their motives and slightest failures)—this proves to them that your heart is given over to them with a love that will cover a multitude of sins. It also proves to them that you have their best interest at heart, and that your heart is not simply filled with righteous and arbitrary judgments.

The reason I send this letter to you, rather than to H __ and C__¹⁰ (whose faith and love I truly desire to emulate), is because we were the first to act on these principles. They have written to me two very long and kind letters, which I hope to fully answer in a little tract that I will write for them on my voyage home, and which, I will then hope to publish as a small booklet.

I particularly regret not being able to get together with you at Bristol. I had so much I wanted to say to you relative to Rhenius,¹¹ and other things connected with India. Naturally, my

¹⁰ Perhaps, this first reference might refer to J. L. Harris of Plymouth. The second reference might refer to J. Clulow, also of Plymouth. However, as said before, there is no way to know for sure.

¹¹ Karl Rhenius was a Lutheran working with the Church Missionary Service, the missionary arm of the Church of England, in the southern

heart would seek sympathy and fellowship with you, and with those dear brethren with whom I have no differing thoughts concerning those great and powerful truths which underlie the Gospel of peace, nor with those with whom I have no difference of thought regarding our liberty of ministry. In fact, my only real difference with you is the “way” in which you have decided to maintain your witness for the good against the evil.¹² Let me explain.

If I was an invited visitor to a household with many servants, I do not think anyone would expect me to be accountable for the way in which that house was managed; nor do I think they would expect that just because I was there as a visitor, I would necessarily approve of all those things that might occur in that household.

However, if someone came to a house where it seemed that I was the one having the say in how the household was managed, then it would only be natural for such a one to hold me accountable for the way it was governed; but let’s say it was afterward revealed to that person that I was not the only one making the decision as to how the household was governed, but in reality, I was only one among many family members making that decision.¹³ No honest mind would make me responsible for

tip of India at Tinnevely. He was a missionary instrumental in bringing many souls to the Lord. Eventually, he was forced to leave CMS, but he continued his work, in close fellowship with A. N. Groves. Karl Rhenius appreciated, and later adopted, some of the same principles espoused by A. N. Groves.

¹² As a reminder for this definition of evil, please see footnote number three.

¹³ Perhaps he might be referring to a rich household where parents and other married siblings might all be living together in one large mansion, much like occurs sometimes with the royal family in England.

all those faults, against which, with my limited power and ability, I had amply protested—especially, if it was found that I had chosen, in my liberty, to put up with the decisions of those other family members because I was hoping, that with a little more time, I might change their mind for the better, whereas, I knew, that if I left in protest, there would never be any hope of changing those faults, resulting in things only getting worse, not only for the servants, but also for the other members of my family.

But, in spite of this example, if fellow believers still find they cannot understand these distinctions of mine, if they find no benefit in my witness, simply because I will not *physically* separate from all those genuine, but erring brethren, knowing full well, of course, that I have never countenanced their *errors*—my only answer to them is, “It is our Lord’s place to judge, and it is before Him that we are called to prove our hearts. I am content to stand or fall before Him in this matter.”

Did you know, dear brother, that some will not have me hold communion with the Scotts, because their views are not satisfactory about the Lord’s Supper? Others will not have me hold communion with you, because of your views about baptism! And others will not have me join in fellowship with those from the Church of England, because of her thoughts about ministry. But based upon my principles of communion, I *receive* them all; but based upon your principle of witnessing against error, I must reject them all (including you!).

Now, I do find each one, in certain particulars, *sinning* against the revealed mind and heart of Christ; they are allowing in their churches, in principle, the most tremendous disorders, but it is not for me to measure the comparative sin of one kind of disobedience against another. And because of that, I make full use of my fellowship of Spirit to enjoy our common life together.

And, because I base my fellowship on that common life of God, that life that is found in every believer, I find that I have many opportunities, not only to bear witness to the truth, but also to set before them those errors—those very small particulars into which, notwithstanding all their grace and faithfulness, and all their godliness and honesty—they have fallen.

I shall never feel that separation from the *good* in other believers (because of certain errors), to be the best way of witnessing against those errors, that is, until I see infinitely clearer, than I do now, that that is God’s desired way.

Naturally, I will always unite together in a constant and fixed fellowship with those in whom I see and feel the life and power of God most fully manifested. But, at the same time, I will always be free to visit and to minister to brethren in other churches, where, indeed, I might find much disorder, just as I will always be free to visit the houses of my friends, friends who might not govern their households in the same way that I might govern them. And it is for this reason, as I have previously stated, I would feel it equally unreasonable and unkind for any brother to judge me for the former kind of “visit,” as I would if he judged me for the latter kind of “visit” (though, of course, I would never deny him the perfect liberty to judge such issues for *himself*).¹⁴

¹⁴ It must be remembered that this was written from the perspective of one who ministered in the broad mission field of India, where, when traveling, fellowship would be limited and fellow believers would be few and far between. As such, since many assemblies had not yet been established in India, one would naturally visit any Christian that might be found in a particular place, regardless of his or her denominational affiliation, or his or her missionary affiliation. This was the thought behind his imagery of visiting a house of a friend.

In conclusion, dear brother, you must not think (from anything I have written or said in this letter), that I will not freely and fully write to you about the things in India. I feel assured in my own heart that your open and generous spirit, so richly taught of the Lord, will one day burst again those tightening bands encircling your heart—bands which come from narrower minds than yours. And when that day comes, I know your desire to bring every living member of our living Head to a place of full maturity will be so much greater than any desire to be someone encircled by little bodies, however numerous, that will own you as their founder.

I honour, love, and respect your gifted position in the church of God. But the deep conviction I have that your spiritual power was so much greater back at the beginning than it is now—back when you once walked in the midst of the various congregations of the Lord's people, manifesting forth the life and the power of the Gospel to everyone—that deep conviction is of such a degree, that I write the above as proof of my love and my utmost confidence that your devotion to truth will be above any human consideration.

Yours very affectionately in the gospel,

A. N. Groves

The original letter of A.N. Groves to J. N. Darby, as it was written in 1836, is now provided below. We will also present some concluding thoughts at the end of this section.

Milford Haven, March 10th, 1836.

My Dear D

As the stormy weather threatens a little delay, I am not willing to leave England without a few words in reply to your notes, and a short explanation of some other points that interest me. I have ever regretted having had so few opportunities of seeing and conversing with you since my return to England, and thereby explaining many things that might have allowed us to depart on the whole more happily than now, yet I wish you to feel assured that nothing has estranged my heart from you, or lowered my confidence in your being still animated by the same enlarged and generous purposes that once so won and riveted me; and though I feel you have departed from those principles by which you once hoped to have effected them, and are in principle returning to the city from whence you departed, still my soul so reposes in the truth of your heart to God that I feel it needs but a step or two more to advance and you will see all the evils of the systems from which you profess to be separated, to spring up among yourselves. You will not discover this so much from the workings of your own soul, as by the

spirit of those who have been nurtured up from the beginning, in the system they are taught to feel the only tolerable one; that not having been led like you, and some of those earliest connected with you, through deep experimental suffering and sorrow, they are little acquainted with the real truth that may exist amidst inconceivable darkness: there will be little pity and little sympathy with such, and your union daily becoming one of doctrine and opinion more than life and love, your government will become —unseen, perhaps, and unexpressed—yet, one wherein, overwhelmingly, is felt the authority of *men*; you will be known more by what you witness *against* than what you witness for, and practically this will prove that you witness against all but yourselves, as certainly as the Walkerites or Glassites: your Shibboleth may be different, but it will be as *real*. It has been asserted, as I found from your dear brother W and others, that I have changed my principles; all I can say is, that as far as I know what those principles were, in which I gloried on first discovering them in the word of God, I now glory in them ten times more since I have experienced their applicability to all the various and perplexing circumstances of the present state of the church; allowing you to give every individual, and collection of individuals, the standing *God* gives them, without identifying yourselves with any of their evils. I ever understood our principle of communion to be the possession of the common life or common blood of the family of God (for the life is in the blood); these were our early thoughts, and are my most matured ones. The transition your little bodies have undergone, in no

longer standing forth the witnesses for the glorious and simple *truth*, so much as standing forth witnesses against all that they judge error, have lowered them in my apprehension from heaven to earth in their position of witnesses. What I mean is, that then, all our thoughts were conversant about how we might *ourselves* most effectually manifest forth that life we had received by Jesus, (knowing that that alone could be as the Shepherd's voice to the living children,) and where we might find that life in others; and when we were persuaded we had found it, bidding them, on the Divine claim of this common life, (whether their thoughts on other matters were narrow or enlarged,) to come and share with us, in the fellowship of the common Spirit, in the worship of our common head; and as Christ had received them, so would we to the glory of God the Father; and farther, that we were free, within the limits of the truth, to share with them in *part*, though we could not in *all*, their services. In fact, as we received them for the life, we would not *reject* them for their systems, or refuse to recognize any *part* of their systems, because we disallowed much. Trusting, that if this inter-communion could be established, to effect all we desire, by being upheld by God in walking in the light, as the Christ-like means of witnessing against any darkness that might be in them, according to the rule of the Lord; John iii. 19: "This is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil, neither will they come to the light lest their deeds should be reprov'd." A more difficult ministry of witness, than a preaching one of words, or

separating one of persons, yet possessing a *much more* mighty power over the hearts of others, and a much more influential one in blessing; and which, dear brother, I know no heart more ready to acknowledge than your own. The moment the witnessing for the common life as our *bond* gives place to a witnessing *against* errors by separation of persons and preaching, (errors allowably compatible with the common life,) every individual, or society of individuals, first comes before the mind as those who might need witnessing against, and all their conduct and principles have first to be examined and approved before they can be received; and the position which this occupying the seat of judgment will place you in will be this: the most narrow-minded and bigoted will rule, because his conscience cannot and will not give way, and therefore the more enlarged heart must yield. It is into this position, dear D_, I feel some little flocks are fast tending, if they have not already attained it. Making *light* not *life* the measure of communion. But I am told by our beloved brethren, C. and H., that if I give up this position of witnessing *against evil* in this PECULIAR WAY OF SEPARATION from the systems in which any *measure* of it is mixed up, I make our position one of simple, unpardonable schism, because we might join some of the many other systems. I cannot be supposed, of course, to know fully *their* grounds of acting, but I thought I knew *yours*, at least your *original* ones. Was not the principle we laid down as to separation from all existing bodies at the outset, this: that we felt ourselves bound to separate from all individuals and systems, *so far* as they required us to do

what our consciences would not allow, or restrained us from doing what our consciences required, and no further? and were we not as free to join and act with any individual, or body of individuals, as they were free *not* to require us to do what our consciences did *not* allow, or prevent our doing what they did? and in this freedom did we not feel brethren should *not* force liberty on those who were bound, nor withhold freedom from those who were free?

Did we not feel constrained to follow the apostolic rule of *not judging other men's consciences*, as to liberty, by our own; remembering it is written, "Let *not* him that eateth despise him that eateth not; and let not him which eateth not, judge him that eateth; seeing that God hath received" both the one and the other? Now it is one of these two grounds; their preventing me from, or demanding from me, other than the Lord demands, that divides me in a *measure* from every system; as my *own proper* duty to God, rather than as witnessing against THEIR evils. As any system is in its provision narrower or wider than the truth, I either stop short, or go beyond its provisions, but I would INFINITELY RATHER BEAR *with all their evils*, than SEPARATE from THEIR GOOD. These were the *then* principles of our separation and intercommunion; we had resolved never to try to *get men to act* in UNIFORMITY *further than they FELT* in UNIFORMITY; neither by frowns, or smiles; and this for one simple reason, that we saw no authority given us from God thus to act; nor did our experience lead us to feel it the best means at all of promoting their blessing or our common aim of a *perfect spiritual*

uniformity of judgment; whilst to ourselves it afforded a *ready* OUTLET to the PROPENSITIES of the FLESH, under the appearance of spiritual authority and zeal for the truth. But in all these matters, we desired that our way might be bright as the light, and our words drop noiselessly as the dew, and if, at the last, they remained "otherwise minded," we would seek of God, that even He should reveal it unto them. There is something at present so like building what you destroyed; as if when weak you can be liberal and large, but when holpen with a little strength, the *true* spirit of sectarianism begins to bud; that being "*one of us,*" has become a stronger bond than oneness in the power of the life of God in the soul. I know it is said, (dear Lady Powerscourt told me so,) that so long as any terms were kept with the Church of England, by mixing up in *any* measure with their ministrations, when there was nothing to offend your conscience, they bore your testimony most patiently, but after your entire rejection of them, they pursued you with undeviating resentment, and this was brought to prove that the then position was wrong, and the present right. But all I see in this is, that whilst you occupied the place of only witnessing against those things which the divine life within themselves recognized as evil, and separating from them ONLY SO FAR as they separated from Christ, you established them as judges of themselves, and of themselves they were condemned; and at the same time you conciliated their heavenly affections, by allowing all that really was of the Lord, and sharing in it, though the system itself in which you found these golden grains, you could not away with. But the

moment your position and your language implied a perfect separation, alike from the evil and the good, and a rejection of them, in consequence of their system, without discrimination, you no longer had their consciences with you, but they felt that though only a brother in a Father's house, you exercised more than a Father's power, without a Father's heart of mercy, and they, therefore, appealed from you to your common Head, both in behalf of themselves and their systems. There is no truth more established in my own mind than this; that to occupy the position of the maximum of power, in witnessing to the consciences of others, you must stand before their unbiassed judgment as evidently *wishing* to allow in them *more* than their own consciences allow, rather than less, proving that your heart of love is more alive to find a covering for faults, than your eagle eye of light to discover them. I send you this letter as we were the first to act on these principles, rather than to H_ and C_, whose faith and love I do so truly desire to follow. They have written to me two very long and kind letters, which I purpose more effectually and fully to answer, by meeting the positions contained in them, in a little tract, which I hope to prepare on the voyage, and finally, to publish.

I particularly regret not meeting you at Bristol, as I had much to say to you relative to Rhenius, and other things connected with India, for my heart would naturally seek sympathy and fellowship with you and those dear brethren with whom I have no dividing thoughts relative to the great bearings of truth, or the truths themselves, in which lie the power and peace of

the Gospel,—neither in the objects or principles of ministry do I differ;— my difference with you is only as to the manner in which you maintain your position of witnessing for the good against the evil. I feel no one ever expects me, when an acknowledged *visitor* in the house of another, to be answerable for the ordering of that house, or as thereby *approving* it— they would naturally come to the house in which I had control, and where the acts were looked upon as *mine*, to form such a judgment; and even in such a case, if I was but *one* among many in, the government, no honest mind would make *me* responsible for faults, against which, in my place and according to my power, I protested; because I submitted to those acts in others, rather than forego a *greater* good, or incur a greater evil. If it is said man cannot discriminate, nor feel the *force* of my witness, unless I separate, not by heart and life, but by contiguity of person, altogether from all kinds of false systems, my answer is, that He, whose place it is to judge, and to whom we are called to approve our hearts, can, and to *Him*, in this matter, I am content to stand or fall.

Some will not have me hold communion with the Scotts, because their views are not satisfactory about the Lord's Supper; others with you, because of your views about baptism; others with the Church of England, because of her thoughts about ministry. On my principles, I receive them all; but on the principle of witnessing against evil, I should reject them all. I feel them all, in their several particulars, sinning against the mind and heart of Christ, and letting in, in principle, the most tremendous disorders, and it is not for me to

measure the comparative sin of one kind of disobedience against another. I make use of my fellowship in the Spirit, to enjoy the common life together, and witness for that, as an opportunity to set before them those little particulars into which, notwithstanding all their grace and faithfulness, their godliness and honesty—they have fallen. Nor shall I ever feel separation from the good for the sake of the evil, to be my way of witnessing against it, till I see infinitely clearer than I now do, that it is, *God's*. I naturally unite fixedly with those in whom I see and feel most of the life and power of God. But I am as free to visit other churches, where I see much of disorder, as to visit the houses of my friends, though they govern them not as I could wish; and, as I have said, I should feel it equally unreasonable and unkind, for any brother to judge me for it, though I leave him in perfect liberty to judge himself. You must not, however, dear brother, think, from anything I have said, that I shall not write freely and fully to you, relative to things in India, feeling assured in my own heart, that your enlarged and generous spirit, so richly taught of the Lord, will one day burst again those bands which narrower minds than yours have encircled you with, and come forth again, rather anxious to advance All the living members of the living Head into the stature of men, than to be encircled by any little bodies, however numerous, that own you for their founder. I honour, love, and respect your position in the church of God; but the deep conviction I have that your spiritual power was incalculably greater when you walked in the midst of the various congregations of the Lord's people, manifesting forth the life and the power of

the gospel, than now, is such that I cannot but write the above as a proof of my love and confidence that your mind is above considering who these remarks came from, rather than what truth there may be in them.

Yours very affectionately in the gospel,

(Signed) A. N. Groves¹⁵

¹⁵ Groves, Mrs. Harriet (Baynes), *Memoir of Anthony Norris Groves: compiled chiefly from his journals and letters; to which is added a supplement, containing recollections of Miss Paget, and accounts of missionary work in India, etc.*, 3rd Edition (James Nisbet, London 1869) Pg. 538-43

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

These were the principles of the early brethren as they sought to return to the very first principles of the Early Church—as they sought to return to those original principles of gathering as found in the Word of God. The practice of those very first principles, however, soon branched off from the main river of God’s Word into two different streams. Those who followed Darby and his mindset branched off into a stream that embraced a narrowing mindset, producing, eventually, what we see today—many divisions within divisions with each one believing they are the only ones maintaining the true unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace and righteousness.

As for the other (the ones following the mindset manifested by A. N. Groves), they remained in the original channel longer than those who followed Darby, but today, some are also branching off into a distributary that is carrying them further and further away from the principles of the early brethren, emphasizing openness to such a degree that it has turned into a toleration of things not found in God’s Word.

We see some assemblies becoming denominational in their thinking, transforming the name “brethren” into the name “Brethren.” Some have even suggested we should just consider ourselves another denomination no different than say a Baptist denomination, or a Presbyterian denomination. How sad it is to see this happen; assemblies are being influenced more and more by denominational churches in the things of God, rather than

denominational churches being influenced by assemblies in the things of God.

This new stream is forgetting those first principles made known to the early brethren by the Holy Spirit; it's a stream that finds itself more and more tolerant of such modern man-made traditions as musical worship teams leading our worship to God, or elders taking on the role of Senior Pastor because they are considered to be the first elder among equals, or, finally, one of the most subtle, a mentality that is giving more and more credence to those who have earned a degree from a Bible College or Seminary above those who have not. In reality, this final toleration is heading toward the creation of a new type of clergy/laity mentality that gives more precedence and credibility to those who might have three letters behind their name than those who do not.

Letters behind a name, like a Th.M. or Th.D., are becoming the greater standard for service, or acceptability. Bible Colleges and Seminaries are being recognized as the new training ground for future leaders in the assemblies.

In the beginning, Bible Colleges were ministries that simply taught the saints the truths of God's Word. Teachers accepted no stated salary; they simply believed they were ministering to the saints in love by exercising their spiritual gift as they would do in their own assembly. In the early days, teachers, like elders, would work with their own hands to provide for their needs, or they would simply live by faith, trusting in the provision of the Lord. But now paid positions are the common thing.

The saints, in the beginning, would attend a Bible College to complete a course of instruction, not for a degree, but for the benefit of gaining knowledge in the things of God. But now degrees have become the desired option. And in order to provide the degrees, Bible Colleges and Seminaries have, in contradistinction to God's Word (II Cor. 6:14), yoked themselves together *with worldly organizations and accreditation boards*, all so they can bestow those degrees on those who graduate. Why? Is not the knowledge gained of God's Word sufficient? Why is it so important for the saints to have such letters behind their names or titles before their names—so important, that a Bible College is even willing to make an educational "alliance" with a worldly organization that has the authority to confer legitimacy to the college program—all so such degrees can be bestowed? All this is doing is producing a new clergy mindset in opposition to the very principles of God's Word.

Already I have seen that question of old being asked, "What gives you the right to teach this?"

"And it came about on one of the days while He was teaching the people in the temple and preaching the gospel, that the chief priests and the scribes with the elders confronted Him, and they spoke, saying to Him, 'Tell us by what authority You are doing these things, or who is the one who gave You this authority?'" Luke 20:1-2 NASB

Ever so slowly, Christians, who have graduated from Seminaries, are becoming (in some Bible Conferences), the preferred speakers; they are becoming the preferred leaders in various ministries. This is beginning to create a nameless clergy.

Now some may protest and feel such a comparison is unfair. And in all fairness, perhaps it might be (that is, in certain cases), for I will be the first to admit that many Christians are not doing so knowingly. They really do **not** believe in a clergy system. But when I say, “this is beginning to create a nameless clergy,” I am emphasizing the word “beginning.” We need to recognize that when we begin to print names with titles before, or letters after a name, or we begin to give more credence to those who might possess certain degrees as opposed to those who don’t, we are setting fellow believers above other believers and we are creating a mentality that judges one’s qualification by the possession of “knowledge,” rather than by the fullness of the Holy Spirit. A. N. Groves never had a degree. Was he any less qualified?

Why do we even need to make such designations known if we are not in some way giving special credibility to certain saints, or, for those who possess such degrees, if they are not in some way seeking special recognition for their training?

“For who regards you as superior? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?” 1Co 4:7 NASB

Now, that does not mean that such brothers, who have devoted long hours to studying the things of God, and who have labored hard in acquiring the knowledge of Biblical languages, should not be respected. They should be respected. They should, in love, be honored and respected for their hard labour. But it is important to always remember, “What do any of us have that we did not receive from the Lord?”

It is one thing for us to freely honor such saints for their labour; in fact, it is biblical. I Tim. 5:17 tells us,

“Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine.” 1Ti 5:17 KJV

But it is something completely different when such honor is overtly displayed, or when such honor is expected and/or demanded. Why not rather follow the way of the apostles who said:

“For, I think, God has exhibited us apostles last of all, as men condemned to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men. We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are prudent in Christ; we are weak, but you are strong; you are distinguished, but we are without honor.” 1Co 4:9-10 NASB

Why not rather take up the cross? Why not rather have a mindset that is willing to be unknown—a mindset that seeks no reputation above that of simply being a servant of God? Was that not the mind of our Lord?

“But [He] made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.” Philippians 2:7-8 KJV

Do we not affirm our Lord's command when we refuse such recognitions?

“But be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your Master, *even* Christ; and all ye are brethren.” Matthew 23:8 KJV

Why is it even considered an advantage to have a degree behind our name for service? A. N. Groves once thought it was necessary, but he soon abandoned that course and left for lands far off to minister in the name and authority of the Lord Jesus Christ, not in the name and authority of a degree bestowed by a Bible College, or a Seminary.

Or, consider another example taken from among those early brethren, Henry Craik, the beloved co-worker of George Muller who took his studies at St. Andrew's University. George Muller once related the following about his friend:

“Whilst endowed by God with such great mental powers, he did not use them to get a name among men, nor to be admired by men, but to throw light on the Holy Scriptures, and to set forth the truth. As a striking proof of his humility, and his being far from seeking the honour of men, I mention the following. In the year 1849, Professor Alexander intimated to him, in the name of the University of St. Andrew's, that it was intended to confer on him the degree of Doctor of Divinity, or of Doctor of Canon and Civil Law. He courteously declined this honour, but recommended a Christian gentleman, who had laboured much in biblical literature, for the degree, as it might be of great use to him as an author. The latter was done, and this gentleman had bestowed on him the degree of LL.D. Some years since, the same university repeated to Mr. Craik their former intimation and desire, and a second time my friend humbly declined the honour. Truly this is a striking proof that whatever momentary failings there might have been to the contrary, he was steadfastly purposed in his heart, not to seek the honour that comes from man, but to commend himself to God, as His servant.”¹⁶

¹⁶ Tayler, W. Elfe, *Passages from the diary and letters of Henry Craik with an Introduction by Mr. George Müller* (J. F. Shaw & Co., London, 1866) pg. xvi-xvii

But this biblical mindset of Henry Craik (that considered such honors to be an unnecessary thing in the work of the Lord), is slowly fading away, and in its place is a growing mindset that believes that a recognized degree from a Bible College or Seminary is a necessary thing (or, at least, a preferable thing) in the work of the Lord. And if one questions this growing belief with an appeal to Acts 4:13—the ones disagreeing often put forth as a counter argument the fact that the apostle Paul received a recognized religious education.

The verse in question, of course, reads as follows:

“Now as they observed the confidence of Peter and John, and understood that they were uneducated and untrained men, they were marveling, and began to recognize them as having been with Jesus.”
Act 4:13 NASB

Now, I am not sure whether the early brethren would question if it was right or wrong for someone to attend a Bible College or Seminary, nor if it was right or wrong for a brother to exercise his gift of teaching in such a work. I believe they would leave that question to individual conscience. Liberty in Christ Jesus was a very important principle. Nor do I think they would ever question the fact that God will sometimes use the Bible College and Seminary system in the preparation of a servant. However, the one thing I do believe they would question is the growing belief that such preparation is necessary, or, at the minimum, preferable for those wishing to teach the Word of God or for those wishing to serve as a missionaries in a foreign field. It is not necessary, nor is it, necessarily, preferable. But many are beginning to believe otherwise, and as such, those who are not educated in that manner are given less credibility. This same

mindset was prevalent in our Lord's day when the Jews were so incredulous that someone could teach with such authority, without ever having been educated. They asked the following question regarding the Lord Jesus in the verse below.

“The Jews then were astonished, saying, "How has this man become learned, having never been educated?"” John 7:15 NASB

Or, as the King James translates it –

“And the Jews marvelled, saying, How knoweth this man letters, having never learned?” John 7:15 KJV

Dear brethren, Acts 4:13 is not an empty cliché that is only being used by certain believers questioning this growing reliance upon Bible Colleges and Seminaries for the preparation of our young people for ministry. It is part of the eternal Word of God, included in Scripture by the Holy Spirit, because it spoke to a very important principle—ministry is not based upon the possession of knowledge alone! Paul succinctly tells us this in I Cor. 13:2,

“And if I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.” 1Co 13:2 NASB

Knowledge, in and of itself, does not make the servant of God into “something,” or into “someone” who now has greater credibility, or greater capability. Without one other ingredient, a person with such knowledge is “nothing,” as Paul says. That ingredient, of course, is love, and Paul did not mean the type of love that can be manufactured by human emotion and strength;

he meant that Divine love, the love that is the fruit of the Spirit, the love that comes from filling of Holy Spirit, that love that comes from the God who is love!

“...and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.” Rom 5:5 NASB

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith.” Gal 5:22 KJV

“... for God is love.” 1Jo 4:8b KJV

Without the Spirit of God, knowledge is like an empty sail, devoid of wind. It profits nothing. Without the Spirit of God, three letters behind a name mean “nothing.” The need for Bible Colleges or Seminaries is not the real issue; the real issue is the need of the Spirit of God, filling the heart of the believer with love and true power.

Ministry is not only based upon “our” possession of knowledge; it is based upon the Spirit’s possession of us. The passage in Acts reminds us of this truth. It is not an empty cliché. The New Testament passage—Acts 4:13, is the equivalent of the Old Testament passage—Zechariah 4:6.

“Then he said to me, ‘This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel saying, ‘Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,’ says the LORD of hosts.’” Zech 4:6 NASB

Yes, in the furtherance of His kingdom, God may sometimes choose one who was “educated,” like Moses, or one who was “educated,” like Paul, but God usually chooses one like a

shepherd from Tekoa—Amos, or a tax-collector from Capernaum—one like Matthew, or fisherman like Peter, or a fisherman like John. Paul speaks to this truth in his epistle to Corinth.

“But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised, God has chosen, the things that are not, that He might nullify the things that are, that no man should boast before God.” 1Co 1:27-29 NASB

And why does Scripture say God makes such choices? So that no man should boast before God. It is not “man” that prepares a servant of God; it is the Holy Spirit that prepares a servant of God. Human recognition is not a prerequisite for ministry—recognition by the Spirit is a prerequisite, and, indeed, it is not only a prerequisite, it is a necessity for any ministry.

This is the lesson we need to remember in the assemblies. The early brethren understood and taught this principle. Yes, some of them were educated, but they never overtly displayed that fact and they most certainly never believed it was a necessary thing in the things of God. Henry Craik emphasized this principle in his book on *New Testament Church Order*. He said the following:

“They who would seek in modern days to carry on, in any measure, the cause to which the Apostles were devoted, must cultivate an habitual sense of dependence leading to persevering prayer. They must, above all things, honour the Divine Spirit, and trust to His effectual agency for the success of their labours. No knowledge, even of Scripture, no natural capabilities, no acquired attainments, must be allowed to supersede the necessity of constant waiting upon God for the supply of

power from on High. The training of a university, or the humbler aid of a Dissenting college,¹⁷ **will be found miserable substitutes for the teaching of the Spirit, and the energy of His inward operations.** Discourses may be prepared with assiduous care, and delivered with propriety and animation; crowds of interested listeners may be attracted by the natural endowments of the preacher, and yet he may be unto his hearers; ‘as a very lovely song of one that has a pleasant voice, and can play well on an instrument, for they hear his words but they do them not.’

By suited instrumentality, **and by the energy of the blessed Spirit, was the foundation of the Spiritual building laid at first, and by similar means must the building be carried on.** On the one hand, there is a danger lest men of ardent feelings, but defective knowledge, should so act as to lead away their hearers, under the influence of excited feelings, into paths of extravagance and folly; on the other hand, there has ever been the still commoner danger lest men should enter upon the work of the Christian ministry on the strength of a course of education, supposed to be a necessary preparation for so high a service. Everything is beautiful in its season. Let its own order be assigned to each. First let there be the higher qualifications of simple faith, and conscious dependence upon the strength that cometh from above; and then let all the helps, connected with mental attainments and diligent study of the Scriptures, be rendered available for the furtherance of the Gospel.”¹⁸

The early brethren believed men and women should minister by the power of the Spirit of God in their hearts. It mattered not to

¹⁷ Generally speaking, Dissenting Colleges were those colleges not associated with the Church of England and the University system of Oxford and Cambridge.

¹⁸ Craik, Henry, *New Testament Church Order* (Snow & Co., Paternoster Row, London 1863) pgs. 20-22

them whether one was formally educated or not. What mattered was whether one was willing to be filled with the Word of God and the Spirit of God, so that, being filled with the Word and the Spirit of God, one might then be useful in filling the hearts of others. This was the mindset of A. N. Groves and most certainly was the mindset of those early brethren.

Unfortunately, however, this mindset is changing, ever so slightly, that it is almost imperceptible. But, for the one who looks closely, the telltale signs can be found. This is why I used the phrase (getting back to the main point), “beginning to create.” This new clergy mentality has not yet taken deep root within our assemblies; but we are naïve and in need of spiritual discernment if we think such emphasis on Bible Colleges and Seminaries, degrees and letters before or after one’s name, will not one day lead us into the adoption of that old clergy/laity mentality.

May we ever remember our authority for service is from the Holy Spirit and our recognized training for such service is not a Bible College, or Seminary program, but rather, it is the direct discipling and training done by our Lord Himself, through the discipline of the Holy Spirit, through the Word of God, and through the ministering done by gifted members within his assembly. Knowledge is important, but it must be knowledge humbled and maintained by the filling of the Holy Spirit of God.

What is needed more than ever in our assemblies today, are men and women who have learned this way of the cross, who have learned what it means to deny oneself, who have learned what it means to follow the Master in all their ways. What is needed are

Christians who are willing to make themselves, once again, of *no reputation*, refusing the titles and special recognition of men.

The cross of Christ and the mind of Christ, the Word of God and the filling of the Holy Spirit—these are the things that qualify men and women for ministry. Indeed, if one still desires letters behind or before one’s name, let them be the letters that should be found behind the name of every believer—the jot and tittles of the everlasting Word of God that is living and powerful, and sharper than any two edged sword.

Finally, it should also be said in regard to this ministry—in regard to this spiritual service—that spiritual gifts are the means of this ministry, not natural talents.

We should reject the rising notion within the assemblies that says utilizing all our natural talents in service to God is not only necessary, but is also what the Bible teaches. It does not. And all I can say to those who disagree with this and who teach God’s people that they must utilize their natural talents in this manner, is to simply consider what brother Groves once said in another place and in another time about this same point. He said:

“Now, let me state, I give no opinion as to how far the cultivation of “natural talent” may be allowable or desirable for a Christian in the pursuit of a worldly vocation; but the moment he approaches "the burning bush," let him lay aside these shoes, for it is holy ground - Jehovah is there!”¹⁹

¹⁹ Groves, Anthony Norris, *On the Nature of Christian Influence*, (Assembly Bookshelf, Sacramento, 2008), pg. 34

Natural talents might be honed and polished for our earthly pursuits, but not for our spiritual pursuits. In our spiritual pursuits, we must use the spiritual gifts God has provided us, and those gifts cannot be honed and polished, **for they are but manifestations of the Holy Spirit working through us** (I Cor. 12:4-7). Natural talents have to do with our soul. Spiritual gifts have to do with our spirit. Natural talents are given to us by God at our birth and are rightly used by us for God in our earthly occupations and earthly pursuits (Col. 3:22-23).²⁰ Spiritual gifts, on the other hand, are given to us at our new birth, i.e. our second birth,²¹ and are rightly used by us for God in our heavenly occupations and heavenly pursuits.

For example, Paul never tried to hone and polish his natural talents in order to improve his preaching. Speaking skills meant nothing to Paul, because they meant nothing to God. It was God who chose Paul—an *unskilled* speaker (II Cor. 11:6)—to be His *primary* speaker (Acts 14:12). Paul knew this; he gloried in it; he needed no homiletical course to improve his preaching skills; he rejected such thinking (I Cor. 2:1-5). Rather, he served God in his spirit (Rom. 1:9), and relied and trusted in the power of Holy Spirit to move men’s souls.

²⁰ Paul is speaking, in this context, about our earthly work or service. Literally, the phrase, “do *it* heartily” in verse 23, would be better translated “do *it* from your soul.” In other words, in our earthly work, we should use all our natural talents. For further treatment on this truth please see *Press on to Spirituality*, also published by Assembly Bookshelf.

²¹ I realize Scriptures intimates that other spiritual gifts might be given to us after our new birth, but usually, I believe, they are given to us when we are saved.

“And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power: That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.” I Cor. 2:1-5 KJV

So this is where those two distributaries off the main river have led us—the first led to greater strictures and narrowness, and the latter led to a broader allowance and toleration. We all need to go back to the main river where the water was balanced and pure. It was a river wide open, but not tolerating of those things opposed to the Word of God. It was a balance of mercy and truth. It was like the kissing of righteousness and peace.

“Lovingkindness and truth have met together; Righteousness and peace have kissed each other.” Psalm 85:10 NASB

(Yet, who can deny that it is hard to maintain this balance, in and of ourselves, for we all still possess the flesh with all its subtle ways and distractions. Oh, how we need Christ to live His life within us to maintain the balance, for that balance can be found in none other. Lovingkindness and truth met in Christ Jesus; righteousness and peace kissed each other in Him and only in Him.)

Those following Darby were carried further and further into a mindset, which, while being full of righteousness and judgment, was, in many ways, short on mercy and love. Righteousness and narrowing judgments were applied to all, but mercy and love

were applied to few. And many times, the few would only be the ones agreeing with them!

Those who followed the mindset of Groves, while remaining in the main channel longer than those who followed Darby, were slowly siphoned off into a different stream of broad acceptance, allowing, and, indeed, tolerating many things not found in the Word of God.

Dear brethren, both streams are wrong. It is true that righteousness and judgment must be applied to all, but it is equally true that mercy and love must be applied to all. The one “without” the other is just an expression of man’s judgment, but the one “with” the other is an expression of God’s judgment. Both find their perfect balance in Christ Jesus. Jesus expressed mercy to the woman caught in adultery when he said, “Neither do I condemn thee.” But at the same time, He expressed righteousness to the woman when He said, “Go and sin no more!” Mercy “without” righteousness can never reflect the mind of Christ Jesus, but neither can righteousness “without” mercy.

These, then, are the two distributaries that have branched off the original river followed by the early brethren. And it is most unfortunate that it has influenced us all in one way or the other. For this reason, we must never become condemning or proud in any pronouncement we might make (at least, we should sincerely try to not be by God’s grace). We should humbly try to speak God’s truth *in love* so that we might all encourage each other to return to those original principles practiced by the brethren. Why? Certainly not because they had any special insight or merit of their own, but simply because their principles were the same

principles recorded for us by the apostles and followers of our Lord in Scripture.

The early brethren, like A. N. Groves, said what they said *because the Word of God said it first*. Their hearts were illuminated by the Holy Spirit to recover forgotten truths in the Scripture. That is the important thing to remember. Their appeal was always, “What saith the Scripture?” We can see this aptly demonstrated below.

Anthony Norris Groves believed and said that we should receive into fellowship every true believer. Therefore, consider the following:

A. N. Groves said this:

“What I mean is this, back at the beginning, we were all concerned about how we, ourselves, might effectively manifest forth the common life we had received from Jesus, knowing that only his life could speak and minister to those who shared that same life. And when we found that life in others, and when we were persuaded it was genuine, we invited them, on the basis of that Divine life, to come and share with us in the fellowship of the common Spirit—all in order to worship our common head, the Lord Jesus Christ. And, since Christ had received them, we also received them to the glory of God the Father, (whether their thoughts on other matters of the Church were narrow or enlarged).”

Because the Word of God said this:

“He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me.” Matt.10:40 NASB

“We then who are strong ought to bear with the scruples of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, leading to edification. For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, ‘The reproaches of those who reproached You fell on Me.’ For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope. Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be like-minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus, that you may with one mind and one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore receive one another, just as Christ also received us, to the glory of God.” Romans 15:1-7 NKJV

He and the early brothers also felt we should not separate ourselves in communion from other brethren simply because they disagree with us in some non-essential doctrines, or because some of their views or practices might still contain some error according to our way of thinking.

A. N. Groves said this:

“However, the moment we abandon this principle of receiving all who Christ receives because of our possession of the common life of Jesus, and, rather, adopt a position of separating ourselves from other brethren, with a mindset that “only” preaches against their errors with words, (that is errors or doctrines that have nothing to do with the essential doctrines of the Faith), then, at that moment, every Christian, or every group of Christians will become suspect. The first thought in our mind will become, “What needs to be set straight in our brother’s life, or, what false interpretation needs to be corrected.” No longer will it be enough to examine whether or not they are Christians, rather a standard will be set up where all their conduct and principles will first have to be examined and approved before they can be received. This mindset will inevitably lead to the most bigoted and narrow-minded in our midst becoming the judges of all. Why? Because it’s not in the

nature of a bigoted and narrow-minded conscience to yield. Thus, those among us with an open and enlarged heart will find themselves forced to yield to the strictures of such narrow-minded consciences... but in all this I would INFINITELY RATHER BEAR with all their errors, than be required to SEPARATE from THEIR GOOD!"

"Did you know, dear brother, that some will not have me hold communion with the Scotts, because their views are not satisfactory about the Lord's Supper? Others will not have me hold communion with you, because of your views about baptism! And others will not have me join in fellowship with those from the Church of England, because of her thoughts about ministry. But based upon my principles of communion, I receive them all; but based upon your principle of witnessing against error, I must reject them all (including you!)."

And in his Memoirs he said this:

"You say I quit your communion; if you mean by that, that I do not now break bread with the Church of England, this is not true; but if you mean that I do not exclusively join you, it is quite true, feeling this spirit of exclusiveness to be of the very essence of schism, which the apostle so strongly reproveth in the Corinthians. I therefore know no distinction, but am ready to break the bread and drink the cup of holy joy with all who love the Lord and will not lightly speak evil of His name. I feel every saint to be a holy person, because Christ dwells in him, and manifests Himself where he worships; and though his faults be as many as the hairs of his head, my duty still is, with my Lord, to join him as a member of the mystical body, and to hold communion and fellowship with him in any work of the Lord in which he may be engaged."²²

²² Groves, A. N., *Memoir of the late Anthony Norris Groves: containing extracts from his letters and journals* 2nd edition, (James Nisbet, London, 1857), pg. 48

“Yet as to our liberty in Christ to worship with any congregation under heaven where He manifests himself to bless and to save, can there be in any Christian mind a doubt? If my Lord should say to me, in any congregation of the almost unnumbered sections of the Church, "What dost thou here?" I would reply, "Seeing Thou wert here to save and sanctify, I felt it safe to be with Thee." If He again said, as perhaps He may among most of us, "Didst thou not see abominations here, an admixture of that which was unscriptural, and the absence of that which was scriptural, and in some points error, at least in your judgment?" my answer would be, "Yea, Lord, but I dared not call that place unholy where Thou wert present to bless, nor by refusing communion in worship reject those as unholy whom Thou hadst by Thy saving power evidently sanctified and set apart for Thine own."²³

Because the Word of God said this:

“Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.”
Eph. 4:1-6 NASB

“Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions. One man has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables only. Let not him who eats regard with contempt him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats, for God has accepted him. Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and stand he will, for the Lord is able to make him stand. One

²³ Ibid., pg. 535

man regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God. For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written, 'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to Me, And every tongue shall give praise to God.' So then each one of us shall give account of himself to God. Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this-- not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way." Rom 14:1-13 NASB

"We then who are strong ought to bear with the scruples of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, leading to edification. For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, 'The reproaches of those who reproached You fell on Me.'" Romans 15:1-3 NKJV

"Therefore receive one another, just as Christ also received us, to the glory of God." Rom 15:7 NKJV

"The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread." 1Cor. 10:16-17 KJV

However, at the same time, he felt the whole denominational system was wrong. He "never" countenanced the errors of the

system, but he always affirmed in love those believers within the religious system.

A. N. Groves said this:

“Did you know, dear brother, that some will not have me hold communion with the Scotts, because their views are not satisfactory about the Lord's Supper? Others will not have me hold communion with you, because of your views about baptism! And others will not have me fellowship with the Church of England, because of her thoughts about ministry. But based upon my principles of communion, I receive them all; but based upon your principle of witnessing against error, I must reject them all (including you!).

Now, I do find each one, in certain particulars, sinning against the revealed mind and heart of Christ; they are allowing in their churches, in principle, the most tremendous disorders, but it is not for me to measure the comparative sin of one kind of disobedience against another. And because of that, I make full use of my fellowship of Spirit to enjoy our common life together. And, because I base my fellowship on that common life of God, that life that is found in every believer, I find that I have many opportunities, not only to bear witness to truth, but also to set before them those errors—those very small particulars into which, notwithstanding all their grace and faithfulness, and all their godliness and honesty—they have fallen.”

And in his Memoirs he said this:

“My full persuasion is, that, inasmuch as any one glories either in being of the Church of England, Scotland, Baptist, Independent, Wesleyan, &c., his glory is his shame. [for such glorying is an affront to the very

person of Christ];²⁴ for, as the apostle said, were any of them crucified for you? The only legitimate ground of glorying is that we are among the ransomed of the Lord, by His grace, either in ourselves or others. As bodies, I know none of the sects and parties that wound and disfigure the body of Christ; as individuals, I desire to love all that love Him. Oh! When will the day come, when the love of Christ will have more power to unite than our foolish regulations have to divide the family of God? As for order, if it be God's order, let it stand; but if it be man's order, I must examine whether or not it excludes the essence of Christ's kingdom; for, if it does, I remember that word, 'Call no man master upon earth; for one is your Master, even Christ, and all ye are brethren.'²⁵

Because the Word of God said this:

“Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you 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. For it has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren, by those of Chloe's household, that there are contentions among you. Now I say this, that each of you says, 'I am of Paul,' or 'I am of Apollos,' or 'I am of Cephas,' or 'I am of Christ.' Is Christ

²⁴ The original phrase read, “and that it is antichristian.” I changed the phrase because one might misunderstand what he was saying. He was not saying that Christians within those denominations were antichristian; nor was he equating the word “antichristian” with the word “Antichrist.” He was saying the denominational attitude that boasts of its system, was antichristian, or contrary to the Spirit of Christ.

²⁵ Groves, A. N., *Memoir of the late Anthony Norris Groves: containing extracts from his letters and journals 2nd edition*, (James Nisbet, London, 1857), pg. 49

divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?" 1 Corinthians 1:10-13 NKJV

“And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able; for you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men? For when one says, "I am of Paul," and another, "I am of Apollos," are you not carnal? Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one?"1 Cor.3:1-5 NKJV

“Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these: fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousies, wraths, factions, divisions, parties.” Galatians 5:19-20

The early brothers felt that even though we are free to fellowship with any believer, we should always seek to find, or to establish, a church based upon the original principles of God's Word as found in the New Testament. They felt this because so many churches, over time, had left those original principles; they made void those portions of God's Word by their man-made traditions. Therefore, they believed it was important to meet together according those New Testament principles in order to maintain a biblical witness to the truth in the world. They felt it was important to imitate the ways of the apostles, maintaining the pattern they had handed down to us, especially in such portions as the book of Acts and the epistles of Paul (e.g. I Corinthians 11-14).

A. N. Groves said this:

“It is only natural that I will always unite together in a constant and fixed fellowship with those in whom I see and feel the life and power of God most fully manifested.”

And in another place he said this:

“The days in which we are arrived appear to me, and I believe to us all, so fraught with danger to the Church of God, opinions are so varying, and principles so fluctuating, that any sentiments which tend to give precision, or stability and fixedness to our principles of action, to guide us through the rocks and quicksands of the unnumbered sects and systems that surround us, must be valuable if they are sound, to preserve the Christian alike from being chargeable with countenancing error on the one hand, or breaking the holy, heavenly bond of brotherly love on the other. It is with the humble hope of setting up some one or two little landmarks, to preserve the heart from illimitable disorder and confusion...”

“The first duty to ourselves is in selecting the congregation with whom we should stately worship; it should be where the form is most scriptural in our persuasion, and the ministrations most spiritual; where there is the sweetest savour of Christ; where our own souls are most edified; where the Lord is most manifestly present with those who minister and those who hear. This is what we owe the Lord, the Church of God, and our own souls.”²⁶

“My object in India is two-fold, to try to check the operation of these exclusive systems, by showing in the Christian Church they are not necessary for all that is holy and moral; and to try and impress upon every member of Christ's body that he has some ministry given him for

²⁶ Ibid., pg. 533-535

the body's -edification, and instead of depressing, encouraging each one to come forward and serve the Lord. I have it much at heart, should the Lord spare me, to form a Church on these principles; and my earnest desire is to re-model the whole plan of Missionary operations, so as to bring them to the simple standard of God's word."²⁷

Because the Word of God said this:

“And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' teaching...” Acts 2:42 ASV

“‘See,’ He says, ‘that you make all things according to the pattern ...’” Heb. 8:5b NASB

“If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord's commandment.” 1Cor. 14:37 NASB

“Therefore I urge you, imitate me. For this reason I have sent Timothy to you, who is my beloved and faithful son in the Lord, who will remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach everywhere in every church.” 1 Cor. 4:16-17

“Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern.” Phil. 3:17 NKJV

“Now I praise you because you remember me in everything, and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you.” 1 Cor. 11:2 NASB

“Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle.” 2 Thessalonians 2:15 NKJV

²⁷ Ibid., pg. 285-286

“Let that therefore abide in you, which ye have heard from the beginning. If that which ye have heard from the beginning shall remain in you, ye also shall continue in the Son, and in the Father.” 1Jn 2:24

A. N. Groves would never try to “impose” his own views upon others regarding any non-essential doctrine, practice, or means of worship. He left such things up to individual conscience, never demanding more than the Lord demanded, never demanding conformity to his own viewpoints, yet, at the same time, never relinquishing his liberty in Christ Jesus to those who might seek to “impose” their views upon him.

However, if it was possible, he was always willing to give up in love his own liberty in Christ Jesus, whenever and wherever he could, that is, if he could do so without any violation of his conscience, and/or of God’s Word. But, if it ever involved some brethren trying to force their own conscience upon other brethren, where their freedom in Christ was not granted, but rather interpreted for them by the individual consciences of a few, he would forever be the first to stand fast “in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free.”

A. N. Groves said this:

“...did we not also feel that brethren should not force their own liberty on others who were hesitant, nor seek to take away the liberty from those who were already free? Did we not feel constrained to follow the apostolic rule of not judging other men's consciences by our own consciences in regard to certain liberties? Did we not feel this way because we remembered it was written, “Let not him who eats despise

him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat, judge him who eats; for God has received him?"²⁸

And in another place he said this:

"In Theory nothing can be more simple and apparently true, than, that if you are all 'baptized into one body,' by one Spirit, you ought to speak the same thing, and be of the same judgment; but in fact, nothing is more certain than that, notwithstanding the unity of the body and the unity of the baptism, this is not, and never has been the case: we must therefore, in a multitude of cases, leave every man to be 'fully persuaded in his own mind.' In smaller matters, this will be easy; in graver, it will be better to form small separate households of faith in love, each preserving their conscience inviolate, than that either party should coerce others into their views and opinions. Uprightness of conscience is essential to all spiritual prosperity, but coercion into some judgment is not. Infinitely better is it for each household of faith to seek to walk in all things well-pleasing to the Lord, than to undertake the management and direction of other households. The unity of the national family is not destroyed by each household acting for itself, as long as all act for the welfare of the nation, and within its appointed laws; and even if these are transgressed, every individual cannot take the place of judge, but those to whom it is appointed by the king. If those who judge can show the king's commission for pronouncing sentence upon another man's servant, and calling him to the bar, well; they all have the right of passive judgment, namely, by withdrawing from him, or from any household of faith, if they think he or it is walking against the will of their Lord, but here I consider their authority ends; and certainly, for myself, I could not exercise more; nor should I feel called upon to submit to more, except from the household of faith to which I more immediately belonged; to them I would concede much, and from them be subject to much more. What I mean is

²⁸ From his updated letter to Darby we provided above.

this, if all the households of faith in England were to unite in bidding me cease teaching, I should consider their authority nothing, if my conscience stood clear in the matter; but if the household to which I felt myself called to minister were to desire me to cease, I should at once feel it right to do so, notwithstanding any clearness in my own conscience as to their being in error in their judgment. I think the mode of pressing unity adopted by some, is most absurd.²⁹

And in another place this:

“...I understand my liberty in Christ to be the liberty of giving up to every brother, in everything not expressly forbidden by the Lord, or his apostles: and the Holy Ghost having enjoined this, I could never submit to any human system, which prevented and condemned it. For instance, though I have much delight in the greatest part of the liturgy of the Church of England, if any brother were to come, not liking to use it, my liberty in Christ would lead me to say, ‘Be fully persuaded in your own mind;’ only preach Christ and pray truly, and all is well. Some may like the gown and bands, others not; some may come ordained by bishops—some by elders—some by pastors—some by nobody; my whole concern would be to know on whose side they were, as our Lord says : and if they were on the Lord’s side, I would bid them God speed, and let them minister. And though there might be disorder to the eye in this, there would be infinitely greater order to the heart, and this is the order which the Lord loves. If he only love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity, what authority have I to force him to submit to what Scripture has not commanded? Rather let me give up my liberty, and be bound with

²⁹ Groves, Mrs. Harriet (Baynes), *Memoir of Anthony Norris Groves: compiled chiefly from his journals and letters; to which is added a supplement, containing recollections of Miss Paget, and accounts of missionary work in India, etc.*, 3rd Edition (James Nisbet, London 1869) Pg. 441-442

those who are bound, and free with those who are free, and not please myself, but my neighbour for his good to edification.³⁰

“... I apprehend that true order does not consist in aiming after outward uniformity, but in following Christ; avoiding discrepancy with the word, not so much in unity of the letter as of the spirit... But if they made their tradition or regulation stand in the way of the least of my Lord's commandments, they would be as weak round my heart to bind it to obedience, as fetters of burnt thread to bind my feet.”³¹

“I do not complain of the exercise of any Church's liberty in managing its own internal concerns, within certain limits. If one likes a form of prayer, if another none. If one would kneel when another sits or stands; in these things I could and would be ‘all things to all men,’ but no Church has a right to cut me off by its regulations, from the privileges of a brother, except for some offence which cuts me off from Christ.”³²

But when the brethren began to abandon these principles, adopting a different mindset, and began insisting upon uniformity of judgment in regard to non-essential doctrines, practices, and worship, he said the following.

³⁰ Groves, A. N. *On the Liberty of Ministry in the Church of Christ* (Sidmouth, and London, 1835) as quoted in the *The Eclectic Review*, 1836, January – June, Third Series, Vol. XV (Jackson and Walford, London, 1836) pg. 298

³¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 298-299

³² Groves, A. N. *On the Liberty of Ministry in the Church of Christ* (Madras, 1834) as quoted in the following work: Marshall, William Barrett, *A Personal Narrative of Two Visits to New Zealand, in His Majesty's Ship Alligator, A.D. 1834* (James Nesbit and Co., London, 1836) pg. 145

“This mindset will inevitably lead to the most bigoted and narrow-minded in our midst becoming the judges of all. Why? Because it’s not in the nature of a bigoted and narrow-minded conscience to yield. Thus, those among us with an open and enlarged heart will find themselves forced to yield to the strictures of narrow-minded consciences.”

“These, then, were the principles of our separation and intercommunion with other Christians, and/or Christian groups; we had resolved never to try to get them to accept what we accepted, or see what we could plainly see, further than they FELT they could in their own consciences. We resolved never to try to get them to accept our views either by condescending frowns or smiles—a frown when they would not agree with us, or a condescending smile when they would acquiesce to our views; and this was resolved for one simple reason, we saw we had no authority from God to act in such a manner.”

“...and in this freedom did we not feel brethren should not force liberty on those who were bound, nor withhold freedom from those who were free? Did we not feel constrained to follow the apostolic rule of not judging other men's consciences, as to liberty, by our own...”

“But in all these matters, we always desired our way might be bright as light, and our words might drop noiselessly as the dew, and if, at the last, our brethren remained “otherwise minded,” we would simply seek God, and pray that He, Himself, might be the One to reveal it to them one day.”³³

Because the Word of God said this:

“Wherefore receive ye one another, as Christ also received us to the glory of God.” Rom 15:7 KJV

³³ Excerpts are from the updated version of the letter to Darby.

“Now accept the one who is weak in faith, *but not for the purpose of* passing judgment on his opinions. One man has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables *only*. Let not him who eats regard with contempt him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats, for God has accepted him. Rom. 14:1-3 NASB

“Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and stand he will, for the Lord is able to make him stand. One man regards one day above another, another regards every day *alike*. Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God. For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord's.” Romans 14:4-8 NASB

“Do not quench the Spirit; do not despise prophetic utterances. But examine everything *carefully*; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil.” 1 Thess. 5:19-22 NASB

“If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have *the gift of* prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. And if I give all my possessions to feed *the poor*, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing. Love is patient, love is kind, *and* is not jealous; love does not brag *and* is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong *suffered*, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” 1 Cor. 13:1-6 NASB

“Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.” Gal. 5:1 KJV

“I could wish that those who trouble you would even cut themselves off! For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not *use* liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.” Gal. 5:12-13 NKJV

“But *it was* because of the false brethren who had sneaked in to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, in order to bring us into bondage. But we did not yield in subjection to them for even an hour, so that the truth of the gospel would remain with you.” Gal 2:4-5 NASB

“For you tolerate it if anyone enslaves you, anyone devours you, anyone takes advantage of you, anyone exalts himself, anyone hits you in the face.” 2 Cor. 11:20 NASB

“All this time you have been thinking that we are defending ourselves to you. *Actually*, it is in the sight of God that we have been speaking in Christ; and all for your upbuilding, beloved. For I am afraid that perhaps when I come I may find you to be not what I wish and may be found by you to be not what you wish; that perhaps *there will be* strife, jealousy, angry tempers, disputes, slanders, gossip, arrogance, disturbances; I am afraid that when I come again my God may humiliate me before you, and I may mourn over many of those who have sinned in the past and not repented of the impurity, immorality and sensuality which they have practiced.” 2 Cor. 12:19-21 NASB

“See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.” Col 2:8 NASB

“Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath *days*: Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body *is* of Christ. Let no man beguile you of your reward in a voluntary humility and worshipping of angels, intruding into those things which he hath not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, And not holding the Head, from which all the body by joints and bands having nourishment ministered, and knit together, increaseth with the increase of God. Wherefore if ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances, (Touch not; taste not; handle not; which all are to perish with the using;) after the commandments and doctrines of men? Which things have indeed a shew of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body; not in any honour to the satisfying of the flesh.” Col. 2:16-23 KJV

And, finally, the early brothers felt the only qualification for ministry was the calling of God, the grace of God, the Word of God, the fullness of the Holy Spirit and the possession of the appropriate spiritual gift. They rejected the concept that “ordination” occurs through the auspices of man, or that any special qualification is obtained through a Bible College, Seminary, or any other man-made system.

A. N. Groves said this:

“Now, it is true, violation of one of these two cardinal points will divide me *in some measure* from every man-made religious system. Why? Because with the former, a person demands me to do something the Lord does not require me to do, and with the latter, a person prevents me from doing what I feel the Lord allows, or even commands me to do. And since every man-made traditional system will always, by definition, be narrower or wider than the truth of God’s Word, I will always have to stop short, or go beyond its requirements.”

And in another place he says this:

“But shortly before that, my connection with Dublin [Trinity College] was broken off in a most remarkable way, just when it had answered the purpose of breaking down the high church feelings which I had carried there. Mr. T., of Calcutta, asked me, 'Why are you wasting your time, in going through college, if you intend going to the East?' My reply was, that if I returned disabled, I should be able to minister in England; and here the matter ended. As we walked home, Mary said, 'Don't you think there is great force in Mr. T.'s question?' I said, 'I thought there was; but not so great as to prevent my going that time; for I had got my examination ready...’”

“... and as I had my money laid by for the journey, I determined to go this time, and then I need not go again for nine months; and I thought this would allow me ample time to consider.' She did not concur, but thought the reasons savouring more of this world than the next. However, I had made up my mind, and went to take my place on Saturday, to go on Monday morning. On Sunday morning, about three o'clock, we were awoke by the noise of something falling. On proceeding into the dining-room, I found the candles lit, as they had been left the preceding evening, and my little drawers broken open, all my papers scattered about the room, and my money gone. As I was returning up stairs, I met dearest M. in the hall, and said, 'Well, my love, the thieves have been here, and taken all the money. 'And now, she said, 'you won't go to Dublin [Trinity College].' 'No,' I replied, that I won't,—and we spent one of the happiest Sundays I ever recollect, in thinking on the Lord's goodness, in so caring for us as to stop our way up, when He does not wish us to go. Some thought it right; others thought it foolish; it mattered not to us, we had not a doubt it was of the Lord. Yet, after my connection with college had been thus broken off—for I was to have taken my degree the following Easter, and I was unable, subsequently, to enter the church at all, from not being able to subscribe the Articles, or rather that one relative to war—I was still so far attached to the Church of England, that I went to London, to arrange

my going out as a layman, for the Church Missionary Society; but as they would not allow me to celebrate the Lord's Supper, when no other minister was near, it came to nothing. My mind was then in great straits; for I saw not yet my liberty of ministry to be from Christ alone, and felt some ordination to be necessary, but hated the thought of being made a sectarian. But, one day the thought was brought to my mind, that ordination of any kind to preach the gospel is no requirement of Scripture. To me it was the removal of a mountain. I told dearest M. my discovery and my joy; she received it as a very little thing—indeed she had received the truth in such power, that she seemed only to desire to know the mind of God, that she might fulfil it...From that moment, I have myself never had a doubt of my own liberty in Christ to minister the word; and, in my last visit to Dublin, I mentioned my views to dear Mr. Bellett and others...³⁴

“You ask again, am I exercising the ministry on my own nomination? I trust not, for if I am, the work will come to nought; I trust I exercise it on the nomination of my Lord by His Spirit; if you can point out any other nomination as necessary, or that there are any persons excluded until they are appointed by man, I hope I am willing to weigh the evidence you bring.”³⁵

Because the Word of God said this:

“And while they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’⁴ So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia and from there they sailed to Cyprus.” Acts 13:2, 4 NASB

³⁴ Ibid., pg. 41-42

³⁵ Ibid., pg. 48-49

“For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ. For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.” Gal 1:10-12 NASB

“But when He who had set me apart, even from my mother's womb, and called me through His grace, was pleased to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went away to Arabia, and returned once more to Damascus.” Gal. 1:15-17 NASB

“And recognizing the grace that had been given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we might go to the Gentiles, and they to the circumcised.” Gal 2:9 NASB

“And say to Archippus, Take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it.” Col 4:17 NKJV

The Word of God, the Sacred Scripture, gives us the balance between mercy and righteousness; it was loss of this balance that caused that stream, the one following Darby, to flow further and further away from those original principles first practiced in Dublin (which were even first practiced by Darby himself, for he was still a curate in the Church of Ireland when he first broke bread with the brothers in Dublin); it caused them to become more narrow and exclusive in their reception of other Christians

and very narrow and righteous in their recognition of other churches.

At first, Darby was a brother of great magnanimity, but over time his magnanimity began to narrow. Consider the witness of W. B. Neatby, who, despite having a perceived unfairness toward Darby (at least, so perceived by some), does not deny the largeness of Darby's heart in those early days as compared to the time when his heart was narrowed in the controversy with Hall and Dorman. In fact, Neatby greatly praises the largeness of Darby's heart.

“At no time does Darby's conduct appear less amiable. If he really felt in conscience unable to retract or modify his doctrines, he might none the less have done justice to the motives of such venerable opponents; he might have given them honour and thanks for long and faithful friendship; he need not have cast gratuitous reproach upon their spiritual condition, or have vilified them as men acting by instigation of the devil. This is not, we may all gladly recognise, the Darby of earlier years. It is not the Darby that Groves and Newman loved for his large-heartedness in Dublin; nor even the Darby to whom his enemies bore honourable witness in Switzerland.”³⁶

Groves intimates this growing narrowness resulted from the growing success of the assemblies in England. “There is something at present so like building what you destroyed; as if when weak you can be liberal and large, but when holpen with a little strength, the true spirit of sectarianism begins to bud; that being “one of us,” has become a stronger bond than oneness in the power of the life of God in the soul.”

³⁶ Neatby, W. B., *A History of the Plymouth Brethren*, (Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1901) pg. 249

Nevertheless, no matter what the reason, it cannot be denied that such narrowness of practice flowed from narrowness of heart; and such narrowness of heart flowed from hearts long on righteousness, but short on mercy and love, the mercy and love of Christ that “covers” a multitude of sins and “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things and endures all things” (I Cor. 13:7).

“Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins.” 1Pet. 4:8 NASB

The true balance of righteousness is righteousness filled with mercy and love. And that can only come from Christ being formed within our hearts by faith (Gal.4:19; Eph. 3:17), and He can only be formed in our hearts by faith if we are willing to take up our cross, deny our self, and follow Him (Matt. 16:24; cf. II Cor. 4:10-12). It can only come if we deny our own standard for righteousness and accept His standard for righteousness, not just for our salvation (which every true Christian has already done), but also for our sanctification (which can only be done if we press on to spirituality), believing that we are crucified with Christ, and believing that He will live out His life of righteousness, mercy and love within us unto sanctification (Gal. 2:20; cf. I Cor. 1:30).

When this is done we will find we can never refuse table fellowship to a fellow believer unless Christ has first refused table fellowship to him (as He lives His life in us). But if we are not allowing Christ to live His life in us, and, instead, we are simply living our own self life, then, indeed, such refusal becomes so easy that we might actually fall into the danger of

refusing communion to a fellow believer who is not being refused communion by Christ.

Even as late as 1839, Darby was still bearing witness to this original principle of the early brethren. He once wrote the following in a letter to Mr. James Kelly—dated Feb. 26, 1839.

“Whenever the first great truth of redemption in a word, whenever Christ has received a person, we would receive him. That false brethren *may creep in* unawares is possible. If the Church be spiritual, they will soon be made apparent, but as our table is the Lord’s, not ours, we receive all that the Lord has received, all who have fled as poor sinners for refuge to the hope set before them, and rest not in themselves, but in Christ, as their hope. We then afterwards teach them as they are able, according to the grace, and knowledge, and wisdom we have received—all the truth we have received at God’s hands; and here it is that ministry comes in. We do not make a creed, but Christ, the ground and term of union; but trusting to the help and ever-watchful and ready care of the Lord over us, and the true and real presence of the Holy Ghost the Comforter, seek and give all the instruction, exhortation, comfort, and when need arises rebuke in love, we are enabled. One may lay the foundation, and all that are on it we receive, and another build thereon; and they must take heed how they build thereon. You may say, ‘But there will be false teachers.’ So God has taught us, and all your plans will not prevent it; but the grace of God will overrule it, enable us to detect them by the word, and turn it to good...There will be heresies there must needs be, says the Apostle, that they which are approved may be made manifest.”³⁷

³⁷ Kelly, James; Darby, J. N., *The Claims of the Church of England Considered; Being the Close of a Correspondence Between the Rev. James Kelly of Stilloan, Ireland, and J.N. Darby* (W. H. Broom, London, 1864), pg. 65-66

“...You say, 'Would you receive a Roman Catholic?' If a Roman Catholic really extolled Jesus as a Saviour and His one sacrifice of Himself as the sole putting away of sin, he would have ceased to hold the error and delusion by which the enemy has misled some souls, (who are still I would trust precious to Jesus), he would have ceased to be a Roman Catholic in the evil sense of the word, and on those terms only could he be with us. I repeat then, we receive all who are on the foundation, and reject and put away all error by the word of God and the help of His ever blessed, ever living Spirit, and ever present Spirit.”³⁸

I am afraid many in the distributary of Darby lost sight of this truth; their narrowness has surpassed the narrowness of Christ; they have forgotten that we must see other believers as Christ sees them; they have forgotten we must see other believers, *not just by the level of their present sanctification, but by the level of their present sanctification and standing before God*—seeing them as ones not only *clothed* with the imputed **righteousness** of Christ but as ones also *covered* by the **mercy** and **love** of Christ Jesus—seeing them as ones awaiting the continued sanctification of the Spirit. I am afraid that many may have forgotten in their fellowship that the Holy Spirit always makes a distinction between sins that immediately disqualify us from fellowship and sins, evil or attitudes which do not.

Thomas Neatby once made the following observation.

“During the months of retirement which have been given to me by the wisdom and goodness of God, I have pondered much the question of reception at the Lord’s Table, and I am convinced than in one respect, at least, we have in practice slipped away from our principles. These I

³⁸ Ibid., pg. 68

need not define, as we take the Word of God without reserve. We have no other rule, no other guide. According to this all-sufficient guide, every member of Christ, not defiled by sin, has the privilege, nay, the right, to keep the feast; as of old it was the right and duty of every Israelite, if clean, to keep the Passover. Thank God that this is His will; thank Him that He has made it so plain!

“Nor does Scripture leave us to our own ideas, or our own inferences as to what constitutes defilement disqualifying for the Lord’s Table. 1 Cor. 5 gives us sufficient guidance as to defilement of a moral character. Fundamental false doctrine is treated of in Scriptures as Gal., Tim., 2 John. In Gal. 1:8, the Spirit of God pronounces even an angel from heaven accursed if he preached “any other gospel,” and treats the false doctrine he writes about as leaven, assimilating it thus to moral evil (than which it is even more intolerable). John directs that the one who brings not the doctrine of Christ is not to be received into the house, nor to be greeted. I need not refer to the treatment of a heretic (Titus 3:10). The cases referred to in Rom. 16:17, 18, and 2 Thess. 3:6-15, although very bad, are to be treated *within*; that is, they are not cases for putting away.

To refuse to a member of the body a place at the Table is a much graver thing than it is often thought to be. If he brings not the doctrine of Christ, or is a partaker with one who does not; if he is a “wicked person,” or leavened by deliberate association with such, we have His word, who is Lord and Master, for treating him as a heathen man and a publican. But woe to us, if we treat thus a brother beloved, one who would shrink with horror from any connection with evil, as from that which cost his Saviour such untold sufferings.

And are there not many simple Christians, gathered in the name of Christ, whose only disqualification seems to be that others call them “open brethren”? And yet we do not receive them at the Lord’s Table...There are hundreds of such, who have never even heard of certain evil doctrines. God grant they never may! But they know the

voice of the Good Shepherd. They follow Him because they know His voice. Through His grace, that is their safety. He keeps them securely by His personal care, without the walls of a sheep-fold. Can we, beloved brethren, continue to refuse them a place at the Table of our common Lord? What account can we render Him of having refused His members? We cannot plead that they are defiled by association, for the brethren of whom I speak are not aware of any evil existing amongst them. Known, allowed evil is leaven, and “a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump.” Evil, not known, cannot defile an assembly, though it may hinder blessing...We receive individuals from the Church of England, and from dissenting bodies, if we believe them to be sound in the faith and godly in their walk. We have no right and no disposition, thank God, to refuse them. But is our balance an even one, are our weights just, if we receive these and refuse those of whom I speak?³⁹

Beloved, certain sins of the flesh must be judged, and judged most severely; these require excommunication and withdrawal of fellowship. In fact, in I Cor. 5:11, Scripture specifically lists those sins that require excommunication and separation. They are: *fornication*—the sin of living a life of sexual immorality; *covetousness*—the sin of living a life that is so self-centered and so filled with the love of money, and/or possessions, that it becomes obsessed with the attainment of wealth, having no care for the poor, and no thoughts for the rights and feelings of others; *idolatry*—the sin of one who continues to worship idols; *railing*—the sin of one who continues to vilify other believers with abusive speech, and/or slander; *drunkenness*—the sin of one who is repeatedly getting drunk; and, finally, *extortion*—the sin of one who goes beyond the sin of covetousness, by obtaining or stealing the things that were coveted through illicit and underhanded means. (In the story of Naboth, found in First

³⁹ Neatby, T., *Reception at the Lord's Table*, (1886), pg. 1-3

Kings 21:1-16, Ahab was the covetous one, and Jezebel was the thief and extortioner.) We can also add to this list, *sectarianism*—the one who creates a *false* separation between brethren (Titus 3:10), and, *heresy*— the one who denies an essential doctrine of the Faith (II Jn. 1: 9-11).

But other sins, certain sins of the soul and self, as well as certain immature attitudes toward the sins or evil of others, were never categorized by the apostle as sins requiring excommunication and separation from the assembly. (If that was the case, then who could stand?) Even Paul had to be given a thorn in the flesh to keep him from his sin of soulful pride. Do not misunderstand me, every sin must be judged by the believer. We should never tolerate any sin, but we must distinguish between sins that require separation from the assembly and sins, or carnal attitudes that are covered by the *love* and *longsuffering* of our Lord, awaiting the spiritual growth and sanctification that will come from the ministry of the Holy Spirit working in our hearts.

For example, the church of Corinth was filled with much carnality, evil, sin, and even some false teaching, but Paul never separated himself from them, nor did he require the churches of Asia to do so, nor did he require the church in the house of Aquila and Priscilla to do so (I Cor. 16: 19-21). Even their false doctrines, or false teachings, did not rise to the level requiring separation or excommunication, for Paul specifically gave them his “greeting” in spite of such things, and in spite of that false teaching (cf. I Cor. 1:12; 7:1; 11:4-10; 15:12; II Cor. 11:1-4; 12-15, 20 with I Cor. 16: 21 & II Cor. 13:11), something he would never do if it rose to a level that required separation and refusal of communion. (However, it should be noted, false doctrine does rise to a level that forbids it being taught or disseminated within

the assembly—cf. I Tim. 1:3 NASB.) Their false state required forbearance and correction, but not separation and excommunication.” (The fact of Paul’s “greeting” shows us that he did not automatically think that every false teaching automatically required immediate separation; it depended on the type of doctrine or teaching that was being taught; however, if a doctrine or teaching ever had anything to do with those essentials of the Faith, those doctrines *necessary* for our salvation, or a doctrine teaching sin, then it would always require separation and rejection in his mind—Titus 3:10; cf. II John 1:9-11& Gal. 1:8; Rev. 2:20).

Paul, for sure, commanded the church in Corinth to excommunicate, and to separate themselves from, those continuing in those sins listed in I Cor. 5:1-11, but Paul never extended that command to include those who might hold different opinions regarding certain portions of Scripture not having to do with the Faith, nor those possessing a “party spirit” (i.e. a “party spirit” that had not yet resulted in an actual division or separation),⁴⁰ nor to those filled with “jealousy and strife,” nor to those maintaining an immature or carnal attitude toward the sin or evil of others, nor those still filled with those sins of self of

⁴⁰ Today, such party spirits might be manifested in those who label themselves a *Calvinist* or an *Armenian* without ever causing an actual division or separation within the assembly. The point is this. Christians should not use such labels, for those labels are labels of men, i.e. John Calvin and Jacobus Arminius. To use such labels is no different than saying, “I am of Paul,” or “I am of Cephas.” This is the sin of party spirits, which, while not rising to the level requiring excommunication, is none the less a sin and evil in itself. However, if those possessing such party spirits do end up causing an actual division, then they would fall under the sin of sectarianism which would require separation.

which, many times, we are not even be aware, but God is certainly aware.

If Paul did not consider every evil found (i.e. certain sins, carnal attitudes, or even those certain false teachings found in Corinth) to be a cause of separation and excommunication—and we are called to imitate Paul, as he imitated Christ—how can we allow certain sins, carnal attitudes, or even different biblical interpretations to cause separation today (again, as long as they have nothing to do with an essential of the Faith)? He patiently bore with those faults, failures, and sins, and, rather, admonished them to put away such sins, while encouraging them in the truth. And even in those cases where one was sinning with those sins that did require separation and excommunication, he would always forgive (II Cor. 2: 4-8), and once again receive and embrace the one sinning (if that one admitted the wrong and so repented).

Now, no doubt, if certain ones ignored his exhortation and his continued encouragement in the truth, and continued in those sins that had not yet required separation or excommunication, it was a very real danger that by continuing in those sins, and by ignoring his admonition, they might fall further away from the truth (by hardening their hearts) and actually end up becoming, for instance, a “railer” or “reviler” who vilifies certain brethren, just like the ones listed in I Cor. 5:11. Or, perhaps, they might end up becoming a “divisive man,” causing division between brethren over personal opinions of Scripture, just like the one listed in Titus 3:10.

If that happened, then, at that time, separation and excommunication would be required by the assembly; but until

that time came, such sin did not rise to the level of separation, but rather, a continued forbearance in mercy and love, filled with a righteous admonition and patient exhortation to the truth.

What is so ironic is sometimes we will refuse fellowship to brethren from other assemblies because of a certain sins, yet, at the same time, we will never judge the sins or evil of certain brethren within our own midst who have become so jealous, hardened, or bitter in their own hearts toward other brethren, that they sometimes actually vilify and speak evil of fellow believers unjustly. Does this not rise to the level of evil requiring the public judgment of the assembly listed in I Cor. 5:11? Is not dishonest vilification the same thing as railing? Yet why do we not separate ourselves from those brethren; why do we not consistently apply the strictures of I Cor. 5:11? Could it be we are showing partiality by being more lenient in our spirits to those within our own circle (who still agree with us in so many other things)? And, if that is the case, is not that partiality itself an evil in its own right? (May God forgive us, if such is true.) If we are going to judge other evil, why is not that evil judged? Scripture is clear; partiality should never arise in our judgments. Judgment must be consistent. The sword cuts both ways.

“I charge you before God and the Lord Jesus Christ and the elect angels that you observe these things without prejudice, doing nothing with partiality.” 1Tim. 5:21 NKJV

“But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.” Jam 2:9 NASB

“For there is no partiality with God.” Rom 2:11 NASB

“To show partiality to the wicked is not good, Nor to thrust aside the righteous in judgment.” Prov. 18:5 NASB

Sin is sin, evil is evil, whether a small one or a big one. It must be judged; as, the English proverb goes— “What is sauce for the goose is the sauce for the gander.” A little drop of poison will still spoil the purity of water; we must be *righteous* and *consistent* in our judgment of sin. Some sins require the self-judgment of the believer (I Cor. 11:31), some, the wise admonition of a spiritual brother (Gal. 6:1), and other sins, the public judgment of the assembly (I Cor. 5:11, Titus 3:10; II Jn. 1:9-11); but all sins must and will be judged, if not by us, then by the Lord (I Cor. 11:32). Yet, in the necessary judgment by us, the three different types of judgments should never be interchanged or confused with each other.

Certain sins requiring self-judgment or certain sins requiring the wise admonition of a spiritual brother are never considered to be on the same level as those sins needing the public judgment of the assembly, i.e. those sins requiring the separation of fellowship of one believer from another.

The Holy Spirit is very clear in Scripture as to what sins or evil require the immediate public judgment of the assembly and what sins or evil do not. We should never add to that His list. We should never allow our hearts to become narrower than Scripture. The Lord has given his Church everything necessary to life and godliness. What is recorded in Scripture is sufficient and wise. Do we question the sufficiency of Scripture? Do we possess more wisdom than our Lord? Is our concern for the sanctity and purity of the Church *greater than the Lord's concern for the sanctity and purity of His own Church, which is*

His Bride? If he did not include certain sins, neither should we. If we keep adding other sins or evil to our lists requiring our separation and excommunication, the standard will become so high that every church will have to be emptied, for until we are glorified with Christ Jesus we will always be imperfect and filled with possible evil and sin, and sometimes it will be sins of which we may not even be aware, but the Lord is most surely aware!

If we keep adding to our lists we will find that divisions within divisions will not only continue, they will actually increase, and two divisions will become four divisions and four divisions will become eight, with each division believing they are maintaining the purity of the one assembly of God on earth. We will, indeed, become, as A. N. Groves said, like the Walkerites and Glassites. It should ever be remembered that the “basis” of our unity is not a separation from evil per se, for if that was the case we would have to be separated from our own selves! If that was the case we could never be in fellowship with any other Christian we might find on this earth for which Christian can claim to be free from evil? Evil is sin and, “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1Jn. 1:8 KJV). The “basis” of our unity is the blood and righteousness of Christ Jesus our Lord, applied to us equally, in His mercy and love, by the washing of regeneration and the renewing of the Holy Spirit of God. Brother Groves saw this when he said in his letter,

“I always understood our principle of fellowship to be this—the possession of the common life, found in the common cleansing of the blood of Christ (for the life is in the blood); these were our early thoughts, these were our first principles, and they still are to me. I have not abandoned them as I have matured in my Christian life.

“However, this transformation, which has occurred in those little bodies (assemblies) who follow you, who witness against all that they judge as evil rather than witness for the glorious truth I just mentioned, has caused your witness, in my humble opinion, to fall from that of our glorious standing found in heaven to one of the earth.”

“...but in all this I would INFINITELY RATHER BEAR *with all their errors*, than be required to SEPARATE from THEIR GOOD!”

Was not this the heart of our Lord Jesus? Did not our Saviour INFINITELY BEAR with the errors or evil found in the hearts of His disciples? Did the Father ever require Him to SEPARATE from THEIR GOOD because of that evil?

Or, let's look specifically at Judas Iscariot. The Lord, who was omniscient, most certainly knew of the evil of Judas. He most assuredly knew of his pilfering of the purse. He knew that he was the one whose dark heart would one day betray Him. Yet, did not the Lord infinitely bear with that evil, even allowing him to remain within the circle of disciples until the end? Obviously, that evil, as bad as it was, did not rise to the level requiring a “cutting off.” Our Lord was most longsuffering. Nor did it rise to the level requiring the Lord to separate from the good of the other disciples, nor to a refusal of table fellowship with them. He continued to break bread with them; He continued to eat with them.

We must remember our Lord never acted in an ungodly manner. He never committed sin. His judgments and manner of walking were perfect in every way. Is not He our pattern in this?

Was not this same principle revealed by our Lord's treatment of Peter? Our Lord patiently bore with Peter when evil was found in his heart, even with the great evil and sin of his denial—

Luke 22:34 Then He said, "I tell you, Peter, the rooster shall not crow this day before **you will deny three times that you know Me.**" NKJV

Thus, if that was the evil, what was the good from which He would not separate? Was it not the faith and love also found deep in Peter's heart, the faith of Peter for which our Lord prayed—

Luke 22:32 "But I have prayed for you, that **your faith** should not fail; and when you have returned to *Me*, strengthen your brethren." NKJV

This is the character of our Lord in the presence of evil and His character has never changed; He is the same yesterday, today and forever (Heb. 13:8).

And, if this is true of Him, how much more should it be true of us? We too quickly turn on each other, thinking we are being righteous in our ways. We too quickly grumble against each other, thinking we are pleasing the Lord. We too quickly deem others in error, thinking we are the only ones standing in truth. We too quickly separate from each other, thinking we are being holy in such separation. The problem is not our identification of error or evil; nor is the problem our exhortation and admonishment against that evil. The problem is when we do such things in a spirit other than the Spirit of Christ (Lu. 9:55). The problem is when we make our own personal "light" (and not the Lord's "life") to be the measure of our communion and fellowship. The problem is when we allow our own zeal against evil (a zeal that many times is without knowledge) to

SEPARATE us from that which is GOOD within our brethren—for is not the ultimate GOOD in our brethren none other than CHRIST JESUS OUR LORD? Are we to separate from Him?

If Christ has never separated Himself from our brethren, neither should we? On the other hand, if He has separated Himself from them, so should we.

Some sins require separation, some sins do not. There is right and wrong. There is truth and error. There is good and evil; and we are called to walk “rightly,” truthfully, and without error or evil, but the problem comes when we always find the wrong, the error, and the evil in others and never in ourselves, when we always find the wrong, the error, and the evil in other churches, and never in our own assemblies.

If the truth be known, until we are glorified, we will always have sin or some evil in our life needing to be forgiven and cleansed (I Jn. 1:8-9). We all commit sin, and God is most certainly aware of our every sin, but in our sinful state He does not separate from us because our *Christian walk* has not yet reached a certain level of purity or reached the sinless state that He desires! **THIS REVEALS A PRINCIPLE!** So, if God views and treats us in this manner, should we not view and treat each other in the same way? Does not the Lord speak to this principle in His parable of the king settling the accounts of His servants in Matt. 18:23-35?

“For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a certain king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. But as he was not able to pay, his master commanded that he be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and that

payment be made. The servant therefore fell down before him, saying, 'Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all.' Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt. But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and he laid hands on him and took him by the throat, saying, 'Pay me what you owe!' So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you all.' And he would not, but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt. So when his fellow servants saw what had been done, they were very grieved, and came and told their master all that had been done. Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?' And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him. So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses."

Are we not glad that the Lord never adopted the standard for separation adopted by some of our brethren today? For, if our Lord had adopted that standard, He never would have tabernacled in our midst. He never would have been born of Mary. He never would have allowed Himself to grow up in the midst of sinners, or allowed Himself to *attend* the synagogue services in Nazareth, or even allowed Himself to eat with every one of his twelve disciples.

Equally, are we not glad that the Holy Spirit did not adopt a standard for separation that some of our brethren have adopted? For, if He had, He never would dwell in our hearts. He never would dwell in each assembly (as in a temple), nor would He

have dwelt in the church of Corinth, a carnal church still filled with evil and much self-serving sin.

“Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?” 1 Cor. 3:16 NASB

How wonderful it is that he dwells in and “receives” us, not because of our righteousness, or because we have reached a certain level of sanctification, or a certain level of knowledge, but He dwells in us and receives us because of *Christ’s righteousness, because of Christ’s love and mercy*, and because of *Christ’s sanctification*, (cf. Jn. 10:36; I Cor. 1:30).

Righteousness without love and mercy is simply self-righteousness, no different in practice than the self-righteousness of Phariseeism. However, righteousness, with love and mercy, is the expression of Christ.

Oh, blessed thought, to be accepted in the Beloved. May we ever receive those brethren who are received by Christ, for if we allow man-made tradition to guide the parameters of our reception and rejection, and do not judge according to truth, according to the parameters of Scripture, then, our rejection of a brother might be a rejection of Christ. What a terrible thing that would be to reject Christ in our brother and so have Christ outside the circle of fellowship, knocking on the door of our assembly, wishing to come in and sup with us. As brother Groves said, “I would INFINITELY RATHER BEAR *with all their errors*, than be required to SEPARATE from THEIR GOOD!”

But what of the other tributary (those having the mindset of A. N. Groves)? They, indeed, remained in the original channel

for a longer period than those who followed the principles practiced by Darby, but, unfortunately, what we see today is “some” of them losing that same balance, and thus becoming another distributary—and it is the loss of that balance that is causing that stream to veer off further and further away from the main river of God’s Word.

It is a stream where *love* and *mercy* might be maintained, but *righteous fidelity* to certain principles found in God’s Word is not maintained. They also are forgetting some of those original principles that were practiced by the early brethren. They are becoming long on mercy and love, but short on righteous fidelity to the truth.

As was mentioned before, the concept of “denomination” is no longer “grieving” the hearts of many brethren. Fellowship with Christians in denominations is commonly maintained “without” any sense of bearing witness to the truth of God’s Word. *The fellowship is good; the lack of witness is not.* They are forgetting, or they never knew, that denominating ourselves is completely contrary to the Word of God, being something that grieves the Holy Spirit, and, as such, should also be something that grieves our own hearts.

I have even heard it reported that some brethren believe we should simply present ourselves as the “Brethren” denomination. What a terrible **sin** that would be! It betrays a lack of spiritual discernment, maturity and knowledge of the principles first laid out for us by the apostles in the Word and reaffirmed through the ages by many different saints and most specifically by the early brethren raised up by God in the early 19th century.

Also, hand in hand with this tendency is the gradual and growing acceptance of missionary and para-church organizations that completely ignore the biblical pattern for the “work” and for the “church.” The early brethren believed the biblical pattern for the “work” was found in God’s Word, just as the pattern for the church was found in God’s Word; in their minds, both patterns carried equal weight.⁴¹

Or, take another example—because of the explosion of modern technology, Christian leaders (who have abandoned the principle of “plurality of elders,” and have, instead, adopted the concept of a Senior Pastor) are being admired and readily followed by many brethren within the assemblies, without any spiritual discernment. *The admiration for a fellow believer is good; the lack of discernment, along with that admiration, is not.* They are being followed through their books, their study Bibles, their modern day media, all “without” any sense of discernment that a position of “Senior Pastor” actually usurps the place of Christ Jesus as Senior Pastor or Chief Shepherd of our souls and is a departure from the principles of the early brethren and, more importantly, from the principles of the Early Church.

Now, let it be stated—respect for a fellow believer is good. The recognition of the good things taught by them in books, etc., is also good and acceptable, for the Holy Spirit uses every vessel that surrenders their heart to Him. But the “ready following” of them, without any hesitancy or discernment, is not good and

⁴¹ For a fuller treatment concerning this subject, see the paper attributed to brother Groves in the Christian Witness (1840), entitled, *A Letter on Missions to the Heathens*, pg. 127

detracts from the honor that is due only to our Saviour and Chief Shepherd— He who is our only Senior Pastor.

The brethren who are willing to so “readily follow” such leaders have forgotten that our loyalty is first to the Lord Jesus, and not to fellow believers who hold a position not found in His Word. They have forgotten that the principle of “plurality of elders” is set up by the Holy Spirit to honor the Chief Shepherd—the Son, and the concept of a Senior Pastor is a departure from that pattern. The pastoring of any brother gifted as such is good; and the fellowship with and the love for such a brother is also good, but the consolidation of that gift or pastoring into an exclusive position, held only by the Son, is not.

Now, granted, some men holding the position of “Senior Pastor,” seemingly, are not given the light from God to discern the principle concerning the plurality of elders. (They are simply doing what everyone is doing, following the man-made tradition that was handed down to them. We should also be aware of this, for sometimes “we” are also guilty of doing things in the assembly simply because it was always done that way!) As such, we should recognize this fact and not judge our brothers too rashly, for it is only by the grace of God that He has allowed us to see and put this truth into practice. If not for the light of God, we might be the ones elevating an elder among elders to the office of Senior Pastor, or, as in some churches, elevating a presbyter among presbyters to the office of Bishop (all to the dishonor of our Chief Shepherd, and the sole Bishop of our souls—the Son). We all walk by the light given to us by God, and for this very reason we should never, never look down in a condescending manner to those who cannot see certain truths. If we do, **we are showing nothing but spiritual pride, a sin and**

evil on our part, for what do we have that we did not receive? Perhaps, God has not shown us certain truths. Perhaps, we too are dishonoring the Son in a way we know not. (May the Lord in His mercy illuminate our hearts if we are.) *But for this very same reason*, we should also never forget that having received the light or the illumination of the Holy Spirit in certain areas **begets a responsibility on our part**, a responsibility that will always, in love, bear witness to the truth, wherever and whenever we can. And if our witness is not received, we must not condemn, but continue in love and prayer, maintaining the same attitude reflected by our brother Groves in his letter above.

“But in all these matters, we always desired our way might be bright as light, and our words might drop noiselessly as the dew, and if, at the last, our brethren remained “otherwise minded,” we would simply seek God, and pray that He, Himself, might be the One to reveal it to them one day.”

Oh, how it should grieve our heart that this new stream is drawing off many brethren, especially many of our young people, into principles not found in God’s Word. Oh, how it should grieve us that so many think the assemblies need to be changed because they do not seem to be as successful as other churches, or, that we should copy some of the things practiced by those denominational churches, because they, seemingly, are more “successful” in the things of the Lord. Oh, how it should break our hearts that others are leaving the assemblies for churches that seem to have more to offer, whether in worship, or in numbers, or in both.

Many have forgotten that true worship is done in “spirit,” not in the excitement of the soul. Many have forgotten it is done in the

truth of God's Word, not in an order of worship created by man. And, finally, many have forgotten that numbers do not necessarily portend the blessing of God, but rather, fidelity to the truth portends such blessing.

If numbers were the evidence of God's blessing, then Jesus was never blessed by God, for only a few out of Israel ever followed Him! The chief priest and rulers of Israel **had a whole nation following them**, but the Lord had but a **few thousand!** Later in time, the chief priest and rulers of Israel **still had a nation**, but Jesus had but **twelve and, perhaps, a few more**; and, finally, later still in His ministry on earth, the chief priests and rulers **still had their nation**, but Jesus **had none**, for He was left completely alone after He was arrested in the garden.

Are we not glad that Jesus never abandoned the way of the cross, because that way, seemingly, left him bereft of God's blessing and bereft of great numbers? It took faith and fidelity to God's Word (in His humanity), to know that even though He had but a few, he had all the fullness of God's blessing.

So too, today, we need that same faith and fidelity to God's Word when confronted with the ways of modern day Christianity. We need faith and fidelity to God's Word when confronted with soulical based worship. Our young people need to understand that worship is for Him, not for ourselves—it is for His joy, not for our own. Now, that does not mean we do not joy in God in our worship; but it means our rejoicing is done by faith down deep in our spirits...behind a torn veil... inside the holiest of all!

True worship, Jesus tells us, is done in spirit and in truth; it is not

done in a soul brought to a level of excitement by “emphasized rhythms” and “overwhelming beats” in music. It is done by act of faith—by a human spirit conscious of the leading of the Holy Spirit, by a spirit that boldly enters the Holiest of all, by a spirit filled with the truth of the Everlasting Word of God.

In the same way, we need that faith and fidelity to God’s Word today, when confronted with low numbers. We need to understand that we gather together to bear witness, if need be, by just two or by three, or, like our Lord before us, by twelve and, perhaps, a few more. We meet for Him, not for ourselves. Great numbers are not needed by us so we can prove to other churches that we are blessed by God, or, indeed, to prove, to our own doubting hearts, that we are blessed and used by God. We need not be embarrassed by low numbers. Jesus was not! Great numbers, may, indeed, be a blessing from God, but they equally may be the attraction of people to programs that coddle carnality, and to teachings that tickle one’s ears (2 Tim. 4:3).

We need to have great joy in our gathering—for Christ is with us! He leads our worship to God. Oh, what a wondrous thought! Let’s not sing with dour faces, but with hearts uplifted and hearts overflowing for He is with us! Our Lord praised God by faith (Ps. 22:21-22); should not we (cf. Rom. 8:31-39)?

We need to understand, it matters not if God grants thousands, or if He grants but two, for as long as we are faithful to God’s Word, as long as we are gathered in His name, as long as we are obedient to every leading of His Spirit, forsaking every tradition of man, as long as we are faithful in our witness, and so preach the Gospel to dying souls, we will continue to be His lampstand shining in a dark place, giving light to those in need.

And so, dear brethren, may the Lord enlighten our hearts to see these precious truths and principles that were borne witness to by those early brethren, and by Anthony Norris Groves in his letter to J. N. Darby. May we follow those principles, not simply because they were practiced by A. N. Groves or by the early brethren (may we never follow the principles of mere men) but because the early brethren, being led and illuminated by the Holy Spirit, were only bearing witness to those principles *first laid out by the apostles and followers of our Lord in the sacred and everlasting Word of God—apostles and followers of our Lord who wrote as they were moved by the Holy Spirit with full and complete inspiration.*

May we learn to follow our Chief Shepherd, and none other, remembering that only One is our Master, even Christ—remembering that we are all brethren (Matt. 23:8), brethren who have been given a great and wonderful responsibility to bear witness to the truth that is found in the everlasting Word of God, to bear witness to that one purpose—that He, and only He, will receive all the glory, praise, and adoration, not only in this age, but also in the age to come!

CONCLUDING PRAYER

So what is the end of the matter? Both streams need to look to the main channel of God's Word and not to their own man-made traditions. Let's not remain focused on ourselves or the supposed correctness of our own viewpoints but rather focus on Him and the correctness of His viewpoint. Righteous attitudes are always

easy; forgiving hearts are not. Yet love forgives; love does not take into account a wrong suffered; love forgives even when forgiveness is not asked. Love blesses when cursed and love tries to conciliate when no conciliation is offered. The measure of righteousness will always be proven by the measure of our love and forgiveness—the One who forgave from the tree has forever demonstrated this truth for us. True forgiveness will always manifest righteousness, and, at the same time, shame unrighteousness. Would to God such forgiveness would have been manifested a hundred and sixty-nine years ago between the brethren in Plymouth.

But, beloved, at the same time, we must also never forget that those brethren were simply sinners saved by grace, as are we. They were not perfect, but neither are we. They were subject to human foibles, but so are we. As they made mistakes, so we too have made mistakes. But equally true, on the other hand, is that just as those in the two distributaries of today love the Lord, so too they loved the Lord. Just as the two distributaries of today seek to follow the Lord with all their heart, so too they sought to follow the Lord with all their heart. Yes, a humble and forgiving heart could have prevented a lot of heartache, but the same is true today! The problem for us today, as it was for them of yesterday, is that sometimes, as sinners saved by grace, we do not see clearly, but we see through a glass darkly. But we must remember that in His light (and only in His light) will we always be able to see true light.

May we always remember it is only the Lord that we follow, and not Anthony Norris Groves or John Nelson Darby—we are called to follow our Master, not the men who follow the Master. As such, may we never believe a mere follower of Christ is

infallible—only our Saviour is infallible. Mistakes were made by those early brethren (in both streams of departure) but if we but recognize those mistakes, then we will be able to see clearly to recommit ourselves to the eternal and abiding Word of God, recommitting ourselves by the light and illumination of the Holy Spirit, and all the while being constrained by the love and mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ.—If the Lord should mark iniquities, who could stand?

May the concluding prayer of David, the man after God's own heart, be the humbling prayer of us all—as we seek to love each other with the love of Christ—as we seek to stand in His righteousness, and not our own—and as we seek to show forth to the world (by our love for all brethren) that, indeed, we are the Lord's disciples.

B.P.H.

Out of the depths I have cried to You, O LORD; Lord, hear my voice! Let Your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications. If You, LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared. I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in His Word I do hope. My soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning—yes, more than those who watch for the morning. O Israel, hope in the LORD; for with the LORD there is mercy, and with Him is abundant redemption. And He shall redeem Israel from all his iniquities. **Psalm 130:1-8 Amen.**

Books from Assembly Bookshelf

Anthony Norris Groves

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B. P. Harris

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Found in a Letter Written by A. N. Groves to J. N. Darby in 1836
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