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To: PB List, INTERNET:pb@cs.dal.ca
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RE: Table(s)

Please take the following as from a brother who loves all his fellow-brethren and who has been thinking about these issues in Spain during the last 30 years. I am not speaking lightly, but before the Lord.

Brother G----- L----- says:

>>>It has seemed to me that one of the reasons why assemblies loose their young people is that many reach a point in their life and experience where they suddenly discover that there are other sincere truly born again Christians "out there".

How can they balance this with the teaching they have been brought up with of "us" as the true remnant, of us having the true table of the Lord?<<<

I think we are mixing two separate questions here. When one reads the history in the beginning of the testimony, it is not one of exclusiveness in the sense that it is today being presented. Rather, it was a protest against denominationalism dividing true born again Christians in differing and rival groups, in the fragmentation of Christendom. That work and testimony was that all Christians are one, and that they should so meet and be ruled by the Word of God, and not by traditions. Never, but never, did Darby, Kelly, Dennett or other early brethren teachers and preachers suggest that there were no real true Christians "out there". Far from it, they all recognized them as their brothers and sisters wherever they were, went and taught them were they were if given the opportunity, and accepted them if visiting, being known as such Christians by the testimony of two or three, and in fellowship with "orthodox societies" [i.e., not knowingly in fellowship at a place where fundamental errors as to the Person and Work of Christ were taught].

Of course, history meant decisions of discipline, and situations were created where there was disciplinary exclusion of those rejecting certain decisions. I am not going to enter into any details, as I would have to write some thick books (I don't agree completely with the lines of the "official" books I have seen, although some are very valuable on many points; generally, though, and understandably, partisan in one or more questions --I would have my own things to add on some points ...).

This meant that where there had been an integration in principle, there was now division. This was most humbling for those concerned, and felt as a judgment of the Lord for wordliness and coldness towards the Lord. And I believe they were right. Israel's division was of the Lord as a judgment, and so the divisions in Christianity ... and in that movement of God amongst Christians that made them to see again God's goal for His people. Now, the reality is: we -Christians- have failed on all counts. To God be the glory. We should humble ourselves and acknowledge the glory of the Only Faithful and True Servant, the Lord Jesus Christ. We all are useless servants, kept only by the grace and mercy of the Lord. But we cannot ignore the divisions, nor live as if they had never happened.

Now, all pretense that the Christians "out there" in the "systems" are somehow to be shunned is against Christian love and the truth. If there is something the Lord teaches us as to the unity of the Body, we must make it known to our brothers and sisters. If they are in a wrong ecclesiastical position, or we believe they are, we ought to communicate in love, not to argue "our system", but to get them to where the Lord would want them to be. Away from human systems of ministry, away from denominationalism, away from Independence, if we can show them by the Scripture that the Lord, as the Head, is the one who by His Spirit gives sovereignly his Gifts to His Church: Pastors, Teachers, Evangelists, etc., to the One Body which is the Church: and that is not "our" circle, but all the Body of Christ on earth, all the saints scattered throughout this world today. But we are called to express this truth in the practice, even if in weakness and the shame of failure. Of this I am fully convinced.

The issue of grace is something to be maintained too: In spite of all that we have done to God's house on earth (the ground of the testimony to the Lord, evidenced outwardly by Christian Trinitary Baptism as in Matthew 28:19), we know the Lord acts in grace towards His people, whether on Independent, Congregationalist, Episcopalian, Presbyterian or whatever other ground in Christendom. And that is only

grace that preserves us Christians wherever we are. The Lord revealed Himself in grace to those going from Jerusalem to Emmaus. He did not wait till they were back in Jerusalem. And the Lord will get each one of His at His pierced feet in Glory.

So, as Darby aptly remarked:

>>Suppose a person, known to be godly and sound in faith, who has not left some ecclesiastical system -nay, thinks Scripture favours an ordained ministry, but is glad when the occasion occurs; suppose we alone are in the place, or he is not in connection with any other body in the place-staying with a brother, or the like: is he to be excluded because he is of some system as to which his conscience is not enlightened, nay, which he may think more right? He is a godly member of the body, known such: is he to be shut out? If so, the degree of light is a title to communion, and the unity of the body is denied by the assembly which refuses him. The principle of meeting (as members of Christ walking in godliness) is given up, agreement with us is made the rule, and the assembly becomes a sect with its members like any other. They meet on their principles, Baptist or other- you on yours; and if they do not being to you formally as such, you do not let them in. The principle of Brethren's meeting is gone, and another sect is made -say with more light, and that is all. It may give more trouble, requiring more care to treat every case on its merits, on the principle of the unity of all Christ's members, than to say: "You do not belong to us, you cannot come"; but the whole principle of meeting is gone. The path is not of God.<< ["Principles of Gathering", Collected Writings, Vol. 31, pp. 381-382.]

As we can see, Darby treats this matter attacking "exclusivism". Of course, he does not accept an indiscriminate openness. As we can see from himself and other writers, as Andrew Miller and William Kelly, amongst others, they held that the connections had to be clean, the person belonging to "an orthodox society" and personally of good testimony, "known as such". But they "had to" be accepted as brethren, BECAUSE THEY WERE MEMBERS of the SAME BODY. So, one of the distinguishing traits of "the Lord's table" must be its inclusion, *in principle*, of all Christians. Any exclusion has to be for reasons that belong also to the character of the Lord's Table. Again Darby remarks:

>>In all that concerns faithfulness, God is my witness, I seek no looseness; but Satan is busy, seeking to lead us one side or the other-to destroy the largeness of the unity of the body, or to make it mean looseness in practice and doctrine. We must not fall into one in avoiding the other. Reception of all true saints is what gives its force to the exclusion of those walking loosely. If I exclude all those who walk godlily as well, who do not follow with us, it loses its power, for those who are godly are shut out too.

>>There is no membership of Brethren. Membership of an assembly is unknown in Scripture. There it is members of Christ body. If people must be all of you, it is practically membership of your body. The Lord keep you from it: that is simply dissenting ground. ...<< [ibid., p. 383).

So you see, brethren, that the One Table of the Lord does not mean sectarianism. It is open to all Normal Christians [in the sense that Watchman Nee would use this term: godly Christians, those who seek to please the Lord and walk with Him]. Now, the practical application of it in each historical situation requires the wisdom from above, and therefore that the Christians at the Lord's table in each place are in fellowship with their Lord as to all these things and in love with Him and with those that are His, and in no way compromising with the world and with ungodliness. These are the general principles.

This, taken together with the fact that the Lord's presence as promised in Matthew 18:20 is meant to be "official", in the sense of sanctioning what is done "in His Name" [see context], that is, in accordance to all that His Name means, all that He is, tells us that if there are different groups of Christians who meet separately because of having taken different decisions as to some issues, whether ecclesiological, or as to discipline, the Lord cannot be -in this sense- in the midst of all sanctioning them all, as He would sanctioning schism. He, of course, is with each Christian, and in His grace He bears with us all in our weaknesses, foibles, and deals with us in our sins, and carries us along in the midst of all this confusion. But we must not make Him the approver of the confusion as if it were indifferent to Him. He has His One Table, and if we have to go to history to find it, well, the Lord works through our lives, individually and collectively, and it is through these exercises that He seeks to prove our hearts and draw us to Himself.

So, as to going to "other Tables", I would not feel free, as there is a history behind the divisions. But I will NOT condemn my brethren there. Who am I to condemn, a poor sinner saved by grace, when grace

reigns for all of US, who ALL have been saved by pure grace? All of us who depend so totally on the patience, grace and guidance of our Lord, who has made us One in Him? And if there is the opportunity for Christians to fellowship at the Lord's table in our place, or wherever it is set, with the conditions so ably expressed by Darby above, so much the better. And, by the way, I do believe that a big problem amongst some "Brethren" is not that they follow Darby, but that they have disregarded that gift of the Lord to His Church. His exposition of Scripture is being neglected by many who profess allegiance to his ministry, and in fact Darby becomes associated with very distorted ideas he did NOT teach, like systematic exclusiveness, etc. We must not put anybody on a par with Scripture, but we ought to be careful not to despise those gifts the Lord sends to His Church, holding always the fact that each man is a responsible steward before the Lord and must apply the test of Scripture to all teachings claiming to issue from Scripture.

Your brother by pure grace, and wishing the Lord's coming to sort all this mess and bring to fulfilment the desire of His heart: a spotless Bride for Him,

Santiago Escuin