CLOSE COMMUNION, OR OPEN COMMUNION—THAT IS THE QUESTION!

While sitting in my study, conversing with eminent divines both ancient and modern, the subject of "Church Reform" came up for discussion.

We concluded that the old style of preaching long sermons was now out of date. A professor of rhetoric thought that a sermon that takes thirty minutes to deliver, is too long unless the preacher is extraordinarily smart. A reliable critic observed that great preachers do not as a rule preach longer than thirty minutes. So, of course, I made up my mind that for the future I would preach just *twenty-nine minutes*.

Then we enjoyed a hearty laugh as we talked about the old fashion high pulpits. There are some very queer stories told in connection with some of them. One of the gentlemen present remarked that it appeared to him that the people used to set the ministers as high up and as far away from the sinners in the congregation as they possibly could without hurting his head against the ceiling. The folk seemed to have an idea that a clergymen was neither masculine nor femenine, but a something between a man and an angel—as an orator seemed to think when he addressed his audience as, "Ladies, gentlemen and clergymen." But now (continued my friend) they have found out by some means that he is but human after all; and that he only differs from other good Christians in the office which he holds. So, little by little, they have brought him down until he is almost on a common level with other good members of the church.

Having settled these trifling matters we turned our attention toward some changes that had been made in regard to the Christian Theology. "Look at the doctrine of foreordination for instance," said an aged divine. "It has experienced such a change in its appearance, and it has been rounded and polished and made so fair to look upon, that even its old and better enemy, Armenianism, has long since ceased from calling it hard names."

Having discussed many other good points in connection with the subject of "Church Reform," I ventured to ask my friends whether they thought Open Communion would be an improvement in this enlightened age, especially as Christians were becoming more liberal in their views? "No," replied the Rev. Doctors Hovey and Strong. "Decidedly not," said the Rev. C. H. Spurgeon. "It would be a down grade. If you get the Baptist church started in that direction it will topple over as sure as you are a man."

Now, to tell the truth, I did not like the abrupt manner in which they shut me off; so I turned away from them to think the matter out for myself. I began to ponder over the subject, and the more I thought about it the better I liked the idea of "Open Communion." I could not, for the life of me, see what harm could possibly come to the Baptist church if she opened her doors wide enough to welcome to the Lord's table all who love the Lord Jesus. Why not fellowship with them? Do we not love all who love the Lord Jesus? Yes, of course we do. Are not the good Methodists, and Presbyterians, and Congregationalists Christians? Then why not invite them to commune with us? While I was thus picturing this beautiful heaven-like union of all who love the Lord Jesus, the scene changed—I was unconsciously translated from my study to a seat in a pew of one of our oldest Baptist church.

This church, I learned, had been Close Communion since its organization—over a hundred years. Hundreds of sinners had been saved there, and hundreds had left to join their brethren in the church triumphant. But I was informed that the church had grown weak during the last few years. There was, however, a large audience, much larger (I was told) than usual. After a while I found out what had brought so many people together on this particular Sunday. The pastor, in reading out the announcements, told us that the church had been undergoing extensive repairs and alterations. They had taken down the old fashioned pulpit for a more modern platform. They had removed the "old time organ" for a splendid piano. They had voted down the old "hum drum congregational singing," and had hired a professional choir. They had done away with the old method in conducting social meetings. It was considered vulgar now to stand up in the prayer meeting and to talk as one feels prompted, so, for the future, the brothers and sisters would be requested to remain seated and recite a verse of a Psalm. After a slight pause the pastor added that, as the church had become more liberal in regard to theology, and more loving and sympathetic toward other denominations, the communion would henceforth be opened to any and all who love the Lord Jesus Christ. I must acknowledge that I was taken back a little at first, but, as it was to be an "Open Communion Baptist church," and so heaven like, I settled myself back in the corner of the pew to listen to the sermon. The sermon was ably delivered; full of gospel truth and unmistakably Baptist. After the preaching the pastor baptized three young converts—two sisters and one brother. While they were coming up out of the water a person sitting near to me, exclaimed, "How dreadfully absurd!" "How heathenish!" said another, and a third laughed right out. I can tell you that for the moment I felt a little annoyed. Before the pastor pronounced the benediction, he invited to the communion all who loved the Lord Jesus. Exclaimed to myself, "How heaven like! How divine! How beautiful!" I had at least reached an Eden of bliss." But, all of a sudden, a strange feeling crept over me. Right in front of me in the next pew sat the very same persons that had made such rude and unchristian like remarks, and who had laughed right out at the dear young converts who were only following their Lord's command; but I suppose that they "love the Lord Jesus," and they certainly had a perfect right there, seeing that they had been invited.

As we were leaving the church a very important gentleman said that he was glad the old church had at last taken one step in advance, that of opening the doors to the communion; but he, for one, could not fellowship with that church, or even attend the preaching service while the minister continued to preach up the absurd and obnoxious mode of baptism by immersion. As the church wanted to live in peace with all men, and especially with all who love the Lord Jesus, it was arranged there and then to call a special church meeting to consider the objection.

At the church meeting one of the deacons said that they could not afford to offend Mr. ——, for he was a gentleman of influence in society, and also a liberal supporter of the church. Another deacon said that he quite concurred with what his brother officer had said, and added that it was not wise always to tell the truth, especially when it gave offence. The pastor, in a very meek and humble manner, made an apology and promised for the future to leave out of his sermons anything that might offend his brethren "who love the Lord Jesus."

All went along very harmoniously for a time, and no complaints were made. But there were no conversions, and consequently no additions to the church. At last some one complained, and said that the church should enquire into the cause. Some of the more influential thought that they had better call a meeting of the church and congregation and discuss the subject openly.

The meeting was duly called; and all who love the Lord Jesus were invited to a seat and allowed to vote. Some of the aged members who were still orthodox tried to speak. I could hear a word or two which sounded like "unconstitutional" and "unscriptural," but the elite of the congregation only smiled; no one thought it necessary to make any reply. After a good deal of talk, a very generous, large hearted brother stood up and said, "Brethren, as we all fellowship together at the Lord's table, why can't we fellowship as church members? Entering the church, having our names enrolled on the church books, cannot possibly be more sacred than being admitted to the greatest privilege and ordinance of the church, namely, the Lord's Supper. Besides (he continued, warming up a little) I strongly object to fellowship with persons who are not considered good enough or fit subjects for church membership." "Hear!" "Hear!" "No!" "No!" and cries of "Order!" interrupted the speaker and he sat down feeling somewhat confused.

After order was partially restored, a very young man, with a very narrow head with the bump of self esteem fully developed, stood up and said, Brethren, I have lately been studying the "World's Fair Parliament of Religion," and I think that the time has come for us to hail all religious people as brothers. Therefore I move that all who love the Lord Jesus be received into the church regardless of the mode of baptism, or even without baptism at all if they so desire it." The motion was seconded by over a dozen persons. The pastor, at first, objected to putting such a motion before a Baptist church; but finding that he could not do otherwise, he put it, and it was carried by an overwhelming majority. After this a goodly number of persons offered themselves for church membership, and, of course, were duly received. As no questions were asked at the communion, no question could be asked at the entrance of the church. They loved the Lord Jesus," and that was enough. There were Mormons, for they believe in the atonement, repentance, baptism by immersion, laying on of hands, and the Lord's Supper.

'Tis true that in addition to all this they hold to the "spiritual wife doctrine," but you know "they love the Lord Jesus."

There were Mohamadans, for they profess to love the Lord Jesus. The Koran asserts Jesus to be the "Messiah," the "Word of God," "Worker of Miracles," "Healer of Diseases," "Preacher of Heavenly Doctrines" and "An Exemplary Pattern of Perfect Life." There were Unitarians, Universalists, and many who call themselves Unsectarians, for they all profess to "love the Lord Jesus."

The fame of this church soon spread abroad; and society people began to flock in from the ball room and from the card table; and when they were asked, "Do you love the Lord Jesus?" they replied with a very amusing smile: "Why, of course! Do you suppose that we are heathens?"

After a few months the new members began to whisper something about a change in the pulpit. Finally a church meeting was called to discuss the matter.

The pastor, after opening the meeting, asked leave to retire. The "influential gentleman" was asked to take the chair. The chairman, after explaining the object of the meeting said, "Brethren, the first question for us to discuss is, 'Do we want a change?'" "Yes," from nearly all present. "Then the second question is—shall we hire another Baptist clergyman?" "No! No!" very loud, and "yes" very softly. "The third question," said the chairman, "is a very important one. 'Whom shall we call to this highly honored office?'" After naming nearly all the clergymen of note, the majority were in favor of hiring an eloquent preacher of the universalist type. A few days after the meeting the Rev. ——, D. D., L. L. D., arrived and called to see the "gentleman of influence," who, by the way, was made an elder, or deacon. The reverend gentleman was very politely informed that it would not do for him to preach "doctrine," but he could preach about anything else under the sun. The new pastor, finding that he could not preach the gospel without coming into contact with some doctrine or other, concluded that he had better leave the gospel alone; and so he did. He was a very learned man, and he had travelled a good deal, therefore he could entertain his audience admirably. This was enough for me. I found, to my sorrow, that the old Baptist church was "no more." It had "passed away." What grieved me most was that it would have to be buried without a funeral service, as there was not a Baptist minister to be found who could conscientiously say over the grave, "Blessed are the dead that die in the Lord."

Then I thought that a large number of clergyman met in a convenient building to hold a post mortem examination over the dead body. The jury brought in a verdict—"Cause of death, Open Communion." This brought me to myself, and I opened my eyes and found that I was still in my study with Dr. Strong, Dr. Hovey, Rev. C. H. Spurgeon and a host of other divines. I felt ashamed of myself for being so foolish in not listening to their advice; so I made a very humble apology and promised for the future to stand by "Close Communion." After the experience that I had passed through in my dream, I concluded that while Open Communion may be a pleasant subject to think about, it is a "broken cistern." It won't hold water; or, at least, as water as *Baptists* require.

I saw clearly that Open Communion leads to mixed membership; and a mixed membership drives the Baptist church into oblivion.

JOSIAH WEBB.

OBEDIENCE AND CHRISTOPHANY.

BY WILLIAM C. WILKINSON.

[An address recently delivered as part of the Wednesday noon chapel exercises in the University of Chicago.]

A religious teacher situated, as most Christian ministers are in respect of opportunity to meet substantially the same congregation, again and again, Sunday after Sunday, with messages of spiritual truth for them, has one important advantage that I keenly feel the lack of to-day. Such a man may cheer himself always with the reflection, 'If I fail this time to say what I would, or to say it as I would, I may hope soon to have a chance to try again and possibly do better."

But the present is perhaps my one opportunity here; at least I feel that I must use it as if it were not to be renewed. What then shall I say? Evidently that which seems to me to be of the highest importance. True enough, although, as suggested, I may not myself for a long time to come, if ever, have an opportunity like the present again; still others, my colleagues, will follow me here and, as I may anticipate, supply what I myself fail to bring forward. But is there not possibly something which no other than myself could so well say as I? Has not God given me a message to my fellows, in some sort or in some degree different from that which He has entrusted to anyone else? If He has done so, then that message is the one which I should bring to you to-day.

No two men ever saw the same rainbow in the sky, and no two men, I suppose, ever had quite the same experience of life from God in the soul. The individual difference of man and man and of situation and situation in life probably provides that we each one of us, in our several relations to God, have a story of our own to tell, that no other could exactly duplicate. Will you then let me very briefly narrate an early experience of mine in my relation to God which has always exercised a supreme, *the* supreme, influence over my spiritual life?

It happened to me once, no matter when, but it was at a capital crisis of my career, to conceive, as I never had done before, the idea of making the whole course of my conduct, outward and inward, in every act of it, little or great, one continuous unbroken campaign of conscious, intentional, resolute obedience to God. I do not now quite mean that I then instantly, abruptly, formed the purpose of actually doing this. I mean that I then first vividly conceived the idea of such a thing. The idea, as it arose in my mind, was indeed extraordinarily definite and commanding. It was not at all the idea of being good, of doing right. It was not at all the idea of fulfilling the highest possible end of my existence. It was not at all the idea of living nobly, living worthily of myself. It was not at all the idea of conforming to the dictates of my conscience, of doing duty because it was duty.

In contrast to all these things, the idea was one of obedience, obedience not dignified compliance, but obedience, absolute humble, unquestioning, implicit, rendered to a person, that person God. Nothing could exceed the definiteness, the vividness, the intense, the incandescent, vividness, of this idea as I then conceived it.

So far, it was a simple intellectual experience, an experience in which the imagination had some part, but in which the conscience, the will, had none. It was a revelation in the sphere of my mind, a revelation to startle, and it did startle me. Not with terror, not with any impulse of recoil before it. Instead, there was twin-born with the conception, the intellectual conception itself, of the idea, a movement of the spiritual nature, of the conscience and the will, to make the idea a reality of life. I embraced it as my law. The mere thought ceased to be a mere thought, and became a living, an all-mastering purpose of my soul.

I need to make the idea of which I thus speak, that is, the intellectual idea transformed at that moment into a practical regulative law of life, still more sharply definite than I have yet done. This idea then was the idea of obeying God, not as I might speculatively represent God to myself according to my own best interior light, but as he had represented himself in that self-revelation of his to be found in the collection of writings which we call the Bible. I had no question then, as I have no question now, that however much God reveals Himself in the secret of the soul of man, in the volume of the created universe, in the solemn process of history, He has chosen to give us the key of all, so far as the conduct of life is concerned, chiefly in the Old Testament and the New Testament Scriptures.

My new idea, my new accepted law of life was very simple, very humble. It was just to undertake doing and being altogether what I was told to do and to be in the Bible, and this as a matter of constant conscious personal obedience rendered to a personal God.

I immediately discovered two very vital things. One was that God would have me honor the Son, that is, Jesus Christ, even as I honored Himself, the Father. The other was that the Bible was a marvelous manual of life. The number, the variety, the interdependence, the endless unfolding adaptability, the practical sufficiency inexhaustible, of the particular instructions or precepts into which the great orb or sphere of the Divine will was analyzed and broken up for our use in the Old and New Testaments, astonished and delighted me. To these all I was to say, and I did say, "Amen, I will fulfil them."

This was in no overweening conceit of my ability to accomplish the obedience I attempted. It was simply rendering the joyful answer of a convinced conscience and a ready will.

In every one of the requirements that I thus found, I recognized an expression of the will, that is, the character, the living personality, of Christ himself, the express image of God. In each separate act of obedience my will met Christ's will, and as in a spotless mirror He revealed Himself to me. I learned that there was no other way conceivable in which one being could so intimately reveal himself to another as by unfolding continually more and more of his will. For one's will is one's self. There is no limit to the degree to which it is possible for Christ thus to make revelations of Himself—no limit, except that which we ourselves set in limiting the degree of our obedience.

I have thus arrived, and I have thus brought you who have followed me, to arrive, by a way of approach somewhat different from that which Christ's first disciples obliged the Master Himself to take, at the self-same principle which he laid down as governing his own promised posthumous manifestations of himself to believers. Jesus said: "If a man love Me, he will keep my word; and my Father will love him, and we will come unto Him and make our abode with Him." To this transcendent experience of Divine communion, there is no antecedent condition necessary, for any soul, except the one condition of obedience. But obedience it must be, obedience to a personal Lord. "If a man love ME, he will keep MY word;" and then the infinitely blessed consequence follows as a matter of course. God abides with you; nay, for such is the sublime, the awful, claim of partnership made for himself by that unique man, Christ Jesus, "We" will come unto you and make our abode with you.

This then is my message, the possibility to every soul on a very simple condition, that of obedience to Christ in His express commands, of entering into transcendent personal relation with Him, a relation capable of ever advancing degrees of nearness and union.

It is only a new scheme of life, rather only the principle, that I have had the time to propose to you. If occasion permitted, I should be glad to add something in the way of showing, through a series of practical illustrations, how this plan of life tended to realize itself in my own individual experience. That experience had in it such a rhythmic peace and joy that it once sang itself in a kind of hymn, some stanzas of which I will venture to give you in closing. It seemed to me, in my way of obedience that the Lord, with a kind of heavenly guile, clear and gracious, was enticing me on as from room to room toward ever more and more intimate communion with himself. It was as if he were continually anew putting a shut door between himself and me, in order that at his knocking, I might open, to find myself nearer to him than before. Try the way of life that I have sought to describe, and see if you will not be able on ever-recurring occasions to sing and say:

The door between is some command
undone;
Obedience is the key that slides the
bar,
And let him in, who stands so near,
so far;
The doors are many, but the key is one.

* * * * * *

Now he is here I seem no longer here!
This place of light is not my chamber dim,
It is not he with me, but I with him,
And host, no guest, he breaks the bread of cheer.

I was borne onward at his greeting—he
Earthward had come, but heavenward I had gone;
Drawing him hither, I was thither
drawn,
Scarce welcoming him to hear him
welcome me.

* * * * * *

This is his guile!—he makes me act
the host
To shelter him, and lo! he shelters
me;
Asking for alms, he summons me to
be
A guest at the banquets of the Holy
Ghost.

So, on and on, through many an opening door
That gladly opens to the key I bring,
From brightening court to court of
Christ my King,
Hope-led, love-fed, I journey evermore.

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These are who sigh that no fond heart
is theirs;
None loves them best! O vain and
selfish sigh,
Out of the bottom of his love,
The Father spares the Son for thee
to die!

For thee He died; for thee He lives
again,
O'er thee he watches in His boundless reign.
Thou art at much His care as if beside,
Nor man nor angel lived in heaven or
earth.

Thus sunbeams pour alike their glorious tide,
To light up worlds, or wake an insect's mirth.
They shine and shine with unexhausted
store,
Thou art thy Saviour's darling—seek
no more.

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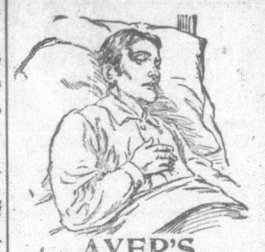

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