

CORRESPONDENCE

BETWEEN

J. BARKER AND THE BODY OF CHRISTIANS OF AMERICA.

Boston, January 1st, 1847.

REV. JOSEPH BARKER:

DEAR SIR,—As a Committee appointed by a Convention of Christian ministers, held October 7, 1846, at Union Mills, Fulton County, State of New York, we address you for the purpose of ascertaining more definitely and fully the character of the Reform in which you are engaged. Our sympathies embrace all true Reformers, who are labouring to redeem the church from error, both in doctrine and in practice; and, regarding you in this light, we desire from your own pen a statement of the principles of faith, action, and Christian union in which you confide, for the recovery of man from the error of his ways, and for the prosperity of Zion.

Perhaps you may wish to know more particularly of the denomination who are so deeply interested in your cause, and who seek to open a friendly communication with you. We suppose that they stand upon similar views with yourself. This denomination has never taken a Sectarian name, and it is probable that it never will. Its members are known only by the ancient, Scriptural and Catholic name 'Christians;' which name they cheerfully give to all who live the lives which this holy word signifies, whether their doctrinal speculations are with them or not. With the first years of the present century this class of Christians arose: in the East, the West, and the South there was a simultaneous movement, with no one man as its cause or representative. Masses of people unknown to each other started up, demanding the Bible as their only creed, perfect religious freedom as their inalienable right, and Christian character as the only authorized test of Christian fellowship. Thus spontaneous was the movement in which the denomination had its origin.

Since that time, churches have been planted in the several States of this republic, and nearly 1600 ministers and churches comprise their present number. But it may not be improper to state a few general ideas, which the use of this religious freedom in the investigation of truth, has quite generally established among them. God is worshipped as ONE—His Unity is not divided into three persons, but is believed to exist in One person, the Father Almighty. You perceive, therefore, that they are not Trinitarians. They acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God, the only Saviour, the Mediator between God and men. They believe in the Holy Spirit, and pray for it as the divine influence which God will send and give to all who ask it; as the comforter, as the helper of our infirmities, as the reprover of sin, and the support of holiness throughout the whole earth.

They think that the Atonement affects man as its prime object. He it is that stands under clouds of darkness and of sin. God is light, and is unchangeably true.—Man needs the change, and he receives it.—The gospel, crowned with the death and resurrection of Christ, is the power of God unto salvation to all who believe. Regeneration is the want of every sinner. The plan of salvation is restorative. It brings the lost to God and secures eternal life. But, sir, neither time nor space allows us to do justice to the doctrinal views on which they stand. A more ample view may be given at some future time. We believe in progress, we believe in reform. But we want the gospel in its light and power to preside over this progress, and to produce this reform. The Bible is the eternal light to ages. The reason may penetrate its truths. We want freedom to study and believe it for ourselves, independent of all extrinsic authority. There are those indeed who rob believers of their freedom, by punishing its conscientious exercise with exclusion; and however strongly such sects may declaim against Rome, is it not clear that they act on the same principle? The difference is in favour of the Pope; for he offers no freedom, only the liberty to believe what the church affirms; but the proscriptive Protestant holds out freedom to you with one hand, and retains a whip in the other, should you use the freedom against his will. The truth however makes free. Man cannot be strong without the free use of his powers. Man errs, it is true, in his attempts at truth, as the child falls in his attempts at walking. But would we say the child shall not walk lest he fall? No sooner would we say, the disciple shall not be free lest he err. Why should Christians allow a name, the form of an external rite, or a merely intellectual speculation to divide them in feeling? Do we not need to be enlarged with gospel views of Christian brotherhood? Ought not they who have light to go forth with the burning zeal and self-sacrifice of the ancient disciples and apostles, and, in prudence and love, labour to restore the Christianity of ancient days?

We rejoice, sir, to think that you are doing a work of this kind among the mass of the people in England, and we pray that you may find great success. We have some knowledge

of the cause you represent. But we greatly desire to know still more. Will you be so kind as to give us a full account of the leading views you embrace, of the name, rise and present prosperity of your people. There are now some five periodicals in the Christian denomination, all of which would gladly publish your statements. We should be very happy as a people to receive a visit from you in this country. The churches would hear you with candour, and would give you a fraternal welcome. Please answer this as soon as convenient."

We are, dear Sir, very truly yours,
Els. HOLLAND,
N. SUMMERBELLE, } Committee.
B. S. FAULTON,

ANSWER.

MY DEAR FRIENDS,—I thank you for your kind and interesting letter. I was aware of the existence of your community, and had heard something of its character and principles; but I was not aware, before I received your letter, that you had become so generally Anti-trinitarian in your views, or that you were of such a reforming character. The perusal of your letter has given me great pleasure, and I lose no time in sending you my reply. I shall give you the information which you desire, respecting myself and the Christian friends with whom I am specially connected, as briefly and as freely as I can, and I trust our correspondence may prove mutually pleasing and profitable.

I was myself brought up among the Methodists, and became a member of the Methodist Society when I was about sixteen years of age. My views at that time, so far as I can recollect, were exceedingly simple. I believed in God and in Christ; in the distinction between right and wrong, and in my own accountability to God; in a future judgment; in the everlasting blessedness of the righteous, and the everlasting punishment of the wicked. I believed that God required men to deny themselves of all ungodliness and sinful pleasures, and to live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world; and I have no distinct recollection that my views at that time went any farther than this. With respect to the doctrines of the Trinity, of the Supreme Godhead of Christ, of Satisfaction to Divine Justice, of Natural and Total Depravity, and the like, I had not, so far as I can remember, any thoughts at all. These were doctrines of which I had either not heard, or doctrines which, if I had heard of them, had made no impression upon my mind. I was, at that period, so far as I can recollect, a simple-minded rational Christian.

But I had not been long in the Methodist Society, before I began to hear people talk about those matters. I had not been long in the Society before I was given to understand that it was necessary for me to believe all those doctrines, and if I would be a proper Christian, and especially if I would be a preacher. As soon as I joined the Society, I heard people talk about a peculiar kind of faith which was said to be necessary to salvation, different from the common belief in God, in Christ, and in the truth unfolded in the Gospel; and I began to seek after this new kind of faith. I also began to labour to understand those peculiar doctrines respecting the Trinity, and the like; and for years my mind was harassed and bewildered with those matters. At one period of my life I supposed myself a believer in the peculiar doctrines of orthodoxy, and if I did not believe in those doctrines, I acquiesced in them; I did not reject them. It was not, however, long before my mind gathered strength enough to investigate those matters, and to test them by what I had learned of the teachings of Christ and his apostles. I then began to have doubts on some of those points. I especially began to doubt some of the representations given by orthodoxy respecting the object of Christ's death. I then began to have doubts with respect to the nature of that faith which was required by the New Testament. As I proceeded in my inquiries, I was led to reject the doctrine of the Eternal Sonship, and to believe in the Unity of God. I still, however, believed in the Godhead of Christ, though not in the existence of separate persons in the Godhead. I supposed Christ to be the incarnation of the Father, and not the incarnation of a second person in the Trinity. I now laid aside the use of the word Trinity altogether, as well as of the word persons when speaking of the Divine Being. I still called Jesus God, and thought myself right in so doing; for though I did not believe in the existence of more than one God, or in the existence of separate persons in the Godhead, I still believed that Jesus was called God in the sacred writings, and that the fact that God dwelt in him was a sufficient reason for his being called God, as well as for his being worshipped as God. With respect to the Holy Spirit, I considered it to be the same God that dwelt in Christ, operating in

a peculiar manner in the great work of human salvation.

These were my views when I entered the New Connexion, and became a travelling preacher in that body. The list of doctrines drew up by that body was chiefly expressed in Scripture language, and the Scriptures were laid down in the list of doctrines as a perfect rule of faith and practice; I therefore found no difficulty in subscribing that list, with the exception of two or three words. As my objection to those two or three words was not considered a sufficient reason for excluding me from the ministry in that body, I became in 1828, a new Connexion travelling preacher on trial. I was then rather more than twenty-two years of age. About four years and a half after that time, I was received into full Connexion. I was not however received without objections. During the time of my probation, my views had become more heterodox than they were at the time that I entered on my probation, and the freedom with which I had conversed on my religious opinions with ministers and others, had given rise to serious rumours respecting my heterodoxy, and some had expressed a strong assurance that I was not fit to be received into their community. A committee was appointed to meet me previous to my reception, in order to ascertain what my views were, especially with respect to the Trinity and the doctrine of Atonement. I stated at once my objection to use the word Trinity, at the same time stating my belief in the divinity of Christ and of the Holy Spirit, adding, that I believed that the Scriptures spoke of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, as we should speak of three separate persons, but that what it was in the divine being that gave rise to such a mode of speaking, I did not understand, but regarded it as a mystery. I also stated my firm belief in the doctrine of the Atonement, but refused to state that I considered the death of Christ as a satisfaction to the justice of God. To prevent mistake, I wrote down my statement, and gave a copy of it to the deputation. When it was presented to the Conference, some objected to its reception, stating that it was no more than what a Unitarian or a Socinian might say: others pleaded strongly in favour of its reception, contending that it was as much as any man ought to say, and as much as any man was warranted by the sacred Scriptures in saying. Those who were in favour of its reception, prevailed, and I was admitted as a minister in full connexion.

In the year 1835 I commenced the publication of a small periodical called the EVANGELICAL REFORMER. In the twentieth number I published an article on CREEDS, in which I contended that all human creeds were useless and mischievous,—that they served only to strengthen error and to oppress the truth,—that they gave power to the indolent and ambitious in the church, and led to the persecution of the thoughtful, and intelligent and the faithful. I pleaded for the Bible as the only rule of faith and practice, according to an article in our list of doctrines, and according to the principle professed and contended for by Protestants generally. This article was censured at the following Conference as erroneous and dangerous, and the censure was published in the minutes.

About this time also I met with a volume of the works of your celebrated countryman, William Ellery Channing, and was so delighted with it, that I formed the purpose of publishing it as soon as I could do so, and spoke of my intention in my small periodical. This commendation of Channing, and some other articles in my Evangelical Reformer, were made the ground of another prosecution at the Conference following, when resolutions were passed suspending or expelling me in effect, unless I could give some kind of guarantee that I would not disturb or alarm the leading members of the Connexion any more. The proceedings of Conference however met with serious opposition from the people without, and created a terrible excitement. This led the Conference to seek an interview with me, and make offers of peace, which ended in a temporary settlement of the dispute.

In this Conference it had been laid down as a principle, that in religious discussions we had no right to appeal to the sacred writings,—that the standard of appeal in Conference investigations into the soundness of a minister's principles, were the writings of John Wesley,—that the question to be decided in reference to my opinions was, not whether they were in accordance with the Scriptures, but whether they were in accordance with those interpretations of the Scriptures contained in John Wesley's sermons, and in his notes on the New Testament. Towards the close of this year I concluded my Evangelical Reformer. In the last number of this work I took occasion to contradict a rumour that has been circulated by some of the preachers, that I had recanted some of the things which I had published in that work. I also took occasion to publish my protest against the principle which had been laid down in the Conference

respecting the standard of appeal in theological disputes, and to declare my determination to acknowledge no authority in matters of faith or in matters of practice but the Scriptures. This renewed the controversy, and a few days before the Conference, the leading minister of the Connexion sent out a letter designed to prepare the way for my expulsion. The letter was an exceedingly weak one, and proved the writer to be exceedingly ignorant on the subject in debate. Before the second day of the Conference had passed over, my reply was out, and was circulated extensively throughout the district where the Conference was held. The effect of this reply upon the people was such that the Conference was divided, and came to terms again, and I continued in the Connexion as before.

During the following year I proceeded still further in my opposition to creeds, as well as to some of the rules and customs of the Connexion. On this occasion the annual committee had a secret meeting, and sent round circulars to the superintendent preachers, and the leading friends throughout the Connexion, respecting the danger to the Connexion if I were continued any longer in the body, and urging the necessity of my expulsion forthwith. The plan succeeded. Though by far the majority of the people were in favour of my continuance in the body, the ruling party were against me, and in the Conference they had a large majority. I was accordingly expelled, together with two other ministers who held views somewhat similar to my own on many subjects.

The Connexion at that time numbered about twenty-two thousand members. From six to seven thousand of those, including a great number of local preachers, class-leaders, and other officers of the Connexion, left the body, and formed themselves into separate congregational churches. Most of those were Methodists of a liberal character, Methodists who were wishful to have religion made plain to them, and who were prepared, wherever Methodism was found to be at variance with the teachings of Christ, to set the doctrines of Methodism aside, and to embrace the simple teachings of Jesus in their stead.

As far as I can judge, the principles which I advocate, are spreading very rapidly throughout the country. Both the number of churches and the number of individuals holding those views, are far greater than they were a year and a half ago. There are, at present, as far as I can learn, upwards of three hundred churches meeting together on the simple principle of faith in Jesus as the Christ, for the object of promoting each other's improvement in knowledge and piety, and of advancing the cause of truth and righteousness in the world. Those churches vary in point of numbers; some of them are very small; others of them are rather large. In some cases not more than six, or a dozen, in a score meet together; in others several hundreds assemble. The whole number of members contained in those churches, I cannot ascertain; but it can scarcely be less than from ten to fifteen thousand.

The number of persons who have been led, during the last three or four years, to embrace the sentiments which we advocate, cannot be less than from thirty to forty thousand.

What our views are on most subjects, you will be able to learn from the accompanying publications.

The principles which we advocate are at present spreading more rapidly than at any former period. Not only are vast multitudes eager to hear what we have to say in our lectures, but anxious to obtain our publications. Several of the churches with which I am connected have lately built lecture-rooms and school-rooms, and instituted free-libraries and reading-rooms.

I thank you for your invitation to visit you. It has long been my wish to see your country, and to observe the work of reform as it is progressing amongst you, and at times I entertain a hope, and even a belief, that I shall one day be able to accept your kind invitation, and have the pleasure of forming a personal acquaintance with you. But the future is all uncertain. How long I shall live, or how my future life will be disposed of, is alike unknown to me. I do however trust, that whether we should ever see each other's face on earth or not, we shall hold intercourse with each other by means of letters, and by an exchange of publications. And I do especially trust, that we shall do our utmost, in the fear of God, and in the love of truth, to enlighten and regenerate our race, and to bring about that happy state of things when all shall enjoy together the blessings of knowledge and freedom, of purity and peace, of fellowship with God, and the hopes of a blessed immortality in heaven.

Yours affectionately,
JOSEPH BARKER.

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