

INFALLIBILITY AND CHURCH ELDERSHIP.

Question. – Brother Russell: I received not long since a letter which set forth that you could not be considered infallible, because the writer alleges that you have changed your views respecting the propriety of the various gatherings of the Lord's people choosing from amongst their number Elders for the oversight of the Lord's work. The writer of the letter I mention was at one time, I believe, an elder in the St. Louis Church, but being no longer elected by the congregation he disfellowships them as "Babylonish." In the letter I mention he purports to give an extract from an old WATCH TOWER, which makes it appear that at that time you considered the election of Elders unnecessary. He then quotes from more recent WATCH TOWERS and from MILLENNIAL DAWN, Vol. VI., your words recommending the choosing of Elders and offering suggestions respecting the Scriptural qualifications of such.

My question is, Is this true? Have you changed your view on this subject, and if so may I ask, Why?

Answer. – First of all I hasten to assure you that I have never laid claim to infallibility. I do not expect to be infallible until by the Lord's grace I shall share a part in the First Resurrection; then, that which is perfect having come, that which is in part shall be done away; we shall see as we are seen and know as we are known.

We accept the writings by the twelve apostles as being so supervised of the Lord as to be free from any error. He himself said of the writers, the apostles, Whatsoever ye shall bind, enforce, on earth will be that which is recognized as bound or enforced in heaven, and whatsoever ye shall loose or release from on earth shall be loosed or released from in heaven. Hence we

may regard the presentations of those twelve men, intended of the Lord to be his special representatives under the holy Spirit's dispensation, as being infallible, true, inerrant. But there is no ground for believing that any others than the apostles have been so miraculously holden by the power of God as were those twelve, or that we have any authority in the Word of God for considering the words and writings of others as being above or beyond testing and proving by the Scriptures. This has invariably been our presentation. It has been our endeavor to present the Word of God faithfully as he has given us to understand it – to our own Master we stand or fall. Nevertheless we trust that our course has the approval also of such of the Lord's dear people as, led by his Spirit, are now walking in the light of present truth.

OUR VIEW IS DIFFERENT

We do not deny growing in knowledge, and that we now see in a slightly different light the will of the Lord respecting Elders or leaders in the various little groups of his people. Our error in judgment was in expecting too much of the dear brethren who, coming early into the Truth, became the natural leaders of these little companies. The ideal view of them which we fondly entertained was, that the knowledge of the Truth would have upon them a very humbling effect, causing them to appreciate their own insignificance, and that whatever they knew and were able to present to others was as mouthpieces of God and because used of him. Our ideal hopes were that these would in every sense of the word be examples to the flock; and that should the Lord's providence bring into the little company one or more equally competent, or more competent, to present the Truth, that the spirit of love would lead them in honor to prefer one another, and thus to help and urge one another to participation in the service of the Church, the body of Christ.

With this thought in mind we concluded that the larger measures of grace and truth now due and appreciated by the Lord's consecrated people would make it unnecessary for them to follow the course outlined by the apostles in the early Church. Our mistake was in failing to realize that the arrangements outlined by the apostles under divine supervision are superior to anything that others could formulate, and that the Church as a whole will need to have the regulations instituted by the apostles until, by our change in the resurrection, we shall all be made complete and perfect and be directly in association with the Master.

Our mistake gradually dawned upon us as we beheld amongst dear brethren to some extent the spirit of rivalry, and on the part of many a desire to hold the leadership of meetings as an *office* instead of as a *service*, and to exclude and hinder from developing as leaders other brethren of equal ability naturally and of equal knowledge of the Truth and competency in wielding the sword of the Spirit. From various little groups of the Lord's people I received kindly worded inquiries as to what should be done in the case of a brother who wished to lord it over God's heritage – who wished to run the Church as though he were infallible and as though the brethren generally were of inferior cast. We uniformly advised moderation, especially that the offending brother should be judged leniently, reminding the friends of the Apostle's intimation that prominence in a teaching capacity is especially dangerous, and that they should in correcting such a brother remember their own weaknesses and dangers in the same direction. But with no uncertain sound we assured them that in the divine order as well as in the rational order the entire congregation [R3745 : page 91] of the consecrated was to seek and to determine the will of the Lord respecting its leadership, and should not permit any man to usurp this function of the Church and to decide for it that he was the one and only choice of the Lord for the service.

We advised on the contrary that the very evidence of a self-seeking spirit and desire to be greatest was an indication of unfitness for the position, and that to continue a "heady" one in leadership would not only be injurious to the congregation but injurious also to the leader, because we have the Scriptural assurance that God resisteth the proud, the self-seeking, and showeth his favors to the humble. And the Apostle's exhortation is, "Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time" – when the perfection of the new body in harmony with the new mind shall have fully taken the place of present imperfections of the flesh.

You have mentioned the St. Louis Church, and I recall that the little company there had difficulty on the score of leadership – and probably with the very writer of the letter you mention. He became offended with the whole company because he was not permitted to manage all the affairs of the Church. He wrote to me insisting that he knew that God had appointed him to that position, and intimating that the congregation had nothing whatever to do in the matter except to support him, and in supporting him to support the Lord and the Lord's will. He urged that he should not be elected, should not be voted for, but should be accepted by the congregation as of divine appointment. He wished me to urge this upon the congregation.

I demurred, and, in as gentle a manner as I could, pointed out to him that the voice of the Lord as respects our individual conduct is to be sought in our own minds through the aid of the Scriptures, and his voice in respect to the Church is to be sought through an expression of the sentiments of all the consecrated members, each seeking to express to the best of his or her ability the mind of the Spirit as secured from the Word.

The brother evidently felt hurt that I did not recognize his divine appointment, and now after several years the resentment,

I presume, is showing itself through the letter you refer to, copies of which, I understand, have been sent to others as well as to you.

Such facts and experiences demonstrated to my mind not only the wisdom of the apostolic method in respect to "Elders in every city" (Titus 1:5) but also the necessity for such a course – that otherwise the Lord's people would not make the proper progress in knowledge and in the graces of the Spirit, nor come to fully appreciate the liberty wherewith Christ makes free, and the equality as brethren of one cast, one class, one company, one body, of all who are trusting in the precious blood of Christ and fully devoted to his service.

I am neither ashamed of the position I first took nor of my present position on this question. It does not surprise me that I did not grasp the full situation, that I did not make due allowance for the ambitions and selfishness which still pertain to the flesh of the friends even after the begetting of the Spirit and the setting of affections on things above and the endeavor to be governed by the wisdom from above.

Without instituting a comparison as between myself or any one else at the present time as mouthpieces of the Lord and those twelve special mouthpieces so marvellously guided of the Lord at the beginning of **[R3746 : page 91]** this dispensation, I venture to call attention to the fact that even amongst the chiefest of those times was required to realize the mind of the Spirit on various subjects: for instance, the Apostle Peter needed a vision and subsequent experiences before he could learn the lessons that the middle wall of partition between Jews and Gentiles had been broken down, so that now under the terms of this Gospel dispensation there is neither Jew nor Gentile, bond nor free, who have any special prominence or preference in respect to the Lord's favors. Peter had a vision of one kind to show him the truth on that subject; I had a vision of another kind – a lesson of

experience coming to me from the various little congregations of the Lord's people, which drove me to the apostolic method and convinced me that it is still necessary for the proper development and upbuilding and progress of the Church which is the body of Christ.

PRACTICALLY NO CHANGE

As I understand you, the brother's letter implies that the fact that the little churches choose their own leaders instead of the leaders choosing themselves proves that we have become sectarian, Babylonish. Well, it is difficult to tell how things will appear to those who begin to lose the spirit of the truth and who begin to go into darkness. As a matter of fact, we never did advocate that the Church should recognize a leader merely because he said he thought himself divinely appointed. Our thought was that the Lord's spirit prevailing amongst those possessing the Truth would so actuate them all that with one heart and one mind each would be glad to yield opportunities and render service to the others to the best of his ability, and that thus the Lord's will would be accomplished. The whole mistake was in expecting too much of fellow servants, neglecting to follow the apostolic method of selecting the latter by the "stretching forth of the hand," or using other means of ascertaining the opinion of the consecrated respecting the Lord's mind on the subject.

NO ORGANIZATION NOW

Those who declare that we have formed a sect or a denomination misrepresent the facts. A sect is a split off, and we split off from nothing. Our endeavor is to bring all of the people of God into heart-relationship and fellowship with the Lord and with each other. We accept all as brothers who trust in the precious blood as their redemption price and who profess and evidence a full consecration to the Lord's service. We bar no one from Christian fellowship along these lines, whatever may be his theories on outside and less essential subjects.

We are not a denomination either, for we accept no name but that of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are Christians, no more and no less. We accept all names given to the Church in the Scriptures, not even taking one of them as a distinctive title as do our friends of the Christian denomination. Each individual has his relationship to the Lord, and because related to the Lord is related to all others similarly related, because the body of Christ is one. This, our union with the Lord, is the union of the Scriptures, and the only one: and so far as we know no other company of the Lord's people take this [R3746 : page 92] position in its entirety nor stand upon it fully. By the Lord's grace we hope to thus stand until he shall say "Well done!" and shall receive us into his glorious Kingdom.

THE TERM "BABYLONISH"

The word Babylonish, as we have frequently pointed out, signifies confusion. Not confusion as respects organization, for the various departments of Babylon, its various denominations, have very strict organizations that permit of no confusion whatever. Babylon's confusion is in her doctrines, which are unscriptural, confusing, contradictory, many of them erroneous. We fear that the brother whose letter you quote from is the one who is in danger of getting into a Babylonish condition – his ideas are certainly quite confused in respect to the question of Elders. In insisting that he and other Elders should rule the Church by divine appointment and without any human appointment he is getting to even a more extreme position than does the Pope of Rome, whom we think to be Babylonish enough; for even the Pope of Rome does not attain his position by a usurpation, but by an election by the Cardinals.
