

Who Is My Brother

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Dear brethren, it is good to be here with you. These international gatherings are a special blessing to my wife and me since we are so lonely with our faith in our home country. There are so few brethren and scattered that we mostly feel like we stand alone for the truth. Many times we wonder about the blessings which brethren in other countries have because most have other brethren around to support and encourage them.

How much do you appreciate the blessing that our heavenly Father has given you in providing brethren in Christ with whom to walk this narrow way? How many times do you give thanks to God for the brethren around you? Do you really value the great privilege of having brethren? Or do you have difficulties in getting along with them?

Even though the brethren are God's gift to us, we may have difficulties among us because of our imperfections. But is it all a consequence of our incomplete nature? Do we have special reasons to fend off some brethren? Have we made some requirements for others to fulfill before we accept them as our brethren? Or do we recognize all who have taken the same narrow way and love them as our brethren?

Criterion For Brotherhood

How do we recognize someone as a brother? What conditions do we make so we may approve them as brethren? Let's first look at criterion Brother Russell suggested. In "Doctrines More Or Less Important" (*Reprints*, p. 5284) he writes:

"There are certain features of the doctrine of Christ which are fundamental and indispensable, and without which none would be recognized of the Lord as one of His followers. There are other features which would seem to be useful, helpful, blessed, but not fundamental—not essential to membership in the Body of Christ."

Here Pastor Russell points out an important aspect of biblical truths, or doctrines. They can be divided into two parts. One part consists of so-called basic doctrines without which no one can be a member of the body of Christ. As the apostle Paul says, "For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 3:10). These necessary fundamental truths have been the same since apostolic times—and they will remain the same until the church is complete. These truths are clearly presented in the Scriptures.

In the same article Pastor Russell defines these basic doctrines as:

- (1) All men—all of Adam's children—are sinners.
- (2) None can be reconciled to God without a Redeemer's sacrifice.
- (3) Jesus came into the world to be that Sacrifice—and later to apply that Ransom-price for the sins of the world.
- (4) On the basis of faith in the Redeemer's work, the believer may consecrate himself to the Divine service, in acceptance of the Divine invitation, 'Present your bodies a living sacrifice.'
- (5) So doing, the believer may—up to the time of the completion of the Elect number—exercise full assurance of faith that his sacrifice will be accepted of the Father; and that he will receive a share of

the anointing of the Holy Spirit – the begetting.

(6) Such as meet these conditions are to be accepted as brethren in the highest sense of the term.

This much would seem to have been always necessary, and more than this we believe is not necessary today. Our advice to the Lord's dear people everywhere is that they put no yoke upon each other, beyond the fundamentals specified above – that otherwise they stand free, and leave each other free, and fellowship and agree as much as they can with each other."

I believe that we all agree that the standard Brother Russell sets was a correct doctrine of Jesus Christ and his sacrificial work. It is sin that separates us from God, and we can approach God only by faith in Christ's redemption work. There is no other way. It does not matter how much we know; Jesus Christ is the only way, just as he said: "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me" (John 14:6).

To recognize as brethren all who accept the basic biblical truths does not mean we are weakening the truth. We can easily understand the thinking of Pastor Russell. We all know he was not weak nor did he compromise the truth. Nevertheless he was the one who wrote those words concerning brotherhood. Do we have the same standard? If not, we clearly disagree with him on this central issue concerning our consecrated life.

Although this standard of brotherhood is based on the fundamental teachings, so-called advanced doctrines are not useless. The ones we have today – called "meat in due season" – are to strengthen us so we may grow "unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13). But they are not necessary for being members of the body of Christ. During the past two hundred years we have been more and more privileged to have better ways to study the Scriptures and gain more information about God's plan. At the beginning of the Gospel age

brethren did not have so much either in means nor knowledge – yet they are still our brethren.

So we must conclude that the "strong meat" we have is not meant to be a test for brotherhood or used to smite the brethren. It is meant as an extra blessing for us who live in these special times.

Different Degrees Of Love

To accept all the consecrated ones as our brethren and love them all does not mean we must honor them all equally. Knowledge must be respected in the church, and growth in knowledge usually demonstrates growth in spiritual matters. If we want to grow in the Lord and in his grace, we must also grow in knowledge. We highly esteem, and rightly so, brethren whose love toward the Lord and the truth is demonstrated in their enthusiasm for studying his word. And as an indication of the heavenly Father's blessing they are led into deeper truths.

The elders must be honored because of their efforts for the church, as apostle Paul says: "We beseech you, brethren, to know them which labour among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you; and to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake" (1 Thessalonians 5:12,13).

But as we in our earthly families love each member, and especially the children who are immature, so do we love our brethren in our spiritual family who are still immature in their Christian walk. We do our best to help and support them so they may grow stronger in the Lord and in His word: "Comfort the feebleminded, support the weak, be patient toward all men" (1 Thessalonians 5:14). Here the apostle says that the weaker brethren must be encouraged no matter what kind of weaknesses they have. Whether it is some personal imperfection or a lack of deeper understanding of more complicated doctrines, we must love and support them.

For the purity of the church there is sometimes a need to make a distinction between brethren. The apostle Paul tells brethren to make a distinction between those who walk

in the pure spirit and those who walk impurely, after the flesh. The latter are not to be respected so that we do not encourage them in their wicked way. The apostle advises us saying, "We exhort you, brethren, warn them that are unruly" (1 Thes. 5:14). They must be rebuked with love and patience, but not treated with the love they would have if they walked faithfully in Jesus' footsteps.

Separating Ourselves from a Brother

In doctrinal matters, the only reason for non-acceptance of a brother is the denial of basic truths. The apostle John puts it this way: "Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son. If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed: for he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds" (2 John 9-11).

If a brother disagrees with me in doctrinal matters that are not basic, I have no biblical reason to reject him. Here is what Brother Russell wrote about that:

"Yet we may be sure that he [the apostle John] does not mean that we are to disfellowship a brother merely because of some differences of view on non-essential questions. We may be sure that he does mean his words to apply strictly and only to the fundamentals of the doctrine of Christ: for instance, faith in God; faith in Jesus as our Redeemer; faith in the promises of the divine Word. These will be marks of a 'brother,' if supported by Christian conduct, walking after the spirit of the truth—even though the brother might have other views which would differ from ours in respect to certain features of the plan of God not so clearly and specifically set forth in the Scriptures." (*Reprints*, p. 3034).

If we have an idea and we present it to the brethren but they do not agree with it, our mission is not to impose it upon them. We all have different ways of reasoning by nature so we may see some things differently. Brother Russell says:

"We have no right to make our own views tests. The things that are tests are the things given us in the Scripture." (*Reprints*, p. 4995)

"We are not to disfellowship anyone on account of differences of viewpoint." (*Convention Report Sermons*, p. 168)

Even though we accept as our brethren and fellowship with those who disagree with us on some doctrinal matter, it does not mean we would not speak up for the truth, or what we believe to be the truth. Yet everything we say to the brethren must be said in the spirit of love. We should not hide the truth in the name of love and peace; this would also be wrong.

The other reason for separating from a brother is his sinful way of life. The apostle Paul advises the Corinthian brethren by saying: "It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you ... And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he that hath done this deed might be taken away from among you" (1 Corinthians 5:1,2).

So let us ask ourselves, what makes me disfellowship certain brethren? If it is because of doctrine, are we following the biblical standard or have we made standards conforming to our own reasoning?

Not Many Wise or Mighty

The well-known words of 1 Corinthians 1:26 declare that God has chosen only a few noble and wise men from the world to be joint-heirs with Christ. One reason is that most of the so-called good people have the feeling that they do not need any redeemer. So God looks for those who have a humble heart, who can confess his sinfulness and his need for a savior, a redeemer. God looks for a humble heart that can accept the fact that an approach to God due is only possible because of the sacrificial work of someone else. So we know there will always be those among us who do not shine in intelligence or great wisdom, brethren whose understanding of complicated doctrinal explanations may not be as high as we possess. But we must accept these dear ones just as we do the others.

He who puts his trust in the Lord and not in his own deeds and own wisdom is a real disciple. Jesus spoke a parable to those who trusted in themselves and despised others. A Pharisee prayed God saying, "I thank thee, that I am not as other men are ... or even as this publican." But the publican said only, "God be merciful to me a sinner." And Jesus said that this publican was justified rather than the Pharisee. And so it is with us: "For every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted" (Luke 18:9-14).

One Body

The special truth we have been given is called "a great mystery" in the Scriptures. It has remained a mystery to the world and to nominal Christians, the "tare" class. The apostle Paul says about this special truth: "This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church ... For we are members of his body" (Ephesians 5:32,30).

Jesus Christ has not only redeemed us but he has also prepared a way to a great glory for us. We have access to that glory only as members of his body. Our hope is based on the fact that Jesus Christ is our Redeemer and our goal is to be his joint-heirs in the future kingdom. So our one and only mission in this present Gospel age is to build this great body of Christ "until the fullness of the Gentiles be come in" (Romans 11:25).

We cannot be faithful servants of God if we are building the body in one place and demolishing it in another. As the apostle says, "But now are they many members, yet but one body. And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you" (1 Corinthians 12:21). The lesson is clear and simple: the faithful servants are doing the building work in the way God has ordained. "He gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto

a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:11-13).

A good servant of the church is always doing unification work among the brethren, never dispersing them. If a servant tries to separate the brethren, and especially if he tries to make some follow him and his teachings, he is not loyal to his Master, the head of the body.

Honoring the Servants of the Lord

The apostle Paul writes: "Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine" (1 Timothy 5:17). This is what we certainly must do: respect faithful elders. Yet Brother Russell reminds us concerning our attitude toward the Lord's servants:

"I think it is the Lord's will that we should recognize every agency God uses, but we are not to recognize any agency of God as being in any competition whatever with the Lord or with his divine arrangement. He is the fountain of blessing, he only is most to be praised. I think that is the right sentiment. I believe you all agree with that. And yet I think there is a danger of some dear friends preaching Brother Russell. Brother Russell would like for you not to do so. He thinks it would not be to the glory of God." (*Convention Report Sermons*, p. 125)

Why is he saying this? Is it perhaps because some spoke falsely in his name? He certainly wanted brethren to use his writings for the blessing of the brethren and glorifying God's name. Yet some brethren have used his or the writings of others to smite others by placing certain doctrines as a touchstone for the brotherhood (see Matthew 24:45-51). This obviously was not Brother Russell's purpose.

Exactly the same situation had occurred in the days of the apostle Paul. He writes: "Whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men? For while one saith, I am of Paul; and another, I am of Apollos; are ye not carnal?" (1 Corinthians 3:3,4). Some in the early church declared themselves allied with a servant of the Lord, not the Lord himself.

They used the name of a servant to divide the church, not to bless it.

This was, and still is, absolutely wrong. That's why the apostle emphatically opposes it. He points out that such are still immature in spiritual things: "And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ. I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able" (1 Corinthians 3:1,2).

Who Is My Brother?

Some may wonder why I wanted to speak about these things. Only my wife and I are here from Finland. In my home country we have never enjoyed such blessed fellowship with brethren as we do here.

When I consecrated, the nearest brother lived 500 kilometers away. In the few times I met brethren they showed no appreciation of the blessings we all receive from each other. In the case of some doctrinal matters, a single wrong word was enough for some to withdraw from another brother. So my spiritual

growth occurs next to my wife, whom I met soon after I consecrated. Happily she received the truth and consecrated soon after.

Because of my experiences, it is easy for me to speak about accepting others since I have no reason to place any special standards upon the brotherhood. That should not be our business. We can but follow the standards our heavenly Father has placed in his holy word. The Scriptures point out two standards: believing the clearly-stated, basic truths, and endeavor to walk the way of consecration purely.

Surely we all have a brother or a sister whom we do not find especially amiable, or someone who disagrees with us about some subject. This provides the moment when we should think about what is really important in our Christian walk. Let us enjoy the great blessing the Lord has given us! You need them, and they need you because you are following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. It is a difficult task to do this under the best of circumstances. To try to do it without a spiritual family is much, much harder.

Amen.