

## FENCES

We would like to consider today a condition that I can't help but feel saddens all of our hearts. A condition that seems to be almost running out of control. A condition that is based on the premise that if we have a difference of opinion from others on a doctrine or application of truth, on the type of studies we should have, on activities, in customs, or what have you, then the proper thing to do is to separate ourselves from the others. I'm sure it's done with the best of intentions, feeling it will be for everyone's best spiritual interest.

The fruitage of this premise in the Bible Student Movement is that we find in city after city where there are brethren, that there are 2-3-4-5-6 Classes and sometimes even more. And we might insert not just in the United States, but worldwide! Canada, England, France, Poland, India.

I in no way want to give the impression that we're here to justify our position, or to point a finger, or in some way find fault with others. We don't want to give the impression that no separation was ever in order or justifiable for undoubtedly that would be incorrect. We don't want to find fault with anyone who may have recently separated. None of these are our intent.

What do we hope to accomplish?? Well you know I'm really not sure. Except perhaps to just bring it to the forefront that we might all look inward and reflect on our own disposition. For to a greater or lesser extent it affects us all. It's a condition that perhaps in some small way we've all contributed to at one time or another. I know I have!

As I reviewed some of the principles involved, I certainly saw how I needed to apply them to myself. So if you too, have ever hammered a nail or two in one of the many present day fences, may we just kind of share together a thought or two.

It's our prayer that perhaps together we may help to reverse the process by pulling a few nails out. And some day, Lord willing, we may look out over the green pastures of the Bible Student Movement and behold, as far as the eye could see they will be free of fences.

### **What is the cause of so many separations?**

One of the basic reasons is we all love Truth. We call ourselves "Truth People" because that's what our life is all about. We speak about how we all received the precious truth we have from our returned Lord who used Bro. Russell as that "wise and faithful servant" to give us meat in due season.

Generally speaking, most all the brethren concur with the vast majority of his writings with very few exceptions. But because each of our minds are different, we may see a prophetic point here or there, or an application of truth, or a certain procedure slightly different from one another. And because we all love the truth and its principals dearly, we immediately tend to react to protect it, to keep it pure when someone has another viewpoint.

So what should we do when relatively small differences arise where there realistically are two or more possible explanations or viewpoints? This is a question we are all

confronted with. Each of us have addressed this question up till now in a way we have thought best.

Generally we could come to one of two conclusions:

1. We could make our own thorough study of the subject. Arrive at the best conclusion we can believing it until and if the Lord may show us differently and allow others the liberty to understand the best they can.
2. Or, the second approach is the subject of our study – which is, because of our strong love for truth, we may feel the only way to keep it pure is to associate only with those who are in total agreement with us on our understanding of the doctrine, or whatever is the issue at stake.

Now as we continue our subject, we do so with a prayer that we cause no ill will to anyone. But rather that whatever view we have we might all come and reason together. We trust our thoughts today will be objective, for I have held both view points. And like many of you have struggled to ascertain what view is most pleasing to the Lord.

The view of endeavoring to keep the truth pure by meeting only with those who share our view 100% at first seems entirely correct and proper. The obvious problem that soon confronts us is that there probably isn't anyone on the entire face of the earth who believes exactly 100% as we do. Because no two minds think exactly alike. So we all need to make some allowances. But for the moment let's assume it is possible. Should this be the only criteria we use to determine with whom we will meet? That all must believe totally as we do? We think not!

Let's go on to consider other aspects of Scripture that we need to bear in mind. We recall Paul's beautiful lesson of how we are all members of one body each in a different state of development. Each needed to contribute to the blessings of the others. Let's consider Paul's words to the Church at Corinth who had similar problems as we have today – factions, divisions, separations – each feeling superior to the others.

1 Cor. 12:20 to 13:8 – Phillips Translation: "So that the eye cannot say to the hand 'I don't need you!' nor, again, can the head say to the feet, 'I don't need you!.' On the contrary, those parts of the body which have no obvious function are the more essential to health:...God has harmonized the whole body by giving importance of function to the parts which lack apparent importance, that the body should work together as a whole with all the members in sympathetic relationship with one another. So it happens that if one member suffers all the other members suffer with it, and if one member is honored all the members share a common joy...As we look at the body of Christ do we find all are his messengers, are all preachers, or all teachers...all able to heal, all able to speak with tongues...No, we find God's distribution of gifts is on the same principles of harmony that he has shown in the human body."

Yes, each member of the body is vital and contributes to the uplifting and blessing of the others. God purposely designed it that way. No one was given all the gifts of the spirit, they were broken up so no one would be self sufficient.. Each would need and be dependant upon others. Shouldn't we strive to bear these admonitions of Paul in mind. Someone may be blessed with a clearer understanding of doctrine, or its application.

Shouldn't they want to share, to help others to see and appreciate it also rather than meeting with only a small portion of the body with whom we seem to agree.

Then comes Paul's beautiful lesson of the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter! Notice this is still a part of Paul's logic regarding separating from other members of the body.

"If I speak with the eloquence of men and of angels, but have no love, I become no more than blaring brass or crashing cymbal. If I have the gift of foretelling the future and hold in my mind not only all human knowledge but the very secrets of God, and if I also have that absolute faith which can move mountains, but have no love, I amount to nothing at all. If I dispose of all that I possess, yes, even if I give my own body to be burned, but have no love, I achieve precisely nothing."

Oh how forcefully Paul brought to their attention as well as to ourselves, that we should not get our priorities mixed up. For it's so easy to lay the greatest emphasis on everyone one dotting the "I" or crossing the "T" exactly alike and in the process possibly overlook far weightier matters. This is what happened to the Corinthians. They were proud of what they thought was clearness of truth. They felt superior to others and decided to meet separately from them.

Paul corrects them, "The eye cannot say to the hand, I don't need you!" For even if they, or we, had absolute perfect knowledge, even though we understood every prophecy perfectly, would it matter much? Would that be the criteria of highest attainment? No! It would be absolutely meaningless without Love overflowing in our hearts.

### **Taking ourselves out of a trial.**

Another point we may overlook in separations is that it may be taking ourselves out of a trial that the Lord permitted for the development of all involved. We can't help but think of the lesson we have all heard about the man who felt sorry for the Butterfly who was struggling to get out of its cocoon. So he takes a scissors and snips open the cocoon so it could cease from its struggles and fly away. But lo and behold the butterfly could never fly. It was the struggle that was an essential prerequisite for the butterfly to have its wings properly developed. May we not forget the same is true of us.

It's the struggle thru trial that if we are rightly exercised will crystallize our characters. Only diamonds can polish other diamonds. Who has not found that business meetings are a great source of polishing. And that when strong differences arise and finally get resolved by each throwing their arms around one another, saying I'm sorry I acted the way I did, that there is a growth of character that takes place that would not in any other way.

### **Doctrinal Differences**

Let's consider for a moment the beautiful Harvest Message that we have all been blessed with. Why did God give us this knowledge? What is its prime purpose? As Paul showed us in 1 Corinthians 13, we realize that knowledge in itself is meaningless if it is not applied.

Knowledge is not an end in itself, but is a means to an end. It's what we do with that knowledge that matters most. He gives us understanding of Doctrine, Chronology,

Prophecy - to see the beautiful harmony of God's Plan – to strengthen our faith – to encourage us to keep pressing on. For just as we have seen these many prophecies fulfilled, God so to speak tells us "I will fulfill all that I have promised to you if you have your life transformed as I apply the heat of the refiners fire."

So we see knowledge is important! It's the very foundation of our entire lives. It effects our zeal, our faith, our character, our love, our witnessing, our compassion, our humility, our sacrifice. But oh how careful we need to be that we do not look upon knowledge from some standpoints as an ultimate criteria of some kind or other just in itself. It can happen so easily! In fact we may have all felt tinges of it briefly one time or another. I know I have.

What do I mean by knowledge becoming an ultimate criteria of some kind just in itself? So that I won't be misunderstood, let me first of all say I do not mean that anyone has come to the conclusion that knowledge is all that matters and that the transformation of our characters is not important.

No, but rather I'm thinking of a far more subtle feeling that perhaps may exist only in our subconscious minds. A feeling that develops perhaps something like this:

I think we have all discovered that those who the Lord has called and chosen are all brethren with firm convictions for what they believe. Thus have firm convictions, we cherish the Harvest Message given us by our returned Lord. We believe our understanding and application of that message is the correct one. This is rather obvious for otherwise we would change our view for what would be more correct.

Having come to this conclusion, we find the next steps can so easily suggest themselves to us. Therefore, it would seem that since we are the ones holding most closely to the Harvest Message, the Lord must be a bit more pleased with us than with the others who differ. We begin to feel a bit superior. Doctrine begins to become a criteria of faithfulness. We develop a sense of security. We belong to the right group. Therefore it would seem proper that we should somewhat isolate ourselves from others to assure that the view we hold so dear will remain pure. That we hear only the truth so that others in our class or fellowship be not swayed by other viewpoints.

I think we can all understand this feeling in measure because many in the Bible Student Movement lived thru the great doctrinal upheaval that took place when the beautiful Harvest Truths we believed were supplanted by those of the Society.

But how do those differences compare to today? How do today's differences compare with those in Paul's day?

- ◆ Some taught that Gentile converts in addition to believing in Christ had to obey the entire Law.
- ◆ Others believed there was no such thing as a resurrection.
- ◆ Others that the resurrection was past already.
- ◆ Others accused Paul of moral weakness.

- ◆ Others questioned Paul's Apostleship.
- ◆ Others argued amongst themselves as to who was greater Paul or Appolos.
- ◆ Others were guilty of great immorality.
- ◆ Some were teaching that Christ's second presence had already begun.

We could go on and on in citing the great differences and errors that existed in Paul's day. And yet what did Paul do? Did he infer by the tone of his letter that he was in any way superior?

Ephesians 3:8: "Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given."

Did he disassociate himself from those in error saying I prefer not to meet with you any more. Did he say that I no longer will attend your meetings or conventions because I have to make a stand to demonstrate how strongly I feel that you are in error? An, No! He did none of these things! What did Paul do? He did everything in his power to help them! He continued to love them, to write to them, to visit them, to teach them, that they might see a more correct viewpoint.

How do the differences of today compare with those in Paul's day. I think we will all agree that they are no where near as serious.

We wonder at times what is a serious enough issue that would warrant separation?? I Don't know? Who could say for sure?

Perhaps one would be that we are so absolutely positive we are right on the issue that we would be willing to risk losing our eternal life on it. By that I mean, that if God told us "I will look favorably on a separation providing you are willing to abide by this criteria, if you are right, you can continue in the race for the high calling. If you are wrong, you will lose your crown."

Would there then be as many separations? Would we be as dogmatic as now? We realize thankfully this is only hypothetical. God knows our frame and would not judge so harshly. But perhaps it will help us to consider our position more depthfully as we consider entering or maintaining a separation.

I guess what I'm trying to say is, there are many points we can be absolutely dogmatic on. Jesus is the ransom, there will be 2 salvations, there is no eternal torment, the soul is not immortal, etc., etc.

But the things which most often we have differences of opinion on, are the things which are NOT as absolute – where there truly can be another possible viewpoint. Where the Scriptures are Not as explicit. In these areas, may we give liberty of thought and conscience to others, to interpret as best they can and continue to study as best we can that together we may strive to get the clearest accuracy on this side the veil as possible, while still appreciating one another as brethren "Beloved of God."

And yet what do we see happening. Throughout the world brethren are building fences so fast it is difficult to keep abreast of what's happening. Where will it all end! I wonder if

Paul is please in how we have followed his teachings and example? I wonder what Bro. Russell thinks of how we have used his writings? Our Heavenly Father?

What's the answer? What should we do? I don't know. But I sure think we have to start to do something!

One of the first aspects is we want to recognize that all of our brethren are brethren, chosen by our Heavenly Father. As Paul said in 1 Thes. 1:4 – even though Paul was about to write a very strong letter correcting error of doctrine and of conduct, he prefaces his comments with, “Knowing brethren Beloved of God, His Choice of you.”

It was God who chose our brethren! So we must love, appreciate, and recognize all our brethren are chosen of God. They all are striving to do God's will just like. They are all begotten of His spirit just like us. We want to have a concern for their welfare just like we appreciate others concerns for us. It's difficult to accomplish any of these if we rarely see one another, or talk to one another.

I had an enlightening experience along this line a few years ago. I was at a Convention and met brethren I never knew before. In the course of our conversations we realized we held a different view on a subject but we sat down and unemotionally we listened to one another, comparing Scripture with Scripture. What a revelation to both of us!

For when all was said and done, we both realized we had wrong preconceived ideas of what those who had the other view believed. That in reality they differed very little. In addition as we compared Scripture with Scripture, we both had the opportunity to bring out thoughts that the other never considered because we were willing to listen to one another. To learn from one another. To share with one another.

Along this line I would to share with you an experience from my early days. It goes back to the year 1952, the Bowling Green, Ohio General Convention. That year they built a new Library on the campus. They placed an inscription over the Library entrance that I thought was a gem. I copied it down and have it to this day. It was a reminder to each student who came searching for truth.

It said “Read not to contradict and confute, nor to believe and to take for granted, but to weight and consider!” What a Gem!

Fully in harmony with 1 Thes. 5:20-21 N.A.S. “Examine everything carefully, hold fast to that which is good.”

So what are we trying to say? That we can't be to sure about doctrine? That we should side step the issues for the sake of peace? No, Not at all! Doctrine is the very foundation of our life. We must every strive for the greatest accuracy of understanding possible. But I guess what I'm trying to say is, that if we are to know and help one another as brethren, if we are truly interested in one another's welfare:

Then we will meet together. We will talk together. We will rejoice together. We will cry together. We will pray together. We will weight Scripture with Scripture together. We will try to help one another to the most accurate knowledge of Truth possible —together. All because we love one another.

In addition, in order for us to manifest this true love for one another, I think it has to be in such a way that the other can truly feel our love and concern. In such a way that our words and actions show that we consider one another as equals, each with our various shortcomings, struggling up the narrow way together.

And as we discuss differences that it be with an attitude of weighing and considering together—looking to the Lord for His spirit to guide our hearts and minds. Not with an attitude of just trying to show how the other is wrong.

If there is an openness of mind on both parts—there will be the greatest blessing. Perhaps one view will thus be obviously seen as correct and accepted. But if not, both will be able to appreciate the others position better—and to realize there are some plausible reasons for their view—that we may not have previously considered.

Dialog= its an exchange of perceptions,—in a non-threatening manner. But if our mannerism in any way implies that we are a bit superior, but we are still willing to show our love by fellowshipping with them, then I'm afraid we will accomplish very little in assisting one another as brethren.

Therefore as we study, may we strive for accuracy of truth, but always bearing in mind that all Doctrine was given for the prime purpose of helping ourselves and one another to become the most loving, the most kind, the most understanding, the most merciful, the most forgiving, of all the people in the world.

And if there is some point of truth that someone is unable to grasp, we have the comforting assurance of Paul in Phil 3:14,15, N.E.:

“Let us then keep to this way of thinking, those of us who are mature. If there is any point on which think differently, this also God will make plain to you. Only let our conduct be consistent with the level we have already reached.”

Yes, God will ultimately make all things plain to us but only if we let our conduct be consistent with the level of knowledge we have already received. I really like that thought. We will understand a little on this side the veil, where we see but through a glass dimly. But oh, think how plain it will be when our eyes are opened beyond the veil.

Oh, if we could have just a one second glimpse of what lies beyond the veil, I don't think our lives would ever be the same. Many of the things that cause so much concern, so much discussion, so much division, would absolutely dwindle into insignificance.

Our lives would be burned up in a fever pitch in serving one another, loving one another, holding up the hands of one another as together we sacrifice with every fiber of our being, working shoulder to shoulder in the great work that God would have us to do.

Let's think for a few moments of the joys beyond the veil that await us if faithful. We're told in Psalms 16:11 “In thy presence is fullness of joy, at thy right hand there are pleasures forever more!”

Pleasures forever More! Daily being in the Father's presence! Divine Immortal life in the realms of glory forever and ever! A home of Ivory Palaces.

And what will our new body be like? A body of brilliance and power the like of which is incomprehensible. No task beyond its abilities to perform. Creative abilities to raise the dead. Make blind men see and deaf men hear, and crippled children run and play.

A body that will harness the power of countless galaxies to spring forth with life forms of every variety and beauty. A body able to travel the realms of space at the speed of thought. A body capable of singing God's praises with a reverberation that causes even the farthest inanimate galaxies to shimmer and twinkle with delight.

As we try to reflect on the joys beyond the veil, we realize our feeble attempts are so inadequate because our finite minds cannot grasp the spiritual realms of the universe.

But if we could! If we could be granted even just a one second glance of what lies beyond, would our lives change in any way? Would our degree of sacrifice change? Would the way we manifest our love for our brethren change a bit?

Would the manner in which we treat our brethren with whom we have differences be more mellow? Would our zeal in shouting from the rooftops the awesome wonder and grandeur that yet awaits mankind in the Kingdom take on a new perspective?

Oh, I can't help but think if we were able to have that one second glimpse of what lies beyond we would never be the same! Everyone of these aspects of our life would take on such a sense of urgency that we truly would be set on fire to RUN! TO RUN AS IF OUR VERY LIVES DEPENDED ON IT!

Paul had this glimpse! It transformed his life! "This One Thing I do" became the sole aim and preoccupation of life.

As we pause to reflect on these joys that await us if faithful, we just can't help but be stimulated to a renewed determination to strive every more diligently to think less about the insignificant transitory aspects of this life. To think less about judging how our brethren are doing or not doing, and to be far more concerned with HOW WE ARE DOING!

This is our desire today, to encourage ourselves to greater faithfulness in fulfilling OUR consecration vows. Making a change within us. As we look within ourselves, if we realize we could be a bit more mellow towards our brethren, may we begin to take steps along this line.

But you know its easier said than done. Some of the fences have existed for many years and our minds have just kind of become accustomed to them as an inevitable part of the landscape of life. So its difficult to break the ice.

We may have had a certain position for years, how do we change it now? Where do you begin? We hardly know anyone closely anymore. And what will the others with whom I meet regularly think? Will it be viewed as a sign of weakness? Would it look like I'm admitting they were right and I was wrong all these years?

And you know I think it is especially hard for us Elders who may have taken a rather strong position when the fence first started to be built. But brethren lets try to forget



about who was right and who was wrong. Let's forget the past and be more concerned with here and now.

You know we all change. We may not even know what others believe today. Let's not worry about what others might think! But more about what God thinks in all avenues of life.

For when we do, others will ultimately come to appreciate the example we set, and the courage it took to put God first. Sign of weakness or compromise?? Ah No! Never! Rather its a sign of triumph whenever a saint of God has the courage to stand up to their convictions regardless of the consequences when they know God would be pleased with a different course.

But again, it's easier said than done! For often when separations take place there are words spoken or written in the heat of emotion that are hard to take. And our initial reaction may be an equally strong feeling. Our flesh may feel inclined to say I don't care to have anything to do with them any more. At least not until they come on bended knee saying they are sorry and pray for our forgiveness.

But may we try to remember they are our brethren even though we may have different views on a few things. We need to recognize that they did what their consciences at the moment told them they had to do.

They did what they felt was pleasing to our Heavenly Father. So, if strong things were said, try to think of them as being begotten by strong convictions and not by any malice. We too at times may have said harsh words one time or another in our lives, and how we appreciated being forgiven.

If we receive an unexpected Christmas card, a get well card, or perhaps a phone call, or even a visit from someone we don't normally meet with, may we rejoice and be glad. May we reciprocate with other gestures of warmth, love and concern. Perhaps it will go on to fully mend a torn relationship.

Even better yet, may we from time to time be the ones to extend a loving gesture. Extending our hand over the fence as it were to show we truly care. It may not be accepted at first, but don't give up, try and try again. As in so many aspects of life, time has a way of curing hurts and mellowing feelings. Then one day as you again test the waters, lo and behold your warmth will produce a kindred response.

Perhaps just a smile or handshake at first, but soon after, a flood of tears as you put your arms around one another and feel once again the friendship you've both so missed for years.

May we strive to fulfill Eph. 4:31,32 "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. And be ye kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.

Finally in the words of Paul - Romans 14:19-20: "Wo then let us pursue the things which make for peace, and the building up of one another. Do not tear down the work of God!"

May this be the work that occupies more of our thoughts and time. Not tearing down the work of God that he has been building slowly in the hearts and lives of our brethren who are struggling up the mountain like ourselves. But rather go out of your way to see them, talk to them, love them, help them, pray for them, hug them, give them your bouquets of love while they are still here to appreciate them.

The kind things you mean to say when they are gone, say before they go. Together may we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another.

If we can, then some day our dream may become a reality! We will look out over the rolling green pastures of the Bible Student Movement, and as far as the eye could see they will be FREE OF ALL FENCES! One thing is for sure, there will be no fences beyond the veil!