

The Fellowship Meeting and the Men

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Free Presbyterian Magazine – March 1958

The late Rev. Donald Beaton dealt with the history of the "Separatists": so did the late Rev. John MacLeod, D.D., Free Church, Inverness. Dr. John Kennedy, in his "Men of Ross-shire," and many others wrote about this Friday exercise of "the men" in some parts of the Highlands and Islands. The cause of this exercise is well known. It was a spiritual departure from the dead ministry of the Church of Scotland before 1843. The Lord's people were starved in their souls by dead formalism which could not satisfy them. It would be useless for the awakened to seek counsel, advice, comfort, or instruction at the mouth of a godless and graceless minister! "Going to church to hear the sermon" would often resemble going to the open market to buy or sell animals! The minister was classified as one of the country gentry, with a manse and a large glebe, or farm. He was often the natural son of some "well-to-do" landed proprietor, estate factor, or a near relative of the landlord! How the poor fellow came into the world was not a question of ethics in those days. The poor in those faraway days were at the mercy of the landlord and his factor. The parish minister was the friend and servant of the proprietor: and we believe that was in part the cause how the masses of the people in more recent times turned against the Church. The tyranny of landlords and employers of labour, and the apathy of the Church has been a smouldering, festering sore in the minds of the working people, which finally alienated them from the Church. As late as fifty years ago the landlord was a mighty man. Not so today: he is in many instances an object of pity! In the days of our fathers, grandfathers, and great-grand-fathers the proprietor was king, master, and lord over his poverty-stricken tenants. "They were his people, slaves and serfs!" But to turn back to the "Friday Fellowship meeting," the cause was dead Moderatism! A fair and excellent account of the Separatists Movement is given by Dr. Kennedy, Rev. Alexander Auld, Rev. D. Beaton, and by Rev. John MacLeod, D.D. It has lasted as we said in some parts of the Highlands and Islands to this day. It was considered of the highest importance among "the men" in former days, when large numbers gathered at communion seasons from wide and remote parts to "the feast of fat things, a feast of wines on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wines on the lees well refined." Isa. xxv, 6. The Friday exercise was generally allocated to the "men." When large numbers of the "men" gathered from Sutherland, Ross, Inverness-

shire, Caithness, etc., Friday was a noted day among ministers, people, and the "men." We remember that Friday was the best attended of all the services, with the exception of the Sabbath day services. It is not so now; as a rule, poorly attended by the people. The former interest seems to be dying out, which is a great pity. It is on a par with other matters. It shows the attitude of the people towards the spiritual affairs of their souls.

Can any other cause or reason be given why the people are so apathetic towards the Friday "Fellowship Meeting"? In former days the "men" were highly respected for their godliness, piety, witness-bearing on the side of the Lord in the home, congregation, and their walk and conversation was in strict accordance with their profession. The people took note of the fact that "their walk" was in keeping with their profession. They might appear to the general public to be far too detached from the common people. They were, above all, men of prayer, and kept up secret communion with God at a throne of grace. Their Father who saw them in secret rewarded them "in that loving respect they were held by the people. The ordinary people believed that they were men of God. They never did try to give that impression to the people that 'I am holier than thou.'" Absolutely not! As we have said above, it was their humble walk, and no airs of superiority about them, sincere, and loveable men. Sin in themselves was their grief, and daily burden: and when they saw it in the words or actions of their neighbours, they witnessed against it. They were "living epistles" that all could read, and that all respected for their godliness. Their piety was not a sham but a gracious disposition through the grace of God in their heart. They walked in the light "as He is in the light" - I. John i. They followed the Lord in His Word. "Follow thou me" was to them the greatest conceivable blessing in this world. "If ye love me keep my commandments," was their constant care, and living desire to obey and honour their Lord and Master. They were no legalists. They knew the "terrors of the law," and that no flesh could be justified in the sight of God through the works of the law. Their constant theme was that Christ crucified was the only foundation for righteousness for lost sinners. They knew, felt, and believed that the ruined sinner must be born again. The Arminian found no place in their theology. This was revealed when the Arminian-Rainy party, and Modernists, did what they could to foist their New Theology on the "men." How quickly and clearly they saw, "Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils-

speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron" - I Tim. iv.

How often we heard them on the Friday warning the young of the sinful declension that was taking place throughout the land in Church and State. Today we have the fruit of the false doctrines that were then shown throughout the land "Wolfenden Report," a national disgrace; the Scoto-Catholics of Scotland, via Iona and Edinburgh, seeking to unite with the Romanisers of the corrupt Episcopal Church of England. When God would not recognise the apostate King Saul of Israel, he must flee to the Witch of Endor! With the "men," Friday was a day that they witnessed against error, false doctrines, heresy, hypocrisy, back-sliding from the truth, Sabbath desecration, immoral practice in word, in business, in profession in general; and spoke of individual relationship to the cause of Christ on the Lord's day, and attending to family worship, teaching, and instructing the children, attending the weekly prayer-meeting, fleeing from all appearance of evil. The dance-hall, gambling, lying, and cheating your neighbour, did not escape their warning; and concluded on the authority of God's Word, that if the man who brought forward the portion of Scripture as a "Question" indulged openly or secretly in any sin, he was in grave danger and in a most unhealthy condition of soul before the Lord! On the other hand, how they would trace the weakest groaning in the soul after spiritual life, and encourage the weak believer to persevere in the ways of the Lord, reading the Word, secret prayer, and attending to the preaching of the Word of God. They were men of the tenderest feeling towards the weak believer. They sought to show the difference between the works of the flesh and the work of the Spirit in the soul. It was not their habit to rehearse their own personal experience, beginning with the "Effectual Calling," and finishing up with "sanctification." The man who gave out the "Question" asked the brethren to give marks of the grace of God in the soul and life of the true believer? The minister in charge "opens the question. "That is to say, he gives the theological meaning and application of the "portion of Scripture" given to the brethren for the exercise of the day. When the minister in charge expounds the verse (which should be as brief as possible) the men are asked to speak on the "question," that is, those who are fit and experienced believers. It is very unwise to be asking young men who are newly received into full communion with the Church to "rise and speak to the question." They are not fit to give marks, as if a pupil on the lower grade in a secondary school was fit to teach and instruct the pupils

that were in their final year! It is bad for young men beginning their public profession of Christ to be put forward too soon: The fathers would not do it.

They most certainly nursed them with their prayers, Christian kindness, and by their own life and walk. But they knew from their past experience how tender and weak the plant of grace is in the regenerated soul! It is better to allow it to grow gradually in secret than to bring it to the full gaze of a godless world and religious hypocrites? "Not a novice, lest being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil" - I Tim. 3. There lurks that danger, the spirit of pride under the cloak of carnal humility. There is again the danger of big ideas developing, self-importance, and the good work of the Spirit made to appear stupid, dull and confused. There is need of wisdom on the part of men in charge of younger men! The Free Presbyterian Church has been stung over and over again (and likely every other Church as well) by laying hands too early on men who could not walk properly in the ways of the Lord. "Not a novice."

But, to return to the "men" and the Friday "Question." Many a poor soul got great and lasting benefit through what the "men" said on Friday. Some, of course, take advantage of the occasion to air personal grievances and scold someone who may be present, or absent, which is entirely wrong and utterly foreign to the spirit and meaning of the exercise. That often arises from bad temper. It is contrary to the spirit of "the day." It is sometimes called "A day of self-examination" and truly that was the original meaning of it: and not a day of airing personal grievances, imaginary persecution, and the like. We do not hear so much of that today as we used to hear forty years ago! The ablest of the men took good care in "speaking to the Question" that all personal matters were kept outside. The odd ones who delighted in personal remarks about those whom they personally disliked were not the most spiritually minded and the most saintly among the men. In fact, the "men" did not favour them very much. They were too aggressive! It can be a most helpful and profitable exercise if conducted in the spirit of the gospel. One thing that should be always avoided is picking up a portion of Scripture which is not a "Question" relative to the state and gracious craving of the souls of the Lord's people. There are scores of suitable passages for such an occasion without going into fields that have no reasonable bearing on the matter before the "men" and the people! The minister in charge has the right to refuse a passage of Scripture which has no relationship to the exercise of the day. It is on rare occasions that that happens, although it may happen and is rather disconcerting when it

happens. The minister is most reluctant to say to the "Propounder," "That is not a 'Question.'" But the men are most careful, and generally there is no jarring: note in that respect. It is truly a good exercise for the "men" themselves, and encourages them to address the people in their respective congregations in the absence of the minister.

We have heard the most of the outstanding men that adhered to the Word of God in May, 1893. Indeed, some of them never entered a place of worship in the Declaratory Act Free Church after 1892, the moment they knew that the majority party in the Free Church Assembly in May, 1892 (by an overwhelming: majority) passed that infamous Act. In Greenock some of the elders, along with some of the people, conducted meetings in private houses before they managed to gather in a more corporate body in a public hall. They were men of clear discernment what they should do in defence of the Word of God. They knew that it was the Bible that was attacked by the devil and his agents. The very life and spirit of the faith that they had in the Word of God was at stake. They saw what was coming the moment the Authority of the Word of God was taken away from the people. They could separate from men, buildings, money, organisations (however painful), but they could not separate from the Word of God. They were warning the young of the awful declension and of the terrible judgments that were sure to follow the national departure from God's Word. Since that time (well over fifty years ago) we passed through what is called the first world war; and now we speak of the second world war; and, what is more terrible, we speak about a third world war! In all recorded history whether among savage nations, or what is called "Christian civilised nations," when nations prepared for war, war was engaged in! Nations were never in all past history so feverishly preparing as they have been during the last twelve years - Russia, United States, Britain, etc. What is also so noticeable, that the very sins for which ancient nations were blotted out are today raging among the so-called "Christian Nations"! This is what the "men" saw coming, and told us would come; that as the light of the gospel would fade out, "Thou makest darkness, and it is night, wherein all the beasts of the forest do creep forth"- Ps. 104, 20. The ferocious rulers of Russia will deluge the world with blood before they acknowledge defeat. Their god is their power! They adore the god of power. This Russian "god of power" shall be broken, destroyed, but at what expense? Britain is still the centre of civil and religious liberty – and not the United States. The Constitution of the United States is a non-religious Constitution; not so the British Constitution. No doubt

whatever, Britain and the United States must stand or fall together against the Russian "god of power." What is, then, behind this dark cloud? The most glorious period in world history, "He shall have dominion also from sea to sea, and from the river unto the ends of the earth . . . and let the whole earth be filled with His glory" - Ps. 72.

Let our men continue to warn, exhort, instruct, encourage, and witness on the side of truth, righteousness, and the souls of men without fear or favour in the strength of His saving grace. The Free Presbyterian Church has been, and now is indebted to our excellent laymen, missionaries and elders - men who are worthy of the highest confidence and trust in the Courts of the Church. Would to God that the Courts of the other Protestant denominations in Scotland were so well and Scripturally conducted by their office-bearers as the Courts of the Free Presbyterian Church. If they were, one would not hear to the end of time any reference to the political Bishops of Canterbury or Rome! It is, therefore, cause of thankfulness that we have in our midst faithful men, who discern the times we live in and the necessity of keeping the Courts conducted according to the Word of God. Faithful elders in the Courts of the Church of Christ are of the greatest value and importance to maintain purity of worship, doctrines and discipline in their respective congregations: and in discharging their duties in the Courts. Oh, what is the use of a graceless elder or deacon? Absolutely none, but a curse and a snare to the perishing souls of men! They will suit the graceless minister and the graceless congregation! Who voted them into office? Who, but ignorant and graceless men and women. Let our Church members in the election of office-bearers be satisfied that the person, or persons nominated by the members for the respective office of elder or deacon is suitable for the office. The kirk session can of course, accept or reject the person nominated by the members. They have the right to use their own discretion as to the suitability of the person, or persons, nominated by the members for the respective office of elder or deacon. The final decision remains with the kirk session.

"Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. For by it the elders obtained a good report." Heb. i, 1-2.