

George Henry Lang

**Observations upon
The Union of
Freechurch Christians
in Germany**

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OBSERVATIONS
UPON
THE UNION OF FREECHURCH CHRISTIANS
IN GERMANY.

By
G. H. Lang.

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OBSERVATIONS upon The Union of Freechurch Christians in Germany.

I. Its Origin.

For the more part of a century there have been in Germany assemblies of Exclusive Brethren, of various parties. The most numerous of these have been known as Elberfeld brethren, from the town of that name where the Brethren movement in Germany took its rise. This community numbered perhaps 35,000 members [sic].

For nearly half a century Open Brethren assemblies have existed and increased, with some 5000 members.

In April 1937, a government order suppressed the Elberfeld meetings on the ground that they were antagonistic to the State. Yet it is beyond question that these Christians had been surpassed by none as moral, law-abiding persons, who throughout their long career had not in any way opposed authorities. Some further explanation of the suppression must be sought.

The world today is marked by a revival of intense nationalism, each people looking to its own national interests. The suspicion of one another thus engendered is a severe danger to world peace. In pursuance of this national aim governments endeavour to consolidate their subjects into one undivided national community. In consequence they are averse to individualism and sectionalism, for they aim at all being welded into one system: the "State" is all.

The Elberfeld community was a religious body separate from all other religious bodies. It also walked aloof from the public affairs of the State, its general and maintained attitude being that of men who considered themselves "pilgrims and strangers" on earth, that is, as aliens and of no earthly citizenship, "Fremdlinge und ohne Bürgerrecht" as the Elberfeld version of the Scriptures translates I Pet. 2.11. Plainly this attitude was different to nationalism and its aims, and it may be presumed to be the sense in which the government held them to be antagonistic and suppressed their meetings.

This is confirmed by the fact that, when negotiations with the authorities were commenced, they presently expressed their willingness to withdraw the order on two conditions: (1) that an Union should be created with a form and regulations that they could approve; and (2) that no member should be received thereinto who held the teaching mentioned of non-cooperation in the public affairs of the nation. They further intimated that the Open Brethren also would be suppressed unless they joined the proposed Union.

This policy necessarily works towards the eliminating of small religious groups, and the formation of an organization upon which government can more easily keep its eye and hand.

Another and smaller group of the Brethren (known in England as the "Raven" party) has also been suppressed.

[2] It is not to be presumed that a definite opposition to religion in general, or to evangelical religion in particular, on the part of the State animates these actions. There may

well be irreligious individuals who are pleased with such steps, but this is scarcely the official attitude, or they would not have so soon agreed to withdraw the prohibition upon measures being taken which would satisfy their political and national objects. They expressly intimated that the purely religious doctrines and activities of the assemblies were no concern of theirs, but they must be satisfied that no risk should exist or arise of political opposition working in the assemblies, but that the State could count upon the active cooperation of the members in politics, war, culture, sport, and other general affairs.

The Union has been formed. All but a small minority of the Elberfeld Brethren, and practically the whole of the Open Brethren, have become members. Each individual joins separately. It is of importance and value that it is not an Union of assemblies but of Christians.

II. Its Structure.

1. There is a senior officer or President (Bundesbeauftragte) who is responsible to the State for the whole Union, with a Council of brothers to aid him. His appointment was confirmed by a general conference of members in June 1938 at Elberfeld.

2. The President chooses a District representative for each large defined area (Bezirksbeauftragte), who also has a Council to aid him. His appointment must be confirmed by the local representatives of the assemblies in his area.

3. Each local assembly chooses a local representative (Ortsbeauftragte). He is responsible that no member be received into the assembly, and that nothing be done or taught there, contrary to the interests of the State. His appointment [sic] must be confirmed, and can be recalled, by the President.

It is important that these several officers are not chosen or appointed by the State, but, as to the local representatives, by the assemblies; as to the district officers, by the President; and as to the President, by the district officers. Thus the government of the Union is within itself.

It is not necessary to recite the numerous regulations laid down in the Constitution for the inter-working of the Union. They are such as naturally belong to an Organization of this type. Some will come before us as we proceed. The Constitution is, indeed, not finally settled as to details.

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III. Observations.

Obs. 1. It is true that this Union is not an inter-assembly organization. It does not bind the assemblies together for general administrative purposes, but leaves each free in its own affairs, as regards interference by another assembly. But it is a super-assembly organization, and in certain cases the officers of the Union may take such action as may affect a local assembly. For example, [sic] if the President be satisfied that a member of the Union is not fulfilling the required condition of active cooperation in the affairs of the State and its general community life he may withdraw that person's membership in the Union (Constitution, VI, 3). In this case the action of the President may deprive the local assembly to which that person may belong of one of its members, and will so far affect its internal affairs.

This introduces a ground of exclusion from the assembly not known to Scripture.

Obs. 2. There is also introduced a new ground of admission to the assembly. According to Scripture a person becomes ipso facto a member of the church of God by the new birth, the reception of the Holy Spirit, and his personal confession of faith in Christ by baptism. But for membership in an assembly associated with this Union the further condition is required that he become a member of the Union, and this implies the subordinate condition that he shall adopt a particular attitude to the State and its corporate affairs. Even if the defined attitude to the State were Scriptural yet was it not laid down by the apostles as a condition of reception into the church of God.

The result is that a child of God, though of blameless life and belief, is automatically excluded from these assemblies if he holds, for example, that a disciple, being a pilgrim and alien on earth (as was Abraham in Canaan), should not unite in public affairs, or in war.

Obs. 3. It is a very serious thing to introduce new grounds of admission to and exclusion from the house of God. And inasmuch as not all believers can, with a good conscience toward God, accept the required membership and its conditions, the Union, by its own rules and action, can never admit more than a section of the true church of God and is therefore itself a sect. Thus is abandoned the original principle and testimony of the Brethren that every child of God, walking in holiness of life, is entitled to his place in the house of God without further conditions.

Obs. 4. Involved in this there is a further conception contrary to the New Testament, even that of a membership in a local assembly as distinct from and in addition to membership in the whole church of God. The divine thought is that one who has been added by the Lord to the one church has been thereby made a member of any and every local assembly of that church, and the local assembly has only to acknowledge this while that person is in its neighbourhood. [4] No formality of admission can arise. The local assembly has no right to exclude any such person, save on grounds specified by Scripture, and therefore [sic] it has no right to require any condition of reception other than those of Scripture. This excludes any thought of a local fellowship limited to such and such persons as the local assembly may to [sic] choose to own, on such terms as it may lay down, and agree to put on a list of members.

This point lay at the very [sic] root of the Brethren movement: it was its actual historical commencement. Dr Cronin, formerly a Catholic, was, soon after his conversion, in the habit of worshipping and taking the Lord's Supper at various of the nonconformist chapels in Dublin. For a time this was permitted, but he was soon informed that unless he joined one of those local churches as a regular and recognized member he would not be allowed at the table of the Lord at any of them. With at that time little knowledge of Scripture, he yet felt in his soul that this demand was a challenge to his position as already accepted by Christ into His church. He could not comply; in consequence he was refused further admission to the Supper; and then, with one who shared his difficulty [sic], he commenced to worship and break bread in a house.

Obs. 5. There is a further condition which affects servants of Christ who travel in the ministry of the Word among the assemblies [sic] or in the spreading of the gospel. As the State holds the President of the Union responsible for the good conduct of these travelling preachers and teachers they must hold his sanction for engaging in this ministry (Con., Ordnung 6). The Holy Spirit may have said in the local assembly "Separate unto ME Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them" (Acts 13,2), and the assembly

[sic] may have solemnly done so; but for the Union this does not suffice: its President must confirm the directions and appointment of the Holy Spirit, or His chosen servant may not exercise his gift from God within the assemblies associated with the Union.

In principle, this can be the beginning of that control of travelling ministry which was asserted by the Council of Arles in A. D. 314, at the time when, under Constantine the Great, the church first came to an arrangement with the State.

The unrestricted right of the Lord's servants to fulfil His commission and preach His word without authorization from man, and without regarding the prohibition of man, including rulers, has been a chief, a vital matter from the beginning. Peter and John asserted it most aggressively before the authorities of their land: "We cannot but speak ... we must obey God rather than man" (Acts 4.20; 5.29). In all ages other men of God, called, moved, empowered [sic] by God, have pressed forward in their steps, suffering fines, imprisonment, death, rather than admit any right of rulers, civil or ecclesiastical, to sanction or restrict their ministry. It was, for example, the very point upon which John Bunyan was sent to prison – he refused to admit the demand of State and Church that he should not preach without their license. Rather than concede this demand he suffered twelve years confinement, during which period it was he wrote "The Pilgrim's Progress". God thus signally endorsed the fidelity of His servant by enabling [5] him to produce at that time this so greatly blessed book.

Obs. 6. It is stated in the Constitution that "The Representatives have no influence upon creed and doctrine" (Ordnung 4). This seems too wide a statement, there being the evident exception that the doctrine that it is not for the Christian to take part in national and public affairs may not be given in the assemblies of the Union, for if it were given it would become the duty of the Representatives to forbid it.

In practice this must involve that the large body of Scripture that has been believed by many to enjoin this separation from world affairs must be ignored or explained away. That "the whole world lieth in the evil one" (I John 5.19); that Satan is its prince (John 12.31; 14.30; 16.11); to whom at present all its kingdoms belong (Lu. 4.5,6); and under whom evil angels rule its separate regions (Dan. 10.13,20; Ezek. 28.12); that the course of world empire is as given in Daniel 2 and its nature as in Daniel 7, and that its destruction is to be as in both chapters; that the disciple of Christ is to be not of the world even as Christ was not of it (John 17,14): these are sample passages that it will not be safe, or be allowed, to expound in the Union and its assemblies.

Obs. 7. In theory the independence and privileges of each local assembly are maintained: in practice it will prove difficult to secure this, and at this early date the tendency has already commenced which, if it continues, will result in a centralizing of influence in the officials of the Union and in a virtual superseding of the local assembly.

For example: because in former days dissensions in local assemblies have been sometimes of long continuance, and because the State (very naturally) wishes to enforce peace within its borders, it is provided in the Constitution (Ordnung 3) that "all difficulties, which show themselves in the assemblies, are to be regulated within the assemblies", but that if this end cannot be obtained within two months the local representative has the duty to notify the district representative. These latter are responsible, each within his district, for good order and peace within the assemblies. For this purpose each has a Council of Brothers to aid him, and these shall seek to settle the difficulties in a local assembly that may be remitted to them by the local representative, [sic] Further, every mem-

ber of the Union has the right of immediate appeal to the President. (See Die Wahrheit etc p. 27).

It is clear that the official position of these brethren will give them no greater spiritual power for adjusting differences among fellow-believers than they would possess without that official position. But the church of God is not supposed to have any other power than the spiritual: it is the present sphere on earth for the exercise of that energy, the spiritual. The scheme here outlined is therefore an introduction of an influence (the official) foreign to the assemblies of God. In all other realms it has been proved that such interv^frence [sic] may indeed compel outward submission and order, but it leaves hearts disaffected. The sore is seldom cured, but only suppressed, which is dangerous. Moreover, the bringing in of persons from outside the local circle concerned carries the danger that the trouble itself will widen from the local into the general circle.

How different this scheme of discipline is to that laid down by the Head of the church in Matt, [sic] 18 scarcely needs mention. By the latter the local trouble is to be dealt with in, and so be confined to, the local assembly. No further tribunal is known to the New Testament, save only appeal to the Head of the church. In the present case there is appeal to the Head of the Union. And already matters (such as how to deal with members who absent themselves from the gatherings of the local church, and similar questions) which, according to Scripture, should be dealt with in the local assembly by the guidance of the Word, are being carried to senior members of the Union.

This tendency for the Union to take precedence over the local assembly is inevitable, seeing that the character and interests of the Union, and its responsibility to satisfy the State, are involved in the actions of the local assembly and must ever be a primary concern.

It must work in the same direction that, to comply with the directions of the State, the financial affairs of each local assembly are liable to the inspection and control of the President. (Const. XI).

This tendency to supersede the local assembly has been further seen in that a letter of commendation to fellowship elsewhere has taken the form of a certificate by the Local Representative that the person was a member of the Union. And it showed itself in that the invitation to the recent great conference at Elberfeld was issued, not by the assembly or leaders of the assembly, but by the president of the Union in the name of the Union from the offices of the Union, and was addressed, not to assemblies, but to the Local Representatives vof [sic] the Union.

Obs. 8. The New Testament knows no visible organization of Christians other than the local assemblies. Competent church historians have pointed out that when the first general organization was formed in the early centuries it followed the mould of the imperial organization, the empire. The capital city, Rome, the seat of the emperor, became the seat of the chief bishop of the churches included in the organization; the provinces of the empire became dioceses of the church; and so on in detail. Both the form and the methods of the empire were adopted in the Church.

The State Church in England offers a broad counterpart to the new Union now being considered. The Archbishop of Canterbury is the President of the Church, with whom the State deals in matters affecting the whole Church. The bishop of each diocese has responsibility over all the clergy and church affairs of his region. The individual local clergyman is the officially recognized representative of religion in his local parish. It is true that in this case the senior officials are chosen and appointed by the State; [7] but in general outline the two schemes correspond.

This principle of following the methods of the world shows itself in the detail that the Constitution of the Union provides that various questions are to be decided by a majority vote of the persons acting. This is the only practicable plan known to the world, but it is quite unknown to the Word of God. The New Testament supposes that the children of God, being all brothers of one family, and possessed by the one Spirit of their Father, will bear with one another in love, and will be brought to oneness of mind by the one Spirit. Where serious contention was present, as at Corinth, no suggestion was made by the apostle to decide matters by a majority vote. And in fact, while decisions can be so made, a settlement of a contentious matter is seldom so reached; for the minority remain unconvinced and ready to reopen the matter.

The divine plan for saints is set forth in such words as these: “that ye stand fast in one soul, with one spirit striving for the faith of the gospel ... let us, therefore, as many as are full grown (men), be thus minded: and if in anything ye are otherwise minded, even this shall God reveal unto you ... I exhort Euodia and I exhort Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord” (Phil. 1.27; 3.15; 4.2). The very endeavour to reach such harmony promotes spirituality of mind; and the opposite also is true.

The adoption of a system that is of the world, worked by the world’s methods, cannot but form in the Christian the mind of the world. The process may be slow and subtle, but it is sure. It is excellent that the need of caring for young people is being pressed upon the assemblies and their leaders. It is recognized that the State, as well as various anti-christian organizations, are working hard to secure the support of youth and so to assure the future in the manner such organizations desire. But how shall young Christians be saved from the world in an Union fashioned like the world, worked in measure by the methods of the world, and which requires its members to cooperate in the public and corporate life of the world? In the hour that the Spirit of God came upon and filled Peter he cried? [sic] “Save yourselves from this crooked generation!” (Acts 2.40). That generation had stronger claims upon Peter and his hearers than any other nation can have upon its members, for not only did they belong to it by birth and training, but also it was the one nation on earth officially owned by God as His people.

It seems almost impossible but that conforminty [sic] to the world shall gradually and subtly increase in members of the Union if they are faithful to its requirements in relation to the State. It may be presumed that the government counts upon this result from its present policy. It followed rapidly upon the agreement between Church and State in the fourth century, and also when the Reformed Churches entered into alliance with the Reformed States.

Obs. 9. It appeared at the time that the alternative to agreeing to the conditions laid down by the authorities was continued [8] suppression of the meetings, with the risk of fines, imprisonment, or the even more to be dreaded concentration camps, had believers met in private for worship. It was considered certain – indeed, the responsible officials said so – that the State would not agree to recognize each assembly separately, with one of its members made responsible to the State for good behaviour in the assembly.

In England, in the seventeenth century, there was a long and bitter battle with the State and the State Church over this very matter of the independence of the local churches. Faithful men knew that it was a vital issue, and they suffered resolutely the severest persecution until at last the State yielded. This point remains a keystone in the arch of religious liberty.

Persecuting States and Churches ever sternly refuse this freedom to local groups of believers to meet as separate units for worship and witness. Whatever fears human

princes may honestly have as to such separate groups, the reason why the great Prince of this world, Satan, dreads and opposes the plan is clear. These unorganized, unattached communities show a remarkable energy in reproducing themselves and a peculiar power of surviving persecution. They are far more dangerous to Satan's kingdom than are organized church systems, being more effective in the spread of the gospel and of the kingdom of God.

Present circumstances in Germany must be viewed as part of a wider movement to destroy this liberty. Of recent years the same endeavour has been made in other European lands to force such assemblies to form an Union or to join such Unions as may exist.

The Stundist churches of Russia were at first such independent units; but strong leaders organized Unions, largely in the hope that such bodies might be able better to escape persecution; but under both the former and the present rulers this hope proved vain.

The early brethren adopted this principle of assembly life. But J. N. Darby shortly led those who followed him to abandon it in favour of a real, effective, though unavowed organization, in which each assembly is bound by the disciplinary acts of every other assembly. He declared independency to be worse than a State Church. The formal notion of this system was that independency denies the unity of the body of Christ. But this is a misapplication of the figure of the body, for in Scripture this is not used with reference to anything external, but only as a picture of a real, practical but purely spiritual union between Christ and His people.

The Open Brethren have upheld the original practice, and are the real maintainers of the assembly principles of the first days of the Brethren; but so greatly does the Enemy abhor this principle that of late years he has craftily brought about a good measure of sectional centralizing and organizing, in hope of duly turning the whole movement from its practice [sic]. The very persistence of Satan's attacks upon such assemblies shows how important he regards this matter.

Obs. 10. The Union involves an admission by the assemblies that the [9] State has some right of control in the house of God. It has been allowed to impose upon the whole community of Christians an organization wholly foreign to the New Testament. Nor is it only external matters that are affected. Internal and spiritual affairs are regulated, such as the manner in which saints shall give of their means to the work of God; that certain views of New Testamwnt [sic] teaching shall not be given; that the travelling ministry shall be under the oversight of the President; that certain persons shall not be retained or received as memebers [sic] of the assemblies. All this is an encroachment upon the sole rights of Christ as Son over the house of God, to Whom alone all authority in that house belongs. If the State be granted such rights as these what can hinder it claiming larger rights when it shall think fit to do so?

All through the Christian centuries this also has been a chief and crucial battle ground between believers and the State. In Scotland in the seventeenth century the State and the Church of England sought to impose upon that country the Church of England order. The resistance was stubborn and prolonged. For twenty eight years the godly endured the bitterest persecution, being fined, imprisoned, shot, drowned, beheaded, burned to death. All round the south west of the country their tombstones bear this notice: That so and so was killed at such and such a time and place "for maintaining the crown rights of Christ as Head of His church".

IV. Its Justification.

No attempt is made by its promoters to show New Testament warrant for such a Union. Its justification is attempted (see Die Wahrheit etc 19–26) by another line of reasoning, known to theologians as the Doctrine of Development. This argument implies a series of assertions as follows: –

1. That there is no apostolic pattern for the organizing of a Christian assembly.

But this is matter of opinion, or rather of spiritual discernment as to the facts shown in the New Testament. It would seem strange if the Head of the church had left no sufficient indication of His mind upon this so important matter.

It is urged that at first there were no elders in the first christian assembly, that at Jerusalem, but only apostles. This overlooks that the apostles were themselves elders. Peter, the foremost apostle of that early period, writes: “The elders among [sic] you [10] “I exhort, who am a fellow-elder” (I Pet. 5.1). It is said that in some assemblies there were elders appointed, in others not. But it is stated that Paul and Barnabas “appointed elders in every church” that they had founded up to that time (Acts 14,23), and later on Titus was told “to appoint elders in every city”. Does not this reveal clearly a divine intention as to every assembly? And is not the explanation as to some assemblies (as at Thessalonica and Corinth) not having elders immediately appointed this, that of necessity the appointment must wait until God shall have raised up in each place the necessary men? And writing to the assemblies named shortly after he had left them the apostle in each case directs them how to recognize such men and that they were to give them the proper honour and obedience.

In this and other particulars the Word of God does give a sufficient picture of what the Head of the church designs for each assembly.

This argument implies that the Word of God is not sufficient for the guidance of the people of God.

2. It is next asserted that, because the New Testament (as is said) gives no pattern, therefore we are at liberty to adopt from time to time such measures as seem best to suit circumstances. It is pleaded that the conditions of the world change, so that what was suitable in the apostolic days may not be suitable now, and the church of God must adapt itself to such changed conditions.

This is the argument that ecclesiastics have constantly used to justify the vast changes that have corrupted the church of God. By candid historians it is admitted that the present great church systems bear no resemblance to the unaffiliated, simple communities of the apostolic days. The ecclesiastic cannot deny this, but he seeks to justify it by the argument in question. There is no limit to the changes that may be so warranted. Every man, every church may do what is right in its own eyes. It were marvellous that the Son of God should leave the church to this utter confusion.

“The Lord knew perfectly the purposes which His church is to serve on earth, and knew fully the condition of affairs amidst which the church must work; and He instituted through His apostles the very best arrangements and methods for doing the intended work under the given conditions. To assume otherwise is to impute folly unto God ... It is a fallacy that the conditions alter essentially, or indeed, at all, in relation to the business of the church of God. God changes not; His claims upon and

principles of conduct for mankind alter not; the sinfulness and rebellion of the natural man abide undiminished; and, for the purpose in view, racial and religious differences, or a local veneer of mental education or of civilization, matter nothing ... As, then, all the essential factors abide as they were in apostolic times, the apostolic plan of church life and of christian service will be, and has been, found to be as divinely suited to this age as to that; indeed, scripturally speaking it is but one age ... Only when some human purpose has been pursued have other methods been found needful ... But as long as Christians address themselves only to the God-appointed business of standing forth as witnesses to the claims of the Lord whom the world [11] “crucified, and of gathering out from the nations a people for His name, in preparation for their serving Him at His return and in His kingdom, so long the New Testament church organization and the apostolic lines of service will be found entirely adequate.

“For the ecclesiastical doctrine of development, by which it is held that the church has both duty and right to adapt her institutions and alter her methods to suit the times, there is neither spiritual necessity nor Scriptural authority” (Affiliation, 4, 5).

The doctrine of development implies that the Word of God is not final.

3. It is further asserted that, though the Word of God is not sufficient or final, that the church has the Holy Spirit to guide in making the changes that are supposed to become necessary.

The leading of the Holy Spirit is indeed a blessed and practical reality, yet this argument has been employed by different persons as warrant for the most contradictory or unspiritual conduct. There are three spirits that may prompt action: the spirit of the man; a wicked demonic spirit (I Tim. 4.1), often speaking as an angel of light (II Cor. 11.14); and the Holy Spirit. Against the two former the Christian must be ever on his guard. His own spirit may becloud his judgment, as when fear of man, of persecution, prompts him to avoid the cross and to seek reasons for taking some easier way. Against deceiving spirits we are most expressly warned (I John 4.1–6). How then may the disciple be sure that it is the Holy Spirit alone that guides him? There are two main tests: (1) In any matter upon which God has spoken in His Word the Spirit will guide by the Word; (2) in any event the Spirit will never lead contrary to the Word, but ever in harmony with it.

These tests will help in the present discussion. The Word of God does speak about the order of the house of God. Parts of it were written expressly that men might know how to behave in that house (I Tim. 3.14[sic],15); and in this very letter the question of the government of the house by elders is set forth. Therefore the need of guidance upon these matters will be given through the Word. If it be that the Word leaves any details indefinite, then we may leave those details indefinite, and follow the Word in so doing. But this is wholly different to making arrangements (such as this Union) which are utterly unknown to the Word and which in important matters are actually contrary to the Word. To this the Holy Spirit will never lead, for Himself gave the instructions in the Word.

The Scripture gives its own ruling upon this matter, and it held good in both Old Testament times and New. One of the most richly inspired of the prophets cried: “To the law and to the testimony! if they speak not according to this word, surely there is no morning for them”, that is, they shall remain and wander in the darkness of night, (Isa. 8.19–21). And John the apostle declares: “He that knoweth God heareth us: he who is not of God heareth us not (I John 4.6). And writing upon this very matter of church order, in some of its aspects, Paul says: “If any man thinketh himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him take knowledge of the things which I write unto you that they are the commandments of

the Lord” (I Cor. 14.37,38), to which he at once adds the same warning that Isaiah gave as to wilful ignorance [12] causing darkness, saying, “If any man is ignorant, let him be ignorant.”

Thus do writers inspired by the Spirit direct to utterances He has already given as the test and guidance. And this was the habit of the Son of God on earth as He moved, taught, and worked by the Spirit: He too appealed constantly to what was written in Holy Scripture. Yet that Book had been written from four to fifteen hundreds of years before He came, but He did not think the changes of those long centuries called for any other course than to fulfil what was written in the eternal Book of God. But the argument now discussed implies that what is therein written is neither sufficient, final, nor binding, and it substitutes for the Word a principle of conduct variable and destructive, and which quickly leads to results definitely contrary to the Word. Nor is it in Germany alone that this argument has been used of late as justification for changes in the work and testimony of Brethren.

4. It is further pleaded as justification for the Union that thereby liberty has been gained for public worship and the spread of the gospel.

In itself this is indeed matter for rejoicing, and all will desire that present opportunities may be fully used and may prove very fruitful in the salvation of men.

But that it shows the formation of the Union to be of God is not so certain. In the days of Samuel Israel gave up God’s external order for their corporate life and adopted one of their own, borrowed from the world, saying, “Nay, but we will have a king over us; that we may be like all the nations” (I Sam. 8.19). This they did hoping to gain internal peace (“our king shall judge us”, that is, settle by authority our internal disputes), and also external liberty (“and he shall fight our battles”). And for a time this seemed to prosper. At first their king brought them the freedom they desired, gaining notable victories over their enemies (ch. 11 and 14.47,48). But later the tide turned against them. Internal dissension arose through their leader becoming jealous of another, oppressing him, and driving him out of the land; and presently the very external foes they had before defeated now crushed them. History has often repeated this story.

Yet, for His own great name’s sake God did not forsake His people. He gave them again deliverance through David and prosperity under Solomon. But this did not avail to hinder the full consequence of their own way overtaking them. In the main their kings led them from the ways of God, and after nearly three thousands of years those consequences are still troubling them, and will yet do so until at long last, by accepting the Lord Jesus Christ as their king, they shall have returned to God’s plan that Himself shall be their king.

All this is instructive as to the ways of God with His own chosen people in both judgment and mercy. God in grace will bless His gospel, for He delights in mercy; yet the harmful effects of adopting principles and methods not of Him will appear in due time.

5. It is also urged that Christians are commanded in the Word of God to obey the State, and that if the State requires such arrangements as the present the assemblies must submit.

In this very important aspect of the question spiritual discernment is necessary to distinguish things that differ.

In the first place it is plain that no unlimited obedience to rulers is allowed by God. The three Hebrews refused firmly to obey the king’s order to worship an idol, and went into the fire (Dan. 3). Daniel went to the den of lions for disobeying a law as to prayer

(Dan. 6). Christ resisted the will of the Minister of Religion (the High Priest), and suffered death. The very apostles who teach Christians to obey rulers were often in prison for disobeying them; and hundreds of thousands of the people of God have rightly and nobly walked in their steps.

In all such scriptural instances it was when authorities entered the sphere of religion that faithful men uncompromisingly refused to obey, whereas in all other matters they were patterns of obedience.

The passages of Scripture used as applying to the affairs now discussed are the words of the Lord “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s (Mat. 22.21), and the apostolic instructions in Rom. 13.1–7 and I Pet. 2.13–17.

There are, then, “things that belong unto Caesar” by grant from God. What are these things as set forth in God’s Word? They are his office as king, with subjection, tribute, custom, fear, honour from his subjects. The children of God are under duty to God to render all this unto Caesar and to subordinate officers appointed by him.

But for what purposes has God appointed rulers? What is Caesar’s province according to God, his Overlord? This is shown in Proverbs 8.15,16:

By me (Wisdom) kings reign
 And princes decree justice.
 By me princes rule,
 And nobles, even all the judges of the earth.

This is confirmed and defined by Romans 13, which, [sic] speaking of the ruler ideally, and according to God’s intention in appointing him, says that he is (i) “a servant of God for good” to them that “do that which is good”, and (ii) “he is a servant of God, an avenger for wrath to him that doeth evil”; and so Peter also says that kings, and governors sent by them, are “for vengeance on evil-doers and for praise to them that do well”.

This is the duty of rulers according to God. In this work of promoting moral order and punishing those who do evil they have divine authority, and the Supreme Ruler requires that they be obeyed and honoured. Their office is for the general welfare, and in the main it serves this end, however imperfectly, for bad rule is better than anarchy. The later chapters of Judges seem to have been written to show how terrible is the state of a people when “every man can do what is right in his own eyes” (ch. 17.6; 18.1; 19.1; 21.25), and what need there is of authority.

And because the due administration of justice costs a good deal, it is equitable that they who benefit by it should bear the cost of it. Therefore tribute is to be paid, and its collectors are “God’s servants attending continually upon this very thing” (Rom. 13.6,7), for without it their divinely ordered service to the public could not continue.

This is the sphere within which rulers hold authority from God [14] and are to be obeyed.

But it has been the perpetual habit of rulers to extend their actions into matters for which God has not given them authority. Love of personal glory, of power, of wealth, with fear of neighbours like themselves, have swayed the corrupt hearts of sovereigns and subordinates and have fostered those racial and national prejudices, hatreds, ambitions which provoke international complications and wars.

It is in this way that “States” are formed and State aims and policies arise; for powerful personalities use the idea of the “State” to further grand ends for which rulers were not appointed by God and for which they hold no divine warrant.

It is very true that God, by His secret and angelic authorities, overrules these doings for purposes of general justice on earth, using a bad ruler to chasten a corrupt people, and

then punishing the king that has thus abused his power (Zech. 11.6,15,16,17); or causing one nation to punish another for its wickedness, and afterward bringing vengeance upon the former for its cruelty to the vanquished (Isa. 10.5–19). But this supervising and overruling of the wicked is an affair that heaven alone can effect: it leaves unchanged the proper duty of human rulers and its limits according to God.

There is therefore a vital distinction between “Caesar” and the “State”. The one is a person owned by God for a definite and needful work: the other is a conception and creation of man for purposes of his own; and the Lord did not say, Render unto the State the things of the State, but “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s”; nor does the New Testament contain the slightest allusion to affairs of State of imperial Rome or the least intimation that Christians should share in them. Nor will this be thought strange by one who considers the nature of the imperial schemes and the crafty and cruel measures by which they were served. The same nature and methods have marked in measure every world kingdom and will do so until they are superseded by the kingdom of the Son of God.

Careful reflection will show that this must needs be the line for the child of God. The Son of man obeyed all the laws in force in His land and taught others to do so (Mat, 8.4; 23.2,3). He differed from other teachers in showing the true force of those laws (Mat. 15.1–20; Lu. 6.1–11; 11.37–52; etc). But in the affairs of the Jewish State He took no part, and indeed refused to do so. That people was then ground under the heel of the ruthless Roman State. They nursed the deepest hatred for their oppressors, and only waited opportunity to free themselves by force from the cruel yoke. Now all men will justify this, and such as will not join in so natural and national an aim will be accounted traitors. Yet the Lord Jesus refused to serve this end, and to allow himself to be made the leader of the national hopes (John 6.14,15).

How could He have done so without trespassing upon the overruling of affairs by God his Father, Who had permitted the Romans to gain dominion over Israel, Who had indeed foretold it a thousand years and more in advance (Deut. 28.49)? Caesar, and Pilate his representative, had been given their power “from above”, as Christ himself said (John 19.11), for “there is no power but of God” (Rom. 13.1), [15] and therefore the Son of God could not, would not resist them, not even when in His case the power was misused. This last point is of deep meaning for those who would follow in His steps, for the common argument used to persuade Christians to join in war is that the other country is in the wrong, is acting unrighteously, and it is a sacred duty to resist the wrong.

Take the case of Paul. By birth he was both Jew and Roman. In the perpetual conflict and final wars between these States, which shall he support? If he fights for the Jews against the Romans he will strive against the overruling of God; and, on the other hand, it could not be that God had authorized Caesar [sic] to compel Paul to slaughter his fellow-Israelites. This is quite apart from his commission as a Christain [sic] and an apostle to show to all men alike the love of God in Christ and to seek the good and the eternal salvation of all men equally. His many letters will be searched in vain for the slightest allusion to the State affairs of Rome.

The Word of God therefore has laid upon the Christian no duty to the State and its schemes, but does most distinctly require him to give to Caesar obedience in that sphere for which Caesar has authority from God. This obedience is to be conscientious, full, and willing. The disciple of Christ is to fulfil legal demands in the spirit, not only in the letter. The king’s messengers had then a legal right to compel a man, with his beast, to go one mile, to help carry the king’s mails: let the disciple cheerfully go two miles, said Christ (Mat. 5.41). But when Caesar enters realms where God has not authorized him his claim

to obedience fails. And preeminently is religion a sphere where Caesar holds no God-given right, and still less does the "State".

This distinction is so clear that it may be drawn still finer. One must distinguish between Caesar and Nero. Nero is Caesar; but the duty to obey Caesar does not carry a duty to obey Nero, as when Nero orders a foul crime which as Caesar God has ordained him to prevent or punish. How much more must one distinguish between Caesar and the "State" which is his instrument and participator in ends not ordained of God.

Paul says "honour the king"; he could not call upon men to honour the man Nero. When addressing Caesar's local representatives Paul honours them with the titles of honour then customary: "O king Agrippa", "Most excellent Festus"; though these men as individuals might not deserve respect.

It has been written by a Christian to fellow-Christians (May 30, 1937) that "by the Divine ordering we are bound up with the fate of our ... people". This were indeed a poor situation and prospect for the people of God. We have above remarked that the first call of this christian age was "Save yourselves from this crooked generation" (Ac. 2.40). Strictly parallel with this is the last call of this age, addressed to servants of God dwelling in the last imperial city of the last world-State: "Come forth, My people, out of her, that ye have no fellowship with her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues" (Rev. 18.4). It will cost something suddenly to abandon home, business, property; but it will cost the Christian far more to remain there, even in heart. "Remember Lot's wife". The Lord "gave himself for our sins that He might rescue us out of this present evil age" (Gal. 1,4).

[16] It cannot therefore be maintained that the Word of God authorizes the State to impose conditions and arrangements upon the church of God, or calls upon Christians to accept the will of either Caesar or the State in this sphere.

V. A Summary.

1. The Union thus involves these unscriptural features: –
 - i. An unscriptural organization, a bond of association between believers not recognized by the Lord.
 - ii. An unscriptural condition of membership in a local assembly, that one must join the Union.
 - iii. An unscriptural ground of exclusion from the local assembly.
 - iv. An unscriptural idea of membership in the local assembly as distinct from membership in the whole church of God.
 - v. An unscriptural sanction and oversight of ministers of the Word.
 - vi. An unscriptural control of ministry of the truth, as regards what may or may not be taught in the assemblies.
 - vii. An unscriptural superseding of the local assembly by the Union.
 - viii. An unscriptural discipline within the local assembly, namely, by officers of the Union.
 - ix. An unscriptural attitude to the world-system.
 - x. An unscriptural degree of submission to authorities.
 - xi. An unscriptural attitude to the Word of God, as neither sufficient, final, nor binding.
2. The present situation contains several alternatives.
 - i. The Union could be dissolved and the former situation be resumed. Either God would secure that the authorities granted liberty of worship and testimony without scrip-

turally unwarranted conditions; or He would strengthen His people for the battles and trials, as He has done in other times in Germany and other lands.

It is not to be forgotten that the purity of the church and the power of its witness have often been highest in such periods. Of the first imperial persecution, in the days of Nero, Tacitus tells how in due time the people wearied of the bloody scenes and that “public opinion relented in favour of the Christians”. As another said, “The blood of the martyrs became the seed of the church”. We fear as we enter into the cloud; but again and again it proves to be a bright cloud, in which the voice of God is heard and the glory of Jesus is seen.

ii. Or the Lord may see fit to disappoint any of His people who have put confidence in man or in princes (Psm. 118.8,9). He may break this Union to pieces as last year He did the “Christliche Versammlung”. Or it may be disrupted by dissensions from within.

[17] Reviewing the origin of the Union the question is forced on the mind whether, perhaps, in the natural eagerness to regain the great benefit of liberty of worship and witness, the authorities were not approached too early and too eagerly and the negotiations carried through too speedily? Might not longer reflection and prayer have raised the enquiry whether [sic] God had broken to pieces one union only to have it replaced by another even more contrary to the Word, and moreover more pleasing to the world? Did not His action rather reveal a desire to free His people from any such external bondage?

Liberty has indeed been gained, at any rate for the present. Time, or the judgment seat of Christ, will show whether the price paid has been too high.

iii. Another alternative is that individuals may leave the Union to preserve a good conscience before God, and suffer for a time some loss of public worship, ministry, and fellowship. They will certainly not go uncompensated by their Lord.

iv. Or, if the Union is continued, its Constitution, as to its terms, may be reduced to the bare minimum that will satisfy the authorities, and may then be allowed to fall into disuse, unless the authorities interfere and other steps may be forced upon the assemblies. By this course the assembly life may preserve something of its proper and free character, if the assemblies prove spiritually vigorous. The question is whether the assemblies as such, by following the New Testament faithfully, can maintain their character and witness, or whether the Union will prove in time the dominant influence. If the latter proves the case the distinct character and testimony hitherto borne before the world by Brethren assemblies will succumb.

VI. The Uniting of Brethren.

It is characteristic of the wisdom and grace of God that he overrules evil and makes it work for good. It is matter of sincere praise to Him that the late action of the authorities gave occasion for a rapid expansion of a feeling that had before been developing in some Elberfeld Brethren, even that no divinely warranted ground existed for the long separation of themselves and Open Brethren.

One able to gauge [sic] the intensity of conviction which for ninety years has ruled the judgments of Exclusive Brethren in all lands can but wonder that this has so thoroughly faded out of so many persons in so short a time, and can only say, “This is from the Lord; it is marvellous in our eyes”.

That the features which have been abandoned by Exclusives were held with all sincerity before God, and out of a conservative desire to preserve His truth from corruption, did but give them the more hold upon hearts, and this makes it the more remarkable that they have been [18] seen to be not of God and have been surrendered. There are four chief elements in this change.

1. It has been seen that events which took place ninety years ago (in 1848) are no just ground for present dissension and division among saints.

Personally I do not agree that it cannot now be determined where the blame for that sorrowful division is to be placed. After close and long examination I am satisfied that it was not the false doctrine held for a time by B. W. Newton, but the false principles of church discipline pressed by J. N. Darby that forced the general strife. But however that may be, it is happy that brethren recognize today that fellowship with a godly person is not to be determined by his attitude to events of long years ago, but by his personal state God-ward today.

2. Mr Darby's chief principle of discipline was that the action of any one assembly was binding upon all other assemblies everywhere. This has proved inevitably the cause of the many world-wide divisions from which Exclusive circles have suffered. It is proving such today in the separation that is proceeding between Elberfeld Brethren in some other lands and those in Germany, because the former cannot endorse the present actions of their brethren in the latter country.

The Open Brethren, on the contrary, repudiate this principle and maintain its opposite, even that an assembly action in one place is not the responsibility of assemblies elsewhere, and that the latter have only to judge of the church status and personal state of any individual who seeks fellowship. As a result Open Brethren have never had a general division, and cannot have such. Trouble in an assembly, or even the dividing of an assembly, remains a local affair, instead of proving a small fire to kindle a large forest.

Of course, that a person had been excommunicated elsewhere should cause him to be refused, unless there was ground to hold that the excommunication was not warranted by Scripture, in which latter case he could be received. The cutting off of an assembly is unknown to the New Testament. It will make for general peace that so many saints now acknowledge these views.

3. For one immediate result is, and will further be, a great increase of true spiritual fellowship, of the family feeling among children of God. A largeness of heart is displacing the narrowness of spirit which was prone to look with suspicion upon a brother in Christ unless he belonged to "us". Thus was he deprived of help to which as a brother he was entitled, nor could he from his side impart what grace he had received from God. General impoverishment was the consequence, because the Spirit of love was quenched.

Yet it must be observed that this holy and spiritual union is not a result of or dependent upon the external Union (B. F. C.). Rather is it endangered by it, since it may come to be felt that membership in the Union is the bond that unites, and those who cannot conscientiously join it may then be treated as less to the heart than those who are in the Union.

[19] It is good that this new-found joy in christian fellowship longs to reach out to yet other believers in circles more removed. But it is an evident danger to seek to bring about unity by external organization. This cannot be done. Since sects are not of God no amal-

gamation of them can be of Him. To reach heavenly unity what is not of God must be abandoned, not amalgamated.

Unity in the Spirit of God can only be realized in unity in the spirits of man. Until it has been brought about there no external union is of value or can endure. When it has been brought about there external organized Union is unnecessary and will prove only a hindrance.

The unity of saints for which the Son prayed to the Father was in no sense to be an external organized affair. To apply His words (John 17.20–23) to an external association is to misapply them and to becloud His meaning. He said: “I pray ... that they may all be one: even as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be in us ... that they may be one even as we are one; I in them, and Thou in Me, that they may be perfected into one; that the world may (believe, and) know that Thou didst send Me, and lovedst them even as Thou lovedst Me”.

It is plain that no external organizing of Christians can prove to the world that the Father loves Christ’s people even as He loves Christ. The two ideas have no relationship; nor, in fact, have all the vast organizations of Christians that exist satisfied the world upon this point, or even made it to think about the point.

It cannot, therefore, be that type of oneness which the Lord had in mind. Moreover, the world, as to thousands and thousands of its members, was led in apostolic times to believe that Jesus was sent by God. In that measure the prayer of Christ had fulfilment; yet there was no vestige of external organization at that period.

Moreover, the terms of the petition definitely exclude the thought of organization, for the oneness desired is the oneness that exists between the Father and the Son, where, of course, the very idea of organization is impossible. Hence the expression “even as we are one, and the emphasis upon the word “in”, “Thou in Me ... I in Thee ... they in us”, showing that it is oneness of spirit, thought, purpose, affection that is meant.

External disunion is, of course, sinful, and principally because it hinders the display of spiritual oneness and so far hinders the world from believing in Christ. But the remedy is not in forming a fresh external organization, but in abandoning all forms of union save that of heart and witness. When the earthen pitchers (krüge) of Gideon’s men were broken and thrown away the light of the torches shone around (Jud. 7.20).

4. A further blessed change is that a spirit of godly toleration has replaced that of narrowness and intolerance.

One of the most hurtful results of sectarianism is the requirement that every one in the circle must think and speak according to the doctrinal standard of that circle. Increase of knowledge is thus impossible, for fresh discoveries of truth in the Word of God are not made, and are regarded with disfavour.

[20] A consequence of this is that grounds of exclusion are multiplied, and excommunication becomes a much abused and terrible weapon.

Yet the Lord said that the instructed teacher would bring out of his treasury (the Word of God) things new, as well as old, and He mentioned the new first (mat. [sic] 13.52). It is most important to preserve all truth already known. The “old” must never be surrendered, or be left unused. It must be “brought forth” again and again. But as yet we “know only in part” (I Cor. 13.12). Even Paul owned this as to himself. Therefore the “new” is needful and helpful, so long as it is brought forth out of the Word, and is neither added to it nor is independent of it.

Truth does not change; but my apprehension of it, being yet imperfect, may need to change; and it is the perceiving something in the Word that is new to me that may cause

this necessary change. It has been said with truth that “to become disabled for unlearning is to have become disabled for learning; and when we cease to learn, we let go from us whatever of vivid and vivifying knowledge we have hitherto possessed” (Hort). It is by this process that truth becomes dull and inert in the soul, and is as a jewel held in the grip of a dead hand.

The New Testament does not sanction the excommunication of a brother in Christ on the ground of doctrine. One who should deny the person of Christ as the Son of God, or His atoning death, can no longer be owned as a brother, whatever he may be before God by a new birth. And because he may not be owned as a brother he cannot be granted a place in the assembly of God. But no one who is true to Christ and His sacrifice can be put out of the church with Scripture warrant, save for evil practice (I Cor. 5.9–13).

Of such evils, the making division among saints by means of a doctrine is one (Gal. 5.20). Thus for causing strife one could be put away, but not because of the views over which he makes the strife. And of course he may be restrained from teaching what the assembly considers unscriptural (see The Churches of God, ch. viii).

With these provisions a loving generous forbearance is healthy, and affords room and freedom for growth in knowledge and grace.

It is therefore to be regretted that the Union (B. F. C.), like all such organizations, cannot fully exercise this godly toleration, but, on grounds above-mentioned, must itself be intolerant against such believers as cannot join its membership. This has ever been an inevitable result of an organization, especially under sanction of the State. The great Reformers fought a stern fight for freedom against the Roman Catholic Church and Princes. But as soon as they had gained freedom for themselves they formed organized unions of churches, placed these under the State, and then equally sternly denied freedom to those believers who could not with a good conscience join these State Churches. The bloody persecutions of godly men by the Reformed Churches is more sorrowful reading than the former oppression by the Roman Catholic Church. It abides a warning to us all, and an appeal for mutual love, liberty, and forbearance.

“Finally, brethren, farewell. Be perfected; be comforted; be of the same mind; live in peace; and the God of love and peace shall be with you” (II Cor. 13.11).