

## 1841 Circular Contentnea Baptist Association

### CIRCULAR LETTER

*Beloved Brethren,*

Our churches have been permitted to meet by representation the eleventh time since our present union was formed and to enjoy a comfortable and refreshing interview, and a pleasant session; and to afford us this one more evidence that the Lord has not yet removed the candlestick out of their places.

Although the almond tree is flourishing with by far the greater part of our association and they will soon go to their long home it is yet needful to exhort one another, and so much the more as we see that day approaching. And as the present age of God's house must soon be removed to heaven, and be succeeded by our children and acquaintances who may derive great assistance and comfort from us if we leave in good order; for their sakes and the mutual peace both of you and us we will offer a few words on the subject of:

#### **Practical Godliness**

Christians can and do err. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us- 1 John 1-8- How easily they are drawn into sin the sacred Scriptures, and their own experience largely show, but neither the Lord's word nor past experience demonstrates the length and depths to which a saint may go, that is how far he may step aside from Gospel track; nor how many thousand causes are constantly in operation to divert his feet from the path of rectitude.

By practical godliness, we mean, carrying out in our lives and deportment, according to their just sense the ordinances and commandments of the Lord; and although it may seem at first view, difficult to provide properly between faith and practice, yet by attention to the word of God, it will be found both possible and necessary. What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith and hath not works? Can faith save him- James ii-14. In this text the apostle makes a distinction, calling the one "faith," and the other "works" – The same apostle says, For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also – James ii-26. According to this testimony it is worse than vain for us to advocate a living faith without correspondent works. And he is at best a foolish virgin whose conduct does not exhibit in the main a counterpart to the Gospel of Jesus, against the error of holding and defaming a living, a saving faith without its fruit and sure concomitant, practical piety. James has warned us again: Yea a man may say Thou hast faith and I have works; show

me thy faith without thy works, and I will show thee my faith by my works. But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead- James ii-18, 20.

But possibly some of us may feel contented with barely good works enough to evince a change of heart; and from neglect of duty we may have declined into worldly mindedness, and from that into sinful indulgences, until our warmest zeal goes no farther than just to keep clear of such acts as would, if known, bring us under church censure. If so, we ought to pause, reflect, and read. Suppose we have faith; should anything be added? Harken. And besides this giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; and to knowledge temperance, and to temperance patience, and to patience godliness, and to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness charity. Ii Peter i-5, 6, 7.

Add virtue: to do unto all men as ye would they should do unto you, dealing justly in commerce, prudently in behavior, cautiously in indulging and blamelessly in enjoying. Add knowledge: grow in it as well as in grace; learn from the Scriptures; read them till you can remember them, and remember till you can understand them. Do we know, but little of that Book of books? Can we read, and yet neither tell nor understand, but little that is in it? Is it the strangest of all books to us, and lie in the house merely to say we have “a Bible.” Are we ignorant of its commands, and of the duties it enjoins? And if so, is it not because that after we have said in our public profession, “I go sir,” we went not. Search the Scriptures is one of His commands, and do we say we love Him, and yet keep not His commandments. Add temperance: What large room, brethren, to add this grace! Add temperance, in speaking, in thinking, in judging, in acting, in laboring, in sleeping, in eating and in drinking, and more particularly in the last named. The intemperate use of spirituous liquors, has done, and is yet doing great evil and it would be criminal to deny the mischievous effects of it among the churches at the present moment and sinful in us not to speak plainly on the subject. There is no doubt of its benefits as a medicine to the sick, and sometimes to feeble constitutions; but it evidently was introduced into general and constant use as a luxury, not as a necessary article of subsistence – but for pleasure altogether; and Baptists or the saints of God should be very cautious how they tamper with “pleasure.” It is only when we yield to the force of habit or the craving of appetite, we insist that it was sent for a blessing; and we know that this argument is used almost without exception by the intemperate. Few need it; only from habit; and whenever it becomes a necessary article from habit, we have then got into a bad place, and we may not get out as well as we got in. Remember that he who uses it for pleasure can never tell where his pleasure will end. If when the usual hour of drinking arrives, we feel restless and uneasy till we get it, we have then passed the point of safety; and if once we venture to take it at an irregular hour, for fear we shall not get it at the stated period, or take a little larger drink because we think it the last opportunity we have then lost the only government that can save us humanly speaking. And if we can scarcely wait with patience at our churches, till worship closes or in conference till adjournment, on account of thirst or craving for our grog we then in all

probability shall never contribute farther in advancing the interest of the church or the glory of God. And if we would before we leave the meeting ground join the swearer and the openly profane, the vicious, the gambler, in taking a drink either the church will relax the reins of discipline or else if that man lives long who thus acts, he will be expelled for excessive drinking. The light that is in the intemperate professor cannot but be darkness. He is unprepared to fill any station well, or to glorify God declaratively in his body, or spirit. He will prove himself the cross and unkind husband. The unnatural and unfeeling father, the cruel and oppressive master, is unable to be a good neighbor, or a good citizen; he will be irregular in his attendance at preaching and drowsy and indifferent when present, wishing often the services were at an end. Should any of you admit the Truth of what we here say, while you are sensible of having been excessive, or fearful of becoming so, and yet feel that you cannot forsake the use entirely (which is the only remedy in all such cases) you are already prepared to become a victim to this withering vice. We affectionately exhort you, brethren, to escape while you can; and commit yourselves conquerors and happy when beyond its reach. Count it or the use of it, as the harpy (sic. ???) of practical religion, and think not that you can see your danger so long as you use it. Learn from those who have been expelled for the church or died in misery and disgrace. They once thought as you now do, that they could use it without danger – For the sake of religion, and this happiness of many living, and of many yet unborn, who will think what their fathers do is right. Do not say to one another, brethren, drink on!

Add patience: This is greatly needed both for happiness to ourselves, and light or example to others. Restlessness and fretfulness, murmuring and repining, discontent, complaining, hastiness – rashness, and disobedience, all follow impatience and are contrary to the spirit of Christ and the Gospel; bad fruit for a saint, and bad example to unbelievers. If we submit patiently to no disagreeable providences, but manifest uneasiness (sic) and opposition of spirit, we greatly mar the beauty of Christianity. If we submit to no wrongs and injuries from the world nor brethren, but seek revenge in all cases we violate our Lord's commands and conceal one of the most beautiful ornaments of the Gospel. If you are smitten on one cheek, lose your coat at law or are compelled to go a mile with any one suffer the injury to be repeated rather than seek revenge. But if you are hasty to be angry inclined to disputation, or contention, give way to quarrel, indulge in abusing one, yield to threatening, ready to adopt the world's "sense of honor," and even to fight; you exhibit little or none of the Spirit of Christ or the Gospel.

Add godliness, holiness of life in every shape, but especially to discharge your obligations to God and to one another. Make it manifest that you love God, by reverencing and obeying Him.

Add brotherly kindness. By indifferent, shy, cool and distant or careless conduct to each other, brethren dampen affection, weaken the bonds of union, excite jealousies, suspicions, evil surmisings, and evil speakings, but by uniform kindness all the opposites.

Add charity. The principle of which is strict union in the affection of the heart to God and a corresponding feeling for man. Its fruit embraces all the train of kind offices, which we perform for the comfort, assistances, relief, and, in a word the happiness of our fellow creatures. It is greater than faith or hope; for the two latter only affect ourselves. This side the grave, but charity extend from us to others, and lives beyond time. It edifies ourselves and others in the end of the commandment is to be followed after, suffereth long is kind, envieth not, vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, does not behave unseemly, covers the multitude of sins - seeks not his own, is not easily provoked, thinks no evil, rejoices not in iniquity, but rejoices in the Truth, beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things; never faileth. Look to it, brethren; we profess to be the people of God. It is a principle or a grace, not likely to be possessed without showing itself in all the above forms; and if we do not exhibit the true character drawn by inspiration, we had better never professed it. Perhaps had better never heard of it. Without this grace, we are but doomed to repeat the cry, "Our lamps are gone out!" Examine yourselves; if your course of life generally is that of charity, your vessels are supplied.

If you have young ministers of the Gospel who may err in knowledge or doctrine, faithfully expound unto them the way of the Lord more perfectly, and when either old or young are faithful to their trusts, think it not a hardship to esteem them highly for their works' sake and be careful to discharge your duty as churches to them and you who are pastors or preachers, think it not a small charge which is committed to your trust. And remember that a dozen tearful exhortations from you may not be sufficient to repair the mischief done by one bad example; take no active part in politics: it will hobble your feet, and detract from the sacredness of your holy office, weaken the bonds of brotherhood and risk, circumscribing your usefulness.

Be sure to keep up strict and *Scriptural discipline* in all the churches. Let no personal variances or disputes come into the churches, until the parties have taken the steps prescribed in Matthew xviii, 15-17. And let no public offence or abomination committed by a member, pass unnoticed; and be sure to specify charges, and specify truly and correctly. If the member of one church sees this in the member of another, take the earliest opportunity to inform his respective church. If you neglect to do so from fear of creating prejudice against yourself, you then become partaker of his offence and aid in injuring the cause of Truth. The sooner you take hold of disorder to correct it the better it will be. Be punctual in attending your stated meetings, whither you have a preacher or not; and talk and sing and pray together. Are any of you without a pastor, pray ye the Lord of the harvest that He will send forth laborers into His harvest. Should a member of a church crave a letter of dismissal, and the church know the reason thereof to be a want of fellowship with the said church, or with any member thereof, it would not be orderly to grant the petitioner a letter "in full fellowship;" neither to grant such a letter to a member or person for whom the church has not fellowship. And forasmuch as no member should leave the fellowship of the church to be from among

disorder, but stay to the last and keep disorder out of the church. Therefore any person so getting a letter is guilty of disorder. And bear it constantly in mind that a member holding a letter under such circumstances, has not in any wise transferred nor removed his membership, but stands in all respects a member of the church whence he obtained his letter, and is as much bound to attend conference and discharge all other duties to the church, as if he had no letter, until he shall have handed it to another church, and have been received and acknowledged a member of the latter. Hence the church who grants a letter of dismissal is as much bound to watch over the dismissed member for good and to call him to account before her for any disorder as though she had given no dismissal. If one member bring a charge against another, give a patient investigation of such charge, *before* you take up *any thing else*. If the charge fails to be established, then take up the case of the accuser, if he be thought worthy of censure. In the event that two or three members should be expelled for disagreement between themselves, either one may be restored to fellowship upon such confession as will satisfy *all the church*, even though the expelled number should not be reconciled with each other. If a member abruptly withdraws himself from the fellowship of any church without a letter of dismissal and through disaffection to the church, the sentence of expulsion should be pronounced against him by said church. If she does not so act, she must stand as worthy of censure, and guilty of such disorder, as he may have charged her with having committed. We would recommend the churches throughout, at every meeting, to have the proceedings of each preceding conference read. Treat excommunicated persons with kindness.

One of the highest duties and best tests of true Christianity is **good orderly conduct at home among one's own family**. The kind husband or wife, the tender father, or mother, the affectionate brother or sister, the feeling and reasonable master or mistress, the peaceable and friendly neighbor, the quiet and loyal citizen, the constant, faithful pious, meek and humble worshippers, is **the character of a Christian at home**; and such should we all unceasingly endeavor to fill, or else scarcely claim the name. It is not enough to confess our remissness and short comings, and carefully continue in our sloth and neglect; it is shamefully wrong: but we should cease to do evil, and learn to do well; to live to Him who died for us and to glorify Him in our body and spirit, which are His.

Be punctual in your promises, true to your word, cautious in speaking, humble in your walk, meek in behavior, and modest, and assuming in all your deportment.- Keep the Sabbath very sacred; it is feared that this day is too much unhallowed, and violated by professors of religion. The profaning of it has a demoralizing effect on civil as well as religious societies.- All by words and light speeches have a bad effect, and taking the Lord's name in vain does much harm.- Covetousness too will deaden every Christian virtue.- Evil speaking will eat like a cancer. Ridiculing, reproaching, and abusing people, either your neighbor or others will change all your greenness as trees of righteousness. Neglect not to pray in your families. Go to meeting or to preaching on every Sabbath if you can. And where you go, if you sit out of doors eagerly talking about the world's

affairs till the minute worship begins, or, after going into the meeting house, introduce such topics there you will pour cold water on your preacher's head, and deadness into your own feelings. It is not right to let our children ramble or fish, or hunt on the Sabbath; this is not "bringing them up in the nurtures and admonition of the Lord." As much as in you lieth live in peace with all men. Pray for the prosperity of Zion; Pray without ceasing and give thanks in everything – Quench not the Spirit. We hope a refreshing time from the Lord's presence is not far off. Be as those who wait for the Lord's coming.

Finally, brethren, farewell. Live in peace, and the God of Peace shall be with you – To Him be glory now and ever. AMEN.