

**1843 CIRCULAR LETTER OF THE CONTENTNEA
BAPTIST ASSOCIATION**

The Contentnea Baptist Association to the churches of which she is composed, sendeth greeting.

Dear Brethren:- God who has been in all time the support of His Church, and solace of His people, has not withheld from us in the past year the mercies of His hand. The enlivening sun and general showers, the products of the earth (and perhaps as much as usual, the blessings of health,) the charms of nature, and the sweet converse of friends, and above all the delightful interchange of Christian affection and the consolation of the Gospel of Christ, have all been extended to us by a kind Providence, and an indulgent Parent. And what have we rendered in return for all these benefits?

Alas, brethren, naught but ingratitude which swells above our faint praises, and feeble aspirations, and lifts its brazen front on high and irreverently claims the bounties of heaven as its due. Nature, fallen and corrupt knows nothing of God or Christ or heaven. Christ is as a root out of dry ground to it. The carnal mind is enmity to God. Self is the idol upon whose altar all the powers and capacity of soul, spirit, and body were offered up. No age, sex, or condition is exempt from its operation. No effort of the mind, no energy of the body, no sacrifice of the hand can eradicate these things from the heart for they constitute its very being. But, brethren, we have not so learnt Christ if so be that we have heard Him, and have been taught by Him as the Truth is in Jesus. That Truth has taught us to know something of ourselves and something of God and Christ, and heaven. Its first lesson aroused us from the slumber of carnal security in which we reposed. We awoke and found ourselves undone. The spell which bound us was broken; but we were left weak and powerless as the feeble infant when first it see the light. Light had indeed penetrated the dark recesses of our hearts, and exposed to our views some of the pollutions there. God in His mercy, withholding a full disclosure – O! Who can know the corruptions of the human heart? Time may furrow the cheeks and silver the locks of the child of God, and could his life be prolonged till time should be no more, yet the depths of that hideousness could not be fathomed by him for it is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked.

Brethren, we cannot trust it: it has prompted us, and it will prompt us again to rely upon our own strength; whereas we are as weak and helpless now as when we first believed. The experience of every day shows us that in our weakness lies our strength, that in prosperity and in adversity, in sickness, and in death, in trial and in triumphs, in joy, and in sorrow, in all the vicissitudes of this mortal life, the dust from whence we sprung, and to which we must return, is our proper place. Humility is the atmosphere in which the child of God breathes most freely, and in which he is enabled to do all things through Christ which strengtheneth him. But this lesson engraven on our hearts by the Spirit of God, not only taught us our weakness, and nothingness, it not only laid open

the fountain of our pollution, but it taught us something of God, and Christ, and heaven; it directed us to the Tree of Life whose leaves were for the healing of the nations. We had all our lives like the rest of mankind, heard of Jesus; but our eyes had never beheld the King in His beauty. We had all our lives heard of His mercy and kindness, but the half had not been told us. It was when all self-righteousness, and self-dependence failed, when wretched, and miserable, and poor and blind, and naked, we felt our condemnation; it was then that His mercy, in all its richness and abundance, sheltered our weary sinking souls, and filled us with joy unspeakable, and full of glory. But it was not merely the kindness of Jesus in lifting us above the ruin of fallen, and depraved nature; it was not alone the sense of safety from impending destruction that gladdened our hearts and tuned our tongues; the mercy of God, through extending far beyond our utmost thoughts, and running over in regard to our deliverance, had not been exercised at the expense of Justice; for then our cup of rejoicing could soon have been exhausted, but “*mercy and truth had met together, righteousness and peace had kissed.*” Justice had received infinite satisfaction in the Surety’s blood; we had been introduced to the privileges, and immunities of the Father’s House, where Jesus reigns, and when there is no law but love,

“From hence the holiest duties flow
Of saints above and saints below.”

And now, brethren, as the object contemplated by a Circular Letter, is to address personally each individual member composing all the churches of the association, and to apply the consolations as well as the precepts of the Gospel to each mind and heart; as such it not only becomes our duty to instruct and comfort the Christian, by the solacing *doctrine of the Election of God*, and all its happy consequences; but it becomes our duty also to point out to the Christian those duties encumbered on him from the relationship he sustains to God, and to urge upon him the importance of faithfully discharging them whereby God is glorified and the *fruits of righteousness abound in the Christian Life*. According to our views of the scheme of salvation, and the economy of God’s grace, all Christians stand upon a level in Christ Jesus. They have all been redeemed at the same expense, and are all destined to the mansions of glory. Therefore, let us consider what are the mutual duties of Church Members? Every act of members either in public or private which is calculated to influence in any degree the discipline of the Churches, it is conceived is properly embraced, within the compass of the question.

The **government of the Church** signifies something more than the business ordinarily transacted on the days of meeting. It reaches to **all that salutary kind of influence** which the grave and more orderly members exercise over those of an opposite character. The conversation and example of such persons, create a sort of wholesome government over others, connected with which is the very important consideration of

watch care.

When the primitive disciples gave “*themselves to the Lord, and to one another,*” one of the essential benefits designed to be secured was *watch care*. They did not unite to resist the authority of the land, which held its sword at their bosoms, or to enhance their temporal interest. No, there was a **higher and nobler object held** in anxious contemplation, it was the assisting each other to lead a **life so holy and harmless**, both in word and deed, that their persecutors should be constrained to acknowledge they had been with Jesus. (and such brethren should be our course in the present day for we are proscribed, and every where spoken against.) But they were too well acquainted with the natural depravity of their hearts to expect to accomplish their object without a constant and sharp-sighted *watch care*. Self interest and prejudice blend in us, and we therefore need the impartial minister who will survey our actions, and point out our faults, destitute of that interest which is inseparable from righteous self. Hence we discern the necessity of brotherly rebuke which is one of the great Christian duties inculcated by the Savior in the 18th chap of Matthew and if those incipient measures then introduced by Him were more closely adhered to in the present day no doubt but our churches would be more healthy and prosperous. There was a faithfulness in the performance of this duty among the primitive disciples of Jesus, which is a stranger in the church of these days of worldly conformity.

Their own liableness to err is urged as an *excuse* by many for neglecting to rebuke others. But the secret of the affair is, we are too unfaithful, too much afraid of the cross to discharge these duties to each other, as it becomes the self-denying Christian. The spirit of this plea for neglecting to rebuke when the good of wanderers require it would relax if not destroy every nerve of Christian discipline. David remained insensitive of his crime against Bathsheba and her husband until Nathan rebuked him; and Peter had no compunction of conscience for his profane denial of Jesus till His penetrating eye called up the transaction of a previous hour.

When the Christian errs which all are liable to do, and such error is pointed out to him in the spirit of meekness and love, he is always ready to make suitable concession. The duties named are common every day duties; but there are others to be performed, by the Church, as A BODY. Here motions are to be made and seconded, subjects to be disciplined candidly and freely, and votes (the voice of the church) to be given. That manner which obtains in some churches of allowing *silence* to decide a great portion of the questions for consideration, we conceive to be a subject well worthy of our deliberation and in **all transactions** of importance, the decision should be known by the *expressed will of the church*; for the church acts not only relates to our peace and happiness here, as church members, but they are predicated upon the authority of Christ, and should be so conducted that each member might express his approbation or disapprobation by his vote, which if silence were to decide, he might not express.

It is the duty of every church to frame a decorum, or a rule of government,

predicated upon the Scriptures, and each new member should be well acquainted with those rules. [These are most often printed so they can be remembered; but some are simple enough to omit printing.-SCP] We are aware that there are some who are opposed to decorum or creeds, alleging that the Bible is a sufficient rule of faith and practice. That we cheerfully admit; but that is no ground of serious objection. To those that thus object, we would say: the minister takes his text and deduces there-from the doctrine inculcated in the Scripture by making quotations, or bringing up certain passages or subsidiaries, or proofs of his views. Now if you object to the creed or decorum, derived by Scripture passages, the preacher should continue to quote Scripture only in succession till proof arose to demonstration and not to select certain passages; for what is a creed or rules of decorum of church government but certain passages of Scripture so that the eye may catch them at a single glance?

We have a custom among us (and one of much importance, too) for church members when speaking in debate, to rise from their seats and address the Moderator, though sometimes with regret we see members keep their seats while speaking in conference. Now if it is the duty of a church member when speaking in debate to rise from his seat and address the Moderator, could there be any impropriety in having it so expressed in writing, in the rules of decorum? We expect the Moderator of a church to have all her business conducted in good order, and yet there are no rules by which he or the church are to be governed. And suppose, as is sometimes the case, that some member may be frequently absent from church meetings, until the feelings of other members become hurt; you have no rules by which you dare say to him, it is his duty to attend conference. [Note: many of the Old School churches have a rule that if any male member miss three consecutive conferences, the church is to appoint a committee to visit and look into his welfare, and report back to the church the following conference.- SCP.]

It is true the Scripture says, “*not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together;*” but who is more competent to determine the times and places of assembling that the Church collectively? And we all know that it is the duty of all church members without some good cause of absence, to attend their church meetings. And could it do any harm to say in a rule of the church, that it should be the duty of each male member in particular to attend as above, and then in the event of such repeated absence, it would become the duty of the church to notice such absence?

But some will say, If members are not influenced by the love of God, and a love for His cause to attend, it would be useless to coerce attendance by a church discipline. To say *we* – But we contend that if *members* by neglecting to attend their church meetings, reproach the cause and wound the feelings of other members, that the church should have some rule to reclaim them or to cease to be accountable for their acts. For it is better for one refractory member to suffer, than for the whole church to suffer or the cause be brought into disrepute.

To all religious bodies there should be wholesome rules of government to which

they could at any time appeal for the adjustment of all difficulties. Finally we cannot terminate that portion of our subject which relates to Christian duties without mentioning some others though not immediately connected with the government of the church.

Brethren, who of you but have witnessed with gratitude to God the reformation in the churches in doctrine which has been brought about within a few years, by those who have so ably defended the Truths of the Gospel, and by the withdrawal of the churches from the popular innovations that were corroding her vitals. And whereas the dear children of God were deprived to a considerable extent of that pure Gospel that disclaims all human merit, and predicates the salvation of the lost sinner upon the imputed righteousness of Jesus, as being the result of election and sovereign grace? You now have it in the fullness of the revelation of God through the ministry, by which it is apparent that we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God and not of us. Yet we have still to regret a want of reformation in Christian duties, the faithful performance of which exert so happy an influence over the churches, and reflect so high a degree of praise to our heavenly Father.

How many of us, in the enjoyment of a blessed Gospel and Christian privileges employ those means by which we are to grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ? Who of us obey the injunction of the Savior; “search the Scriptures for in them you think you have eternal life, and they are they that testify of Me”? How many of us call our families together at evening or morning and instruct them from the Scriptures and invoke the blessings of God upon them and us; or do we forget the great responsibility that rests upon us as the heads and directors of those the Lord has given into our charge, and for the welfare of whom we feel so much anxiety. It is therefore the duty of each Christian parent to order his household according to the direction given in the Scriptures, and if we would realize the blessing, we must learn that **it is in** (not “by” or “for”) **his deed** that the righteous are blessed.

But how many professing parents do we now address, whose children have never heard them pray for them, and how will our children know we desire their salvation and welfare unless we point them to the Savior, and ask His pardoning mercy upon them. And though we may offer up our secret prayers, and shed a thousand tears before the Almighty for our children, yet this does not exempt us from that important duty in view of which the Patriarch Joshua exclaimed, “Let others do as they may, as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” But in passing from these duties, we wish to impress on your minds that your obligation to perform them, arises not from the relationship you sustain to man, but to God. And if the love and mercy of God made manifest to us through Christ have imposed these duties upon us, how can we omit them? For it is through the manifestation of God’s mercy, that we have a knowledge of Jesus Christ whom to know is life eternal.

But, brethren, the knowledge of Christ, though constituting eternal life, is as

imperfect as the knowledge of ourselves, here we know but in part – we see through a glass darkly, - the full display of the brightness of the Father’s glory is not adapted to human sense, for no man can see God and live. It was only by being veiled in a body of flesh, that the Godhead could become visible to, and acceptable to mortal touch; hence the words of our Lord, *“He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father;”* and yet the grandeur of Jesus can not be fully comprehended by us, for He was without sin. Clogged with the infirmities and frailties of His people, we may follow stumblingly in His footsteps. Our longing eyes may trace indistinctly the pathway to glory which He has marked out; but it is reserved for another state of being, to see Him as He is, and to know Him as we are known. We have learned to admire His wisdom, and His righteousness in the scheme of redemption, where nothing is left to human imbecility or to blind chance; but all our interests, temporal and eternal, are bound up in the *“sure mercies of David,”* where our own righteousness is cast aside as a worthless thing, and in its stead we have the soul-sustaining the substantial assurance that the Lord is our Righteousness. Brethren, do we want more? Can our hungry souls long for better food?

Is not the grace of God adapted to every exigency and to all our necessities? Certainly it is. And can we desire again to be in bondage to the weak and beggarly elements? No, the knowledge of Christ is far superior to earthly paradise. The knowledge of Christ is heaven, for where Christ is, there is heaven. Now Jesus dwells with His church, His bride; He reigns in Zion, and if we are His, our names are already written in heaven from the beginning. He bears our names on the palms of His hands; our bodies are the temple of the Holy Ghost. Yes, those vile bodies, though defiled with sin, to the dust, are the habitations of the Spirit of Christ; for if we have not the Spirit of Christ, we are none of His. These same bodies after they have suffered the penalty annexed to transgression, when every thing earthly shall have been swallowed up in the grave, these **same corruptible bodies, shall be raised incorruptible, and fashioned like unto the body of Christ.**

Here we have but an imperfect view of the glories of that state, like the infant upon whose feeble vision surrounding objects, make but a slight and transient impression. *“Here it doth not appear what we shall be, but we know that when He shall appear, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.”* It is by this hope we are saved, saved from the allurements and temptations of the world; saved from its follies and extravagancies; saved from the prompting of our own deceitful and wicked hearts, and indeed but for this hope why do we encounter the scoff and derision of an ungodly world? if what advantage all our sufferings and patience if the dead rise not?

But brethren, be not deceived; so brighter dawn cannot be shrouded in eternal night, so blissful and expectation cannot terminate in disappointment, for Christ has risen from the dead and as He is our Life when He shall appear, then shall we also appear with Him in glory. This cheering; this glorious hope, shall encourage us to endure, with patience, the tribulations of the way, to render our bodies a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God which is our reasonable service.

Finally, brethren, let us remember, lay members as well as ministers, that death will soon put a period to our active duties that in a few short years, the labors of the young of this body, as well as the aged will terminate, and we shall be called to render up an account of our stewardship.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.