

1858 Circular Letter Delaware River

Written by
Philander Hartwell

[Ministers present this session were: Elders Thomas Barton, Gabriel Conklin, E. Rittenhouse, Philander Hartwell, H. Stout, W. Housel, D. L. Harding, Gilbert Beebe, G. W. Slater, J. F. Johnson, and St. John. Associations seated: Baltimore, Baltimore River, Old School Conference of Western N.Y. (formerly Alleghany Association), Salisbury, Lexington, Chemung, Licking Particular, Maine O.S. Association, Maine Old School Conference, Corresponding, Va. Ocmulga, Uharley, Yellow River, Oconee, and Kehukee].

CHRISTIAN

The elders and Messengers composing the Delaware River Old School Baptist Association, convened with the Second Hopewell Church, at Harberton, Mercer Co., New Jersey, June 2d, 3d, and 4th, 1858. To the churches whose Messengers we are, send love in the Lord.

Beloved Brethren:- As we are permitted to enjoy another Associational meeting, you will expect an epistle from us on some subject connected with the interests of Zion, we therefore send you this annual letter. As a subject upon which briefly to dwell, we present the *Christian*.

The *term or appellation* is not often used in the Scriptures; yet as it several times occurs, we consider it a proper subject. And as the Scriptures alone are to determine the import of the terms used in them, it becomes us on this occasion to examine them, lest the true meaning be mistaken. "And the disciples were called *Christians* first at Antioch,"- Acts 11:26. By whom they were thus called we are not informed, whether by themselves, their enemies, or by common consent. But from the fact that we are informed that they were so *called*, it is probable, like most of the names by which the church of God has been known and distinguished in the world, it was given her by her enemies as a reproach or stigma upon them, as the term "*Old School*" has been given to the church in this nineteenth century. But whether the name was assumed or given, it is evident the church were willing to own it, for it was appropriate. Inasmuch as they acknowledged Christ as their Head, followed Him, received His doctrine, and obeyed His commandments. Peter in his first epistle general to the strangers scattered abroad, whom he styled "elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father," evidently applied it to the brethren, 1 Peter 4:16. But the name derisively given them, in time, like all other names by which the church has been called, became so honorable that a portion of the same family that stigmatized them *Christians*, assumed the name themselves, and wished to be called Christians too. Indeed, so *honorable* has the name become, that they not only wish it applied to *themselves*, but to all their inventions also, nothing passing current with them unless the term in some way is attached to it. Hence we hear of Christian Church, Christian Sabbath, Christian Benevolence, Christian nations, &c. In like manner we now hear those, or at least those of the same family who stigmatized the church as "*Old School*" some thirty years ago, claim to be "*Old School*" themselves. But it is only the *name* Christian, &c., that is so highly esteemed by them; the doctrine and

the order of the church now is as odious to the enemy as when they first called them *Christians*. Hence they continue to attach opprobrious names to all the saints who cleave to Christ, and stand aloof from all the doctrines and institutions of anti-Christ. But none of these things should move *Christians*, for Christ has forewarned them of these things. “*It is enough for the disciple that he be as his Master, and the servant as his Lord. If they have called the Master of the house Beelzebub, how much more shall they call them of his household?*”- Matthew 10:25.

1. The characters called *Christian*. “*The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.*” It was the same *character* which had been known as *disciples* from the time they were called to follow Christ up to the time this new appellation was given them. But who are *disciples* in the Gospel sense? The Scriptures alone must decide the question. And as the limits of an ordinary circular letter forbids our entering lengthily into the subject, we will endeavor to be as plain and concise as possible. “*If any man come to Me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. And whosoever doth not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple.*”- Luke 14: 26,27. It will not be disputed that those who were first called *Christians* were disciples of Christ. They were called *disciples* by the inspired writer. They were learners and followers of Christ. They were such as had been *born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God which liveth and abideth forever.*” Had been “*delivered from the power of darkness, and translated into the kingdom of God’s dear Son,*” and were no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow-citizens with the saints, and of the household of God; And were built upon the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief corner-stone. They had renounced the hidden things of dishonesty, did not walk in craftiness, nor handle the word of God deceitfully, but commended themselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God. In other words, they were the children of God, walking in Gospel order, having no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather of reproofing them.

If such were *Christians* in the first century, those of like precious faith are *Christians* now, and they alone have the right to bear the *name*. We do not understand that the disciples of Christ literally, maliciously, *hated* their earthly father, mother, *etc.* But they were brought to forsake all and follow Christ. They trampled upon everything that opposed their following Him, yea, they were constrained to go contrary to their own fleshly inclinations – all were treated as though they hated them. So it may truly be said of *Christians* in every age, they hate their kindred, and even their own life also, for they forsake all and follow Christ. *Christians* do not love their earthly kindred less after they have been experimentally brought into union with Christ and His people; but another love has been implanted in the heart, even the love of Christ, which constrains them to renounce all earthly things that come between them and Him. The *Christian* is not less kind to his earthly friends after this experience than before, but often kindred ties are made more visible, so that a marked change in relationship is observed, even by those who know not the cause.

Should persecution rage so that his life is in danger, yet he loves Christ more than life, or friends, yea, he treats all as though he hated them. The love of Christ is supreme with him, every other consideration has to give place. The language of his heart is, "*Whom have I in heaven but Thee? And there is none upon earth that I desire beside Thee. The Lord is my Shepherd I shall not want. God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.*"

II. The Experience of the *Christian* Man in Nature is a Sinner and not a *Christian*. Those who were first called *Christians*, were like other men, sinners by **nature**, and were incapable of anything to please God; "*were children of wrath even as others;*" and from the Scriptures we learn that the change effected in them was not by their own might, but by the power of God – that they were saved by grace, not of works – that spiritual things were *revealed* unto them by God's Spirit, and that they were made nigh by the blood of Christ. As it was with those who first bore the *name*, so it is also with Christians now – they are yet saved by grace. The work of grace is essentially the same in all the children of God; yet when we hear them declare *what great things the Lord has done for them*, no two experiences are exactly alike in every particular, yet there is such an agreement that they can recognize each other as brethren. The family likeness is borne by them all – they are all made partakers of Christ. Why should it be thought strange that there should be diversity in the experience of the spiritual family, more than in the natural family? We find no two of the earthly family who look, feel, and act in every respect alike, yet none of us doubt our relationship on account of this diversity. In nature we are all like our head, Adam – all earthy. So in the spiritual family we are all like our Head, Christ – are spiritual, all bear the image of Christ.

As we shall not be able to enter largely into the subject, we will confine ourselves to a few of those things in which there is an agreement in the experience of *Christians*. "*It is the Spirit that quickeneth, the **flesh profiteth nothing.***" To *quicken* is to give life where it did not exist before. "*As the Father **quickeneth** them, even so the Son quickeneth whom He will.*" When the sinner is quickened by the Spirit, he has new emotions, new desires and aims added to him. He is made to feel that he is a poor sinner – that he has transgressed the law of God, and is exposed to wrath. He feels that he is a sinner by nature as well as in practice – that his heart is deceitful and desperately wicked. When these things are opened up to him he tries to reform his life, to repent of his sins, and to cry unto God for mercy, but finds no relief – the corrupt fountain still sends forth the polluted streams – all seems to be in vain – instead of getting better and better he feels that he is getting worse and worse all of the time, which leads him to that he shall never obtain deliverance from his load of guilt, but shall sink beneath it to rise no more. The law of God is holy – is good, notwithstanding it condemns him. The justice of God shines clear in his condemnation – he has no charge to bring against God nor against man; himself he feels is the guilty one, he alone must bear the curse. He sees no way of life for himself – others may be saved by Jesus, but his is an outside case, even beyond the reach of mercy. When he tries to cry "*God be merciful to me a sinner;*" he feels his cry is in vain, that God will neither hear nor answer it. It even seems to him

that it is wicked for him to try to pray, yet the desires do arise in his heart for grace and mercy, and still he can see no way consistent with justice that God can save him. Thus God continues to instruct His children until their own righteousness is totally consumed, their strength completely exhausted, and their hope utterly perished, so that they lie low in the dust before Him. Their ruin is now complete. When all hope has fled from them the “hope of Israel” is revealed unto them. Christ is the “end of the law for righteousness to every one that believes.” Jesus appears to them the chiefest among ten thousand, the altogether lovely One; of God “He is made unto them Wisdom, Righteousness, Sanctification and Redemption.” Thus all are reduced to the same ruined condition, and all are delivered by the same Jesus, and all ascribe all their salvation to Him. Their burden is taken away, the curse removed, the law fulfilled, and they are accepted in the Beloved.

To some of the children of God these things appear plain as soon as their burden is removed, but to others it is not given thus early to read their title clear; yet to each the Scriptures appear precious, and the Gospel sounds sweet. “*Blessed are the people that know the joyful sound.*” They all “*have received the Spirit of adoption whereby they cry Abba Father,*” and love the brethren, and desire to mingle with them in the true worship of God. “*We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren.*” They feel drawn toward the people of God, and if they could only feel sure they were fit to belong to the church, they would gladly declare to them what they hope the Lord has done for them. But very often, their experience looks so small, and they feel so unworthy, they feel to draw back. The *ordinance* of baptism looks very precious and inviting, yet the flesh draws back, lest they pollute such a precious thing. There are many things that come up before the young believer calculated to deter him from following Christ in this. If they could but have all things as they wish, they think they would be willing to follow Jesus. But if all things were to their liking would it be *bearing their cross*? We think not. But it is evident that in all the struggle in the mind of the child of grace upon the subject of making a *public profession* of faith in Christ, fleshly ties and feelings have much more to do in keeping them back, than what they are aware of. If they but could only feel *sure* that they could give the church a satisfactory evidence, and that they should always adorn their profession, then they would go forward boldly; but the lack of this assurance serves to keep them back. But if ever the child of God goes before the church, he has to go with this little experience, unworthiness, and all the imperfections, as a poor sinner, whose hope is alone in the mercy of God. Thus he is weaned from his earthly ties – shows by his practice that he hates them all. The love of Christ constrains him, and he is now willing to bear his cross and come after Jesus publicly. He finds a home among his brethren, willing to participate in their joys and sorrows. He is now recognized as a *Christian*.

III. *His Trials and Prospects.* The Christian is made sensible that he is still very much in possession of the old man, or carnal nature; and that he is engaged in constant warfare” “*For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary the one to the other, so that he cannot do things that he would.*”

He feels the corruptions of his own nature and often cries out, “*O wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death?*” yet at times he can answer with Paul, “*I thank God, through Jesus Christ our Lord.*” While he remains in the world, he will feel the emotions of the flesh, and will have to mourn his unlikeness to Christ; yet he is assured that as his day, so shall his strength be; and that, “*when the enemy cometh in like a flood the Spirit of the Lord shall lift up a standard against him,*” so that, weak and trembling though he be, he shall not be overcome. He has to encounter many, and divers temptations, but is assured that his “*God is faithful, who will not suffer him to be tempted above that he is able; but will with the temptation also make a way of escape, that he may be able to bear it.*” He is assured that in the world, he shall have tribulation; but Christ has bidden him to be of good cheer, for He has overcome the world. He has the promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come; that he shall be more than conqueror through Him that loved us. Death will seize upon the body; but death is a conquered enemy, and will not be able to retain it long, for Christ is the Resurrection, and shall raise it up again, so that death the last enemy of the saints, shall be destroyed. Then the saints will all be like Christ for they shall see Him as He is. “*For this corruptible, must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.*” Then the victory over death will be manifestly complete, and then shall be brought to pass the saying, that is written – “*Death is swallowed up in victory.*”

Beloved, are we *Christians?* – If so let us ever bear in mind, that God, who spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, shall with Him also freely give us all things. “*Fear not little flock, for it is the Father’s good pleasure to give you the Kingdom.*” May we be enabled by grace to give all diligence, to ass to our 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; For if these things be in us, and abound, they make us that we should neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Philander Hartwell, *Moderator.*

Samuel H. Stout, *Clerk.*