1 Thessalonians - Commentaries by Herbert Chisholm Anstey

Bible Treasury: Volume 12, ?Neutrality? Its Value in the Things of God Briefly Tested and Examined by Scripture

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“Prove all things, hold fast that which is good.” 1 Thess. 5:21.

It is well for us to pause sometimes, amid the roar and bustle of this world, and consider the bearing and end of things wherein our day is cast, and amidst which it is God's will that for a time we shall walk. That the world, as a system, is drifting on swiftly to the hour of its judgment, is certain from all scripture testimony. The Christian has been called out of it, and is exhorted to walk in separation from it. (See John 15:19; Rom. 12:2; James 4:4, 1 John 2:15, &o.)

But, besides the world, there is what we may call its religious forms, what men speak of as “The Christian world,” and in these much is accepted as right, with but little examination of scripture. One of these is the assumption of neutrality by some, as a way of escape from the present sorrowful and confused state of the church on earth.

If you have never yet done so (I address all brethren and sisters in the Lord), look quietly around on all those who make a profession of Christianity to-day. Remember, amidst much that is unreal, that every true believer is a member of the body of Christ (Eph. 5:30, 31, 32), and a living stone in that one assembly on earth (Matt. 16:18; Eph. 2:22) and one also of that “Assembly of the living God” (1 Tim. 3:15), in which God Himself dwells. (1 Cor. 3:16, 17.) Let me ask, Do you, as that individual member, find this assembly in her doctrine and practice to be identical with that description of her written in the Acts of the Apostles, and in the Epistles of the New Testament?

You will say, perhaps, that “Since times and customs have so changed, such reality is not to be expected now, for we have no living apostles.” But whatever may be your reply, I know that as a sober student of the word of God, and of what is written there of the church (more properly “assembly") if asked, Is she outwardly identical with all she was then, your answer in some form or other will be in substance, “No.”

Will you then allow me yet to ask you another question? Why do I find you habitually assembling with that certain company of believers in our Lord Jesus Christ, and not with certain others in your locality, who are (as you believe,) equally the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus, as you are? And this is the kind of answer I have received from some, “Oh, I believe from my little knowledge of scripture, that those with whom I meet are more correct and according to its teaching than those others you name, and you know that if we have not all the spirituality and energy of the church in her early days, nor all her divinely taught doctrines and practice, at least we have a measure of them, and we must get the nearest we can to the perfection of scripture; that is why I meet with them, and hold what I do.” I detect in this reply the refusal of neutrality as a principle—a refusal actuated by divine instinct. And none will deny that there is also in it the confession of the church's departure from the truth.

Will you not be frightened if I deny (as some) your right of conscience thus to judge? Will you not shrink with horror if I assert (as some do) that though you are a Christian, with an open bible in your hand, and the Holy Ghost as your teacher, neither you nor any other individual has ability to judge, and withdraw from what it condemns, but that you must go on with certain evils which its light has discovered to you, as existing and sanctioned in the professing church to-day rather than take God's ground and God's distance from the evil?—which place they as good as tell you it is impossible for you ever to reach! And though I have no intention to make such unholy assertions, yet I would humbly suggest that the word “neutrality” however attractive at first sight it may appear, means this, when traced to its legitimate end. For neutrality does not assert that everything in the professing church is right and scriptural; to say this would be to destroy itself, for then, wherefore neutrality? Nor therefore does it totally deny your right to separate yourself from evil, but it sets up a stopping-place for you in your path of separation, a place short of what God has set up. If it does not do this, it also destroys itself, and we are brought to ask again, “Wherefore neutrality?” We see then that it has a measure of the negative, but it has not reached the positive. It says, you may separate from evil, but only up to a certain point, at which point you must stop. It tells you that you may go a certain way outside the camp, provided you will be content without reaching Him—with whom can be no neutrality—who is to be found there. (Heb. 13:18.)

But mark—If I do not reach Him I have not attained to my goal in this scripture, nor to that power (His own presence) which follows only upon true separation. When the church is looked at as a light-bearer, and with evil there hindering the light, He becomes the faithful witness instead of her, as the only measure of holiness, separation, and troth. “These things saith he that is holy, he that is true.” (Rev. 3:7.) And what then is to be the measure of my individual separation? He is, and His company only: I must not stop having taken one step, I must reach Him, and in order to do this I may have to take many steps; for His distance from evil is my goal.

And here I desire to observe that liberty of conscience to separate from evil is taught, and more, is insisted on in scripture, whenever the Holy Ghost looks on to these present days. Separation from evil has been from early days always the Spirit's testimony and exhortation. (Josh. 24:24.) From His teaching I gather, too, that I must turn away from the corruption of what was once good, and that though Acts 2:42-47 once described the “assembly” —now generally called the “church” —yet the Holy Ghost teaches that the church (so called in professing Christendom in the last days) is not a reliable guide for any individual Christian; she must be tested and tried by the word of God.

A word more before we turn to scripture itself in proof of this.

I will take the Church of Rome as one specimen of the professing church on earth. You have tested her claims, her doctrine, and practice, by the word of God. At your conversion you were probably informed that this only (or some other religious community, for I only take this as an illustration) was the true church. But you found on examination that she had departed far, very far from the truth. Hence, as an authority, you rejected her pretensions and her doctrine, and you are not therefore what is called a “Roman Catholic.” But having examined one, other bodies of Christians invited you to join outwardly on earth in their communion. If you had any authority to test and reject one, you had the

same authority for testing them all! It is right then here to ask—Has the church (so called) departed from the truth? Does scripture anticipate each a departure? Have we the same sanction (God's word) for declaring that the church in the last days is not a reliable guide for any individual believer? Am I, as this individual, directed how to act?

To all of these questions scripture furnishes answers for the ear that desires instruction. “He that refuseth instruction despiseth his own soul.” (Prov. 15:32.) If there can be neutrality, we must find and shall find, that scripture teaches it. We will now turn to its testimony.

For an answer to the first question I read, “Of your own selves shall men arise speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them.” (Acts 20:30.) These words were spoken by the Apostle Paul to the elders of Ephesus in view of their seeing his face again more. Does this testimony as to what would exist in the assembly after his death indicate departure? If it does, and if it is not an encouraging one, What was his resource for the faithful? “I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified?” He speaks not of the teaching of the church as a reliable guide, nor does he hint at “neutrality” as to the perverse things spoken; the word is to, test the whole, and to be the unfailing guide of the sheep, when those who ought to lead the flock go themselves astray.

In 2 Tim. 2 he brings before us the figure of a great house, in which there are vessels, “Some to honor, and some to dishonor.” Already he had spoken of all those in Asia having turned away from him, and at this early day in the church's history he had marked the error of Hymenaeus and Philetus, error eating into the assembly, he says, “as doth a canker.” And now, in view of all this, the partial fulfillment of his own words to the elders of Ephesus, what does he say? He exhorts the faithful one to purge himself from them, he does not—say take a middle (neutral) position, between the vessel to honor and that to dishonor, no, he says he must purge himself “from” these, and follow righteousness, faith, charity, peace, “with” those that call on the Lord out of a pure heart. We have a perfect path here, the negative and the positive both before us, marked out with unerring wisdom and divine accuracy.

Again he speaks of the last days and perilous times (2 Timothy when there is a forth of godliness, but the power thereof denied, and again he says to the faithful soul, “From these turn away.” Can words more plainly indicate departure from the truth? And it is not here the world in question, but those who have a form of godliness—religious professors. He speaks of a time when those who profess religion “shall heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears” —while their ears are turned away from the truth. (2 Tim. 4) And again he says, “But watch thou in all things, endure afflictions—for I am now ready to be offered.”

John speaks of, the last time as present then, when he wrote, the spirit of Antichrist being already there and at work. (1 John 2:18; compare also for the gradual corporate decline 2 John 8, 7-10 John 9-11.) Jude speaks of certain men who had, in his day, already crept in among them— “ungodly men,” to be dealt with in judgment by the Lord at His coming (Jude 4, 12, 14, 15, 17), commending them for guidance to “the words of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ,” not to the church, nor to neutrality as a resource.

Rev. 2 and 3 bring before us the Lord Jesus. Himself occupied with the professing church on earth, there seen as set up in responsibility as a light-bearer to shine for Him until His own return. And the character in which He is revealed is that of judgment. If there is that in her, which (hindering her light) we can yet go on with, on the ground of neutrality, not so with Him. He must condemn it, exhort individuals to overcome it, and finally remove the true thing from the corrupt mass, which has swamped a corporate testimony, and which consequently ceases to be a witness for Him on earth. (1 Thess. 4:16, 17; Rev. 3:16; 18:1, 6, 16, &c.)

Now my Christian reader, whatever be the corporate failure and want of faithfulness, do you not desire to go on individually as a faithful light-bearer for Him? Can you then turn for guidance to the church or assembly on earth, when from the days of John, the writer of the Revelation, she has been declared by the Spirit to have been unfaithful? “He that hath an ear to hear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.”

Question 2 is therefore answered. Question 8 is also practically met. Nowhere in scripture is the individual believer told to turn to the church on earth, always to the word for guidance.

Now as to the last question, Am I, as an individual believer, directed how to act? I want to know not only what I have to refuse, but what I have to cleave to: without both we have not a perfect rule. Scripture gives both.

If we are believers, as remarked earlier, we are already members of the body of Christ, we have not to “join” any company of persons on earth in order to become so. God added to the assembly in the days of the apostles (Acts 2:47), and God adds still. As to our walk in fellowship with the Christians, it is as simple now as in the days of the apostles, if we will be guided by their word. Among their writings, the scripture of the New Testament, Eph. 4 and ii., Timothy ii. 22, are most important to regulate our walk together. Individually, Christ Himself is our only model (1 John 2:6; Phil. 2:4; 1 John 3:2, 8)—this last showing us our measure: “As he is pure.”

Is it expecting too much of Christians, that they should examine if these things be so, and all of them, nor countenance anything in the assembly on earth, which the word of God condemns? No, for it says, “Prove all things, hold fast that which is good. (1 Thess. 5:21.) And what does neutrality say? It says you may prove some things, but not all things. Is it then of God?

But there is more definite language against it in scripture, for God does not cover up or deceive. Scripture declares that neutrality or indifferentism is even abominable in the sight of God.

For if Christians, let us look at God's word as to our relationship. “Christ loved the church and gave himself for it.” (Eph. 5:25.) “They two shall be one flesh.” (Eph. 5:31.) Can you introduce “neutrality,” my beloved reader, here? Does anything touch the Bridegroom and the Bride remain indifferent, the Head, and are the members not to feel it? We are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones.” (Eph. 5:30; 1 Cor. 12:26.) “This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church.”

To Laodicea, the last phase of the church on earth, He of,” Thou art neither cold nor hot, so then because thou art lukewarm and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.” (Rev. 3:16, 17.) That is, when the assembly becomes definitely “neutral,” it is nauseous and abominable to Him. But let other passages of scripture testify.

“He that is not with me is against me, and he that gathereth not with me scattereth.” (Luke 11:23.) Here indifference and neutrality are excluded. “He that is not against us is for us.” (Luke 11:50.) “He that receiveth you receiveth me, and he that receiveth me, receiveth him that sent me.” (Matt. 10:40.) In all these passages there is not the slightest hint of neutrality— “No man can serve two masters—ye cannot serve God and mammon.” (Matt. 6:24.) Nay. We must be either against the Lord or for Him, we must receive Him or reject Him, we must be either gathering with Him or scattering, nor is it left for us to choose to be neutral, as to anything that affects Him as Head. It is already settled by Him, “Ye cannot.”

Now neutrality is not complete ignorance, there is a measure of light in it; but while it is certain that God bears with ignorance, and instructs it— “The meek will he guide in judgment, and the meek will he teach his way” (Psa. 25), so surely will that which has a measure of light, yet light not acted upon, be presently judged by Him.

Neutrality is the Zoar, the little city, to which many a righteous Lot has fled for refuge since the days of Gen. 19 It is not Sodom, it is far removed from that wicked city, but it is not the “mountain” (see Gen. 19:17) God's place of safety. It is a place reached without much difficulty, for it is in the plain, and no toilsome mountain ascent lies before those who would reach it. It is a principle getting widely spread in our day, which unmasked speaks but plainly when it says, “Let us make the best of both worlds.” It is nevertheless (and so is every step from evil) a step in the right direction, but being a resting-place short of the goal, it becomes a snare, and will presently be the most subtle snare of the enemy, for it will be received far and wide. Neutrality is short of a living center, the person of Christ, awaits His judgment, and receives it in Laodicea. “That servant which know his Lord's will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will shall be beaten with many stripes.” (Luke 13) And it is Christendom that has taken the place of the servant.

Some say, while owning the existing confusion and evil, “Well, I thank God I belong to no church on earth.” Let me ask then, where are you? Have you, having left the camp, got to Him? To Him that is holy, Him that is true? Has His voice reached the inmost recesses of your heart, saying to you notwithstanding all the confusion, “I have set before thee an open door and no man can shut it “? And having got to Him, is there the refusal of everything that He refuses, He the measure of your distance from evil—He the standard to be attained? And do you know of any others who have done these things, the little company contemplated in 2 Timothy ii. 32, and in Matt. 18:20? And should evil grow up and be sanctioned among these, and His presence thereby practically disowned, in faithfulness you and I must again go forth to Him who invites us by “the Spirit” to come. (Rev. 3:18, 22.) Leaving the evil we must go forth again to “him that is holy, him that is true,” contented that we are pleasing Him, though we have to suffer for it and to bear “His reproach.” (Heb. 11:26.)

Ah! yes, beloved reader, and then it is but a “little while” that we are left here for Him. Presently He will return (John 14:1-3; Heb. 10:3, 7) and it behooves each of us to see to our testimony. The responsibility is individual and is ours. It is a solemn thing and brings no true rest, to stop short of God's place for the soul, but there is a yet more solemn consideration than this, for it is the verge of Laodiceanism which is repulsive to the Lord. Where are you, as one in testimony for the Lord amidst all the present confusion? Neutrality will be the reigning characteristic of the professing church on earth in its last stage (Rev. 3:15) when the Lord will reject it as no longer a witness for Him. We are rapidly advancing to it. Principles of neutrality will increase with frightful rapidity, and become more clearly adopted later, and they will be received by the mass as right principles to glory in. (Rev. 3:17.)

Finally, I would ask, is it not a snare to rest satisfied with one step in the right direction, the goal not being attained? I believe it is and echo again those words of Gen. 19: “Look not behind thee (Phil. 3:18), neither stay then in all the plain, escape to the mountain.” We are cast upon the Lord for all these things (as says the apostle in Jude 14, 25) and in the same language as he used, beloved reader, who spoke in full view of the apostasy of these last days—days in which it is your lot to live, I would say, “Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy, to the only wise God our Savior, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and forever. Amen.” H. C. A.

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