

The Little Baptist

By J.M. Martin

"And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus." 2 Timothy 3:15

Chapter 13

The Church Trial - Strange Visitor

Doctor Farnsworth having, as he considered, used all the means in his power to influence Mrs. Brown to desist from her public criticisms regarding the usages of the church, summoned the Ruling Elders to a Session Meeting, and with expressions of regret for the necessity of such a course, laid before them the state of affairs in the Brown family. He thought himself not wanting in liberality of feeling, nor averse to a free exercise of opinions by others, and had no inclination to deny the right of conscience in all matters of religion. "But there are occasions," said he, "when 'forbearance ceases to be a virtue.' I have labored earnestly and faithfully with Sister Brown, but my efforts have been fruitless - my counsels to no purpose. She is immovably fixed - a firm and uncompromising Baptist. She disseminates doctrines, both publicly and privately, that are obnoxious to us, and detrimental to our cause. She does not withdraw from the church, and yet refuses to withhold a free expression of heretical opinions; thus she is guilty, not only of gross errors in doctrine, but of sowing discord in the church. We have patiently suffered this for many months, and, in my opinion, the time has now come when some action by the church is demanded. She must change her course, or, to speak without evasion, she must be excluded from our communion. Our self-respect requires that we do this, much as we regret the necessity for it."

Elder Jeffreys was the first to speak, who said: "This erring member being a woman, we may as well let her enjoy her own opinions unmolested. She is not a preacher, and can do but little harm, I suppose,. If we let her alone, she will, no doubt, soon settle down and become quiet again. It is woman's right to talk, and if Sister Brown enjoys it, let her have the gratification it affords her."

Elder Sprague objected to this policy. "Because," said he, "Mrs. Brown has already done our church much injury. She has the reputation of being a pious woman, which gives her a strong influence with the public. Her daughter, as well as herself, has been continually uttering sentiments detrimental to our church, and the leaven is spreading and affecting the whole community; and if it is not checked, it will work great harm in our church here. These two ladies - members, I might say, have already done us more harm than all the Baptists in the community. Members who don't endorse our doctrines and practices are a curse to us and for my part I favor their expulsion. Let us act boldly and promptly, and make short work of the case before us, as an example to others."

"Yes," said the pastor, "make an example of her, that others may fear - that is the plan. I know that Col. Brown and his family have been strong supporters to the church, but we can't permit one of our members to be continually inveighing against our doctrines and

practice. The usage of our church will not sanction the retention of a member under such circumstances."

Elder Jeffreys raised his spectacles to his forehead, and with a knowing look at the pastor remarked: "Such cases of discipline have been very rare. Such members generally leave of their own accord, and, perhaps, a little longer forbearance in this case will relieve us of all trouble. And by what law will you try her? Where is the statute? What rule in our church government will apply to the case? Remember this is not a case of scandal; no crime is alleged against Sister Brown; she is charged with no offense against public morals, but she only entertains opinions that we think erroneous, yet not such as to impair her Christian character, or to create a suspicion as to her piety."

"It is true," remarked the pastor, "that our forms for the trial of such cases are not as explicit as I would desire, yet there are general principles laid down, covering this offense. On page 460 of the Confession of Faith, it is declared that 'an offense is anything in the principles of a church member which is contrary to the Word of God; or which, if it be not in its own nature sinful, may tempt others to sin, or mar their spiritual edification.' Again, the rule is, that 'nothing, therefore, ought to be considered by any judicatory as an offense, or admitted as matter of accusation, which cannot be proved to be such from Scriptural or from the regulations and practices of the church, founded on Scripture.' The matter of accusation against Mrs. Brown, is clearly an offense against the 'regulations and practices of the church, founded on Scripture,' therefore is, clearly within the meaning of the law, a subject of discipline. Heresy and schism are offenses to be dealt with according to our rules; and the apostle Paul, in his Epistle to the Romans, says: 'Mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrines you have learned; and avoid them.' In his letter to Titus, Paul says: 'A man that is an heretick, after the first and second admonition, reject; knowing that he that is such is subverted, and sinneth, being condemned of himself.' The usage of all the Christian churches is to exclude from their fellowship all members who openly avow sentiments opposed to their faith and practice. They could not be consistent and do otherwise."

"Yes," said Elder Sprague, "our Methodist brethren have a very plain, consistent rule on this subject in their Discipline, a copy of which I have with me. It is on page 144; edition published, 1859."

"Read it, Bro. Sprague," said the pastor.

Elder Sprague read as follows: "If a member of our church shall be clearly convicted of endeavouring to sow dissensions in any of our Societies, *by inveighing against either our doctrines or discipline*, such person so offending, shall be first reproved by the senior minister, or preacher of his circuit, and *if he persist in such pernicious practices*, he shall be expelled from the church."

"That's it," said the pastor, "that's the way to do it. We can't have a church platform wide enough to hold all the heterogenous notions in the world. If those who do not agree with us will not leave us, we must leave them."

Elder Jeffreys made a motion to adjourn, to meet at the residence of Col. Brown on a

future day, but after some consultation and interchange of opinions, it was decided to send a committee to inform Mrs. Brown of the proceedings commenced against her, and to request her presence at the next meeting of the Session. The pastor instructed the committee to say to her, that if she would recant the alleged heresy, or even agree to cease hereafter to speak against the doctrines and usages of the Presbyterian church, all further proceedings would be stayed; but otherwise, she would force on them the necessity of excluding her from their communion.

The committee promptly called on Mrs. Brown, and very kindly tendered to her forbearance of the church, provided she would promise not to speak against their faith and customs. They earnestly entreated her not to force on them the painful necessity of excluding her.

Mrs. Brown told the committee that she would not attend the meeting of the Session, and handed them the following written statements, which she wished to be understood as her final decision:

"I have not acted hastily in forming my conclusions, nor am I now prepared to take any backward step. My wish, all my life, has been to be a Bible Christian; and with my conception of God's teachings, I cannot endorse the baptism of unconscious infants, nor believe that anything but immersion is Scriptural baptism, therefore can make no promise to abstain from a free expression of my opinions. I regret to be compelled to differ from those with whom I have so long and so pleasantly mingled in a church relation; and while I cherish the kindest feelings for the members generally, I cannot sacrifice the right of conscience. In a word, I will obey God rather than men."

The committee reported to the Session, "That,

"WHEREAS: Sister Amanda Brown has been charged with the offense of disseminating heretical opinions and *inveighing against our doctrines and customs* and,

WHEREAS: She has been repeatedly admonished, and faithfully warned of the evil she was bringing on the church, and earnestly entreated to withhold her expressions of disapproval and still solemnly declares her intention to persist in her former course, we recommend her exclusion from the communion of the church."

With but few remarks, the report was adopted.

At the next regular meeting of the church, the pastor, in accordance with his duty as defined on pages 514 and 515, of the Confessions of Faith, announced that certain charges of errors in doctrine, and habitual expressions, tending to produce discord in the church, had been made and sustained against Sister Amanda Brown and that the Session, after due deliberation, had, on behalf of the church, excluded her from their communion. He then read from the book (Confessions of Faith): "When any offender has been adjudged to be cut off from the communion of the church, it is proper that the sentence be publicly pronounced against him." "The design of excommunication is to operate on the offender as a means of reclaiming him; to deliver the church from the scandal of his offense; and to inspire all with fear, by the example of his punishment."

He then pronounced the sentence in the following form:

"WHEREAS: Sister Amanda Brown hath been, by sufficient proof, convicted of publicly disseminating doctrines contrary to the faith and practice of the church, and after much admonition and prayer, obstinately refused to hear the church, and hath manifested no evidence of repentance, therefore, in the name, and by the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ, I pronounce her to be excluded from the communion of the church."

"It is due to Sister Brown, perhaps," he remarked, "to say that there has been no impeachment of her moral character, no allegation against her piety. It was because of the dissemination of views opposed to our doctrine and practice as a church, that made her expulsion necessary. The harmony of feeling and unity of sentiment in a church, is of the highest importance in its welfare, and it became a matter of necessity to purge out the leaven of heresy that had begun to work. For as the Scripture doth truly say: 'How can two walk together except they be agreed?'"

The exclusion of Mrs. Brown from the church, as might well be supposed, was a subject of much talk in the community, and many were the guesses as to what would be her future course.

It was but a short time after the church trial until Mr. Jones, a neighbor, called on her, accompanied by a stranger, whom he introduced as Dr. Atwood, and who, she soon ascertained, was a preacher of that system of doctrines known as Campbellism. The title of Doctor, however, had relation to medicine, rather than to divinity.

Dr. Atwood had recently organized a small church in the town, and being desirous of gaining more members, and knowing Mrs. Brown to be a convert to immersion, he thought she would probably unite with his church. Several hours had been spent in conversation relative to the different denominational peculiarities, in which he had taken special pains to represent his own in the most favorable light. Finally his conversation was directed to Mellie, to whom he remarked: I can see no reason why anyone who is inclined to be an immersionist, cannot unite with the Christians. There is a great similarity - in fact but little difference between them and the Baptists."

Mellie smiled, and softly and pleasantly inquired, "Are not all the believers in Jesus Christ, Christians? The world has given the different denominations their names, and they accept them, and since the world has given you a name, too, why do you not accept it? Then, when you wish to be more explicit, say you are a Campbellite Christian, as distinguished from Baptist Christian, Methodist Christian, etc. And as regards a similarity between your doctrine and the Baptists, excepting the action of baptism, it appears to me, nothing can be farther from the fact. I understand you to believe that *baptism* is essential to salvation, while Baptists teach that *salvation* is essential to baptism. You deny the doctrine of inherent total depravity, which is the very foundation of Baptist theology. Baptists teach regeneration by the direct agency of the Holy Spirit, which you deny. Baptists teach that religion is spiritual in its nature, while you seem only to regard it as a mental exercise. You teach regeneration is only a reformation of life, while Baptists believe that it is a radical change of the moral nature, followed by

reformation as its fruits. You baptize to make disciples; Baptists baptize on a profession of discipleship. You are a stranger to me, but your doctrine is not new. I have read it from books; heard it from the pulpit; and find that you run in the familiar channel. It seems to me that your teaching is contradictory."

"Why, Miss," said the Doctor, "you interest me by your ingenuity, as much as you astonish me by your boldness. And now you will please point out some of the contradictions."

"Well," replied Mellie, "you profess to believe that there was a necessity for the mediation of Christ, and that beside Him there is no Saviour, and yet you deny man's total depravity, or entire helpless condition. You deny the operation of the Holy Spirit only through the written Word - deny the direct influence on the heart. It appears to me, that to make up a constant system of theology, requires three things: 1st. Total ruin or moral depravity. 2nd. The mediation and atonement of Christ; and. 3rd. The application of the virtues of this atonement to the sinner's heart, so that its effects shall be experimentally realized. Taking out the idea of total depravity, you render useless the mediation of Christ; and in denying the experimental evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration, you deny the efficacy of Christ as a sacrifice. Thus one part of your system overturns another, and, as a whole, it is inconsistent, contradictory and self-destructive. The world is beginning to realize this fact, although you may not be prepared at this time to admit it."

"Strange! Strange! Perhaps it is true that every generation gets wiser," said Dr. A.

After a few minutes spent by the Doctor in trying to extricate his doctrine from the charge of inconsistency, the following dialogue ensued:

Mellie. - You are a physician, are you not?

Dr. A. - I am.

Mellie. - You have administered medicine to the sick, I presume.

Dr. A. - I have.

Mellie. - Does your medicine usually have a effect upon your patients?

Dr. A. - It does, generally.

Mellie. - When it has the desired effect, what is the result?

Dr. A. - When it has the desired effect, the disease is removed and the patient restored to health.

Mellie. - When the medicine has no effect, what is the result?

Dr. A. - In severe cases, the patient dies.

Mellie. - Well, Doctor, suppose there had been no such thing as disease, would you have undergone the labor and study of preparing yourself for the practice of medicine?

Dr. A. - Certainly not; because in that case a physician would be altogether useless.

Mellie. - Well, suppose that notwithstanding there is disease, that people need healing, and yet can experience no beneficial effects from the use of medicine - allowing that if medicine does the sick man any good, the fact is experimentally known - would there be any use for the physician?

Dr. A. - No; no more than in any other case.

Mellie. - Well, again: Suppose a malignant disease breaks out in the country, the people are all sick and in danger of death, but you, as a great philanthropist, prepare a remedy, and, through kindness, you proclaim that relief is in the reach of all, that the remedy is sure, and offered without money and without price - whosoever will, may apply and be healed. But if this be all that is done, will the people be cured?

Dr. A. - Of course not, unless the remedy is applied - unless the medicine is taken according to the prescription.

Mellie. - When the medicine is taken, what must the effect be in order to prevent death?

Dr. A. - The disease must be eradicated - the system cleansed, and the patient restored to health.

Mellie. - Could this be done and the patient not be sensible of the fact - not know experimentally of the change or cure effected?

Dr. A. - I never knew a case in which the patient did not realize the change. If a sick man is made well, of course he knows it.

Mellie. - Well, Doctor, the Bible pronounces sin a disease, declares the whole human race to be affected by it, and in danger of eternal death. The virtue of the blood of Christ is offered as *the* remedy, to which all may come and be made whole. The Holy Spirit offers to apply this remedy to all who will come with faith in its merits, and promises that all who partake of it shall be made *new creatures*, and have God's Spirit to bear witness with theirs that they are passed from death unto life. Now, if the remedy is applied and the disease cured, the sinner must experimentally realize the effect - must experience a change of heart, of motives, of feelings, desires and aspirations. But if there were no disease, the remedy would be useless; unless applied, the remedy becomes of no avail, and if applied, and no effect produced, it is worthless, and if an effect is produced, and yet not sufficient to be sensibly ascertained by the sufferer, it is certainly of doubtful value."

Mellie was, in reality, a "Little Baptist" in theory, in every sense of the word. There seemed not to be a single doctrine or practice, common to the denomination, that she

had not found a satisfactory reason for in the Bible. But, as will ever be the case with all who closely investigate it, the difference between the Baptists and all other denominations became more and more striking, the more she examined the subject. There are leading fundamental principles distinguishing them as a peculiar people, that cannot be given up without sacrifice of what they believe to be the vital doctrines of the gospel, and, taking TRUTH for their watchword, they will ever remain unmoved, though the rest of the Christian world stands arrayed against them. Having professed allegiance to Christ, they cannot shun to declare His truth as they understand it, nor depart from obedience to His laws.

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