

Anthony Norris Groves

Letter to John Nelson Darby

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MILFORD HAVEN,

March 10th, 1836

MY DEAR D—,

As the stormy weather threatens a little delay, I am not willing to leave England without a few words in reply to your notes, and a short explanation of some other points that interest me. I have ever regretted having so few opportunities of seeing and conversing with you since my return to England, and thereby explaining many things that might have allowed us to depart on the whole more happily than now, yet I wish you to feel assured that nothing has estranged my heart from you, or lowered my confidence in your being still animated by the same enlarged and generous purposes that once so won and riveted me; and though I feel you have departed from those principles by which you once hoped to have effected them, and are in principle returning to the city from whence you departed, still my soul so reposes in the truth of your heart to God that I feel it needs but a step or two more to advance and you will see all the evils of the systems from which you profess to be separated, to spring up among yourselves. You will not discover this so much from the workings of your own soul, as by the spirit of those who have been nurtured up from the beginning, in the system they are taught to feel the only tolerable one; that not having been led like you, and some of those earliest connected with you, through deep experimental suffering and sorrow, they are little acquainted with the real truth that may exist amidst inconceivable darkness: there will be little pity and little sympathy with such, and your union daily becoming one of doctrine and opinion more than life and love, your government will become – unseen perhaps, and unexpressed, yet – one wherein, overwhelmingly, is felt the authority of *men*; you will be known more by what you witness *against* than what you witness for, and practically this will prove that you witness against all but yourselves, as certainly as the Walkerites or Glassites: your Shibboleth may be different, but it will be as *real*. It has been asserted, as I found from your dear brother W— and others, that I have changed my principles: all I can say is, that as far as I know what those principles were, in which I gloried on first discovering them in the word of God, I now glory in them ten times more since I have experienced their applicability to all the various and perplexing circumstances of the present state of the Church; allowing you to give every individual, and collection of individuals, the standing *God* gives them, without identifying yourselves with any of their evils. I ever understood our principle of union to be the possession of the common life or common blood of the family of God (for the life is in the blood); these were our early thoughts, and are my most matured ones. The transition your little bodies have undergone, in no longer standing forth the witnesses for the glorious and simple *truth*, so much as standing forth witnesses against all that they judge error, have lowered them in my apprehension from heaven to earth in their position of witnesses. What I mean is this, that then, all our thoughts were conversant about how we might *ourselves* most effectually manifest forth that life we had received by Jesus (knowing that that alone could be as the Shepherd's voice to the living children), and where we might find that life in others; and when we were persuaded we had found it, bidding them, on the Divine claim of this common life, (whether their thoughts on other matters were narrow or enlarged), to come and share with us, in the fellowship of the common Spirit, in the worship of our common head; and as Christ had received them so would we to the glory of God the Father; and further, that we were free, within the limits of the truth, to

share with them in *part*, though we could not in *all*, their services. In fact, as we received them for the life, we would not *reject* them for their systems, or refuse to recognize any *part* of their systems, because we disallowed much. Trusting, that if this inter-communion could be established, to effect all we desire, by being upheld by God in walking in the light, as the Christ-like means of witnessing against any dark that might be in them, according to the rule of the Lord; John 3:19: "This is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil, neither will they come to the light lest their deeds should be reprov'd." A more difficult ministry of witness, than a preaching one of words, or separating one of persons, yet possessing a *much more* mighty power over the hearts of others, and a much more influential one in blessing; and which, dear brother, I know no heart more ready to acknowledge than your own. The moment the witnessing for the common life as our *bond* gives place to a witnessing *against* errors by separation of persons and preaching (errors allowably compatible with the common life), every individual, or society of individuals, first comes before the mind as those who might need witnessing against, and all their conduct and principles have first to be examined and approved before they can be received; and the position which this occupying the seat of judgment will place you in will be this: the most narrow-minded and bigoted will rule, because his conscience cannot and will not give way, and therefore the more enlarged heart must yield. It is into this position, dear D—, I feel some little flocks are fast tending, if they have not already attained it, making *light* not *life* the measure of communion. But I am told by our beloved brethren, C. and H., that if I give up this position of witnessing *against evil* in this PECULIAR WAY OF SEPARATION from the systems in which any *measure* of it is mixed up, I make our position one of simple unpardonable schism, because we might join some of the many other systems. I cannot be supposed, of course, to know fully *their* grounds of acting, but I thought I knew *yours*, at least your *original* ones. Was not the principle we laid down as to separation from all existing bodies at the outset, this: that we felt ourselves bound to separate from all individuals and systems, *so far* as they required us to do what our consciences would not allow, or restrained us from doing what our consciences required, and no further? and were we not as free to join and act with any individual, or body of individuals, as they were free *not* to require us to do what our consciences did *not* allow, or prevent our doing what they did? and in this freedom did we not feel brethren should *not* force liberty on those who were bound, nor withhold freedom from those who were free?

Did we not feel constrained to follow the apostolic rule of *not judging other men's consciences*, as to liberty, by our own; remembering it is written, "Let *not* him that eateth despise him that eateth not; and let not him which eateth not, judge him that eateth; seeing that God hath received" both the one and the other? Now it is one of these two grounds; their preventing me from, or demanding from me, other than the Lord demands, that divides me in a *measure* from every system; as my *own proper* duty to God, rather than as witnessing against THEIR evils. As any system is in its provision narrower or wider than the truth, I either stop short, or go beyond its provisions, but I would INFINITELY RATHER BEAR *with all their evils*, than SEPARATE from THEIR GOOD. These were the *then* principles of our separation and intercommunion; we had resolved never to try to *get men to act* in UNIFORMITY *further than* they FELT IN UNIFORMITY; neither by frowns, nor smiles; and this for one simple reason, that we saw no authority given us from God thus to act; nor did our experience lead us to feel it the best means at all of promoting their blessing or our common aim of a *perfect*

spiritual uniformity of judgment; whilst to ourselves it afforded a *ready* OUTLET to the PROPENSITIES of the FLESH, under the appearance of spiritual authority and zeal for the truth. But in all these matters, we desired that our way might be bright as the light, and our words drop noiselessly as the dew, and if, at the last, they remained “otherwise minded,” we would seek of God, that even He should reveal it unto them. There is something at present so like building what you destroyed; as if when weak you can be liberal and large, but when helped with a little strength, the *true* spirit of sectarianism begins to bud; that being “*one of us*,” has become a stronger bond than oneness in the power of the life of God in the soul. I know it is said (dear Lady Powerscourt told me so), that so long as any terms were kept with the Church of England, by mixing up in *any* measure with their ministrations, when there was nothing to offend your conscience, they bore your testimony most patiently, but after your entire rejection of them, they pursued you with undeviating resentment, and this was brought to prove that the then position was wrong, and the present right. But all I see in this is, that whilst you occupied the place of only witnessing against those things which the divine life within themselves recognized as evil, and separating from them ONLY SO FAR as they separated from Christ, you established them as judges of themselves, and of themselves they were condemned; and at the same time you conciliated their heavenly affections, by allowing all that really was of the Lord, and sharing in it, though the system itself in which you found these golden grains, you could not away with. But the moment your position and your language implied a perfect separation, alike from the evil and the good, and a rejection of them, in consequence of their system, without discrimination, you no longer had their consciences with you, but they felt that though only a brother in a Father’s house, you exercised more than a Father’s power, without a Father’s heart of mercy, and they, therefore, appealed from you to your common Head, both in behalf of themselves and their systems. There is no truth more established in my own mind than this: that to occupy the position of the maximum of power, in witnessing to the consciences of others, you must stand before their unbiassed judgment as evidently *wishing* to allow in them *more* than their own consciences allow, rather than less, proving that your heart of love is more alive to find a covering for faults, than your eagle eye of light to discover them. I send you this letter as we were the first to act on these principles, rather than to H— and C—, whose faith and love I do so truly desire to follow. They have written to me two very long and kind letters, which I purpose more effectually and fully to answer, by meeting the positions contained in them, in a little tract, which I hope to prepare on the voyage, and finally, to publish.

I particularly regret not meeting you at Bristol, as I had much to say to you relative to Rhenius, and other things connected with India, for my heart would naturally seek sympathy and fellowship with you and those dear brethren with whom I have no dividing thoughts relative to the great bearings of truth, or the truths themselves, in which lie the power and peace of the Gospel, – neither in the objects or principles of ministry do I differ; – my difference with you is only as to the manner in which you maintain your position of witnessing for the good against the evil. I feel no one ever expects me, when an acknowledged *visitor* in the house of another, to be answerable for the ordering of that house, or as thereby *approving* it – they would naturally come to the house in which I had control, and where the acts were looked upon as *mine*, to form such a judgment; and even in such a case, if I was but *one* among many in the government, no honest mind would make *me* responsible for faults, against which, in my place and according to my power, I protested; because I submitted to those acts in others, rather than forego a *greater* good, or incur a greater evil. If it is

said man cannot discriminate, nor feel the *force* of my witness, unless I separate, not by heart and life, but by contiguity of person, altogether from all kinds of false systems, my answer is, that He, whose place it is to judge, and to whom we are called to approve our hearts, can, and to *Him*, in this matter, I am content to stand or fall.

Some will not have me hold communion with the Scotts, because their views are not satisfactory about the Lord's Supper; others with you, because of your views about baptism; others with the Church of England, because of her thoughts about ministry. On my principles, I receive them all; but on the principle of witnessing against evil, I should reject them all. I feel them all, in their several particulars, sinning against the mind and heart of Christ, and letting in, in principle, the most tremendous disorders, and it is not for me to measure the comparative sin of one kind of disobedience against another. I make use of my fellowship in the Spirit, to enjoy the common life together, and witness for that, as an opportunity to set before them those little particulars into which, notwithstanding all their grace and faithfulness, their godliness and honesty – they have fallen. Nor shall I ever feel separation from the good for the sake of the evil, to be my way of witnessing against it, till I see infinitely clearer than I do now, that it is *God's*. I naturally unite fixedly with those in whom I see and feel most of the life and power of God. But I am as free to visit other churches, where I see much of disorder, as to visit the houses of my friends, though they govern them not as I could wish; and, as I have said, I should feel it equally unreasonable and unkind, for any brother to judge me for it, though I leave him in perfect liberty to judge himself. You must not, however, dear brother, think, from anything I have said, that I shall not write freely and fully to you, relative to things in India, feeling assured in my own heart, that your enlarged and generous spirit, so richly taught of the Lord, will one day burst again those bands which narrower minds than yours have encircled you with, and come forth again, rather anxious to advance ALL the living members of the living Head into the stature of men, than to be encircled by any little bodies, however numerous, that own you for their founder. I honour, love, and respect your position in the Church of God; but the deep conviction I have that your spiritual power was incalculably greater when you walked in the midst of the various congregations of the Lord's people, manifesting forth the life and the power of the gospel, than now, is such that I cannot but write the above as a proof of my love and confidence that your mind is above considering who these remarks came from, rather than what truth there may be in them.

Yours very affectionately in the gospel,

(Signed) A. N. GROVES.