

7. THE MILITARY SERVICE DIVISION

THE divisions which occurred in 1923, originated as far back as 1914 in connection with the subject of Military Service.

As it is of the utmost importance to get the right atmosphere surrounding the matter we purpose giving the sequence of events, and as far as possible in the words of brethren who, although often admitting the wholly unsatisfactory and unscriptural conditions existing in the Temperance Hall, Birmingham ecclesia to which we directed attention, when the time came to take the necessary action, without exception elected to remain in fellowship with an admittedly unsound ecclesia.

It will therefore be evident that the trouble in 1923 has its origin in the subject of fellowship. Much of the matter which we now set out has already appeared in print in various forms during the past forty-five years, but for the benefit of a large number now in the ecclesias who may not have had access thereto we give here the essential facts.

Petition to Parliament

In an earlier section we have dealt with the matter of the presentation to Parliament of a petition asking for exemption from Military Service in the event of this country becoming involved in war. The petition, signed by one hundred and fifty-four ecclesias, was never signed by the Temperance Hall ecclesia. The following extract from *The Christadelphian*, January, 1915, page 33, makes this perfectly clear -

“In Birmingham, the arranging brethren recommended the ecclesia, for the sake of unanimity, to authorise the signing of the petition; but after much discussion, at two special meetings, it was decided not to sign it, but to send to London a resolution expressing sympathy with the idea, and willingness to sign when conscription should actually be before the Government. There is a widespread opinion that premature presentation may do more harm than good.”

Prior to this date, however, the Birmingham ecclesia had prepared a petition of its own, a copy of which is to be found in *The Christadelphian*, September 1914, page 422. We desire particularly to notice Clause 7 of this petition, which states

“That the conscientious objection of your petitioners does not extend to strictly non-combatant branches of National Service, but only to those which involve the bearing of arms or resort to force.”

The report of the meeting at which this petition was considered continues –

“This was for several reasons preferred by the meeting to the form of petition of 1878, which was submitted to the ecclesias by the London brethren, though not, as we understand it, as a necessary form. With regard to the foregoing petition it may be said that some objection has been taken to Clause 7 for reasons which need not now be stated. But on the main issue of taking the sword it is hoped and believed that all must be agreed; and it ought not to be difficult hereafter to agree, if necessary, on a brief form of words somewhat on the lines suggested. We shall probably do well to say no more than this at present.”

This petition was never presented to Parliament. We may be sure the hand of God was in that circumstance. It would have been a terrible day for the brethren and sisters if it had been presented. That dissatisfaction with the situation existed in the Temperance Hall ecclesia is evident from the fact that in November 1914 Bro. E. W. Newman, a leading brother, still in their fellowship, moved the following amendment

“That having further considered the Petition previously passed, and realising the dangers attaching to Clause 7, the terms of which are a virtual approval of military service of a non-combatant nature, we, the Birmingham Temperance Hall ecclesia, renounce the principle which Clause 7 contains: and earnestly desiring unanimity of action throughout the brotherhood upon this important matter, approve of the London Petition, and request our Recording Brother to sign it on our behalf.”

The mind of this Birmingham brother towards their petition is here expressed by himself

“Our petition provides justification to those of us who have joined the non-combatant service in the army, and we have therefore no reasonable ground of action against them while our Petition remains where it is.”

Immediate Cause of the Trouble

We have now endeavoured to recreate the atmosphere of the Temperance Hall ecclesia during those fateful years 1914-1917. It was this unhealthy atmosphere which gave birth to the events we are now going to narrate.

We will let Bro. A. Davis, of the Temperance Hall ecclesia, relate the circumstances in his own words.

In his published statement of the facts, he tells us –

“The trouble was caused by the action of two brethren who joined as ‘Special Constables.’ One was an old policeman who rejoined the force and was serving ‘*as a cook.*’ The other had no ‘Pelham’ Certificate, but had obtained special exemption. This looked like being withdrawn and to protect himself he joined up as a ‘special constable.’ Each case, therefore, had exceptional features, and where special features exist wise men at least ask themselves whether some discrimination is not necessary. The minutes presented to the Ecclesia were to the effect ‘that as Service in the

Constabulary was inconsistent with the commands of Christ, we should have no alternative but to withdraw from them, unless they could obtain their release.’

“This was objected to by a certain number of brethren for the following reasons, amongst others –

1. The Constitution did not specifically provide for such cases.
2. The action now proposed was inconsistent with our attitude in the past, for we have fellowshipped a policeman for many years.
3. A general objection to disfellowship any brother without giving him an opportunity to be heard in his own defence.

“In order to gain more time for the consideration of these points I moved the following resolution, which was seconded by Bro. T. E. Pearce –

“That no action be taken at present on those parts of the Minutes which relate to the cases of brethren L. and M. and the position of constables generally.’

“In moving this I said ‘My reasons for this proposition are, that while I think these brethren have *certainly acted indiscreetly* in what they have done, nevertheless their fault is not such as to justify disfellowship, and, furthermore, there are reasons which make it expedient to postpone action, at least for the present’.”

Here, then, are the facts which led up to the subsequent trouble, from the pen of a brother who is certainly fully qualified to relate them. Let us summarise them –

- 1. Two brethren in the Temperance Hall ecclesia joined as “special constables.”**
- 2. The Arranging brethren proposed to withdraw from these two brethren.**
- 3. Bro. A. Davis moved a resolution to take no action at present.**
- 4. Bro. T. E. Fearce seconded the proposition.**

Now when the matter was thus before the Temperance Hall ecclesia, and when the Arranging brethren were determined to do the right thing in withdrawing from those who had become “special constables,” these two brethren, A. Davis and T. E. Pearce, opposed them, and in the course of their opposition delivered two speeches, which are really the cause of the trouble.

Unscriptural Speeches

We personally heard Bro. A. Davis re-deliver his speech in London and had the opportunity of questioning him on matters contained in it: we can only say its contents came as a shock to us as they did to many others present. Amongst comments on the character of the speeches made by brethren who at the time were Presiding brethren of the Clapham ecclesia, but who chose to remain in fellowship with the authors of the speeches and with the Temperance Hall, Birmingham ecclesia, we select the following expressions

“It is admitted without question that the cause of the dispute between the Temperance Hall and the John Bright St. brethren was in the first instance the matter of dealing with erroneous teaching in the Temperance Hall ecclesia. That wrong teaching was

set forth in the speeches of brethren Pearce and Davis . . . There is no need to quote them or enlarge thereon. It is admitted that they were dangerous and wrong.”

“I agreed, that, as I heard Bro. Davis’s speech, it was unscriptural.”

“I should certainly draw the conclusion that he countenanced service in the Constabulary.”

We repeat that these are the words of responsible brethren who heard the speeches which admittedly were the cause of the ecclesial trouble in 1923. Both of these brethren are still in fellowship with the Temperance Hall ecclesia which refused to withdraw from the authors of these “*dangerous*” and “*unscriptural*” speeches.

Commandments Called in Question

We now refer to the late Bro. C. C. Walker, Editor of *The Christadelphian* at the time. Here is his comment on the speeches —comment made, let it be remembered, at the time of their delivery, and therefore indicative of their true character

“In all my thirty years’ experience in the Truth, I have never heard the commandments of Christ called in question in that manner by brethren before.”

Evidently Bro. C. C. Walker was shocked by the nature of the speeches. What kind of speech could call forth such a rebuke from a brother of thirty years’ experience, but an unscriptural speech? We submit the evidence is overwhelmingly conclusive. We next consider the statements of Bro. F. G. Ford, a Birmingham Arranging brother. After two years’ consideration of the matter, he publicly stated –

“If the views of brethren Davis and Pearce were followed, I could foresee the city being policed by brethren.”

Again, in a letter to Bro. Viner Hall he wrote

“Last week we had to meet the organised attack of some brethren, who, to my mind, had departed from the elements of the Faith. This week, as good soldiers of the Lord, we also should be organised for the defence of the Truth.”

Let us carefully note these expressions. “An organised attack”: Who attacked? What did they attack? Who had “departed from the elements of the faith”? These are expressions which very clearly show the true character of the speeches of these two brethren.

Finally we may note the clear view expressed by the Temperance Hall ecclesia’s Recording brother, J. F. Smith, who wrote to Bro. Viner Hall -

“We have taken the right stand, and a good conscience with fortitude will carry us through. The opposition has not been without benefit; it has developed a clearer definition of our position.”

A brief extract from the speech of Bro. A. Davis gives some idea of its purport. He said –

“The policeman, on the contrary, finds that his work is entirely good. He is engaged in restraining evil in order that freedom may live and act. In a word, his use of force is judicial, and I submit that we are to discriminate between judicial force and personal violence . . . judicial force on the other hand is a divinely appointed means for the suppression of evil and is virtuous because of its Divine sanction it is moral and beneficent in result.”

Bro. A. Davis has told us that he does not justify police service for brethren, and we must accept his statement; nevertheless in the words quoted above, as one of his own supporters has said, “the teaching is dangerous and wrong.”

Having examined some of the evidence from the *character* of the speeches, we turn to consider some of Bro. A. Davis’s own expressions in reference to himself and his views. These will be found to be confirmatory of what we have seen to be the true nature of his speech.

Quoting further from his published letter, we select the following

“I have never justified service in the Constabulary, nor do I do so now. I say that any brother who joined would be very foolish. If I knew anyone who proposed doing so, I would do my utmost to dissuade him. But if, in spite of that, he still joined I would not accept the responsibility of disfellowshipping him.”

Our view is that faithfulness to the commandments of Christ compels us to accept the responsibility of withdrawing from those who act contrary to them.

Further evidence of the mind of Bro. A. Davis is furnished in his letter of April 14th, 1919, when he wrote -

“When I said last night that I would not accept the responsibility of withdrawing from a brother who joined the R.A.M.C., I used the word ‘joined’ in the sense I have always explained in my public speeches; namely, that he joined under Conscription, and then only after he had first obtained a Non-Combatant Certificate.”

If there were no other evidence than these two expressions of his mind, surely these words, *his own words*, are sufficient to justify the action we took in the year 1923. Here then, are the “reasons which necessitated our withdrawal from the Birmingham (Temperance Hall) ecclesia, and which continue to make our separation from that ecclesia and those in fellowship with it, a duty in faithfulness to the commandments of Christ.”

Position Remains the Same

The reasons remain to this day, nearly fifty years afterwards. The speeches were never withdrawn, and the Arranging brethren of the Temperance Hall ecclesia always refused to deal with the offenders. On the contrary, they have, through their Recording brother, more than once defended them as being “*sound*” and “*scriptural*.”

Whilst this state of mind exists we must adhere to our determination to withhold our fellowship from that ecclesia and those in fellowship with it.

It is a matter of the greatest possible regret to have to do so, but what are the alternatives? To act the part of traitors. To betray the Truth; to know the *right* and to do the *wrong*. These we cannot do even though it means separating from many we have loved. Let us rather be prepared to stand alone for the sake of the Truth.

The day of Christ will reveal whether or not we have acted from pure motives: the day of Christ will try every man's work: it will search every heart and lay bare every thought; then, the truth on this matter, as on all others, will be revealed.