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### PARTING OF THE WAYS

BY THE year 1917 the die was cast. There was no settling down after the departure of Johnson. The primary issue which had subsisted since 1915 was still unresolved. The country as a whole was looking to London for a lead and London was not sure which way to go. The Jesse Hemery view of ministerial control by an appointed minister assisted by a few leading elders on the one hand; an increasing call for the Pastor's principle of democratic congregational electoral government espoused by Henry Shearn, William Crawford and others on the other; in the middle that section of the London Church uncertain for the moment which was right. And the rest of the country, insofar as they were cognisant of the position, waited for the outcome.

The tragedy of the matter is that, in a way, both sides were right. Democratic control by the multitude looks fine on paper and sounds logical when advocated from the rostrum, - and it appeals to individual pride and self-esteem. Unfortunately men - even high-souled Christian men - are notoriously imperfect and oft-times lacking in that balanced and dispassionate judgment which alone can guarantee a successful democracy. In a good many spheres wise direction and authoritarian teaching from an accepted leader is the most effective course for an orderly community and progress in knowledge. In the Christian world many prefer to have their thinking done for them by the leader or minister and accept what he says without further question. But the usual result is that they become hide-bound in their beliefs and activities and do not perceive the advancing light on Divine truth or the relation of those things to the changing and developing world around them. Thus they can unwittingly become the prey of an unscrupulous and ambitious leader who aspires to gratify his own impulses to the detriment

of those he leads. So they draw back from the high-sounding appeal of the democrat and point to the dangers inherent in a leaderless community where, eventually at least, the high ideals are submerged and, like Israel in the time of the Judges, "every man does that which is right in his own eyes". The very freedom of thought, of interpretation and understanding of the Scriptures, which they require as a right can – and all too often does – lead to divergences in thought, in understanding, in co-operative service, and so at the end to fragmentation of the fellowship. And which was the best way to go many at this time frankly did not know.

One man who did know was Henry Shearn. He saw, perhaps more clearly than any of the other principal participants in the controversy, the true nature of the threat to the future of the movement. It was not just a London matter; it concerned the entire UK community. It was not just a question of London Church control of its own affairs; it was whether the entire UK community was to continue in the freedom it had enjoyed since its inception, or pass under the direction of an autocrat. But because the London Church was the most influential in the country and peculiarly associated with Brother Russell as Pastor, it became true that what London thought and did today, Glasgow would do to-morrow and the rest of the country during the following week. Someone had to give a lead; Henry Shearn was the only man who could do it. A lesser man would have raised the standard of revolt and gone through the country leading an insurrection and forming a new movement. The mood was there and it was growing. But this man, who had given his life and his means to the forwarding of the Bible Students and in earlier years had gone the length and breadth of the country counselling and strengthening the local Churches and taking the message door to door to those who as yet knew it not, was not going to admit defeat until he had exhausted all efforts to hold the community together on a mutually acceptable basis. He, with William Crawford, had been dismissed, or compelled to resign, as joint managers of the London office of the Society on account of their joint opposition to Jesse Hemery's endeavours to assert control, and at this time were finding it necessary to settle into normal business life

again. In the meantime they became associated with the various re-organised Churches in the Metropolis, and in Forest Gate, East London, which had by now severed its connection with the Society and Rutherford its President, and publicly announced its independence. By now also six of the London elders originally espousing what was now being called the "freedom" movement had resigned or failed of election, and mostly linked their destinies with the seceding London churches; this began a process of attrition of what increasingly became known as the "opposition" elders which reached its climax in 1924 when the last two of such were eliminated.

At a London Tabernacle church meeting held on January 21, 1917, a motion was put to the effect that the new President of the Society, Joseph Rutherford, be appointed Pastor of the London Tabernacle in succession to Pastor Russell. There was not much enthusiasm for this - he was hardly known in this country and what was known from what knowledge had filtered through from USA concerning the events surrounding his gaining control had not endeared him to the more thoughtful. A good many abstained from voting; of those who did, the "ayes" considerably outnumbered the "nays" and he was declared duly appointed. A few weeks later, on February 18, he was similarly appointed Chairman of the congregation and of the Board of Elders, with Jesse Hemery as vice-chairman.

It has often been questioned in subsequent years how it was that the London brethren submitted so tamely to the rule of a man who was quite unknown in this country and whom many felt instinctively was by no means likely to be the spiritual leader and "father in God" as had their deceased Pastor. Those who were there at the time know the answer to that question. It grew from the deep-seated and sincere conviction held by all the brethren, whatever their attitude to the question at issue, that the "work of Harvest" in which they were engaged was in truth and in fact a definite move of the Divine Spirit in this present period of the Age - just as Moody and Spurgeon and others viewed their lives' work. The argument ran - and it was frequently expressed in discussions at the time - "the Lord has so wonderfully blessed the work initiated by Pastor Russell and in which we are still engaged. Is it conceivable that He would

allow any man to take control who would not maintain the same high standards that had been raised in the past. He may not appear to us the desirable man we would expect, but perhaps it is that the Lord knows better". In the climate of the times this was a powerful argument and had it not been for this feeling on the part of so many the outcome may well have been different. Looking back, one reflects that it was better so, in the long run. The movement was getting too big and it needed a winnowing.

There is little doubt that a substantial proportion of the congregation now consisted of people who looked upon the Tabernacle as their church and Jesse Hemery as their minister, but were not deeply involved in the characteristic work of the brethren. Their votes on any matter automatically went the way preferred by Hemery, and this could have been an important factor in the outcome.

Despite this now very evident disagreement over the question of Church control, leading to the re-establishment in their own localities of some of the ecclesias which originally merged to form the Tabernacle congregation, and the consequent loss to the Tabernacle of an appreciable portion of its adherents, there was little if any move on the part of those ecclesias to a definite separation. The feeling was that they had achieved their own freedom and were satisfied to remain in general fellowship with their erstwhile associates. In the endeavour – fruitless as it proved – to stem further breakaways of this nature and to dissuade the faithful from supporting such ventures, a motion was put before the congregation on February 25, 1917, and carried by a majority, in the following terms.

"Resolved, that the only preaching services in the London area supported by this congregation be those held in the London Tabernacle, always excepting those specially arranged for in connection with Class Extension and similar work. Where local needs seem to require a Sunday meeting at a distance from the Tabernacle, the meeting should take the form of a Berean Class Study, the appointment of a chairman to be left to the discretion of the Church Executive Committee."

Here was the gauntlet thrown down with a vengeance. No meeting in London was to be considered a Bible Students'

meeting unless authorised and controlled by the "Executive Committee" of the Tabernacle. Some eyebrows at least were raised at this. The term "Executive" was a new and unknown one, and certainly not authorised by the Church. There was an "Appointments Committee" comprising five of the senior elders, whose function was to appoint month by month changes of chairmen for the fifty or so week-night Bible study classes in London from the elders and deacons. It might have been an honest mistake by the framer of the resolution, the unspoken wish being perhaps a father to the thought; it might on the contrary have been a "try-on", to see how the brethren would take it. If so, they did not, even though they passed the resolution. The term "Executive Committee" disappears from such documents as have survived and does not re-appear until 1922 - but that is another story. The significance of this resolution however, lay in the realisation that failure to conform to the increasingly authoritative demands of the Tabernacle was going to involve disfellowship.

Two relatively minor incidents of this time illustrate the reality of this tendency. In the course of an open congregational discussion on some Church matter one of the elders, Duncan Cronk, referred to "our brethren at Forest Gate". Jesse Hemery, from the rostrum, looked down at him and in an icy tone of voice queried "Our brethren at - where, Brother Cronk?" Forest Gate had been the sister London Church for many years but had now refused to accept the new Society President and declared its independence. Doggedly, and predictably, Dan Cronk repeated "Our BRETHREN at Forest Gate", "I don't know what you mean" observed Jesse coldly, and changed the subject. The other instance was at a memorial Service held on October 28, 1917, in memory of Pastor Russell, addressed by John Gentle in the morning on "Brother Russell's Teachings", George Swain in the afternoon on "Brother Russell's Example", and Jesse Hemery in the evening on "The Harvest Message and Work". Whereas both Gentle and Swain presented helpful and encouraging discourses on their subjects - too long to reproduce here - Hemery, after dealing with his subject in his usual masterly way, closing with a picture of the present condition of the work, had to conclude with a personal

“dig” at the “reformers”. “Brethren, I say to you” he said “what I say to myself; let us review our consecration to the Lord, our view of these things, and the Lord will give us all we need to make our calling and election sure. There’s plenty of work for the willing. I am glad to tell you that the classes are continuing as usual. A few classes have broken away from us; they think they are in bondage in the IBSA. Well, they may have their freedom if they call it thus. Some go very readily and happily into bondage, as when a woman marries a man. Brethren, we feel we’ve never had so much liberty before as when we were bondservants.”

The immediate result of all this at the end of 1917 was the loss of two more of the “reforming” elders, Frank Edgell who went to Stoke Newington, one of the pre-1911 re-established London Churches, and Robert Cormack, who went back to his native Glasgow where he first found the Faith round about 1885, and now joined up with the independent assembly recently broken away from the second largest British Church. He fellowshipped and laboured there for something like another twenty years. Independent meetings at Kensington, Ealing and Surbiton had come into existence, having closed down in 1911 to join the Tabernacle. Cotton, Cruikshank and Fraser had gone back to the Crouch End church early in the year. All of these save Kensington remained in fellowship with the Tabernacle until the final separation of 1919 – some till 1924.

The year was marked by the defection of John Gentle from the “reformers” side to that of the “establishment”. Hubert Thackway had done the same thing a year earlier. Their loss was keenly felt on the “reform” side; as senior elders of long standing their influence counted. By the early months of 1918 there were only five reformers; many of the congregation had given up and left to join with the dissident meetings but still there was no open break. It was a case of hoping against hope that a semblance of unity could be maintained.

But events were moving in other parts of the country. The new Society President had not yet presented himself in person to the British brethren – it is tolerably certain that he was still having difficulty in stabilising his position where he was – and there was still a hope in London that when he did get to the UK



he would be found perhaps more amenable to change than he had been presented. (That was a forlorn hope but no one really knew that at the time.) The war (World War I) was nearing its close; all people were heartily sick of it and things were very quiet. But a general move towards secession from the Society was now taking place, following the example of brethren from the major centres, Forest Gate, London Tabernacle, and Glasgow. Provincial cities such as Manchester, Birmingham, Bristol, Nottingham, Darlington, now had their independent meetings. Altogether something like sixty such centres, large and small, town or rural, were by now in existence and clamouring for a lead from someone they knew and could trust to point the way to a corporate future in which their local independence could be assured consistent with the provision by a suitable centre of the printed literature for evangelical work, of speakers for public meetings, and "pilgrim" counsellors to visit them and give pastoral aid to their continued growth in the grace and spirit of the Faith - all those helps which had heretofore been provided by the Society founded for the purpose by their departed Pastor, and from which they had now to turn sorrowfully away.

And so the Bible Students Committee of Great Britain came into existence.

By the beginning of 1919 the demand for action from all parts of the country was becoming too vociferous to be ignored any longer. There were now more than a hundred independent "classes", Churches, in the UK. Some were in localities where the entire existing IBSA community had seceded en bloc from the Society; most consisted of a proportion, sometimes minority and sometimes majority, who separated from the existing meeting and reformed themselves in a new meeting-place. Henry Shearn and William Crawford, and others with them, realised that the time had come to act if this demand and desire for a form of union for concerted action was not to be dissipated. There were still a good many, not only in London but in many of the provincial cities, who were still with the original Society meetings hoping that the division could yet be avoided but steadily losing hope; nevertheless the increasing number who saw no prospect of this and would wait no longer prompted the

step that was now taken.

Following consultation with a number of brethren throughout the country, a conference was held at University Hall, London, on April 5 1919, at which it was decided to set up a central committee to be known as the Bible Students Committee, to initiate and conduct those activities requiring joint communal action such as printing and publishing, providing lecture speakers and pilgrims, etc, which heretofore had been provided by the Society. This Committee was to be subject to annual election by the UK brethren generally, and there would be no titular head or leader. The organisation was to be proceeded with at once, and in four months' time approved, modified or terminated by a General Convention to be held in London. Thus the entire arrangement was in the hands of the brethren generally and so fulfilled the principles for which the dissident brethren were contending. The brothers thus elected to serve, seven in number, were William Crawford (London); Frank Edgell (London); F. G. Guard Sr (Forest Gate); Alex. Guy (Forest Gate); William Seager (Ipswich); Henry Shearn (London) and George Tharratt (Bishops Stortford), all well known and trusted.

A circular letter dated May 1919 from the Committee's temporary address at 42 Selborne Road, Ilford, London, was widely distributed among the brethren reporting these arrangements and notifying the coming Convention in London on August 2-4, at which the whole arrangement would be presented for universal discussion and ratification. This Convention was duly held at East Ham Town Hall, London.

Six hundred brethren from all parts of the country, from Londonderry and Dublin to Dover and Ipswich, from Penzance and Barnstaple to Glasgow and Sunderland, were present. Sixty-five local Churches over this entire area had sent delegates armed with specific instructions and most of the remaining forty or so centres advised their opinions and wishes, so that the net number having thoughts on the matter at issue considerably exceeded the six hundred. The net result was a unanimous decision that the inauguration of the proposed Committee should be ratified and the system placed on a firm footing. In consequence, and by unanimous vote, the existing



Committee was continued in office for another twelve months, at which time a national election would be conducted to decide who should serve for a further term. Henry Shearn was appointed the Committee's first Secretary. (In fact he held that office until his retirement on age grounds in 1935.) F. H. Guard Jr was appointed Assistant Secretary.

Having thus made universally agreed arrangements for what it was hoped would provide for the undisturbed conduct of the Bible Students' traditional and normal activities as they had been in the past, thoughts turned towards the brethren from whom they were now avowedly separated, and a strong feeling was expressed from many in the hall that one last attempt be made to bring about a reconciliation with the Society and effect some form of unity which would still preserve the individual Churches' rights of self-government without having to create this new organisation. George Tharratt, stressing that "it is proper to keep the door for re-union always open" proposed that an approach be made to the Society voicing the general feeling of the Convention. This developed into a motion which was proposed and approved by the brethren in the words "if the proposals for reconciliation submitted by the Society are acceptable to the brethren corresponding with the Society in respect to same, that they submit these to the Bible Students Committee, and if considered by them sufficiently satisfactory, the Committee be empowered to call a Convention at the next Bank Holiday time, so that the whole matter may be considered at a properly convened business meeting, to decide if the reconciliation proposals are satisfactory, and whether the Bible Students Committee shall be disbanded".

The feeling of the Committee that this "last ditch" attempt to heal the breach should be made was expressed in the report of the Convention, in the words "the only object of the Committee is the comforting and supporting of the many brethren in Great Britain now finding themselves unable to acquiesce in much that is being said and done in the name of the Lord and the Harvest work. Seeing that, apart from the extraordinary claims made by the Society of late, there are no outstanding doctrinal differences, the brethren are hopeful that the true basis of union, justice, liberty, peace and love, may be recognised and

unity established".

In the spirit of this feeling a special "Reconciliation Committee" of eight trustworthy brethren was elected, entrusted with a mandate "to take all steps possible to bring about reconciliation with the Society, in harmony with the expressed desire of the Convention".

The Convention closed, the delegates returned home to report to their fellows the progress that had been made, and all settled down to await the outcome of this last attempt to resolve the points at issue with the Society. It failed. Correspondence and interviews went on for many months but always the response was the same. The wanderers from the fold would be welcomed back, but they must accept the new concept now being insisted upon by Rutherford, to wit, that the Watch Tower Society with its President was the only channel of Divine truth and direction of evangelical activity. All must accept the wish and word of the Leader. In a statement dated January 26, 1921, furnished to every member of the London Tabernacle congregation, dealing with this attempt at reconciliation and blaming the failure of same upon the alleged intractability of the other side, occurs the words "Evidently, that which the Bible Students Committee desires is not reconciliation so much as a frank disavowal by the Society of its office of channel for the Lord." This, of course, was a perfectly true statement. This claim lay at the root of the matter. Subsequent events over the next ten years demonstrated the intention of Rutherford to convert the entire movement into an instrument of his own will and any antagonistic factor must be rigorously repressed.

By 1921 therefore the secession was an accomplished fact and the brethren taking part in it settling down to the new order of things. The number of independent churches associated with the movement was now up to 135, aggregating some three thousand brethren, just about one half of those associated with the Society when the differences arose in 1916. The annual London Convention continued together with another in the Midlands and a start was made with the publication of literature of the type formerly favoured but now with a new publisher's imprint. An office and stockroom was opened at 23 Marylebone Road, in Central London; after a short period this was removed

to 93 Cambridge Gardens, Kensington, in West London, where there was a congregation of seceded Bible Students, and here it remained until the end of 1924 when it moved again to more commodious premises at 204 Broadway Chambers, Letchworth, some distance out of London. This became a well-known centre and here it was located until 1935 when with the retirement of H. J. Shearn it moved to Welling, and in 1956 to Hounslow in the care of Basile Dumont.

Then in 1922 the Judge (Rutherford) paid his long-expected visit to Britain to meet and talk with those of the British brethren who were still loyal to him – up and down the country only about one half of those who had been in the movement at the Pastor's death. He had paid a brief flying visit in 1920 but only to consult with Jesse Hemery as to his plans for the future and – apart from one London meeting – few of the faithful so much as saw him. Now he was coming to announce the new kind of evangelism he intended to introduce. As a preliminary he was to be introduced to the elders of the London Tabernacle, of which in 1922 only three were on the dissentient side, the others having been eliminated during the preceding years on one ground or another, and replaced by "new blood" whose loyalty to the Judge was more or less guaranteed. And so the elders were bidden to be present in full ceremonial dress (which consisted of the traditional English frock coat, an essential for a London elder in those days; but the Judge soon put a stop to that) and they stood in a wide horse-shoe in the Bethel dining-room at 34 Craven Terrace while Jesse Hemery, visibly on edge, conducted a kind of military inspection to ensure that everyone was neat and tidy, saying then "I am now going to fetch the Judge, brethren" and disappeared through the door at the far end of the room. Presently he re-appeared, and behind him a massive bulk, featuring a grim expression of a type not usually associated with brethren in the Lord. "These are the elders, Brother Rutherford" announced Jesse with a slight wave of the hand. A loud and deep grunt was the only response from he of the grim visage; he looked at Jesse as much as to say "And I don't think much of them". A thought flashed straight through the mind of one elder "this man is no successor to Pastor Russell" and later discussion with his two fellow dissentients

revealed that they were of the same opinion. An awkward pause, broken by Jesse volunteering a little information about the organisation of the Church, to which the great man responded by saying that he would be seeing the elders again, and with a curt nod turned round and walked back the way he had come. To give him his due, he did rather better when he addressed the congregation on the following Sunday, and Jesse did explain afterwards to the elders that the grunt was due to an obscure throat complaint; having by then heard him in full cry on the Sunday, that particular excuse did seem rather thin.

Mercifully, the elders were not called upon to meet him again at this visit. A tour round the principal cities of the UK had been arranged to give him the opportunity of acquainting the British brethren with his vision of their future work. At many places a number did not like the vision very much and since almost immediately the number of classes and churches declaring themselves independent and coming into association with the Bible Students Committee increased from 135 to 160 there is ground for thinking that, quite unintentionally of course, the Judge had proved to be a quite good recruiting agent for the secession movement. Particularly was this the case at Glasgow, where he faced the second largest Church in UK, some 800 strong at the time, augmented by visitors from other Scottish churches so that a thousand people were gathered to hear him. It seems that he appeared on the rostrum flanked by a kind of bodyguard of muscular young men, procured from where nobody knew, and to serve what purpose nobody knew either. Someone should have told him that if he wanted to introduce innovations of this nature Scotland was the last place in the United Kingdom in which to do it. And Glasgow had a long history of association with the Faith and with Brother Russell, and with some of them what they were now seeing and hearing was not going down very well. And someone also should have told him that the Glasgow brethren were more sturdy and less tractable than the ones he had left behind in London. The climax came when he initiated a kind of election of elders – it transpired that he had already been told who of the existing elders were likely to favour him and who oppose. He began to rule down any name he thought fit, and at that really flagrant

usurpation of the Church's own right and privilege there began to be audible dissent. Observing this, he shouted brusquely "Let the lame ducks get out". He could not have anticipated the reaction. Of the thousand people present, almost five hundred stood up and streamed out of the building. The existing fairly small independent meeting in Glasgow received an accession of membership that day which put it in the lead of the independent Churches of Britain. It was said at the time that for the only recorded time in his career the Judge was visibly shocked at the denouement.

It was at about this time that Duncan Cronk, one of the London elders most ardently supporting Rutherford, abandoned that stand and joined the dissentients. Dan Cronk was a man of tender heart and wise counsel when anyone was in trouble, and the general run of brethren loved him for this, and of caustic tongue and keen insight where pride, ambition, insincerity and double-dealing was detected - and he was good at detecting it. Fiercely loyal to the Pastor and the Society, he was slow in accepting the inevitability of the division, but when he did accept it, there was no doubt about it. He told Jesse Hemery one day that the time would come when "Ichabod" ("the glory has departed") would be written over the doors of the London Tabernacle; Jesse was never quite the same to him after that!

No one knows how many letters of concern and entreaty went to the Society's offices at London and Brooklyn - obviously these never saw the light of day after receipt. One such letter is known, from a sister of long standing in Kent. The sentiments therein expressed may be taken as typical and expressive of the feelings of many who, after holding on for a lesser or greater period, at the last had to join the secession. That letter reads:

"In the following remarks I do not oppose the service work but I do stand for religious liberty and toleration. In the June 15 Watch Tower in the article on 'question on witnessing' it seems that individual opinion is not allowed. The claim that the W.T.B. & Tract Society is THE visible organisation of the Lord on earth is to my mind not Scriptural. I grant it may be AN organisation of the Lord but to me the Scriptures teach that 'if

ANY man be in Christ he is a New Creation' and all begotten of God's Holy Spirit are anointed and commissioned to preach the Word, irrespective of any organisation. We have our ordination of God alone. The Church is entitled to govern itself, but if all policy whether in relationship to service work or anything else is to come through the organisation then the Church has no option in the matter and therefore to some extent is in bondage. This we must remember was Papacy's claim, to be THE visible representative of God on earth and we are all familiar with the bitter fight for liberty and freedom in religious thought and action. To me God's organisation consists of all his anointed people whether in or out of the I.B.S.A. An arrangement between a community of the Lord's people for harmonious work is a very different thing to the present claims. My allegiance is to the Lord alone. He is the Lord, the Master and the Head, and his true people are one with him wherever they are to be found. I could not believe that they are all in one earthly community and all outside of that community are not in his organisation. Neither have any power or authority over one another, but "all are brethren'."

Many in those dark days felt like that.

So the drift away from the Society continued. By 1924 there were 181 local centres in fellowship together and the Committee was being kept increasingly busy printing and distributing literature, assisting local brethren with their public meetings with advertising notices and, where necessary, speakers for same. A regular service of "pilgrim" visits was now in operation, in which Henry Shearn, William Crawford, Frank Edgell, Ebenezer Housden, and other well-known brethren were active in touring the country and encouraging the smaller communities in their activities. Some quite appreciable assistance in this process was unwittingly afforded in 1923 by the institution, at Jesse Hemery's recommendation, of a system whereby Tabernacle elders visiting provincial meetings should render a report stating whether the community visited was "healthy" or "unhealthy", viz; were they in general manifesting subservience or opposition to the edicts emanating from America. At an elders meeting on October 12, 1923, where strong dissent was expressed to this rather un-British form of



"spying", Jesse, sensing the mood, hastened to assure the elders that this was only a "request" and not mandatory, and it did not mean that anyone was going to be disfellowshipped; this was only intended "to alert headquarters to those meetings which needed assistance in understanding the issues involved and encouraging them to loyalty". All of which sounded fine and large at the time, but its effect was rather spoiled half-an-hour later and a little farther down the agenda when Jesse announced that the Executive (meaning himself, Gentle, Radwell, Thackway, Seeck, Swain and Dey) had decided to delete one of the local London meetings (Plumstead No 54) "on policy" which meant of course that they had been judged "unhealthy" within the meaning of the Act. At this usurpation of powers belonging to the elders sufficient of them supported the three remaining dissentients to reverse the Executive's decision, and for a short time Plumstead No 54 was reprieved.

But this marked the end of delay tactics. If the will of the Executive could be thwarted the whole system of dictatorial control slowly being built up was threatened. The three surviving opposition elders must be eliminated. Jesse knew that - and they knew it too.

The first essential was to get rid of Duncan Cronk. That would not be easy. He was highly esteemed and popular among the brethren in general and he was an elder of long standing, back to about 1900 in the old Lewisham (South London) Church which had closed in 1911 to merge with the Tabernacle. He had been a valuable ally when he had supported Hemery but now he had changed sides the situation was different. The annual election of elders was due in January 1924 and he had been an elder as long as anyone could remember. While the entire Church had the facility of voting, his re-election was virtually assured. So what?

Came the day of election and the Church assembled for what was always regarded as a serious and momentous occasion. The selection of the right men was considered essential to the well-being of the Church. The procedure was always the same. Names were nominated and seconded the previous week and everyone had their list. Jesse Hemery presided and he called each name in the words "Brother A -

Those in favour of Brother A — please raise your hands". The tellers went rapidly along the pews, counting, then proceeded to the front where the totals were quickly added up. A two-thirds majority was necessary. The result was passed up to Jesse who glanced at it and announced "Brother A — has — votes. He is elected" — or "not elected", as the case might be.

On this occasion the election proceeded as usual and with the customary formula through the A-s and B-s and to the C-s. At the turn of the name Cronk, Jesse paused for a moment, while the congregation waited. He raised his head. "I am going to ask Brother Gentle to take my place whilst this name is voted upon. I cannot conscientiously preside over the voting for a brother who is so lacking in restraint and consideration for the principles of the Truth and I prefer to stand aside whilst this vote is being taken." Amidst a stunned silence he descended the stairs from the rostrum, John Gentle replaced him and called for the vote.

Consternation was evident. One looked at another in bewilderment. No such thing had ever happened in the Tabernacle before. What had Brother Cronk done? What did Brother Hemery know that the brethren at large did not know? An election was traditionally a time when there were no questions and no discussion. No one spoke for fear that there must be some dark unknown secret which had prompted this unheard-of action. And so the tellers went about their normal duty. A few who saw through the ploy raised their hands defiantly. Others who esteemed their own knowledge of the brother in question superior to anything said from the rostrum added their votes, but when the result was announced there was no majority vote. "Brother Cronk — is not elected."

That left two. Brother Hemery did make a feeble attempt to unseat one of them. Instead of the usual formula "Brother So-and-so. Those in favour of Brother So-and-so please raise your hands", he first gave the name "Brother So-and-so." A long pause; then "those of you who think Brother So-and-so should be an elder will of course raise your hands." The innuendo was not lost on the congregation. But this time it did not work. Brother So-and-so got a majority vote.

But, of course, the bell was now tolling loudly. The two

remaining dissidents knew that the farce was not going to last much longer. It only remained to go down with the flag flying. And Judge Rutherford was coming to the UK again this year to complete his re-organisation of things. As a foretaste of things to come, at the second elders' meeting of the year, held on February 15, 1924, Jesse Hemery raised the issue of the tunes to which hymns were sung at the Tabernacle services. He had observed, said he, that many of the tunes were not those in the book (*Hymns of Millennial Dawn*) and he wanted to know why. (The new tunes had been going on for a long time but he hadn't noticed it before.) It had always been recognised - among those who had to sing the tunes - that American and British tastes in hymn tunes differed widely, largely due to the different religious heritages of the two peoples. In consequence of many observations to this effect from many members of the congregation, the Praise Committee, whose responsibility it was, had prepared a new tune book, using many better known and appreciated tunes more customary in UK places of worship, retaining the *Millennial Dawn* tunes in cases where by nature or tradition they were more appropriate. In this latter case they had cut out said tunes from the book formerly used on the Tabernacle organ, thereby leaving same sadly mutilated. John Radwell, Convener of the Praise Committee, responded to Jesse Hemery's question by explaining the circumstances, observing that there was general support for the changes. This, of course, was the wrong thing to say; it savoured too much of congregational control at the expense of dictation from the top. Something had to be said at this point and Jesse said it. "Not only has the Praise Committee taken upon itself to change the tunes the Society has chosen for the Society's official hymnbook, but they have also cut up the official Tabernacle hymnbook to make their new one." He seemed more aggrieved at the damage to the Tabernacle hymnbook than that to the Society's authority in the matter of hymn tunes. Nevertheless he delivered himself of the following impressive dictum. "Harmony with the Society necessitates harmony with the tunes the Society has chosen for its hymnbook." The importance of "hymnbook theology", the effect of the doctrinal content of customary hymns on doctrinal belief, is of course well

known in Christian circles, but that doctrinal orthodoxy is also contingent upon the tunes to which the said hymns are sung was definitely a new one to the London elders, and their reaction to this, and perhaps that of the congregation, may have some bearing upon the fact that at the next elders' meeting, May 30, 1924, arising from the minutes of the previous meeting, it was almost unanimously felt that the apparent preponderance of dirge-like tunes which the Praise Committee seemed to have selected recently for the services rather illustrated the force of the arguments previously put forward. It is possible that Jesse felt that he had unwittingly been "taken for a ride" over this matter, but if so he could not see what he could do about it, and so, rather grudgingly, he assented to the insertion of a note to the minutes giving the Praise Committee leave to vary the hymn tunes if those in the official book were considered by them to be unsuitable.

This commendable concession having been made, the elders were informed that they were about to be received in audience by Brother Rutherford, who was waiting in the wings, so to speak, to be introduced into the meeting. His intention was to outline the future work and methods of inculcating Divine truth which he intended the brethren to pursue. After this, said Jesse, he would invite questions from anyone present. The Executive, however, had decided that there was need only for two questions and Brother Seeck had been briefed to ask one and Brother Middleditch the other. The implication was that any other elder who presumed to make use of the proffered opportunity to ask questions would find himself in trouble. In former days there had been a feature in the "Watch Tower" headed "Questions with inspired answers", dealing with questions on Scripture topics answered by reference to the inspired Word of God. Duncan Cronk the irrepressible, had he still been on the Board of Elders, would undoubtedly have interjected a favourite remark of his - "Looks like a case of inspired questions with answers". Unhappily he was not, and the questions proceeded.

Theodore Seeck put the first question. What should be the ideal subject for the Tabernacle Sunday afternoon study? Came the oracular response, it should, of course, be from the "Watch

Tower", the "Sunday School Lesson", and, adding for good measure, all the week-night meetings should be devoted to the study and discussion of the leading article in the current "Watch Tower" (said leading article, of course, being written by himself, although he did not mention that at the time). This, of course, was not actually Bible study, but the question had been asked and the oracle had spoken.

Harry Middleditch came up with the second, and here the iron hand in the velvet glove began to show. How should the election of elders be conducted and on what principles? Considering that this subject had been well expounded and laid down by Pastor Russell in Volume 6 twenty years earlier and had been followed faithfully by probably every Bible Student Church in the world annually ever since, one might be forgiven for wondering why such a question should be raised by the leading Church in the land. The Judge thought a little as though this was a serious matter - as indeed it was - and gave his verdict. A committee of three senior elders should prepare a list of all brethren considered by them as suitable for elders and a similar one for deacons. This should be placed before the retiring Board of Elders and all names upon which they were unanimous would be voted in en bloc. Any name on which they were not unanimous would be nominated and voted upon by the Church in the usual way. Any name not on the list would not be eligible for election.

A few years earlier a proposal such as this which took all electoral power away from the Church would have been flatly rejected by the elders and by the Church. It is a measure of the success achieved by the rosy picture painted by the Judge of the marvellous work of preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom and bringing many more into the fold and all realised by merely obeying the mandates of the Judge without question that the brethren were so easily persuaded.

Against the rules, and at the price of a stern look of disapproval from Jesse, one of the dissentient elders did ask a supplementary question. How did this proposal square with the Scriptural method which had been assented to by all Bible Students for forty years past, and as outlined in Volume 6?

The Judge also looked daggers. He had spoken, and who

should question? He explained tersely that times changed and practices had to change accordingly. And anyway Volume 6 was written twenty years ago. He indicated that he had been in the meeting long enough and was duly ushered out by Jesse Hemery. He had at least ensured that after the next election there would be no dissentient elders.

There were not many shots left in the locker. The battle was lost anyway. It had probably not been worth fighting for two or three years past. At the next elders' meeting, June 20, 1924, the Chairman - Jesse Hemery - announced that the Executive had decided that all week-night meetings in the London area were to be held on Thursdays (traditionally each meeting chose its own convenient meeting night) and all of them must study the same "Watch Tower" article. This was unreasoning standardisation with a vengeance, a thousand people all over London being told they must meet on a given night and must discuss what they are told to discuss - not the Bible, but the word of man. Unfortunately one of the two dissentient elders, Walter Mott, was absent from the meeting that night. The other one spoke up in protest, asking what was happening to the Bible Student claim that they based all their beliefs and conclusions on the basic study of the Bible itself; what was happening to the volumes of Scripture Studies which had been the means of leading so many to this basic study of the Bible, the inspiration of the entire movement?

Jesse Hemery replied in a more conciliatory tone than he had employed to the questioner for a long time past. Perhaps, at this late hour, he recalled his own early days in the Truth, way back in 1890, when he was about the same age as his present questioner. Full of enthusiasm for this new understanding of the Scriptures he had then received, visiting any who expressed an interest, expounding to them the message, he did all that was within his power to make it known, in an atmosphere of perfect freedom and good Christian fellowship. If so, the vision must have faded and here he was, a mature and perhaps disillusioned man of sixty, head of a large and well-known church but bound to obey the dictates of a man more powerful than he. It might have been with a sense of weariness that he gave his answer, the answer that he knew he had to give. We must be up-to-date, he



said. The brethren can study the volumes at home if they so desire. And that was all.

But not quite. The subject of "unhealthy" week-night class meetings came up again for discussion. An "unhealthy" class was one the members of which were not proving amenable to the voice which spoke from America. The remedy, if they could not be persuaded to mend their ways, was to strike them off the list. "Unprofitable" was the technical term coined to express the position. Several present spoke rather disparagingly of the bad influence Walter Mott was having on the meeting held in his home at South Norwood. Strangely enough, the same meeting and the same Walter Mott had been highly esteemed for many years as a good community of students but since he had made his objections to current events known not so much was said about that. Walter Mott was a moderately wealthy business man and upon coming into the Faith many years previously had donated large sums to the Society towards its work and given generous gifts to the Tabernacle itself. He was a cheerful, enthusiastic and utterly sincere man and a popular elder. But he dissented, and so he had to go. And the best way to accomplish that was to disfellowship his local meeting. Their feelings were not consulted.

The formal proposal was made. Walter Mott was not present at this particular meeting. No one seemed to think that mattered. Before the vote was taken, Albert Hudson, the only other remaining dissentient, pointed out the unfairness of condemning a man in his absence and unheard. His only crime - if crime it was - that he contended for the congregation's control of its own affairs as against dictatorship from above, and up to recently that had been the normal position at London Tabernacle. He himself happened to have been the appointed chairman of that particular study class for the month just past and he had found them to be an earnest and instructed group of people well worthy of the name of Bible Students. He opposed the motion.

He sat down, thinking to himself "If Mottie is for the chop, I go to the block with him, and that is the end".

It was. Arthur Lodge, in measured tones and impeccable English, put the opposite case, and that ensured the verdict.

South Norwood was struck off. The last two dissentients gave up. The 1925 Board of Elders had no dissentients and no opposition.

But the secession movement flourished and increased.



R. Cormack



H. J. Shearn



W. Crawford



F. Edgell



C. Cotton



D. Cronk



H. Hooper



W. Eddington

LONDON TABERNACLE



F. G. Guard



F. H. Guard



A. Guy



J. Sharman



S. French



A. Parker



D. Vaughan

FOREST GATE AND ALDERSBROOK

SOME OF THE LONDON ELDERS ACTIVELY INVOLVED  
IN THE SECESSION

# BIBLE STUDENTS' COMMITTEE.

ADDRESS ONLY

45, BELMORE ROAD,  
LONDON, ENGLAND.  
May, 1919.

Dear Brethren,

Greetings in our dear Redeemer's Name.

Since the death of our dear Brother Russell, and since the withdrawal of his disciples from amongst the Laodicean people, and since all the brethren in Great Britain and elsewhere had themselves found to distrust their work, and to give up the work of the Lord and the Harvest Work. It is necessary to find all the various means by which we can be instructed, but we must be not afraid to show a Christian how to study of the Bible, and also from the arrangements of our beloved Brother.

Early after his "absence," there were references to him in the Country which indicated the true position of the "Golden Rule," and of the principle that we should not be together as a body, but as a body, and that we should be instructed by the things which have been printed, and at which time it is hoped that a Committee may be arranged in London, so that by means of a general conference of brethren the Laodicean will have means as they realize may be better determined and arrangements for the future made accordingly.

The Committee wishes to state that it does not desire to act in opposition to any who are engaged in the propagation of "secret truth." It stands humbly, yet firmly, by the Word of God, believing that the things written therein are sufficient for the guidance and instruction of God's people. It looks upon all who are engaged in the propagation of "secret truth" as those who are given us of the Lord through our dear Father in His name of "Blessed in the Scriptures" and "Tribulation, and" and "Joy" as well as "Peace" in every possible way.

Early in this time it believes as all to "watch and pray" as ever before, for the great coming of God's people, giving light for darkness and darkness for light, and as they have a deep and profound trust in Him into the spiritual and eternal methods of His Word.

In addition, dear brethren, "we counsel you to find rest in the word of His Word, and to be able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those that are faithful," whereby you may, with the help of the Lord's people, receive an inheritance, as the other Laodicean brethren, which indicate that the "Word" is coming to us all.

Hoping it may make a glorious contribution for you,

We are, with love as ever,

Your brethren and fellow-workers,

- W. CRAWFORD.
- F. H. PERRELL.
- ALAN HOVE.
- F. C. GUARD.
- W. C. SUMNER.
- H. J. SHERIFF.
- G. B. STAMMANT.

# BIBLE STUDENTS' COMMITTEE.

ADDRESS ONLY  
45, BELMORE ROAD,  
LONDON, ENGLAND.  
August, 1919.

Dear Brethren,

Since the death of our dear Brother Russell, and since the withdrawal of his disciples from amongst the Laodicean people, and since all the brethren in Great Britain and elsewhere had themselves found to distrust their work, and to give up the work of the Lord and the Harvest Work. It is necessary to find all the various means by which we can be instructed, but we must be not afraid to show a Christian how to study of the Bible, and also from the arrangements of our beloved Brother.

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PART OFFICIAL REPORTS OF CONFERENCE AND CONVENTION  
ESTABLISHING THE BIBLE STUDENTS COMMITTEE IN 1919