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SETTLING OUR DIFFERENCES.

By Levi T. Pennington.

"It must needs be that offences come", said the Master; and if offences are inevitable, so also are the differences out of which offences arise. The problem of settling differences in the church is one of the most difficult which is faced by those who are vitally concerned for the advancement of the Kingdom of God.

These differences vary all the way from those growing out of personal opinions, preferences and idiosyncrasies to those that have to do with the most profound tenets of theology and philosophy. Some of them are puerile in their origin, however fatal in their outcome; some of them are trivial and concerned with matters that are of little moment either way; some of them have to do with fundamental issues that must be settled or right or disaster lies ahead for the church as well as for individuals in the church. How are these differences to be settled?

Well, the methods actually used are various, and some of them certainly not to be advised.

In some cases and places, the theory seems to be that the way to settle a difference is to "fight it out", and it must be admitted that some peace-loving Quakers (supposedly) are exceptionally nasty fighters. Believing, or at least acting as if they believed, that the end justifies the means, they fight each other with but slight regard to any rules of church battles, supposing there were such rules -- certainly with little regard for Christian charity and none too much for the truth. Surely this is a method that cannot be commended.

A commoner method is intrigue, machination, political manipulation that would not be particularly creditable to Tammany Hall. Church politics ought to have no place among Quakers, but a man would have to be blind indeed to claim that it does not exist, and some of it decidedly discreditable. Surely this method of dealing with differences is not to be commended.

The scriptures give us the method for settling individual differences, the hard way but the only effective way. "If the answer is easy, it's wrong." Man to man is the method, the two who have a difference facing it honestly, not with the idea of "fighting it out", but with the intention of seeking a resolution of the difficulty. There are few differences that cannot be handled by two men honestly seeking the right way rather than each seeking his own way.

There will need to be humility on both sides. To approach an attempted settlement of a difference with the idea that I am certainly and completely right and the other man must therefore be certainly and completely wrong is the surest way to make a settlement of a difficulty impossible. What a world of arrogance, spiritual pride, intolerance, bigotry, religious egotism and other undesirable qualities the Lord has to forgive, even among those in places of leadership in his church.

There is one pre-requisite to a solution of any problem of difference in the church that is more often than not a solution in itself. That is for both parties to the difference to seek to get near to God. Two men lost from each other in the wilds may search in vain each for the other; but if they both know where the camp is, and both come to the camp, they will soon be together. And if two men or two women, two groups or two factions in the church, earnestly seek the Lord, and draw near to Him, they cannot be far apart. We shall increase our fellowship with one another in proportion as each of us comes into closer fellowship with Him who prayed "that they all might be one."

This is not a plea for the union of Catholic, Protestant and Jew; it is not a plea for organic union of "Hicksite" and "Orthodox"; it is not a plea for anything so outward as organization. It is a plea for those of us who claim to be followers of Christ to end the differences that are interfering with the progress of the Kingdom of God, in our own hearts and lives, in our local meetings, in the entire work of God among men. Let us seek not to emphasize and increase our differences, making impossible the fulfilment of Christ's prayer for Christian unity, but to resolve our differences by the means that God approves. Let us give the world a better chance to say, "How these Christians love one another."
