

**SEVEN LETTERS TO A
MEMBER OF THE
SOCIETY OF FRIENDS**

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Seven Letters to a Member of the Society of Friends by Edward Ash

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MEMBER OF THE SOCIETY OF FRIENDS.

[Edward A.]

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SEVEN LETTERS

TO A MEMBER OF THE SOCIETY OF FRIENDS.

LETTER I.

INTRODUCTORY.—DOCTRINE.

MY DEAR FRIEND,

In the personal intercourse which we have had with one another of late years, I have often given utterance to my thoughts on various matters relating to that religious community with which we have both been connected from our birth; and I will now endeavour to express them somewhat more fully and accurately in writing.

Although I felt constrained, a few years since, by the Society's continued publication and circulation of Robert Barclay's Apology, to relinquish my membership in it, my interest in its welfare, and my value for many of its distinctive views and practices, have not diminished. I can heartily thank the Giver of all my mercies for having been connected with it; I count it a privilege still to hold habitual fellowship with its members in the public worship of God; and I rejoice in being united to very many of them in the bonds of Christian love, and in the faith and hope of the gospel.

And, besides these reasons for feeling a deep interest in the Society's welfare, I have another in my belief that it holds an important place in the universal church, by reason of that peculiarly emphatic testimony which it has always borne to the purity and spirituality of the religion of Christ. Hence I cannot but greatly regret that past and still continued decay of its numbers which (at least as regards our own country) is now so universally admitted; and I should rejoice to see the

wise and godly portion of its members giving their minds to a free and earnest investigation of the causes which have led to such a state of things. Perhaps among the thoughts which I am about to express, some will be found to throw light on this subject.

I shall begin with briefly adverting to the Society's doctrinal views, as these may be inferred from the present general character of its ministry, yearly epistles, and other public documents. Thus judged of, they seem to be substantially the same with those which are generally received among evangelical Christians: the chief difference being in its manner of looking at the work of the Holy Spirit. On this and some other points I will now proceed to make a few observations.

The earnestness with which Friends are accustomed to dwell on the convicting, renewing, and sanctifying operations of the Holy Spirit, appears to me to be a most valuable feature of their teaching; and I should rejoice to see more of it in the church at large. They do not, however, seem, in their manner of looking at and speaking of this subject, always sufficiently to bear in mind the important principle, that it is in immediate connexion with God's revealed truth, his Spirit ordinarily works in the heart of man. The natural consequence is, that, while the inward or subjective part of religion is almost always largely insisted on in their ministry and writings, its objective truths (including those momentous ones which relate to the person and personal work of the Lord Jesus) are often very inadequately brought into view.

What I have just said naturally leads me to notice that distinctive though not absolutely peculiar article of the Society's faith, the universality of divine grace; or, to speak more specifically, its belief that Christ's salvation, and consequently the renewing and sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, is not limited to those who hear and receive the gospel message, but is placed within the reach of all mankind without exception. Far from having myself any disposition to dispute the truth of this doctrine, I think there is much in

the revelation which God has made to us of his character and ways that seems to favour it. I cannot, however, regard it as a part of his revealed truth: for, although the Scripture declares, in terms the most express, God's unwillingness that any should perish, and his desire that all should be saved, I nowhere find it disclosing any other way provided by him for giving effect to this his gracious disposition towards mankind, besides the publication and belief of the gospel.

Now, such being the case, it seems to me that the wisest and safest course, the one most befitting man's utter inability to penetrate the ways and counsels of the Most High any further than he has seen meet to disclose them to us, is to leave the question of his manner of dealing with those who never hear the gospel message, as one among his "secret things;" in the perfect assurance that "the Judge of all the earth" will and must "do right." At the same time, I would by no means censure those who think they are warranted in going further than this. Only let them beware of allowing their belief that men may be saved without the knowledge of Christ's gospel, to divert them from the consideration of their own share in the solemn obligation which he has laid upon his followers, to publish that gospel among all nations. It must, I think, be admitted that the doctrine of "the universal and saving light," as held by the Society of Friends, has in past times largely had this effect upon its members: and I fear that it still has so, however unconsciously, to a very considerable extent.

The indispensable need of the Spirit's teaching for the true understanding and profitable use of the Holy Scriptures, is another part of his work which is more strongly insisted upon by Friends than is common in the church at large, though assuredly not more so than its importance demands. I must, however, think that, as a body, they have not sufficiently perceived that, though this is unquestionably the first and most important means which the providence of God has appointed for that end, it is not the only one; but that it is the duty of all believers, as they have opportunity, diligently to employ their natural faculties in the study of the sacred volume, and in the acquisition of whatever knowledge is cal-