RECOLLECTIONS OF THE WALKERITE OR SO-CALLED SEPARATIST MEETING IN DUBLIN

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IN a recent article[1] entitled: 'Secession from the Established Church in the Early Ninteenth Century', Dr. H. H. Rowdon mentions the so-called Walkerites. As one of the last surviving members of the Dublin Meeting of these people I can add some further information and I have been prompted to write at the instigation of my son, Dr. J. R. Martin. This is also an opportunity for calling attention to the posthumous edition of Walker's collected papers and letters[2]. All the references in the following paper are to this valuable work.

John Walker (1768-1833), the son of an Anglican clergyman in Roscommon, was a Fellow of Trinity College, Dublin in days when every fellow had to be an ordained minister of the Anglican Church. From his study of the Bible, undertaken along with a few friends, he reached the opinion that the Anglican was not the true church in the scriptural sense and that the position of a minister therein was unscriptural. Accordingly, on 8 October 1804 he called on the Provost of the College and offered to resign his fellowship. According to the story told me, the Provost somehow reassured him, but the next day the Board of the College publicly expelled him. In justice to the College it should be stated that they granted a pension of £600 a year to Walker, in 1833, a few months before he died.

On leaving college, Walker earned his living by teaching or coaching candidates for matriculation and other college examinations. Shortly after his dismissal he and his friends started the practice of meeting together on Sunday mornings in accordance with the custom of the early churches to remember the Lord, as He had appointed, by breaking bread and taking wine. This, the first Walkerite Meeting, began in 1804 and met in some rooms in Stafford Street[3]. As the scriptural warrant for their action, they referred to the Lord's promise that 'where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them' (Matt. 18:20). In 1819 Walker moved to London, but he returned to Dublin in 1833 where he died a few months later—in October.

The group was impelled to take the step it did by a conviction that a wordly semi-political organization, deriving mainly from the secular government of the Roman empire, had overspread and engulfed the Christian church until the latter was almost lost to view. In their opinion, from this false, material and worldly church all Christians should withdraw totally. 'Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you' (2 Cor. 6:17) was a passage they often quoted. For this reason they became known as 'Separatists' or 'Walkerites' though they repudiated both titles and simply called themselves 'Christians' or 'Primitive Christians'. The Dictionary of National Biography states they called themselves 'The Church of God'. I have no recollection of any of them ever using this title though, of course, they believed that the meeting was part of God's church.

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In Walker's day they did refer to a local church as a 'Church of Christ'[4].

The separation or detachment from the world (that all Christians admit is enjoined on them in some sort in the Bible) they took to be a separation in religious or spiritual beliefs and ways of thinking, and not a refusal to participate in harmless amusements and social activities. In other words, they did not confuse asceticism with Christian unworldiness. On the contrary, they pointed out that asceticism is a very prominent feature in the natural man's ideas of godliness or of 'saintliness' in the modern corrupt sense of the term. Millions of pagans and unbelievers impose the most exacting prohibitions upon themselves and afflict themselves with incredible discomforts, hardships and physical suffering under the illusion that thereby they become holier and less sinful. This, Walker and his companions regarded as a form of self-indulgence and glorying in the flesh and not true self-denial (Col. 2:23). Consequently they saw no objections to dancing, going to parties, card-playing and seeing a good play. All things should be done in moderation, they admitted; and, of course, they condemned disorderly living and riotous behaviour of any sort. Walker's personal views on amusements were, perhaps, stricter than this. He believed, however, that this was an area where differences of opinion were perfectly legitimate, and denied that a meeting had any right to legislate on the matter; but he did not hesitate to rebuke those who he thought were abusing their liberty[5]. Nor did they condemn Christians marrying non-Christians; though many of them thought it an unwise step in most circumstances. At first they took a more serious view of such unions[6].

However, in spiritual matters and religious ideas they believed that the separation of Christians from the world should be complete and absolute[7]. There an unbridgeable gulf existed; irreconcilable opposites were in conflict. This they conceived to be the lesson that needed emphasis in modern times when so many composite creeds and doctrines that are hybrids between the Biblical teaching and the views of the world masquerade under the name of Christianity. They carried this conviction to the point of refusing to take part in any religious ceremony or observance sponsored by any other church, or even to share with other Christians in prayer or saying grace before food. These other Christians, they argued, were 'walking disorderly', and, with such, the apostle Paul had commanded us not to associate. 'No, not to eat' (1 Cor. 5:11).

The Walkerite group differed from parallel groups in some other points as well. By saving faith they understood belief of the testimony that God has given in His word concerning His Son Jesus Christ[8]. Belief, that is, that Jesus was the Christ. It was not belief in one's own salvation, though that, of course, should follow, but does not always do so owing to the tortuousness of the human mind. Nor was it accepting a particular theory as to how Christ's death had saved us, though most or all the members accepted, I think, the Anselmic view that on the cross Christ had taken the punishment for our sins. This was not made an article of faith. We simply believed that Christ had died for us and thereby had saved us and all men who believe in Him. Nor did we agree with such expressions as: 'Knowing Christ as one's personal saviour'. Saving faith is believing that Christ is the Saviour; and that, of course, means knowing

He is our personal saviour. Nor again did we concur in the distinction that some preachers make between heart-belief and head-belief. The Bible says we must believe in our hearts, but in the days when the Bible was written everyone, including all the Greek writers except Hippocrates, placed the human mind in the heart, and not in the head. When the Bible speaks of believing in our hearts it means what we now would call believing in our minds. This led to some accusing Walker of making saving faith a mere intellectual assent to a proposition, which was grossly untrue. He recognised that the Bible distinguishes clearly between real belief 'that worketh by love' (Gal. 5:6), and belief with the lips, that is, a mere profession.

Repentance was another subject on which we deviated somewhat from evangelicals. 'To repent' means in the Bible to change one's mind. It does not mean 'penitence'; though that, of course, always accompanies true repentance. The point is well brought out in the Lord's parable of the two sons. The one who said: 'I go not', afterwards repented and went. The essence of his repentance was not that he felt sorry for having said 'I go not', though no doubt he did; it was in his changing his mind and going (Matt. 21:29). A little orphan girl of twelve (whose father and mother had been friends of my parents, and for whom my parents, though not her legal guardians, had undertaken much responsibility) was dying of tuberculosis. My mother visited her frequently. One day my mother found the child in great distress. A minister had told her that she must feel sorry for all her sins, and she was trying frantically to feel sorry for them, or to persuade herself that she did feel sorry for them. In substance my mother's reply was: 'I wouldn't worry, dear. You believe the Lord loves you and died for you; and you love Him, however poorly; and when we love someone we are sorry for having done anything that displeases him'. The girl died about four weeks later—her fears settled.

The group believed that the taking of an oath was forbidden to Christians[9]. They did not practice water baptism. Water baptism was, they held, an initiatory rite practised by the early Christians following the Jewish practice of baptising the whole family of proselytes, but not extending the rite to their, as yet, unborn children[10]. The Walkerites were non-sabbatarian and regarded calling Sunday 'the sabbath' a hopeless confusion in language and thinking[11]. At one time the meeting elected, or formally recognised, Elders[12] to see that its meetings were conducted in an orderly manner and to look after its business affairs; but this was dropped when the meeting shrank in numbers; the two or three senior members then acting together in any matter that required a collective decision. The Elders, or senior brothers, exercised a quite firm discipline over the meeting, and called-on any brother who they thought was straying. My grandfather had, I believe, a very bad temper, and one day two or three brothers called on him to protest against it. 'You have a very bad temper for a Christian, brother Martin', they said to him. 'I admit it', my grandfather is reported to have answered, 'but you have no idea what it would be like if I were not a Christian', which we all thought was not a bad reply. A family in the meeting owned a good business in Dublin, but the father was not a good business man. Either shortly before or after his death the firm went bankrupt, and the family was left in great poverty. The girls had been brought up not too wisely, and were utterly untrained for any employment. The youngest, an exceedingly pretty girl, but a mere child, was sent as a governess to a family in Buenos Aires—in those days very far indeed from all her relatives. There she was seduced by a married man, and after that shattering experience returned to Dublin with her little girl. A few members of the meeting were of the opinion that she should express public sorrow for her 'sin', but my mother stood for none of that. The first day she re-entered the meeting my mother took her in, and sat her down beside herself. Nobody in the meeting demurred! The young mother for a time called herself Mrs. . . . but then she insisted on using her maiden name as Miss . . . She refused to sail under false colours.

I joined the meeting in 1905 when I reached thirteen years of age. Members were admitted to break bread only when they reached that age. This was based on a belief that among the Jews thirteen had been the recognised coming-of-age in the religious sense. Shortly before my joining there had been a division in the meeting owing to a brother getting married in an Anglican church (by an Anglican clergyman)[13]. This, some contended, was 'touching the unclean thing', and they held that the brother should be excluded until he had expressed regret for his misdoings. The majority disagreed and the upshot was that one brother and several sisters withdrew, and started another meeting. Where it met I do not know, but it came to an end shortly afterwards with the death of its one male member. The original meeting met then in the Ancient Concert Rooms in Brunswick, now Pearse Street. There was another meeting in Birmingham. One of its most prominent members was a wealthy glass manufacturer named Chance†. I think his wife was a Unitarian, but I know little more about it beyond remembering my parents going on a visit to the Chances when I was a very small boy. A third meeting existed in Russia. I think it was somewhere in the Ukraine, and I remember my father corresponding with someone in it. Scattered about Ireland were several families, e.g., Dr. Burton of Co. Clare and the Parkinsons of Portlaw, who were connected with the Dublin meeting, but were seldom in Dublin. I have an idea that meetings were held in their homes. Walker during his fourteen years residence in London established a meeting there and another at Leith.[14]

In the meeting the men sat on one side and the women on the other. This was done to avoid scandal, for we recognised the oft-repeated injunction to 'greet one another with a holy kiss'; and, at the end of the meeting, had to kiss both of those sitting beside us[15]. I always sat beside an old cabman, a Mr. Woods, of whom I was very fond, and at the end of the meeting we kissed each other. It was not a bad reminder, to me at least, that in the Lord's sight we were equals and fellow members of His one body. Each Sunday at the beginning of the meeting, one of the senior brothers, in rotation, nominated one brother to preside, and another to read the scriptures, one to take the first prayer, and another to take the second prayer. The service was therefore ordered, but the participants were changed and renewed every Sunday. Speaking or exhorting was not set, but left to the prompting of the Holy Spirit. Any adult male member could speak, and not necessarily on the scriptures that had been read.

†Chance Bros. Ltd. are today one of the largest British glass manufacturers—*Ed*

The presiding brother gave thanks for the bread, and gave out the hymns which had been chosen by the nominating brother. The brother who read the scriptures gave thanks for the wine. To the best of my recollection the order of service[16] was: hymn, first prayer, hymn, breaking of bread, scripture reading, exhortation, collection, hymn, second prayer, and kiss of peace. We read a Psalm, a chapter from some other Old Testament book, a chapter from the gospels, and one from another New Testament book, each Sunday. Subject to this, our reading proceeded in order through the Bible. Visitors sat apart from the members of the meeting and were not asked, or allowed, to contribute to the collection. When I joined the meeting there were two elderly ladies who were regular and constant members, but who would never take communion because, they argued, there was no authority in Scripture for women doing so. On the last Sunday of each month there was an evening meeting for Bible study. The meeting supported all its poorer members: a not inconsiderable load on its finances that found some relief when old-age pensions were established.

In September 1908 my family moved from Dundrum to Co. Wicklow, but my parents went one week-end each month to Dublin and attended the meeting there. The remaining Sunday meetings were held every Sunday in our home outside Wicklow town, the attendance being almost wholly a family affair except for occasional visitors. I had started attending a Bible class run in the local Y.M.C.A. by the Anglican and Methodist ministers. This caused my parents some misgivings at first, but after they got to know P. B. Johnson, the Anglican minister, all misgivings vanished; and my father even asserted that he was welcome to not only attend, but to participate in, any of our meetings—which he never could do because the hours of his service and our meeting coincided. A change, in fact, had been coming over the meeting. Humanly speaking, this was largely due to a Mr. Doull, a very lovable Christian who came from Caithness in the north of Scotland. He was a clerk to a cattle salesman. To enable himself to read the scriptures in their original languages he had taught himself to read Hebrew and Greek. During the terrible scarlatina epidemic in the nineties he had—in one week—lost his wife and three children, and was left with an only son. He had a great influence on my father, as also had some of the books my father read—notably Spurgeon's sermons. Other incidents tended in the same directions. Outsiders, that is, people who were not members of our circle of meetings were allowed to attend the monthly Bible study sessions and to partake in the discussions. Because of their presence no collective or open prayer was made at these meetings. One day an undoubtedly Christian man who often attended protested that we should open the meeting by jointly asking God's blessing on our study. My father answered that he had been in silent prayer for many minutes. 'So have I', the man replied, 'but that is not enough. Should we not all join in a common open prayer?' My father was deeply affected by his remark which he felt was completely justified.

The meeting had been extremely exclusive, and while this was not intended to be a judgment on others, but an effort in all charity to move them into reconsidering their position, it was, in fact, an implied judgment on them. It gave ground for others to suggest that we were setting ourselves up as better Christians than anyone else, and I think that sometimes, or often, in our zeal to give no recognition to the 'unclean thing' we were offensive to other Christians who did not see eye to eye with us. Our non-Sabbatarian views frequently gave offence. We became too concerned with church government, and too little concerned with 'maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace'. We lost all sense of proportion. Things that ought not to be left undone dominated our view, and things that ought to be done were forgotten. Now the exclusiveness, and rather self-righteousness, began to disappear until the Dublin meeting reached the point of professing to be simply a group of Christians, meeting together on the first day of the week to remember the Lord in His appointed way, who welcomed to His table all who believed in and loved Him. In effect we became indistinguishable from an 'Open' Brethren meeting.

In 1912 I went to live with the Flints in Dublin. They were members of the Dublin meeting and I attended it with them. Shortly afterwards the meeting moved from the Ancient Concert Rooms to a room over a shop in Lincoln Place, and then after a very short interval to Mill's Hall in Lower Baggot Street where it remained until it terminated. Fred Flint was employed in the Bank of Ireland. He had a beautiful tenor voice and as a young man had been much in demand as a singer in Dublin. This was a tremendous asset to the singing in the meeting. His brother, McHardy Flint, became a Roman Catholic and professor of elocution in Maynooth College, the training college for the priesthood. The whole family were greatly interested in elocution and the art of speaking in public; and, when I about this time began to take a part in the ministry of the meeting, were of immense benefit to me and others in a like situation. They criticised us freely and trained us to speak properly and to articulate. It is a subject that is much neglected nowadays and I think Brethren meetings would do well to follow their example.

Needless to say, what the world regarded as our quirks and oddities led us into situations with sometimes an amusing side. In earlier days our refusal to take an oath led sometimes to loss of employment and even to imprisonment. It was not till 1833, five years after all disabilities had been removed from Roman Catholics, that an act of Parliament was passed legalising our affirming instead of taking the oath[17]. My father one time had to give evidence against a man charged with fraud who over many years had made a firm profession of Christianity and, among other things, would not take an oath. When my father came forward and declined to take an oath an audible snigger ran round the room, and the presiding judge looked at him as much as to say: 'O goodness, here is another of them!' Whether the man's professions had, or had not, been sincere we cannot say, although my father had believed them to be sincere. We have to take such incidents, sniggers and all, as they come. 'It's all in the commission' as they used to say in the army. In 1914 I was admitted into the Royal Irish Constabulary (R.I.C.) as a cadet. The first incident affecting myself arose when I refused to take the oath of allegiance. I was marched before the Commandant, at that time a man named Pearson, who after satisfying himself that I was not refusing for any reasons of a disloyal nature, asked if I would subscribe the official and recognised form of affirmation. I replied that I would, but they could not find the authorised form of words anywhere so I was told to go away and return in two hours. When I returned they had found the formula somewhere and, with a weary air, presented it to me for my signature. I carried away no illusions of their admiration and respect. Then I had to fill in a form giving all sorts of particulars about myself, including my religion. Under this heading I wrote either 'Christian' or 'Christian of no denomination'. I think it was the former. A sergeant watching what I wrote remarked: 'Well, we never had one of them before'. A few days later a message from Dublin Castle arrived saying the Inspector General, the head of the Constabulary, wished to see Cadet Martin at a certain hour three days afterwards. This created a tremendous impression, for when the I.G. wished to see anything as insignificant as a cadet it usually meant that the cadet had done something awful, and was in for peremptory dismissal or a very severe reprimand. So for three days I was almost the centre of attraction as a deep and devilish sort of fellow doing all sorts of dreadful things on the sly, and posing as a conscientious man who would not take an oath. I was very apprehensive myself not knowing what it was all about. In due course I was ushered into the presence of Sir Neville Chamberlain, the I.G., 'Well, young man', he said, 'you have upset the organisation of the whole constabulary'. I expressed due regret for such an enormity and asked what I had done. He explained: 'I have to provide the answers to questions asked in the House of Commons as to why there are so many Protestant or Catholic District Inspectors in such and such a Catholic or Protestant County, and now I have to say I have so many Protestants, so many Catholics—and a Christian!' I could not help bursting into laughter. He was very nice and insisted that I was not to change what I had written unless I was perfectly willing to do so, but that it would be of great help to him if I would change my entry to 'Protestant' which, of course, I gladly did.

One more personal anecdote may be permissible. I tell it in honour of a man who befriended me in an hour of need. The war had broken out and we all were super patriotic. One guest-night in the mess a senior officer suddenly stood up and proposed the toast: 'To hell with the Kaiser!' I was taken by surprise and could do nothing. During the ensuing week I learned that this officer intended to repeat the toast on the next guest-night when some officers from the Sixth Reserve Cavalry would be our guests. I went to my company commander, P. O. Holmes, afterwards Major Holmes of the Royal Irish Regiment, and told him that if the toast were proposed I would refuse to drink to it; which, in so obscure and insignificant a creature as a cadet, would look very badly. Holmes was one of the most courageous men I have ever met. He made neither a confession nor a denial of Christianity; he was just casual. He told me I was 'a damned fool', and my scruples were ridiculous, and marched me off to the adjutant, Major Fleming, of the Irish Guards. He more or less repeated Holmes' opinion. They were getting thoroughly fed-up with me and my conscience. They sent me away and I heard nothing more for some days, then the guest-night arrived. The officer proposed the same toast, but Holmes, who happened to be the senior officer present, at once said: 'No, so and so, that is too strong. We drink defeat to the Kaiser!' A number of officers protested against his squeamishness and asked what had come over him, but Holmes stuck to his guns and never gave me away. He took all the taunts on himself and I cannot say what a relief to me his self-effacing and generous action was. A few months later when the officers of the R.I.C., who had volunteered, were being seconded into the regular army, Major Holmes did me the honour of writing and asking me to serve in the Royal Irish Regiment with him. He was killed in the County Kerry during the Irish troubles.

On returning from the war I worked for eighteen months with the Agricultural Wages Board, and was away from Dublin. Then I was posted to R.I.C. headquarters in Dublin Castle. My father had died in 1916 and my mother in 1920. The meeting had shrunk to a handful as members died or moved from Dublin, and new recruits came seldom and few. There also was an unfortunate clash of personalities between two of the few remaining members. I felt we were accomplishing nothing and had cut ourselves adrift from almost all our fellow Christians. In 1921 the Dublin meeting came to an end, but I kept in touch with its few remaining members.

We are all adept at seeing motes in our brother's eye and remaining oblivious to huge beams in our own. It is easy to look back and criticise; but with all its faults the meeting, when all is said and done, left a deep impression on all who came under its influence; and, to the best of my knowledge, an impression that was never wholly effaced. It implanted in their hearts a reverence for the Bible. It taught them to go to the Bible, and to the Bible alone, for guidance and instruction in the things of God. In these days when a complete and cold, or even a contemptuous, indifference to the Bible pervades so much of the world, and so much of the so-called Christian world, this was a worth-while achievement.

As a postscript I may add that a hymn written by Walker in 1794, 'Thou God of Power and God of Love', has found its way into many hymnals.

I apologise for the excessively personal nature of these recollections, but then recollections are usually rather personal, aren't they?

REFERENCES

1 H. H. Rowdon: 'Secession from the Established Church in the Early Nineteenth Century'. *Vox Evangelica* 1964, 3, 76-88.

2 John Walker: *Essays and Correspondence, Chiefly on Scriptural Subjects.* Collected and prepared for the Press by William Burton. Two volumes. London: Longman, Orme, Brown, Green, and Longman's; E. Madden and R. M. Tims, Dublin; A. and C. Black, Edinburgh, 1846.

3 By 1821 there were some 130 individuals in fellowship, including twelve former clergymen. In addition there were six or seven smaller churches in other parts of Ireland. John Walker: op. cit., 1, 557; 2 243, and H. H. Rowdon, op. cit., 78.

4. John Walker: op. cit., 2, 278.

5 John Walker: op. cit., 2, 343, 497.

6 John Walker: op. cit., 2, 321-2, 386. It should also be noted that during Walker's lifetime they restricted the term 'believer' to one in fellowship with their circle of meetings. John Walker: op. cit., 2, 500.

7 Walker insisted that in any truly scriptural group of churches there must be: 'Unity of sentiment upon the faith of the gospel and upon the revealed rule by which they are to walk together'. For his ecclesiatical views see John Walker: op. cit., 1, 244, 355-6, 556-60, 2, 24-6, 170, 209, 257, 496-7.

8 Walker attached supreme importance to a correct understanding of saving faith. He was quite emphatic that in conversion man played a completely passive role and that those who taught the contrary were preaching salvation by works. For Walker's doctrine of soteriology see John Walker: op. cit., 1, 19-24, 451-6, 474-5; 2, 228, 239-40, 248, 252, 259, 262, 280, 436, 503, 521-22, 526.

9 John Walker: op. cit., 1, 560.

10 John Walker: op. cit., 2, 258-308; 2, 260, 283-4, 472.

11 Walker considered the custom of ceasing from labour and amusements on the first day of the week as human traditions for which no scriptural basis could be found. John Walker: op. cit., 2, 505-7.

12 In Walker's day elders were not elected or appointed, but the meeting was expected to 'acknowledge' or 'recognise' as elders those who had the qualifications specified in the pastoral epistles. Elders were a 'gift' to the assembly and not an essential prerequisite for its proper functioning. John Walker: op. cit., 1, 243-4, 560.

13 John Walker would have applauded the action of the minority. In his day to resort to a clergyman for the performance of a marriage was an excommunicable offence. Anyone wishing to be married without loss of ecclesiastical status was obliged to travel to Scotland where civic ceremonies were available. John Walker: op. cit., 2, 308-9, 379-81, 542-3.

14 John Walker: op. cit., 2, 287, 324, 388, 522. In the hope of establishing intercommunion he corresponded with the Bereans in Scotland and with a branch of the Sandemanians in the U.S.A.; but nothing appears to have come from these approaches. John Walker: op. cit., 2, 241, 278.

15 John Walker: op. cit., 1, 560.

16 Essentially the same pattern was followed in Walker's day. He regarded the weekly observation of the Lord's Supper as the one obligatory service for Christians. His principles precluded anything in the nature of a service for a mixed audience of Christians and unbelievers. He deprecated multiplicity of meetings, but at various times the public was invited to hear a presentation of the gospel. John Walker: op. cit., 2, 25, 254-6, 261, 263, 358, 462.

17 John Walker: op. cit., 2, 1-22.