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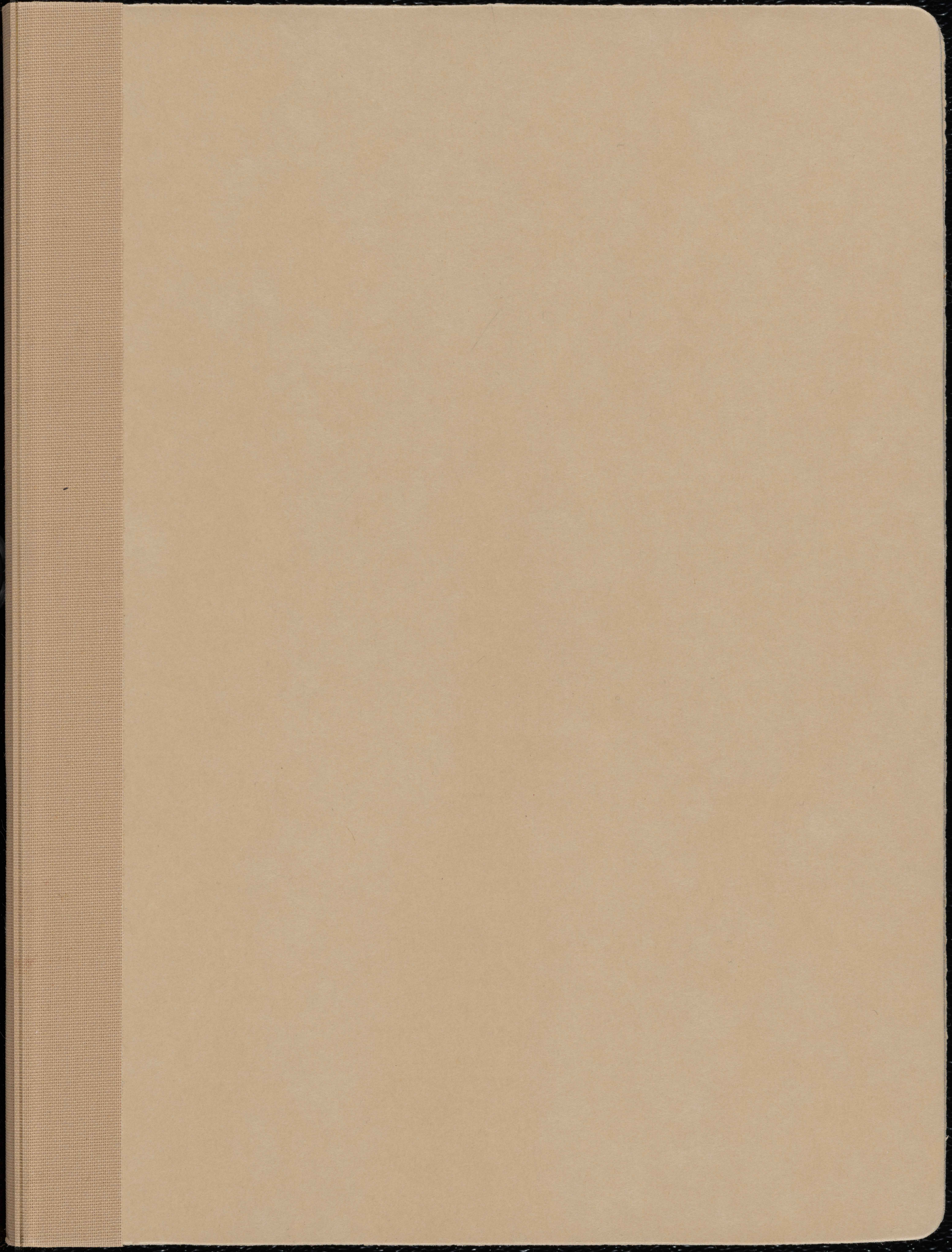
Our Plea: A Radio Sermon

J. P. Sewell

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OUR PLEA

A RADIO SERMON

By J. P. SEWELL



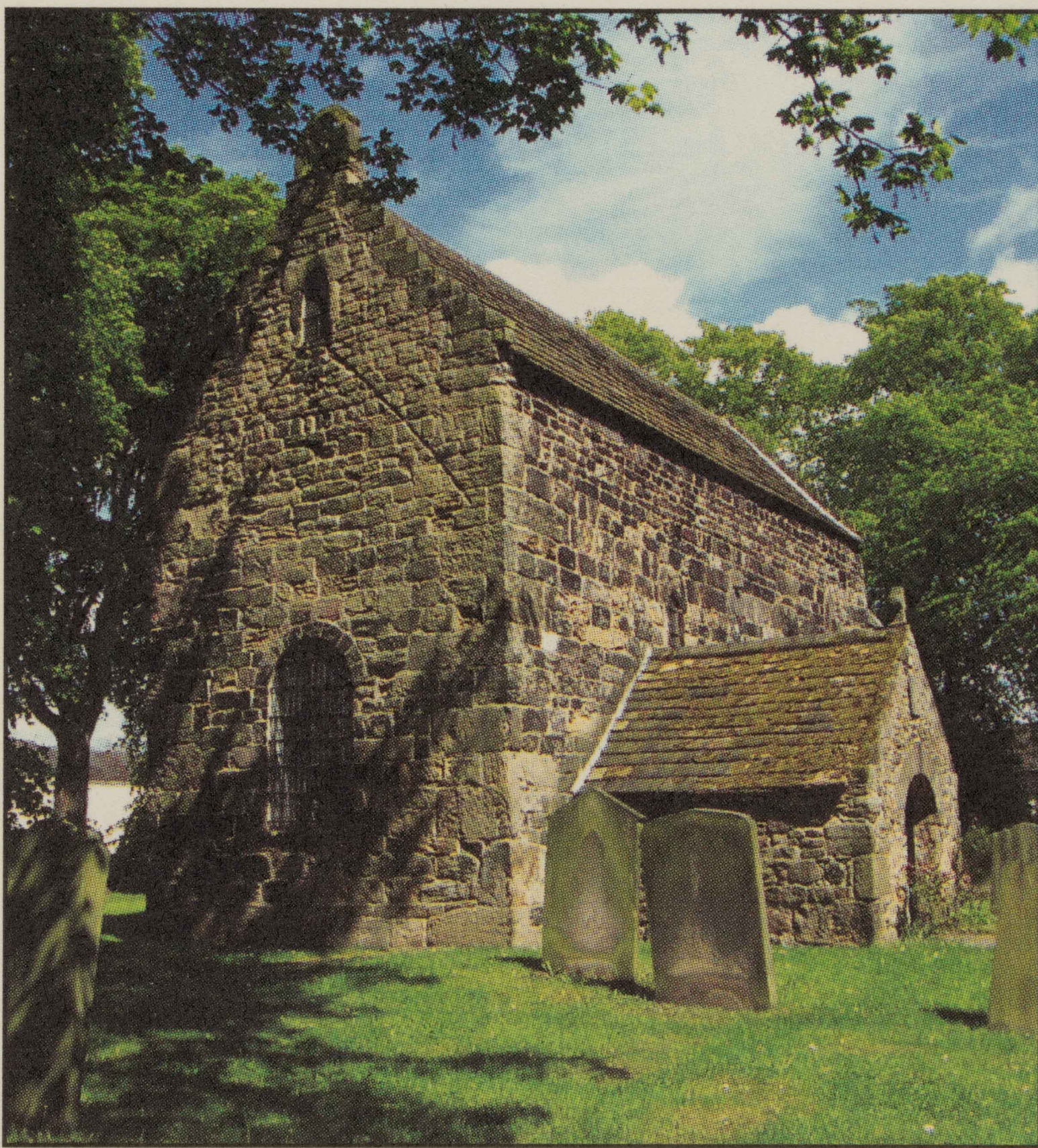
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FOREWORD

The sermon that composes this tract was delivered by Brother Jesse P. Sewell over radio broadcasting station WRR from the auditorium of the Pearl and Bryan streets church of Christ, Dallas, Texas, on April 3, 1927.

Brother Sewell is the regular minister of the church of Christ, Corsicana, Texas, a most excellent church with a beautiful new house of worship. Brother Sewell and I exchanged appointments upon this Sunday. I suggested that he give to us something of a historical nature, and when I received the advance manuscript which was to (and did), appear in the Dallas News, I was so impressed with the subject matter I suggested that the sermon be brought out in tract form.

The religious editor of the Dallas News was so impressed with the sermon he featured it in the News on the next day with large display headlines. There were many expressions of appreciation of the lesson. Many who read the account in the News were gratified.

Brother Sewell was three and one-half years minister for the Pearl and Bryan streets church, and on account of the state of his health he went to San Angelo and labored for some time. After regaining his health he was elected president of the Abilene Christian College and served in that capacity for twelve years and resigned to protect his health. He is now president emeritus.

If Brother Sewell had the physical form to support the giant mind he has he could do much more.

J. B. NELSON,

Minister Pearl and Bryan streets church of Christ,
Dallas, Texas.

RADIO SERMON DELIVERED BY JESSE P. SEWELL

OUR PLEA

The subject for our sermon on this occasion is "Our Plea," and the text is 1 Peter 3:15 and it reads as follows: "But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts; and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear."

Introduction.

The existence of a separate body of believers in the Lord Jesus Christ is not an indifferent matter. There must be a real reason for such existence or it is inexcusable and sinful. We should be "ready" and able at any time to give "a reason," not merely an excuse for our existence, and to give this reason "with meekness and fear."

By "our" I refer not to a denomination, known as the church of Christ, but only to those believers, who profess to have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and to trust in God for the forgiveness of their sins through the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ and who are serving and worshiping God as members of the church to which He added them when He saved them, without joining anything else religious.

I shall not at this time endeavor to establish either the scripturalness or reasonableness of "our plea," but only to present a clear, comprehensive statement of it. Without regard to whether it is established in scripture and reason, I shall labor to state this plea in such a way that there may be no misunderstanding as to what it is. If I can succeed in this undertaking you will then be in a position to consider the "reason" for it.

I. A Plea for Restoration.

Ours is not a plea for a new church or denomination, but it is rather a plea for a restoration among all believers of the doctrine, faith, spirit and practice of the New Testament church.

It is well that we consider here the statement of some of our outstanding men of a hundred years ago. I quote first from, "Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery." This document was issued by the presbytery of Springfield, sitting at Cane Ridge in Bourbon County, Kentucky and was signed by Barton W. Stone and associates June 28, 1804. In the "Impremis" this document says, "We will that this body die, be dissolved, and sink into union with the body of Christ at large; for there is but one body, and one spirit, even as we are called in one hope of our calling."

There can be no mistaking this language. It was not their purpose to establish a new church or denomination. They were convicted deeply of the sin of denominational division and were resolved to clear themselves of all responsibility for such division by dissolving their body and sinking "into union with the body of Christ at large."

On Sept. 7, 1809, more than five years after Barton W. Stone and his associates issued this statement in Kentucky, Thomas Campbell and his son Alexander, sent forth their Declaration and Address from Buffalo, N. Y. In that document, which has since become so famous, they said, "That this Society by no means considers itself a church, nor does at all assume to itself the powers peculiar to such a society; nor do the members, as such, consider themselves as standing connected in that relation; nor as at all associated for the peculiar purpose of church association; but merely as voluntary advocates for church reformation." This language very clearly

shows that these two great men had not even a slight idea of starting a new denomination or church.

In that same document they said again, "Dearly beloved brethren, why should we deem it a thing incredible that the church of Christ, in this highly favored country, should resume that original unity, peace, and purity which belongs to its constitution, and constitutes its glory? Or, is there anything that can be justly deemed necessary for this desirable purpose, both to conform to the model and adopt the practice of the primitive church, expressly exhibited in the New Testament? Whatever alterations this might produce in any or in all of the churches, should, we think, neither be deemed inadmissible nor ineligible. Surely such alteration would be every way for the better, and not for the worse, unless we should suppose the divinely-inspired rule to be faulty and defective. Were we then in our church constitution and managements, to exhibit a complete conforming to the apostolic church, would we not be, in that respect as perfect as Christ intended we should be?"

Nothing could be more clearly established than this paragraph establishes the fact that Thos. and Alexander Campbell were aiming at the restoration of the model and practice of the primitive church among all believers and not at starting a new denomination, or even at an undenominational separate existence.

That there may be a still clearer understanding I quote further from the same document, "It is, to us, a pleasing consideration that all the churches of Christ which mutually acknowledge each other as such, are not only agreed in the great doctrines of faith and holiness, but are also materially agreed as to the positive ordinances of Gospel institution; so that our differences, at most, are about the things in which the kingdom of God does not consist, that is, about matters of private opinion or human invention. What a pity that the Kingdom of

God should be divided about such things! Who, then, would not be first among us to give up human invention in the worship of God, and to cease from imposing his private opinion upon his brethren, that our breaches might thus be healed? Who would not willingly conform to the original pattern laid down in the New Testament, for this happy purpose?"

If further proof were needed, it would be given abundantly; but these quotations demonstrate beyond any doubt that it was the restoration among all of the churches or denominations of the original doctrine, faith, spirit, and practice of the New Testament church and not the starting of a new church, that these great men had in their hearts. The creation of another denomination was the very thing they did not desire.

"But," it is said, "You people are a denomination, you do exist separately." I answer, yes, we do exist separately; no, we are not a denomination.

Mr. Stone, the Campbells and their associates were greatly surprised and deeply grieved. None of the denominations would "be the first among us to give up human inventions in the worship of God," and "cease from imposing" their "private opinions on their brethren," and willingly conform to the original pattern laid down in the New Testament. On the other hand, they soon found themselves branded heretics and "turned out" of the various denominations in which they had their membership. Thus they were forced to a "separate" but not to a "denominational" existence in order that they might continue this great plea. They resolved simply to speak where the Bible speaks and to be silent where it is silent; to obey the Gospel of Christ trust God for salvation, be members of the church to which He added them when he saved them and to join nothing else religious, and continue their plea for restoration.

We exist separately today—but as Christians only and not as a denomination. Each local congregation

is free and independent under God to study, understand, and practice the scriptures for itself. It is responsible to no denominational organization.

“But,” it is insisted, “you claim to be the only Christians.” Listen! We claim to be Christians only, and our plea is that all believers should be Christians only, and not denominational Christians. Our plea is a plea for the restoration of the original doctrine, faith, spirit and practice of the New Testament Church.

II. A Plea for Union.

Ours is a plea for union. It is not a plea for consolidation of denominations, church federation, or the establishment of an ecclesiastical trust or combine. It is a plea for such a union with Christ and such conformity to His teaching as would bring all believers in Him into fellowship and co-operation.

On this point I also quote from “Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery” as follows: “Imprimis, We will that this body die, be dissolved, and sink into union with the body of Christ at large; for there is but one body, and one spirit, even as we are called in one hope of our calling.” “Item. We will, that our name of distinction, with its reverend title, be forgotten, that there be but one Lord over God’s heritage, and His name one.”

It was not easy for these good people to dissolve their organization, for them to give up their name, to sign and send forth this wonderful document. But their deep, earnest desire for the peace and union of believers in Christ made it possible. They had no idea of the uniting of denominations or the federation of churches. They saw and felt the sin of sectarian division. They could not act for others. They were not responsible for others. They could dissolve their denominational organization and sink into the body of Christ at large, be

Christians only. They could drop their distinctive human name and wear only the name of Christ. These things they did that they might contribute their part to the union of believers.

I shall quote from "The Witnesses Address." This is an address issued by Barton W. Stone and others explaining the action of the Springfield Presbytery. On the point now being discussed they said, "With deep concern they viewed the division and party spirit among professing Christians, principally owing to the adoption of human creeds and forms of government. While they were united under the name of a Presbytery they endeavored to cultivate a spirit of love and unity with all Christians, but found it extremely difficult to suppress the idea that they themselves were a party separate from others."

In their Declaration and Address, after quoting several scriptures, Thomas and Alexander Campbell said, "With such encouragements as these, what should deter us from the heavenly enterprise, or render hopeless, the attempt of accomplishing, in due time, an entire union of all the churches in faith and practice, according to the word of God?" These same scriptures are to-day a part of God's inspired word. With their encouragement we plead for the accomplishment of this heavenly enterprise, the union of all the churches in faith, and practice, according to the word of God.

These great leaders said further, "Our brethren of all denominations will please to consider that we have our educational prejudices and particular customs to struggle against as well as they. But this we do sincerely declare, that there is nothing we have hitherto received as matters of faith or practice which is not expressly taught and enjoined in the word of God, either in express terms or approved precedent, that we would not heartily relinquish, that so we might return to the original consti-

tutional unity of the Christian church; and in this happy unity, enjoy full communion with all our brethren, in peace and charity.”

This is not an easy thing to do. It is easy to become partisan. It is easy to become devoted to custom. It is easy to decide that we have found and that we practice the entire truth and to close our minds against further study and discovery. We are making a sincere effort, if not a completely successful one, to hold ourselves ready to relinquish anything which we practice, not expressly taught and enjoined in the word of God, that we might turn to the original constitutional unity of the Christian Church, and enjoy full communion with all true believers in Christ. This is our plea for union. We plead with all believers to join us in this plea.

I beg your indulgence for one more quotation on this point. This one is also from the Declaration and Address and is as follows: “Having said so much to solicit attention and prevent mistake, we submit as follows: 1. That the church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one; consisting of all those in every place that profess their faith in Christ and obedience to Him in all things according to the Scriptures, and that manifest the same by their tempers and conduct, and of none else, as none else can be truly and properly called Christians.

2. That although the church of Christ upon earth must necessarily exist in particular and distinct societies, locally separate one from another, yet there ought to be no schism, no uncharitable divisions among them. They ought to receive each other as Christ Jesus hath also received them, to the glory of God. And for this purpose they ought all to walk by the same rule, to mind and speak the same thing, and to be perfectly joined together in the same mind, and in the same judgment.”

In the seventeenth chapter of John it is recorded that

our Savior prayed, "That they [those who believe in Him] all may be one as thou Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us." This is the union for which we plead.

III. A Plea for Liberty.

As Stone, the Campbells, and their associates began to send forth their plea for restoration and union the chief obstacle which they found in getting people to accept it was ecclesiastical authority as embodied in the conflicting creeds. During the last century the party spirit has greatly decreased, and the ecclesiastical authority of denominationalism is not to be compared with what it was one hundred years ago. Yet it is altogether too strong now. It is the great bar to the return of all believers to the original faith and practice of the New Testament.

Our plea is not for liberty to reject divine authority, but it is a plea for liberty to reject human authority, whenever and wherever it is found, and to accept all truth revealed in the word of God. The great advantage in our undenominational separate existence does not consist in the amount of the divine truth which we may have discovered and which we may practice, but rather in the great fact that we are free from all human authority to search the word of God for this truth and to accept and practice any and everything we find there. We are responsible to no human authority. We are responsible only to God. Our plea is that the faith and practice of Christians should not be decided and dictated by human ecclesiastical legislative bodies, but that individuals and local congregations should be free under God to search the Scriptures and therefrom fix their own faith and decide their practice.

I desire to quote on this point also from the Last Will and Testament. "We will that our power of making

laws for the government of the church, and executing them by delegated authority, forever cease; that the people may have free course to the Bible, and adopt the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus." And you will please consider carefully the following from the Declaration and Address: "From the series of events which have taken place in the churches for many years past, especially in this Western country, as well as from what we know in general of the present state of things in the Christian world, we are persuaded that it is high time for us not only to think, but also to act for ourselves; to see with our own eyes, and to take all our measures directly and immediately from the Divine Standard; to this alone we feel ourselves Divinely bound to be conformed, as by this alone we must be judged." . . . "Our desire, therefore, for ourselves and our brethren would be, that, rejecting human opinions and the inventions of men as of any authority or as having any place in the church of God, we might forever cease from further contentions about such things; returning to and holding fast by the original standard; taking the Divine Word alone for our rule; the Holy Spirit for our teacher and guide; to lead us into all truth; and Christ alone as exhibited in the Word, for our salvation; that, by so doing, we may be at peace among ourselves, follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord."

IV. A Plea for Loyalty.

Ours is a plea for loyalty. It is not a plea for loyalty to denomination, party name, or creed, but for loyalty to Christ and His Word. He, Himself said, "All authority hath been given unto me in heaven and on earth." The Holy Spirit through Paul said, He has been made "head over all things to the church," and again that God has "spoken in these last days by His Son." The Father

speaking from the cloud said, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye Him." Once again I beg your consideration of a quotation from the Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery. "We will, that the people henceforth take the Bible as the only sure guide to heaven; and as many as are offended with other books, which stand in competition with it, may cast them into the fire if they choose; for it is better to enter into life having one book than having many to be cast into hell."

I now present to you the last quotation for this occasion. This one is from the Declaration and Address and is as follows: "Nothing ought to be inculcated upon Christians as articles of faith; nor required of them as terms of communion, but what is expressly taught in the Word of God. Nor ought anything to be admitted, as of Divine obligation, in church constitution and managements but what is expressly enjoined by the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ and His apostles upon the New Testament church; either in express terms or by approved precedent."

Any idea of liberty or liberalism which involves disloyalty to Christ is at war at once with the fundamental principles of our plea, and is based on a false conception of Christian liberty. Christian liberty is not license to do as one pleases or to follow the authority of men. It is the liberty to do God's will as revealed through Christ, no more, no less, nothing otherwise, and this without the interference of men.

Our plea is a plea for loyalty to Christ in all things.

V. A Plea for Progress.

Ours is a plea for progress in the discovery and practice of divine truth. The importance of our plea and our safety in making it do not consist in the particular truth we have accepted and which we now practice, but

rather in our attitude toward all truth in Christ. If we ever allow ourselves to become satisfied with our achievements in the realm of spiritual knowledge and practice our usefulness will be ended. It is not the truth we know and practice that is all important, but all truth revealed in Christ Jesus. Our minds must ever be kept open and our hearts warm as we continue to search the Scriptures. Our desire must be to know all divine truth which has been revealed to man. If we would be safe and useful we must "grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ."

"Let us press on unto perfection."

"Not that I have already obtained or am already made perfect; but I press on, if so be that I may lay hold on that for which also I was laid hold on by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I cannot say yet to have laid hold, but one thing I do, forgetting the things which are behind, I press on toward the goal unto the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus."

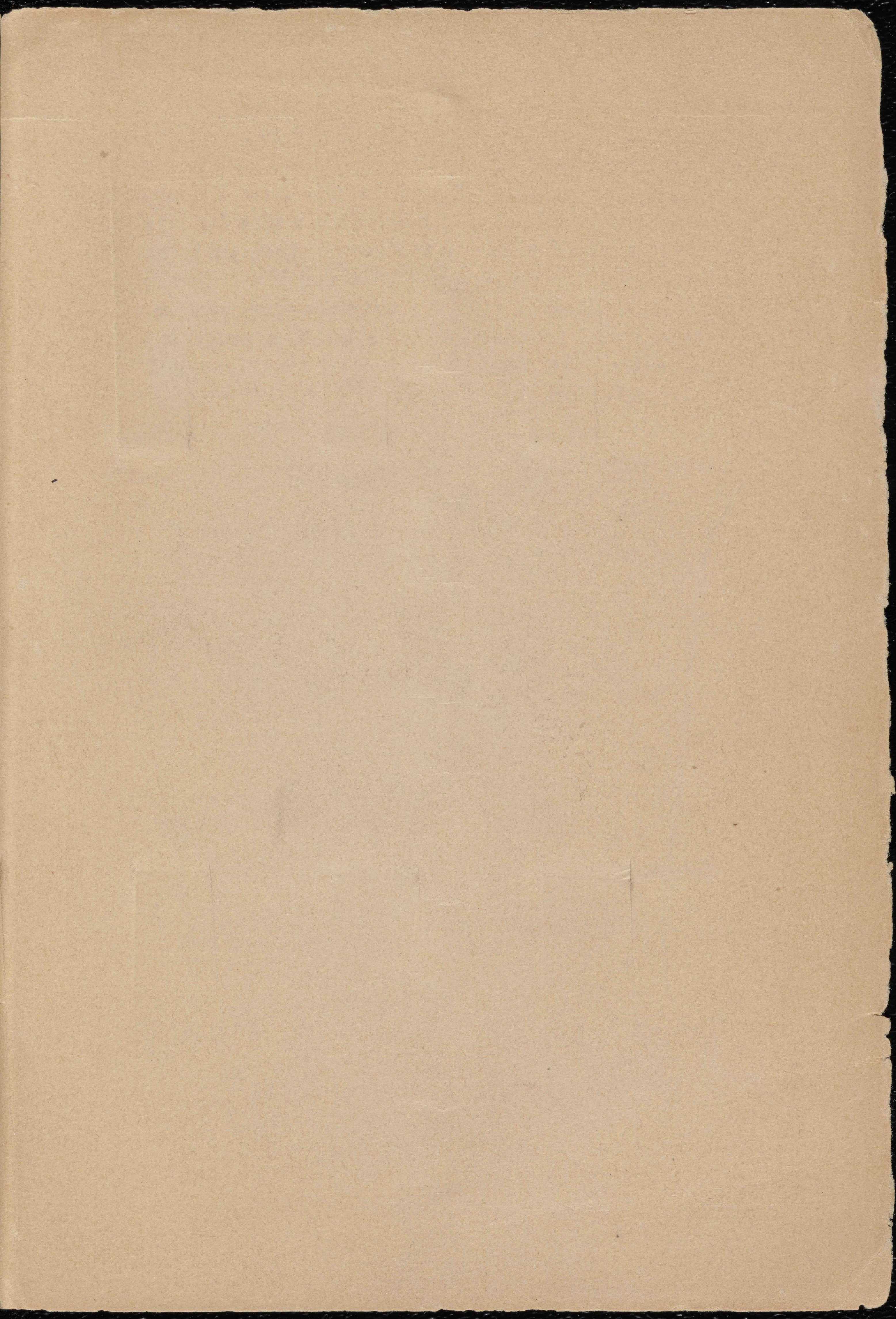
Until every person on earth has been brought to the fullness of a knowledge of the truth in Christ and to loyalty to Him in all things there will be a real necessity for pressing on, for stretching forward.

Ours is a plea for progress.

In Conclusion.

Our plea is a plea for the restoration of the original doctrine, faith, spirit, and practice of the New Testament church among all believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, and not a plea for a new denomination. It is a plea for Christian union, that is for such union with Christ and such conformity to His teaching as will bring all believers into fellowship and co-operation. It is not a plea for the union of denominations, church federation, or the establishment of an ecclesiastical trust or combine. It is a plea for liberty, not the liberty to reject

Christ and His authority, but the liberty to reject human authority whenever and wherever found, and to accept and practice anything found in the New Testament, without the interference of men. It is a plea for loyalty. It is not a plea for loyalty to denomination, party name, or creed, but for loyalty to Christ and His authority in all things. It is a plea for progress—progress in the discovery and practice of divine truth, a progress that leads out of the shackles of human traditions and on “unto perfection.”



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