

June 4, 1973

Dear brother --- and sister ---,

Loving greetings in the name of Jesus Christ.

I received your letter of April 27th and found its contents most encouraging and thought provoking.

You'll find enclosed a copy of the letter which I wrote to brother ---. Please feel free to use it in any way you wish.

It is hard to believe that only slightly more than a year has passed since I wrote that letter; so many things of happened, and at such a furious pace -- much too fast relative to the weightiness of the situation. I do not feel, however, any real need for revision of the letter, for upon reading it over, I find that it expresses my current thoughts more so now than ever.

Insofar as divorce and remarriage are concerned, I've used every available opportunity (no more, I'm sure, than what most concerned brethren are doing) to study the matter, and have read and re-read what seems like volumes relating to both extremes of interpretation. I never realized that there was so much material available concerning this subject, whither Christadelphian works, or the works of those "without" (not always without at least some degree of value).

The result is always the same, however, no matter where one turns -- always many avenues of interpretation and interjected assumptions resulting in two fundamental theories, and "theories" is about the only applicable word to describe the conclusions. I find it increasingly difficult to make even a personal decision as to belief, let alone enforcing it upon the brotherhood as a first principle, a condition of fellowship.

I am increasingly disturbed by the efforts of some to raise the matters of divorce and remarriage to the degree of a first principle doctrine. Matters worthy of first principle status require either one - and preferably both - of two major qualifications, neither of which was, in my view, applicable to the current issue:

1. It must be a matter in which is involved the fundamental bearing upon the things concerning the kingdom of God, and the things concerning the name of Jesus Christ.
2. It must be a matter in which straightforward, indisputable teaching and evidence can be brought forward from scripture.

The responsibility question and matters of police duty have been cited as examples comparable to divorce and remarriage, and inasmuch as both were given first principle status in the statement of faith requiring uniformity of belief, it is assumed that there should be similar application regarding matters of divorce & remarriage.

It should be noted that the responsibility issue, while involving some doubt and uncertainty, was and is nevertheless a matter in which definition 1 very directly applies. Unlike divorce and remarriage it cannot be considered a matter of moral conduct and practice.

Matters of police duty, while primarily a moral principle involving conduct, does, however, fulfill the qualifications of definition 2, something which I believe no fair minded brother or sister can say concerning matters of divorce and remarriage. We should also add that in spite of the conformity these two matters to one or the other requirement making them only remotely eligible for first principle status, they were added to our statement of faith only after much deliberation and extreme reluctance. With how much more reluctance should we approach this issue of constituting divorce and remarriage teaching to be matters of first principle doctrine when it does not meet even the very basic requirements? We have to draw the line somewhere, and surely it is here that line must be drawn, or we will soon be no better than the Pharisees. How high a fence can we build around the law (of Christ) before we lose its principles?

Generally speaking, all fundamental first principles presently in our statement of faith fulfilled the application of both requirements, with the above exceptions. Divorce and remarriage teaching is different and fulfills neither description without a substantial amount of distortion. The matters of resurrectional responsibility, police duty and related matters, when cited as bearing upon the present issue, can only be described as excellent red herrings. By doing so it becomes very easy to rationalize ourselves into an unwise action and a wrong position.

"Is not the whole point whether we are going to alter our statement of faith? I contend that to alter our statement at this point is a tragic and wrong thing, for it means that for all of us we did not know the whole counsel of God when baptized. The commands of Christ deal with unique and every situation that may arise whenever and wherever it may occur, and therefore eyes say let us stand just were we are." The brother who made this statement in 1942 was not ignorant nor unwise, and we would do well to apply his words to the present situation.

I failed to see why brethren feel that they must solve this problem now one way or the other. There is good evidence that this has been an open and much agitated question since the time of the first century ecclesias -- especially within the Palestine ecclesia. Surely we are not now at this stage required to suddenly solve the matter as to belief and raise it to the status of a first principle. What special privilege have we been granted that we are now able to provide the answer to a question which for at least the past 1800 years -- and maybe more -- has been the cause of an almost perpetual controversy in all Christian circles, true and false alike? What additional knowledge has now been granted to the extent that anyone has the right or the authority to legislate a decision in favor of either extreme, and make that decision binding upon the entire Brotherhood on pains of disfellowship? To make a personal decision is one thing. To involve others in that decision is quite another, one upon which we have to be extremely certain of our reasons and foundation.

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While I have no revisions to make, I do have a few supplemental thoughts to convey, and would like to emphasize certain points regarding Paul's teaching on what I have labeled for the sake of easy reference the **PRINCIPLE OF CONCESSION**. I know that you -- quite correctly, I believe -- point out and stress the *mutual* aspect of this principle. This is exactly the present problem. Very few were willing to concede their point of view one iota to accommodate those of a differing interpretation concerning an indefinite precept; and the problem is not one-sided.

It is quite essential that we first thoroughly apprehend and understand the situation which confronted the apostle and caused him to lay down this principle for all time. The most concise outline of the situation is contained in 1 Corinthians ch 8.

There was, and is, no moral or scriptural sin capable of the affecting more moral and spiritual decay than idolatry. Idolatry was the basic cause of a great many other sins -- moral sins -- sins which included adultery and fornication, resulting many times in divorce and consequently remarriage, especially in Greece where the Corinthian ecclesia was located. These and many other corruptions were all a byproduct of idolatry particularly prevalent in Greece with all their deities and superstitions.

Many Greek believers had come out from all this through the preaching of Christianity and had turned unto the one true God. We can well understand, therefore, the conflict of their consciences as they rubbed shoulder to shoulder with that from which they had separated and which they had come to regard as utterly wrong; mainly because the Greek believers had evidently not yet rid themselves of their present convictions that such deities actually existed. Paul reasons against these convictions in vs. 4 to 7. We can appreciate their utter abhorrence, therefore, in regard to anything which had even the remotest connection with Greek idolatry.

This is where meat entered the picture. Animals were offered in sacrifice to the deities. In private sacrifice the animal was divided into three parts: the first third was burned on the altar; the second third was the priests' portion; and the remaining third went to the worshipper himself, with which he then proceeded to give a banquet. These banquets sometimes involved Christians, and it is to such that Paul directs his advice in verse 10, and also in chapter 10 vs. 27 to 31. It is interesting to note the latter reference, where Paul advises that it is better to refrain from eating if one has been enlightened as to the source of the meat, the reason being for conscience sake -- "conscience, I say, not thine own, but of the other", lest he be offended by the action of a brother partaking of the meat even after being told what it was.

In public sacrifice (sacrifice offered by the state) there were also the three portions. The last third was again the cause of the trouble: it went to the shops and the marketplaces. There is evidence that most of the meat sold in the markets to the public went through these channels. Also, to complicate things further, the Greeks believed strongly in demons and Devils. As one historian put it, *"the air was full of them, and they were always lurking to gain an entry into a man's body and unhinge his mind... one of the special ways in which these spirits did gain an entry was through food; they settled on the food as a man ate and so obtained entry. One of the ways of avoiding that was to dedicate the meat to some good God, whose presence in the meat would put up an effective barrier against the evil spirit."* Such

dedication was carried out in connection with all meat not already dedicated through sacrifice; it is easy to understand therefore, that a man could not possibly eat meat at all that was not in some way connected with a heathen God.

We can appreciate, from the foregoing, the extreme beliefs of some in Paul's day who were convinced in their own minds that partaking of meat offered to idols was a grave sin. This conviction, no doubt, arose out of zealousness for the truth, in contrast to Greek superstition. I wonder sometimes how many of us would not have been right in there with them? How many of us would not have been burning up with zeal to establish this conviction as a first principle of doctrine to be received and believed by all? There is certainly far more justification for such action in connection with this issue than there is for the issue facing us today. In any case, we can well imagine how tempers must have flared and personalities clashed; and we can easily conceive the prevalent feeling that "this evil must be kept out".

On the other hand, there was the other extreme. These held that their superior knowledge had taught them that the heathen deities simply did not exist, and that consequently it was possible and acceptable for a believer to eat meat that had been offered to idols without any inhibition whatsoever. They seemed to feel that they were specially blessed with a certain knowledge, and that with that knowledge came the privilege or the duty to exert and exploit the rights which they felt they had obtained through their advanced knowledge. Paul states to the effect that, fundamentally, he is in agreement with them, and outlines his reasons in vs. 4 - 6. From this we might expect that Paul would have sided in with them; instead we find him disagreeing with their attitude and procedure, and in doing so he makes some important points that go hand in hand together to form this "principle of concession".

- 1.) In verse one Paul says that nothing ought to be judged solely from the viewpoint of knowledge. The argument of the advanced Corinthians was that their greater knowledge made them somewhat superior to the others. Knowledge is a necessary element for salvation; but by itself, untempered by love, it can be a hateful thing. "We all have knowledge", says Paul; but so what, if we have not also love? "Knowledge puffeth up, but love buildeth up." There is always a certain danger in knowledge, especially in controversial matters. It tends somewhat to make one arrogant; it tends to make one feel superior and to look down on the brother or sister who is not as far advanced as himself; it tends to make one unsympathetic to the brother or sister whom he regards as less knowledgeable than himself; it tends to make one have a higher opinion of his knowledge and his judgment than he may actually deserve. The consciousness of intellectual superiority, either assumed or actual, is a dangerous thing. Our conduct in matters controversial, therefore, should always be guided, not by thoughts of superior knowledge, but rather by a sympathetic and considerate Love for our fellow-believer. And it may well be that for his sake we must refrain from doing and saying certain things in which otherwise we would see no harm.
- 2.) This all leads to the greatest truth of all, at the basis of which are the "two greatest commandments." No brother or sister has any right to claim a right, to assert authority, to undertake a duty, to indulge in or demand a liberty, the principles all of which are uncertain, and under circumstances where said right, authority, duty, or liberty, may lead to the offense or ruination of others. The only remedy to unquenchable controversy is love. No brother, no ecclesia

has only himself or itself to think about in such matters. We are our brother's keeper. There are other brethren and other ecclesias. Any indulgence, or pleasure, or liberty which may play havoc with a brother's conviction and therefore his conscience, is not a pleasure or a liberty but a sin, and that a sin against Christ (verse 12).

- 3.) When we back off for a general perspective of the chapter, what Paul appears to be saying is that when uncertain matters arise, concede to the stricter view. Give the Truth the benefit of the doubt. No real harm could come, no evil encouraged, by abstaining from meat (see verse 8) even though from a fundamental point of view there was no harm in the eating of it. The matter goes beyond fundamentals, beyond knowledge, beyond technicalities of belief.

There is also a requirement concerning those who entertained a stricter interpretation, and here is where the mutual aspect comes in. These would have to tolerate and except the fact that Paul and others did believe differently. Paul said in effect that "for the sake of avoiding offense I'll refrain from the eating of meat and will encourage others to do likewise, but you in turn will have to peacefully and respectfully accept the fact that I and others do believe differently." Rather than admonish what to him was an evident technical error, Paul quite happily put up with it and expected others to do the same. For him, the greater error existed in the attitudes of those with whom he was fundamentally in agreement.

Paul's statement in verse 12 "Ye sin against Christ" raises the matter of offence to a very high plane, higher perhaps than most of us would have considered when giving it a mere passing thought. It was and is a sin against Christ in no uncertain terms; and as such is it not reasonable to expect that Paul would have dealt with those who continued in their unbending and offensive course?

Paul does say in Romans 16:17, "Mark them that cause divisions among you contrary to the doctrine that ye have learnt ." I have no doubt in my mind but that by the term "doctrine" Paul was referring to the teaching on unity which he had so vividly displayed to the Romans in Chapter 14, and to the Corinthians in Chapter 8. The issue involving the Romans centered to a great extent around the factions arising out of personal preferences; while in Corinthians the issue concerned factions arising out of important personal convictions based upon obscure technicalities, yet no doubt looked upon by each side as an open and shut case.

Paul teaches the same principle in connection with both, and terms his teaching a "doctrine". It is only reasonable that it should be so considered. If a procedure contrary to this principle involves a sin against Christ, it is only proper that it should be termed "a doctrine."

One brother, in writing to one of us, stated to the effect that he was in agreement that the causing of offense was wrong, but that if it were a principle involving fellowship and comprehending the whole body in this matter, in order to be consistent, it would have to be applied in every matter – e.g., the cutting out hair, sisters speaking, etc. I believe in this we should realize that the principle is as comprehensive as the prominence, influence, significance, and potential of the offense requires. The application of the principle must be directed to whatever is in the balance. For instance, if the offense is limited to certain individuals within an Ecclesia and is based upon preferences, that

principle needs only to be applied to the individuals concerned, with the intention of curbing a limited breach of individual relationships. If, however, the offense should begin with an individual, and then broaden out and envelop the entire Ecclesial world because based upon convictions, as in the present situation, the principle remains parallel with the problem, and becomes extremely comprehensive, applicable to inter-ecclesial relationship, because it is essentially inter-ecclesial relationship that is in the balance.

What would Paul have done concerning those who yet flaunted the “rights” of their superior knowledge and continued, by their overzealous actions, to work disruption and destruction? What would Paul have done had such irresponsible works attained inter-ecclesial proportions and had affected inter-ecclesial life? When Paul instructed the Roman believers to “mark them”, I do not believe that he left much to our speculation in this regard. Paul was not one to easily back down from a principle in which he wholeheartedly believed. Much, of course, rests with those concerned. If the majorities surrender to the teaching, the problem is minimized. If the majorities continued their opposing ways regardless, the matter is essentially wrested beyond the bounds of this principle, which, to me, is a tragedy and a shame.

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We have made extensive application of this principle in our resolutions and have come under strong criticism for doing so. Why? Perhaps the specific mention of divorce and remarriage has tended to obscure and divert attention away from the much more comprehensive influences which this principle involves. Thus when viewed in perspective with the technical interpretations of divorce and remarriage, it may seem to some to be vague wording, when actually it is the specific application of a definite principle which has greater far-reaching consequences than any technical law could ever hope to accomplish. We merely describe divorce and remarriage as being the particular area of application at this time, but the principle itself can stand alone and be equally applicable to this or any other like situation that may arise.

It might be wise to take a closer look and examine just how and why his principle does apply to the present situation. There are several areas of consideration.

- 1) The subject is different, but the plausibilities, uncertainties, and general attitudes remain the same. The earnestness of purpose, conviction, and conscience on both sides of the question remain the same. Surely it is not too much to expect, therefore, that the application of the principle should be also somewhat the same. The eating of meats sacrificed to idols was not the origin of the principle, but an example of its effectual working out. All things written in Scripture are for our learning and instruction, and certainly this is no exception. The principle itself is eternal. Why we should diminish its value and application is beyond my comprehension.

Unlike laws, principles are not limited. Principles are comprehensive in their scope and application. I see no reason why any exception should be made in this matter. To many it appears that all the evidence hangs in a precarious balance. The principle of concession teaches us that not always is there a direct positive and negative, hot and cold, left and right, insofar as our own limited

knowledge and understanding is concerned. It teaches us that not always is the emphasis upon such positive and negative convictions. Personally, I quite firmly believe that herein lies one of the essential reasons why the passages of Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 have been left in such a manner which we might term obscure --to teach as that sheer knowledge and intellectual ability does not always provide the answer; that sometimes the answer is only to be found in the foundations of charity.

It teaches us that true righteousness does not always consist in casting out of fellowship those with an opposing view or edit differing interpretation, but sometimes consists rather in the proper and timely display of love. I emphasize timely because we so often are prone to manifest a "fair weather" type of charity. It is so easy to display love, kindness, and thoughtfulness when everything is progressing smoothly but just let there be some brother or some ecclesia to cross our path and all the wonderful spiritual characteristics seem to mysteriously disappear.

- 2) If there were definite, indisputable statements given in regard to divorce and remarriage that would need no room for misunderstanding when studied what the usual Christadelphian thoroughness and perseverance, or for other interpretations by Christadelphians on the details of "except it be for fornication", "state of adultery", "act of adultery", and upon terms having direct bearing upon the matter of forgiveness, we might be quite justified in condemning those with punctilious views on the matter. It is evident, however, that such a clear line of distinction is just not forthcoming, either now, or at least in the very near future. There appears, therefore, no scriptural alternative but to concede to the stricter views, and in turn require of them that they tolerate and respect that use of those who are in doubt, and the views of those who differ in belief, but "for conscience sake... not thine own but of the other" are united as to the action of practical procedure. This then would involve advising a brother or sister that a contemplated divorce or remarriage is wrong because of the flagrant violation of the consciences of fellow believers. This is exactly how Paul handled a similar situation.

In other words, this means that those who yet willfully flaunt the "rights" of their superior knowledge, continuing to work disruption and spiritual destruction by either their overzealous actions on the one hand, or by the insistence of an offending permissiveness on the other, both the extremes should be dealt with in accordance and conformity with the standard set forth by Paul – "MARK THEM".

Strict views have been and will ever be at the deterrent to corruption even though only a limited one; and it is a precept throughout Scripture that the ethics which encourage refraining from even the appearance of evil are the wisest and most pleasing to God. Therefore, as long as there is with us those who are convinced that divorce and remarriage for any cause is evil; and as long as there is even the faintest hint that divorce and remarriage for any cause may have even the remotest appearance of evil (something which I believe that none at any time could ever honestly deny) there should never be the slightest hesitation by anyone as to the course of action to be pursued -- regardless of one's own personal convictions on the matter.

- 3) What about refellowship? Our Recommendation and Resolution has been criticized as to “vague wording”, allowing “for a variety of doctrinal positions but which attempts to correct the situation by stating that those who have divorced and remarried may never return to fellowship.”

A thorough apprehension of all principles involved will again reveal this charge to be somewhat unfair. Firstly, as we have seen, there is no situation to correct -- all is in accord with proper scriptural procedure relating to indefinite matters. Secondly, strict views, if handled properly by the ecclesia concerned, need never be a deterrent to forgiveness. The reluctance to re fellowship does not arise out of convictions based upon obscure interpretations of terms, but rather arises from the same concession principle which forms the entire basis of action in this matter. I myself believe that upon expression of repentance, offenders should be refellowshipped. By accepting the statement that they will not be refellowshipped, I am conceding to the stricter views of those who hold to the theory of “state of adultery”; a concession made, again, for “conscience sake”.

We have just stated the belief that offenders should be refellowshipped upon expression of repentance. This might be true when considered solely in relation to the limited issue of divorce and remarriage. As we have seen, there are higher principles involved, and greater violations. The sin of offense appears to be proportionately greater by a considerable degree than that divorce and remarriage, in view of the emphasis by Paul and also that by Christ – “whosoever shall offend one of these little ones, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were cast into the depth of the sea”. This and other statements in connection with the causing of offense are very profound and should never ever be forgotten or neglected.

That's in all cases of divorce and remarriage for the one cause, whether considered to be theoretically allowable or otherwise, the very real and immediate sin becomes the cause of offense; the sin which thwarts and defeats the great principle of concession which Paul taught. It is here that the emphasis must be placed. Where the other matter is unclear, subject to interpretations based upon assumptions introduced from outside the texts themselves, this on the other hand is definite, straightforward, and concise.

Like any other sin or unacceptable attitude, this also can be repented of, and forgiven. But in surveying the ecclesial position, it does become essentially a question of refellowship rather than forgiveness -- as I am quite sure in my own mind that there is a distinction to be made here. We refellowship; God alone grants forgiveness. Of course, we realize that refellowship is always predicated on the assumption that forgiveness has likely been granted. In this matter, however, even though the ecclesia might be disposed to consider a brother or sister truly repentant, and therefore perhaps forgiven, they would be grossly inconsistent to advise such an one to commit the very same sin over again. The action of refellowship in such a case would most seriously violate the consciences of those who believe that remarriage involves continuously repeated acts of adultery. It is for these, and for this appearance of evil that such concession is made.

Such violation effected by refellowship would surely not only contradict previous expressions of repentance, but also, in God's esteem, would tend to involve the ecclesia itself as an accessory, in

which it would have to bear the responsibility of encouraging the individual to once again become the cause of strife and offence to many who may yet regard such an one as living in sin.

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The final point I would like to make has its base in the fact that so often in these matters we assume a legalistic attitude and forget that we are dealing with fellow human beings and human hearts. We forget that one of the greatest principles of the law of Christ was but an exemplification of that eternal principle -- a the service of human needs. What I am about to say is not meant to contradict what has gone before, but rather as a moderation to our actions, and temperance to our attitudes.

We must never forget that we are under the law of grace. The self-confessed and outwardly commendable purpose of the Pharisees in the time of Christ was to build a fence of protection around the law; and in so doing they dissected the great eternal principles underlying it (reverence for God and respect for fellow man) into thousands upon thousands of rules and interpretations and regulations. By the time this legalistic interpretation of the law was completed, it had frustrated the eternal principles and made true religion into an intolerable burden. Paul styles all legal structures -- including the law of Moses -- as "weak and beggarly elements" because, while they define sin, and teach men what it is, they are unable to effect a cure. The cure is to be found only in the law of Grace, therefore it is here that the emphasis must be placed.

Resolutions, documents, legal interpretations, and this continuous wrangling over uncertainties, are all, to me, because of the emphasis being given them, repulsive. It may well be that they are necessary because of the condition in which we find ourselves; they have become "the crutch" which we cannot do without, but originally true Christianity was not meant to be this way. I do not discredit their usefulness when kept in their place, but in present circumstances they seem to me to have become dangerously tainted with "the weak and beggarly elements". Paul makes it very clear once and for all in Galatians ch 4 that under the law of Grace we have presumably freed ourselves from the negative burdensome aspects of the law and grown up unto manhood in Christ.

There exists a vital need today for instruction and education -- not so much upon the negative idiosyncrasies of divorce and remarriage which already could fill volumes -- but rather upon the more positive aspects of trying to effect understanding, advice, and real help for broken homes, broken hearts, and the failure of love. The entire life of Christ was centered around the focal point of answering to human needs -- not human last and desires -- but real human need, physical, mental and spiritual. When these things get pushed aside to make way for contention over technicalities and legalism, true religion dies a tragic death.

Pure religion and undefiled before God and the father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, (or, literally, to help the bereaved and deficient in their need) and to a keep himself unspotted from the world. - James 1:27 It is possible for us to pursue and obtain an outward purity in ourselves and in our ecclesias by means of a rigid legalism, and yet at the same time to be sadly lacking in those things which make the Truth come alive in the manner Christ intended. It is very possible that we might pride ourselves in being able to say that because we have taken a certain stand in connection with a matter,

our fellowship is pure, being troubled with it no longer; but the facts might reveal that we have “a name to live, but are dead”. “Inasmuch as he did it not to one of the least of these, ye did not to me.” Too much legislation has the effect of driving us away from the needy, and the needy from us.

It was Micah’s complaint that all ritual sacrifices were useless, if man did not do justice and love mercy and walked humbly before God. (Micah 6:6-8) All through history men have tried to their utmost to make ritual and legislation a substitute for self-sacrifice, kindness and service. All of us need help. All of us are bereaved and deficient in some manner. Sometimes the very help that is needed is denied through the self-righteous process of heaping rules upon rules and leading a tangled web of unproven interpretations and theory. Sometimes those who are in greatest need of help are driven away by that very means and we've remained blind to it. Sure we might have purity, but that purity has been attained through isolation rather than ministrations. God prefers works of love and attitudes of kindness far more than rituals and legislation, and it is this that must temper our actions at all times.

This whole matter is one to which we might well bring more sympathy and less condemnation, for, of all things, the failure of love ought to be least approached in legalism, and most in love. In such matters, the emphasis should not be up on the conservation of a rigid law as much as it ought to be rather upon the human heart, the human need, and the administration of kindly advice and guidance; and that if a marriage is in danger of failure, every possible physical, mental, and spiritual resource be mobilized to save it. Let us never forget that a rigid legalism is inadequate in dealing with the intricacies of such a situation, for its jurisdiction generally only begins after a marriage has passed the point of no return, being applicable only to the results of marriage failure, and that is too late to be of any help. Rather it is the principles of grace which are powerful and effective by their very comprehensiveness, and by their ability to be applicable to the root of the problem.

I sincerely hope that I have not given the impression of setting myself up as an authority or an “expert” in these matters. Far be it from me. The points expressed are my own personal views based upon what I most surely believe to be Scripture teaching. They are things which I most surely believe should never be lost sight of or neglected in these days of decision-making; that whatever is course of action we have chosen or should choose to take in the future, let the emphasis be least upon rigid legislation and negative laws, and most upon true Christian principles and the positiveness of cures.

I mentally and spiritually sympathize with you in the sad situation and trial which you have encountered. Let us fervently pray that a scriptural solution may be arrived at soon.

With kind regards in the truth to all,

Your brother,