

CONTRIBUTIONS

TOWARDS RENEWAL

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*‘ . . . providence is a great maker of journeys,
And whoever refuses to go forward is dropped by the road’.*

These words which Christopher Fry puts into the mouth of Henry II in his play *Curtmantle* seem to me to express admirably the predicament which confronts the Brethren Movement today. The choice is either to go forward or to stagnate, to progress or to be dropped by the road, relegated to the limbo of half-forgotten religious movements which served their brief moment and then vanished from the scene. To go forward will require a radical new appraisal of all our structure, our purposes and our beliefs. To go forward will require the painful cut of the surgeon's knife stripping off the devitalised accretions of 130 years, the outworn and out-moded paraphernalia of the Victorian Age; but if the Brethren Movement does have a genuine word to say to the World and the Church of the twentieth century then go forward it must.

Such a reappraisal will not necessarily imply the rejection of traditional orthodoxy, but it will imply a reformulation of belief and practice into the cultural idiom of contemporary society. Here perhaps it needs to be said that there is a common misconception that the early Brethren recaptured the essential first century primitiveness of the New Testament, no doubt one of the reasons why we arrogantly claim the appellation ‘New Testament assemblies’; but if we think, or for that matter if the early Brethren themselves thought, that the situation of the early Church could be recaptured, then we and they were mistaken, for it is a manifest impossibility for us to project ourselves back into the milieu of the Greco-Roman world. What those early Brethren did do was to restate certain principles and ideals of the New Testament and apply them to their own situation. Above all they restated the great principle of the ‘priesthood of all believers’ based on the fact that because of the redemptive act in Christ the whole meaning of priesthood has changed; because of the Incarnation it becomes something all-embracing. This is a principle which is again in danger from the Romeward trend of Anglicanism and its fellow-travellers, but these principles must be applied afresh to this as to every other generation. To neglect this is the way to stagnation and death.

The authority of Scripture

We have over the years rightly stressed the authority of Scripture, and on this ground we must part company with the Quakers with whom we have so much in common. They have established the rule of experience,

this has become their authority, but we have tended to the opposite extreme and have forgotten that Scripture must be interpreted in the light of experience, in the terms of concrete human existence. The authority of Scripture surely rests in its ability to speak to mankind in all conditions of life and at all periods of human history, for it derives from the authority of God Himself who speaks to men through its medium. Yet it is precisely this that should make us careful before we commit ourselves to theories of inspiration and heap our anathemas upon those who dare to disagree. If the uniqueness of Holy Scripture lies in its ability to declare the truth about man and about God at all times, and in particular in its ability to speak the truth to *me* in *my* situation, then clearly the inspiration of Scripture does not lie in externals, in the use of words and symbols, but rather in the ideas which underly those words and symbols, ideas which live forever and express to us in the depths of our being the eternal realities. Such terms as 'plenary inspiration' and 'verbal inspiration' have become touchstones of orthodoxy in some circles, but their use has led to the present situation, common in evangelicalism generally, in which we have allowed ourselves to become bogged down in a sort of superstitious reverence for words which, in its turn, has led to an over-literal application of these words to every situation. We forget that words are merely the cloaks for ideas: they provide us with images, and those images may require changing from generation to generation. We have, I believe, demonstrated, although we have not recognised, the truth that 'the letter killeth'. It is only as we reach beyond the words and the symbols that we will genuinely hear the Word of God addressing us and come to know that 'the spirit maketh alive'.

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The Interpretation of Scripture

This leads on to the problem of the interpretation of Scripture, and here again we must go behind the words to the ideas and principles which these words express. The New Testament spoke to its time, it spoke in the imagery and the idiom of the first century, and its concepts, its world view, its basic premises were those of a particular era of history. If the New Testament is going to speak meaningfully to us in this day in the realm of practice and belief, then we must look below the externals for the real idea, the real principle which is there, just as we must if the Bible is to speak to us at the personal level. Only then will we be able to reclothe these ideas in language applicable to our own time, finding fresh images, and above all determining how a particular principle may be re-expressed in actions fitted to our time as Paul or Peter fitted such principles to their time.

The importance of all this lies in its application to the forms in which our belief and worship and practice are to be expressed. The need for re-defining our theological images is already apparent, and however much we may deplore some of the more unguarded statements in such books as *Honest to God*, *Soundings*, and the like, they have, nonetheless, focussed our attention on the gulf between the language and presuppositions of

Christian people and those of the 'man in the street'. At the moment however, I am more concerned with the expression of our belief and practice as a group of committed men and women. In some senses it is one of the saving graces of the Brethren Movement that it has steadfastly refrained from the formulation of constitutional statements and the like, for this will mean that any re-interpretation or reformulation and re-evaluation will be that much easier than had our beliefs and practices been enshrined in some codified form. Yet even so we shall have to contend with forms, customs and ceremonies which have become hallowed and sacrosanct by virtue of long usage, and with ideas and interpretations which have become hardened into dogma and, even more regrettably, have been formed into touchstones of orthodoxy (which latter, as many know to their cost, applies especially to views on eschatology). Nonetheless, if there is to be any ongoing, any advance forward, then our most cherished ideas and practices must be analysed afresh with an open mind and in the light of the New Testament, finding again, as did our forefathers, how underlying ideas and principles may be expressed in a meaningful way in our own situation. Both in respect of the inward relationships within the Church and the expression of our outward relations to the hostile world it is essential for us to grasp that the New Testament provides us with the principles for life, not a rigid code; nor, even with reference to the life and practice of the Church, does it provide clear cut practical directions. There is no need to labour the point: even the most optimistic of us must admit that there is a need for an urgent reassessment of our present Victorian image.

Evangelism

The need for a reinterpretation of verbal forms becomes even more apparent with respect to evangelism. This, I believe, is a matter which has not really penetrated into the cloistered solitude of some assemblies. It has not really occurred to most of us to enquire whether the Gospel we preach bears any relevance to life today, nor whether, even allowing it to be relevant, our form of proclamation is meaningful. In the final analysis our faith is pragmatic, it is an experience which works, and the moment we come to try and define that experience we have to utilise language which is based on images, and the moment we try to push beyond our images we lapse into obscurantism. This is not to suggest that the language of images is invalid, but it does mean that we must always beware of making the images into something more than they are. Images and symbols are not reality, and any attempt to distort Christian imagery into reality must be resisted. Furthermore, because we are dealing in images their value will not necessarily be the same for two generations, and as they are images we should be free to alter and adjust them to suit the particular situation. Yet it is just here, I believe, that we tend to find the most die-hard opposition to change. Our images and symbols have been mistaken for reality, and thus we continue to insist that the Gospel cannot be proclaimed apart from the use of a particular type of terminology which clothes

a particular set of concepts and ideas. Let me take but one example. What meaning can such a commonly used phrase as 'the atoning blood of the Lamb' possess for the non-initiate in our modern technological society? We must ask ourselves seriously whether our preaching of the Gospel really answers to the present situation. The reality of the human predicament is well known to every man, he is only too well aware of his bondage to the latent destructive forces inherent within the human situation, but does our preaching present the disillusioned world of today with a faith which can answer and transform the human situation? The despair and the anguish are acknowledged on all sides—does our Gospel supply the answer? More, *can* our Gospel in its present terminology, in its present symbolism supply the answer?

It has been, I believe, one of the failures of evangelicalism from its inception that it has laid its emphasis on the individual to the almost total exclusion of the community, and the individual salvation which has been proclaimed has been in spiritual terms to the almost total exclusion of the natural order. This has meant the distortion of the Gospel, for it has become inevitably divorced from reality, not this time as a result of the terminology or imagery, but because an historical Gospel has been proclaimed in non-historical terms. To lay our emphasis upon a 'salvation of individuals from time and history, not the salvation of a community through time and history', to use Tillich's words (*The Protestant Era*, 1948. p. 71) may be a gospel of apocalyptic pessimism but it is not the Gospel of the prophetic religion of the Bible. There is an unquestioned urgent need to re-emphasise the New Testament emphasis on the Church as a community; a community which, although not *of* the world, to use that well established distinction, is very much *in* it, and to re-emphasise those obligations which belong to the New Community in the world.

Christian Unity

The concept of community leads on to one further matter, namely, the position of the Christian Brethren with relation to the ecumenical movement. Many individuals have played an active part and at times a prominent part in various inter-church activities, non-denominational organisations and the like, but such participation has rarely been above an individual level, there has been little evidence of group co-operation.

Quite apart from the problem of whether the peculiarities of our church structure, with its correct insistence upon the autonomy of each local congregation, would allow us to take our place on representative bodies with other Christian communions, there is the more immediately important matter of the expression of the oneness of Christ's Body on the local level. It is here that the local congregation can, and must, play its part by sharing in the common work, witness and worship of Christ's Church with other local groups, thus demonstrating in reality that basic concept which lies at the heart of the Brethren Movement, and which is so often forgotten by us today, that the Church of God is one. We need to remember that the sin of sectarianism is one of the most heinous sins in the New Testament.

Renewal by the Holy Spirit

There is one final aspect of renewal which in reality is the most important of all. Everything that has gone before I believe to be true, but it is true only up to a point, for the issues which have been raised deal with externals and not that which is internal. In the final analysis renewal will only come through the activity of the Holy Spirit. Such a renewal will indeed shake the foundations; before it our pet theories, our futile concern with minutiae will collapse as a pack of cards. A radical appraisal of the grounds of our beliefs and practice will help, but a renewal of this nature will only come through full committal and response-in-obedience, through confession and acknowledgment of our sin—"If my people who are called by my name shall humble themselves and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then I will hear from heaven . . ." (2 Chron. 7: 14). But, and here's the rub, such a renewal cannot be found in isolation, it will only be found in full communion with the whole Church of God. If we are to find renewal, if we are to rediscover and re-express the foundations of our existence, if we are to enter again into worthwhile dialogue with our fellow-Christians of different ecclesiastical traditions from ourselves, then we must accept the necessity for change, but above all accept the necessity for humility and obedience, for confession and committal, so that under God's good hand our barrenness and aridity may be turned into fruitfulness to the glory of our Lord and the blessing of His whole Church.

Much of what we have written is essentially the practical expression of the fact that in Christ we have escaped from the narrow confines of a legalistic religion. In Christ we have been brought into the New World in which reality is righteousness, and we face the world about us in the knowledge that in spite of all its sin God has willed to redeem it, and has chosen His Church, of which we are members, to be the instrument of mediating that redemption to a sick humanity. It is thus imperative for us, not merely as individuals but as a part of God's Church in the wider sense, if we are to fulfil the divine mandate, to enter into the fulness of the transforming power of the Gospel, liberated from our pharisaical legalism, our spiritual pride and our spiritual immaturity, some of the symptoms of which we have attempted to elucidate.

In what has gone before I have tried as far as possible to concentrate upon the problems, and I have avoided giving answers. Not everyone will agree with this diagnosis, which is as it should be, since valid answers will only come through dialogue (to use current idiom) and there are no facile solutions to our problems. It is here, in the sphere of dialogue, that CBRF can, and should, play a valuable part, but if one may offer a criticism, it seems that it is failing at just this point—are we also afraid of rigorous self-analysis?