

THE DISCUSSION AND A SUMMING UP

To open the discussion, the Rev. Andrew R. Anderson, a member of the Fellowship who was brought up among Brethren, but is now the minister of the Evangelical Free Church at Rainham, Kent, gave a forthright and lively account of the reasons which led to him taking up the work in which he is now engaged. During the course of this address he emphasised the over-riding importance of a continuous teaching ministry, exercised by one known to his church, and himself knowing the church personally. He also emphasised what seemed to him to be a confusion in much Brethren thinking on this subject: there was an obsession with the preaching ministry, which led to taking truths which were concerned with the whole range of gifts within the church, as a whole, and applying them to one gift in isolation. Nevertheless, much of the controversy was not a doctrinal issue at all, as against fellow evangelicals, but rather a practical one.

The discussion took up the responsibilities of elders in the matter of teaching, mentioning the need for utter frankness and willingness to accept criticism of one another, the need for a proper control of ministry to eliminate the unscriptural practice of 'any-man ministry', and (through one contributor) asking for a phased retirement of elders as age restricted them. The importance of the emphasis on a shared ministry was raised on one or two occasions, and one speaker in particular stressed both the rarity of a gift which could sustain a teaching ministry by one individual over a long period, and also the very real danger of professionalism where the recognition of the plurality of gift was muted.

There were some pertinent comments on the addresses. One participant laid his finger upon the unconscious (but illogical) leap, from the minister as one elder among others, to the minister as presiding elder, which he detected in Mr. Prime's address. Another asked for a clearer distinction between the 'priest' and the 'prophet'—the settled and the *ad hoc* gift. Another suggested that the addresses and discussion had unduly restricted the term 'ministry', ignoring its basic meaning of 'service': in that respect Brethren were often far too 'settled' for their own good!

The discussion finished by pleas from several speakers for some practical guidance. Where do we go from here?

That note is as good as any to form a starting point for any summing up. The most striking thing about the contributions from Mr. Prime and Mr. Anderson was the way in which they emphasised how *close* we are to others: as Mr. Anderson rightly pointed out, the differences from other evangelical bodies are essentially of practice rather than doctrine. All accept the two basic points: that the Biblical revelation is absolutely authoritative in this matter, and that Biblical precepts are as practical today as they ever have been.

Why then the differences in practice? Dr. Rowdon showed the conflicting and contradictory currents which make up the Brethren tradition. Many of our inhibitions arise out of contemporary circumstances of the early Brethren, which have largely disappeared today. The *reasons* for the practices might have disappeared, while the practices themselves survive (like the grin of the Cheshire cat in *Alice*). Yet it is important to notice that the early Brethren eschewed various practices, not as being in themselves wrong, but because they carried with them the taint of misunderstanding or of compromise: the practice of the laying on of hands was a significant example. We must remember that not all elements of their historical situation have gone for good: the element of protest in our practices (or our abstinence from other practices) might well remain as valid today as ever, and as valuable as ever to the life of the whole Church.

But these distinctive features of Brethren practice serve to emphasise an important factor. We must look for our own pattern of ministry: we cannot find one satisfactorily by simply copying the practices of our friends, however close to ourselves in doctrine. Two matters which arose during the discussion emphasise this. One participant mentioned the danger of professionalism—and it is certain that any person who has been reared in Brethren circles immediately becomes conscious of this factor when he begins to mix with Christians from other traditions. His personal outlook on the ministry of the word, and upon his fellows who are engaged full-time in that ministry, is fundamentally different from that of any person who has known only a professional ministry—so much so, that it is probable that any attempt to create a full time ministry within Brethren at all like the pattern of traditional churches is foredoomed to failure, even if all the parties are agreed upon its desirability. A servant of God who wishes to exercise a settled full-time ministry in an assembly today must face the fact that he is embarking upon an unknown pathway, requiring very special qualities of personality, and a completely open mind. The second factor was raised by Mr. Anderson during his address, when he remarked with a certain disapproval on the emphasis within assemblies upon the Lord's Supper, which he suggested brought a related tendency to undervalue the preaching of the Word. But this is an emphasis which few Brethren are likely to wish to see altered: the weekly centrality of the communion is calculated to give birth to a personal spirituality which cannot be otherwise gained, and to serve as an important corrective to unduly theoretical faith. In *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren* Leonard Verduin states that: 'In sacramental churches preaching atrophies; in preaching churches the sacraments are secondary. Attempts have been made to combine the two "means of grace", but one or the other is always *primus inter pares*. No church has been able to achieve in practice the equality to which it in theory holds'. (p. 136 note). This pessimistic assessment is not likely to dissuade Brethren from feeling that their own *modus vivendi* is worth persisting in.

What then are the practical implications? Mr. Rowdon made some valuable suggestions at the end of his address, and some others are added here.

1. First and foremost, elders must take seriously their duty to ensure a regular and systematic teaching ministry within the local church.
2. Much more specialisation of gift is called for: and this involves both a perceptive analysis of the constituents of the range of gifts, and their recognition by Christians in each other.
3. In some way or other, means *must* be found by which the possessors of gifts are recognised and made plain to the church—and this extends *not* only to ‘preaching’ gifts, but to the whole range of helps. It is essential that all should know the function of themselves and others.
4. The value and importance of local settled service must be recognised more practically than by mere lip-service.
5. The gifts for the whole church must be recognised as well as the local gifts—the ‘strategic’ as well as the ‘tactical’.
6. This very range of service requires that within each church there should also arise the gift of the co-ordinator: the man who will probably exercise no gift other than that of linking all the others.

F. ROY COAD.