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# THE BRETHREN MOVEMENT IN THE WORLD TODAY

THE CHRISTIAN BRETHREN RESEARCH FELLOWSHIP

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# PREFACE

The feature essay of the present issue of the Journal originated as a lecture given by Dr. Donald Turner, Book Editor of *Christianity Today*, at Granville Chapel, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. Because of the widespread interest shown among the local Brethren assemblies at the time and the subsequent interest on the part of many others,\* it was thought that Dr. Tinder's paper should be given a wider circulation and that it might provide an excellent occasion for dialogue among a wide variety of people either associated with the Brethren or who have a special interest in the Movement. With this in mind, a typescript of the lecture was prepared and distributed to some twenty people in various parts of the world with a request for brief responses to and comments on the ideas set forth by the author. Thirteen of these responses are contained in this issue.

The variety of background of the respondents will be apparent when it is pointed out that they represent seven different countries, five different denominations, and nearly as many different professions as people. In the opinion of the Editors, both Dr. Tinder's paper and the solicited comments make extremely edifying reading and have much to teach all who are associated with the Brethren Movement (or, for that matter, all who wish to reflect on the problems of their own church fellowship in the light of the issues raised by the contributors). It is our hope that the careful study of these materials will stimulate both thought and action on the part of all who are in positions of leadership.

The Editors would welcome additional comments on Dr. Tinder's paper and the various responses by any who have additional points to raise.

All who have studied the Brethren Movement are aware how difficult it is to find accurate information. Until the recent publication of two books by members of this Fellowship, there was hardly anything available that was even remotely reliable. Today, this need for trustworthy material is being gradually met, though it is still generally the case that the majority of short articles on the "Plymouth Brethren" in the various encyclopedias and reference works are extremely inaccurate. Thus it was with a deep sense of satisfaction that several members of the Fellowship received, through the good offices of Donald Tinder, copies of an article by Professor Arthur C. Piepkorn, a Lutheran theologian, in which he gives a sympathetic and accurate account of the churches with which many of us worship. Because it was thought that the article should be known to a much wider audience, we have reprinted in the journal of the CBRF. Our thanks go to the author and to Concordia Publishing House for their kind permission to include this material in the Journal.

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\*Available on cassette-tape for \$5.95 (Canadian) from REGENT COLLEGE, 5990 Iona Drive, Vancouver 8, B.C., Canada.

## THE BRETHREN MOVEMENT IN THE WORLD TODAY

By DONALD TINDER

When I use the term “brethren movement” or “brethren”, I want you to put quotation marks around it, because biblically and theologically the brethren movement refers to the whole people of God. All of us are “brethren” since Jerusalem. So it is only for reasons of historical accident that this term is applied to a particular, distinguishable movement for which practical and historical reasons might be found to so designate it. But then, this is not uncommon; after all, the so-called Orthodox Christians are not the only orthodox ones, the Baptists are not the only ones who believe in baptism, the Presbyterians are not the only ones who believe in presbyters (= elders), and so forth.

“The Brethren Movement”—I would like to put it first within the context of the whole development of the Christian church. Everyone agrees that Christianity began as a movement which called *out* from the world—people who were Jews, people who were Gentiles, people who followed a variety of religions or people who were following no religion at all. In that sense it was *particular*; it picked out particular persons, often coming as families to respond to the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ; and these people were gathered together into congregations planted by the apostles and those in fellowship with them.

It continued this way for several centuries. Then through a variety of events it came about that the Roman Emperor professed Christianity, and soon it became the thing to do to become a Christian. And hardly before you knew it—though it took a good many decades in actual practice—Christianity had changed from being a particular movement, made up of a few people in any given place, of a small proportion of the population, seldom more than a few percent; it changed from that to be what we might call *comprehensive*, so that everybody was a Christian, every baby born into a household was baptised, and the church became co-extensive with the nation or the empire. Oh, there were a few dissenters here and there, but for the most part ninety-five percent were nominally Christians. Thus the church changed from a particular group to a comprehensive group. And so, by the Middle Ages, with the exception of a few Jews and occasional travelling Muslims, the church and the various nations were co-extensive—they were equivalent. The politics in the churchly realm and in the more properly speaking political realm were scarcely distinguishable.

All the time that this was going on there continued to be unrelated and intermittent particularistic movements that came out of the church in any given area. Sometimes these were what we call today heretical—all of them were called heretical in their own times. The comprehensive church which called itself the Catholic Church believed that any group of believers unrelated to it was by definition heretical, and therefore had no business existing, and the use of the arms of the government to suppress these groups was eagerly pursued. Some of them were genuine heretics by any standards, some of them were not. It is hard to tell because very little trace of them

remains today. One group that did come out before the Protestant Reformation, that was recognised as Protestant and joined with that movement upon discovering it, was the Waldensians in much of what is now Italy. And the Waldensian movement is one of many. It happens to be the one with the most survivors of the many groups that withdrew in medieval times. And these groups were not related to one another, and many of them hardly aware of one another. They came out in different centuries and in the various corners of Europe.

At the time of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century the comprehensive idea was continued by many of the Protestants. The result was a comprehensive church involving all of the sides. Some who remained loyal to the Bishop of Rome came to be known by the name Roman Catholic. Those who earlier separated from Rome in Eastern Europe were the Eastern Orthodox and included all the people in these lands, or all the people who had not become Muslims. Then with the Protestant Reformation came the addition of Anglicans in England, Lutherans in Northern Europe, and the Presbyterians or Reformed—various kinds of Calvinists in Scotland, the Netherlands, parts of Switzerland and South Germany. And so you had a continuation of the comprehensive ideal, though in the case of Protestants this was side by side with the recovery of many of the biblical emphases on doctrine, but *not* of the biblical emphasis on the church. For the great reformers felt that the situation of the church had changed since the time of the New Testament; and while the New Testament church could not be anything other than a small group of believers, fifteen centuries later they believed the church rightly included everybody that it possibly could in the society.

But at the same time as the Anglicans, the Lutherans, and the Calvinists were emerging from the Roman church—with a reformed doctrine but with the same ideals of comprehensiveness—there were some believers arising who often took the name simply of “brethren”, “saints”, “Christians” One of the men who arose among them as a leader and was recognized for his teaching abilities was a man named Menno Simon, a Dutchman. And so eventually the name Mennonites came to be attached to these groups, including many who had never actually been ministered to by Menno Simon directly. These Mennonites continue right down to the present, many of them quite active here in Western Canada through having to flee the lands of Europe, where they were initially welcomed but later hostility was directed towards them.

In the seventeenth century, movements arose in England that similarly had the ideal, like the Mennonites, of people coming out of the established society and the established church of whatever form, to be committed believers, people who followed the New Testament not only in its various doctrines but also in its concern for the church as a community distinct from the world. Not at first, but eventually the name Baptist came to be associated with many of these believers. Some of them who took even more radical directions on various areas of doctrine and who in many ways thought that the New Testament processes were only temporary became known as the Quakers, the Society of Friends.

Meanwhile in Europe still other movements emerged. The original Mennonite movement had become ingrown and had ceased to be evangelistic, in part because of the intense persecution that sapped it of its energy and its leadership. So other movements arose, such as the Moravians (building on a small remnant of pre-Reformation believers), and a group arose in the early seventeen hundreds in Germany which took the name simply of "Brethren". Because they believed in immersion (in fact immersion, three times—once each for the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit)—they got the name Dunker Brethren. But the persecution was so intense that soon after their beginning they almost all had to flee to the colony of Pennsylvania, and from there they spread across the Northern and Western United States. The Dunker Brethren was a group that initially grew by winning people from the state church to a personal commitment to Jesus Christ, but by persecution and through various other factors, as they emerged in an alien land, they also became largely ingrown; today they persist, for the most part, through natural reproduction.

Turning back again to England, in the seventeen hundreds the great movement that arose was the Wesleyan Movement. Wesley did not intend to found a new church and he was not particularly upset with the way church government had come to evolve in his country and in the rest of Europe; he was primarily concerned with getting people converted and forming cell groups of those who were true believers. But his policies and his practices made a separation from the state church inevitable, though not with the same concern for reproducing a New Testament pattern that the other groups I have mentioned have manifested. The Wesleyan movement had even more influence upon the American continent than it had in its original homeland.

Then in the early eighteen hundreds, this time originating in the United States itself, was a very interesting movement indeed. Among the men who were initially most responsible for it were a father and son named Thomas and Alexander Campbell. They were Scotsmen, members of a smaller Presbyterian body, who had come across to the Northern United States. Through contact with some men in England and in Scotland who had new ideas about the church that went back to the New Testament, but also through their own thinking and reflection on the Bible, especially as they came across to this country, they began to realise that the whole division of Christians into all these denominations that we have mentioned so far was contrary to the will of God. Christians had come to live at ease with the existence of various denominations; the Lutherans, the Anglicans the Presbyterians and Reformed, the Mennonites, Baptists, Quakers, the Dunker Brethren, and others that we could mention had come to co-exist with one another, sometimes to have certain degrees of co-operation, especially during times of revival, but not to be too concerned about this division into various groups that was so evident among them. And many times, of course, they spoke different languages—they came to North America at different times—so their co-existence was not so disturbing to many of them. But others were disturbed by it, because as they read the New Testament they got the impression that God intended that all believers be one.

Therefore the Campbells and others who quickly joined with them began to preach that Christians should be guided by the Bible alone, not by their denominational traditions. Though the Campbells were themselves of Presbyterian background, they felt that the Calvinism of the Presbyterians was not nearly so clear in Scripture as the Calvinists felt it was. They also came to believe in believers' baptism, but in a somewhat different way from the way the Baptists believed in it. To them baptism was of much more importance; it had a much more important role in the salvation of the individual. On the other hand, they were not so happy with the Wesleyan emphasis on the emotions. These men were a little bit more sombre in their approach, and so to them salvation could not be dependent on various kinds of emotional experiences, which seemed to them bordering on hysteria at times, but was a process that involved the mind, as well as the will. It was a process in which, though emotion played a role, it was not the dominant role.

This movement caught fire on the American frontier, and even to this day it is not widely represented along the eastern seaboard but rather in the states of Kentucky, Ohio, Tennessee, and Indiana in particular. Many whole Baptist congregations went over to this movement which had two different names associated with it—one was simply "Christian", and the other was the name "Disciple". These movements, as they gradually came together—different people at different times and places being responsible for the emergence of them—fellowshipped one with another. They searched the Scriptures, and they began to find that the New Testament called for all Christians to be simply "Christians", that it called for the Lord's Supper to be celebrated every Sunday (at least, the examples seemed to be that way). They did not admit the distinction between the clergy and the laity and did not allow the existence of a hierarchy with authority over the congregations. Such congregations were independent. This movement arose on the American frontier, beginning in some respects in 1800 but for a long time existing as part of the Baptist movement; but by 1830 it began to go its separate way from the Baptists, and thereafter the movements have been distinct. Today some five million Christians in North America are heirs of this movement. Because of the name of Campbell, they are sometimes called Campbellites, but their churches themselves are known simply as Christian Churches or Churches of Christ.

Now at the same time as the Campbellite movement was getting started in North America another movement was getting started in the British Isles, a movement that became known as the Plymouth Brethren because one of the largest and earliest congregations (though not the first) was founded in the port of Plymouth, England. In many respects the so-called Plymouth Brethren and so-called Churches of Christ movement had amazing similarities. Both stressed the fact that all Christians should be one, but not through the existence of an institutional hierarchy such as Medieval Catholicism had tried. They all believed that one's doctrine should be examined by the Scriptures and that the Scriptures were adequate to guide the church in what it was to do. They were not inclined to accept the distinction that had evolved between the clergy and the laity, which the

Catholic church had hardened into a sturdy doctrine of the priesthood and which Protestants had modified but not completely eliminated. The parallels are very interesting, but yet there is a significant difference. There was something about the Brethren Movement which distinguished it from all the other groups that I have mentioned up till now—distinguished it in theory, distinguished it in the beginning, but human nature being what it is, unfortunately did not always continue to distinguish it thereafter. What was the difference? It was simply this: that all the other groups—Mennonites, Baptists, Moravians, Quakers, Dunker Brethren, Wesleyans, Campbellites, and others like them—all these groups were based upon calling people, oftentimes people who already were Christians, out of the established churches, or out of the comprehensive type of church, on the basis of a common agreement concerning what the Scriptures taught: an agreement as to a way that baptism should be, an agreement as to whether Christians should participate in the armed forces, agreement on doctrines that distinguished Calvinists from Arminians, and so forth. These various groups were based on a view of unity, but unity by conformity. Everyone should join together in them (this was especially, of course, the emphasis of the Campbellites, but earlier the Baptists had preached it just as strongly); but in order to join one had to agree on many different areas of doctrine, covering a wide range of activities and beliefs.

The Brethren Movement was different, for *the unity that the Brethren sought was to exhibit a unity that was already there, rather than to create one by seeking people to come to agree on a long list of points.* The Brethren said, “We recognize in all these different denominations people who are one in Christ and yet, because of the traditions and customs of the denominations, we cannot sit down and break bread together; the clergy say we cannot. We have to go to the Methodist church, we have to go to the Baptist church, or we have to go to the Anglican church; but we cannot simply break bread together, we cannot identify ourselves together as Christians because we each have to take our own particular party that we’re going to line up with”. The early Brethren said it ought not to be this way. We ought to be able to meet together and exhibit the unity that is given to us by God. We do not have to agree on every point of doctrine, on every issue of practice in order to be able to meet together. If God has made us His children, if we are able to recognize each other as children of God, that in itself is sufficient reason to be able to exhibit our unity in a practical way. In effect, the early Brethren theory, and often the practice, called for making decisions only where they were unavoidable. You had to decide, for example, whether or not to Break Bread every Lord’s Day; you cannot avoid that decision. But in many other matters, they decided they would not try to force a particular line of things, for this would be to exclude some who were genuine “brethren in Christ”. So on the question of baptism, for example, there was liberty. Some of the people came from the Anglican background; others came from the Baptist background; they often carried with them their various views. Sometimes there was change, of course, but often a person felt that the view he held before was still valid; and so they said, “Well, that’s all right. We can still meet and

express our unity in Christ even though we don't agree on baptisms. This can be left for each individual, for each family to pursue". There were differences of varying degrees on Calvinism; while there was not much pure Arminianism, certainly consistent Calvinists would feel that the Brethren had a strong tendency in that direction. In other respects the Brethren Movement exhibited the kind of zeal for expressing the unity of the body of Christ, and then for taking this unity out to the world as a testimony that God had united people of various backgrounds. Some of the nobility, many of the upper classes, were joined together with those of the lower classes, people of varying backgrounds, some from state churches, some dissenters—to testify to their unity in Christ and to carry the gospel.

Two of the key distinctives that emerged throughout the movement arose out of the desire of Brethren to testify to their Christian unity. One was positive: the Lord's Supper—the one loaf, the uniting ordinance. In breaking bread they remembered what God had done for them through Jesus Christ, and they testified that they were made "one body" in Christ, one out of many. The common worship of the believers around the Lord's Table, not only served to repeatedly commemorate what Christ had done, to keep the focus on His work upon the cross and His triumph through the resurrection, but it also served as a testimony that believers were "one" and that they were free to come and express their unity in their corporate worship to God. One testimony to the unity was negative: the elimination of the distinction between clergy and laity. This was related to the Lord's Supper, because it was felt by all the other groups that the Lord's Supper had to be administered by an ordained clergyman. And since different groups did not recognize the ordination of other bodies, this was in itself a factor which led to disunity among believers. As the Scriptures were searched and as church history was looked into to see about the emergence of the clergy, it came to be realized that this was not God's intention, and that Christians simply should meet together, recognizing that God distributes spiritual gifts among them but that He does not set up one class of men as those who alone are custodians of the ordinances. Therefore, by eliminating the clergy and laity distinction they were free to gather together, to break bread as one body in Christ. And so set did these distinctives become that anywhere in the world today when a group of Christians emerge who have never heard of Plymouth, England, or the movement associated with it, start to Break Bread regularly and do so without having a separate ordained clergy they are usually branded Plymouth Brethren, whether they like it or not. (Oftentimes, when they find out what happened to the Plymouth Brethren, they don't like it!) But a pattern has been established based upon those practices which distinguish it from other groups.

But, as is often the case when a movement arises which seeks to recapture biblical ideals, the Enemy is at work to sow discord, dissension, to compromise the original vision, to tarnish it, and even to destroy it, if possible. And it happened with the "Brethren Movement" as well. It has already been indicated that many of the continental movements became very introspective and ingrown, and persist, not by the original evangelism

which got them going, but instead merely by biological reproduction. And so it is that the early Brethren movement, which the documents indicate originated as a testimony to the unity of believers, has in many parts of the world and in the eyes of most church historians as well become a byword for the extremes of divisiveness amongst believers.

How did this come about? The answer is complicated, but part of it is that there were two different ideals which were present at the beginning, and as soon as an occasion arose they exhibited themselves in an open division. On the one hand, there was the emphasis of withdrawing from the existing Christian bodies as a means of testifying to the unity of believers; the emphasis passed from testifying to *unity* to the idea of testifying to *purity* by separating from those who did not agree on the Lord's Supper and its importance and on the need for eliminating the distinction between clergy and laity. This ideal which shifted in the direction of "the purity of the Body" also began to stress uniformity: what one congregation did—what it taught, what it practised—was to be very similar indeed to what was done in other parts of England and in other parts of the world.

Now the other tendency which was present from the beginning was that believers should testify to their unity in whatever ways possible. Those who were able fully to gather together to break bread and meet together in regular congregational fellowship should do so; those who for one reason or other did not desire to leave their traditional fellowship or denominational background, whatever it might be, should still be co-operated with in evangelistic work, in Bible Society work, and other kinds of co-operative endeavour. Moreover, in any given congregation that does exist for the purpose of breaking bread and testifying to the Lord, there could be *diversity* from place to place, different emphases and different styles, and within each congregation there could be differences of understanding.

An issue arose which is complicated to explain and which, on the surface, is not quite related to this; but, as one penetrates beneath, one finds that when the smoke had cleared, within twenty years after the Brethren movement had started, it divided in two different directions. The larger group at the time, known as the Exclusive Brethren, stressed the separation of believers and their uniformity one with another after having separated. The other side was called Open Brethren, for they were open to receive other believers without expecting uniformity and were open to continue fellowshiping in specialized activities with believers who had not broken with their denominational background.

Originally the Open Brethren were smaller, but down through the decades they have become much the larger—in part because of a greater evangelistic zeal. Exclusive Brethren were held together for a generation or so, especially through the primary leader, John Nelson Darby, who had no official position but whose authority was largely recognized. Darby was born in 1800 and he lived until 1882. The division between Open and Exclusive Brethren occurred during the years 1845-48. For the next thirty or so years the Exclusive Brethren continued as a vital and living group, welded together by the personality of this unique man. But such was the

danger inherent in the emphasis upon uniformity that within a decade of Darby's death the Exclusive Brethren were divided into five distinct groups, each given the nickname of a prominent teacher in their circle: Kelly, Grant, Stuart, Lowe and Raven. Because the Lowe brethren were quite numerous upon the continent of Europe, they are frequently called the Continental Brethren. When Mr. Raven died the man who emerged as his unofficial successor was James Taylor, and his son followed in his footsteps, so the Raven brethren came to be known as the Taylor brethren; they were the largest of the groups, though these groups were found in varying strengths in various parts of the world. The story of what happened to the Brethren Movement is sad. What arose with the intention of being a beacon of unity for Christians by which they could exhibit what God had done among them, had become instead noted for division, for quibbling, for splitting one from another upon issues that by almost any candid examination are less than essential (though, of course, to the people participating in them they seemed to be very serious indeed).

The process did not stop with the division into the five different groups of Exclusives. Within twenty years after that the Grant brethren had divided and would divide again; the Stuart brethren had divided; the Lowe brethren had divided and the smaller group had itself sub-divided; and the Raven or Taylor brethren had divided. The process is continuing to the present. There have been reunions among some portions of the exclusives, though very often when there is a reunion there is a further division by those who do not want to reunite.

What went wrong? It is hard to analyse. Certainly it is not wise to trivialize these believers, to make fun of them, or just to assume that they were made up of worse stock that tended to be divisive by nature. I think it is better to see at work here the natural outworking of a specific principle, the principle of *unity by uniformity*; i.e. unity by conformity to what happens to be the prevailing view; unity on the basis of what distinguishes Christians from one another, rather than on the basis of what they have in common simply as believers.

The Open Brethren followed this second path; they sought to demonstrate the unity which all believers already possessed in Christ and to co-operate with other Christians to the extent possible without demanding uniformity. To be sure, they followed this path with varying degrees of commitment; many of them, especially those that arose outside of England and came into the movement later were, for practical purposes, not much different from the Baptists in their initial understanding, for they came to believe that to belong to the Brethren was to accept a whole long list of certain ideals and doctrines and practices; and they could not understand why anyone would want to join with the movement that did not agree with them on these points. The Open Brethren have avoided significant divisions, though there was one group nicknamed "Needed Truth" (the "needed truth" being that there needed to be a formal organization of a Presbyterian type on the congregational, the national, and even the world level). But that was a very small group (although some who did not actually leave the Open Brethren absorbed many of the influences of that group).

For the most part the Open Brethren have avoided division; yet for that same reason one cannot speak of the Open Brethren generally. One can speak of the Salvation Army as a united movement, with one head who can be identified and located. One can speak of the Roman Catholic Church—though, of course, it has considerable diversity in it now—which is (outwardly) one structure. One can speak of various kinds of Exclusive Brethren, each of which, though without a formal institution, is represented by congregations which are very, very similar to one another all over the world. In other words, many denominations, for one reason or another, have a certain unity so that one can speak of a denomination and the direction in which it is going as a whole. But the Open Brethren are not this way. There is considerable diversity among them. The Open Brethren, because their emphasis is upon the local congregation instead of the fellowship as a whole, vary from place to place, even in a city and certainly from country to country; thus it is impossible to make generalizations about what they are like. Personally, I think this is a necessary strength of the movement, one that needs to be retained if it is to have any particular relevance as a testimony to the whole body of Christ, the whole people of God, as to the way that the church should be.

There are four particular emphases or principles which were characteristic of the Open Brethren from the beginning, though in varying strengths and varying degrees, and which are important today. These need to be recognized as part of our heritage and need continually to be examined to see how we are practising them and whether there are ways in which they should be altered, reformed, enhanced, and taught to others as part of the heritage entrusted to us—not to preserve for ourselves but to pass on to others in the body of Christ.

The first of these principles or emphases concerns the clergy and the laity. God has never seemed to be too closely bound to men's ideas in this regard. Many of the great saints in the history of the church were not men who were recognized as clergy, and many even in our own times who have been raised up by God for evangelistic or teaching purposes were not counted as clergymen by one group or another. And on the other hand, many people who have been recognized clergymen have not evidenced spiritual distinction. God does not seem to pay much attention to these categories. And I think that the Brethren Movement, if it is to be true to its heritage, has to continue to recognize this, and has to follow after the way that God seems to be working with the church at large. However, in our zeal for emphasizing that there is no biblical basis for distinguishing clergy from laity we sometimes neglect and even completely distort other biblical teaching, for example, concerning the diversity of gifts and the fact that some men (and women too) are to exercise their spiritual gifts on a full-time basis and were supported by the churches among whom or on behalf of whom they ministered. Thus there is a role for those who are full-time ministers of the Word, as long as such people are not regarded as representing the whole of the ministry of the people of God. The full-time worker in the New Testament is the one who develops the gifts of others; indeed, part-time workers do this as well. The full-time worker is not to do the

work of the ministry: he is one who is called of God to develop, to strengthen, and to train others to do the work. All of us from the biblical point of view are “clergymen”. (I think it is better to look at it that way than by saying all of us are “laymen”.) All of us have gifts from God which are to be exercised for the purpose of building up the body of Christ.

This was one of the earliest distinctives of the Brethren Movement, and it is a truth we do not need to be ashamed of and one that still needs to be proclaimed. We need to recognize, however, that at times we honour this principle more by lip service than by actual practice. Within the brethren there has arisen, not so much a dominating group of clergy as rather a passive group of laity, who allow others to do the work of the ministry. In many congregations which have full-time pastors at the head there is a greater participation by more people in the work of the ministry than in many Brethren assemblies. This was not the intention of those who, under God, were the founders of the movement. All of us are ministers of God—some are called to full-time ministry, but all are ministers.

The second distinctive of the early Brethren Movement concerns the Lord's Supper. It was an enormous step for these first brethren to begin breaking bread simply as Christians, meeting around a common table, because, for all of them, the Lord's Supper had been part of the churchly practice. Even for those who were not Anglicans, the Lord's Supper was something that was done under the authority of a recognized elder or clergyman and in a very formal and official way; and the idea of a spontaneous participation in the breaking of bread was something that was quite revolutionary in its day. We can imagine something of the joy as they thus began to remember the Lord Jesus Christ in this way, and ever since the Lord's Supper has been the means of attracting other Christians to this fellowship. But, at the same time, it must be admitted that all too often the Lord's Supper has become something which in its own way has developed its own ritual, its own traditions, its predictability. While some of us may like it and even prefer it that way, we have to admit that it is no longer the attraction for other Christians that many of us long for it to be. Why is that? Part of it may be the feeling that only certain kinds of prayers or utterances are appropriate. The hesitancy of younger people or of newcomers to take part is due to fear that they might say the wrong thing. Thus one can go to many assemblies where scarcely ever a voice is heard of someone under forty years old. The impression is given that somehow if one says the wrong thing God is going to be greatly displeased and thunder will come—or something like that.

The Lord's Supper in the New Testament is not given to us with a certain ritual or form to follow. The Great Church of the Middle Ages evolved a highly complex form, eventually in a language that the people did not understand, so that it became something ceremonial and far-off. We, too, have to be careful that we do not let the same thing develop among us. The Lord's Supper should be something that is always fresh. There need to be certain patterns, so that people are not always wondering what is going to happen next, yet also freedom for spontaneity, for diversity of

the way in which worship to God is expressed. The Lord's Supper is still a precious means of testifying to the unity of believers. If it is not conducted with the proper concern for honouring the Lord and for allowing for diversity and freshness, it can become just another ritual, not very distinguishable from the ritual of the more formal churches.

The third principle is that of co-operation to the degree that is possible. Many denominations have the "all or nothing" philosophy: either agree with us all the way, or we will have nothing to do with you. The early Brethren did not look at the matter that way, at least, those who later sided with the "Open". They felt that while the goal was to have all Christians meeting together and identified fully one with another, on the way to this goal one could co-operate with one's brethren in Christ even when one did not see eye-to-eye with them in some things. Even when there was disagreement on the role of denominations, upon the role of the clergy, and upon other things like this, there was still room for co-operation. Thus members of the Open Brethren movement, down through the years and in most countries of the world, have participated in transdenominational activities to a degree disproportionate to their size. Missionary Radio, for example, has both national Christian and European-American missionaries from the Brethren participating in it to a far greater extent than the size of the Brethren Movement would warrant. In publishing, in Billy Graham crusades, in movements such as the Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship, the Gideons, the Christian Businessman's Committee, and many others, Brethren are free to participate. In fact, they are encouraged to participate as they follow through with the genius of the insights of the original (Open) Brethren Movement that we should co-operate with our fellow believers to the extent that we are able to, and to the extent that they are able to co-operate with us. Participation in these other activities should not be regarded as somehow in competition with what goes on in the local congregation. All of us are to be identified with a local congregation, but God calls some of us, maybe even many of us, to be identified also with specialized groups, with other brethren who may not be Brethren with a capital B but who nevertheless are brethren in the sight of God. This transdenominational co-operation is something that is encouraged by a careful examination of the biblical insights of those who first dared to begin meeting in the name of the Lord alone for the breaking of bread.

The fourth important emphasis of the early Brethren movement is that of the freedom from the bondage to ecclesiastical tradition and hierarchy. The early brethren believed that the Holy Spirit was active in their presence, that *He* was the representative of Christ on earth—not some man, or some body of men—and that the Holy Spirit was able to guide individuals and groups of individuals as to what they were to do, and that there was to be continual re-examination in the light of the Word of God of the best way to carry on the commissions which God had entrusted to the church. One of the strengths of the Brethren Movement to this day, I believe, is the way that individuals can have a burden from God to start out in a certain direction and make it known to others. Many important works of God all around the world have started in this way, through the

initiative of individuals. Because the Brethren movement does not have an over-arching hierarchy or a group of authorities from whom formal approval or sanction must be obtained before any new direction can be taken. And this is something that we should prize. But alas, though the movement began with a sense of freedom from tradition, it often has developed a tradition of its own. Thus if a new group of Christians arises or people begin to do things that are similar to the way that Brethren have done them but different in little respects here or there, there is a tendency to separate oneself from them lest one be contaminated, or to let them go their own way. This was not the intention of the original movement. The original movement was a coalescing of groups that started independently in different parts of the world and that joined together when they found one another, even when they didn't have complete agreement. And so it should be with a lively congregation and with the Brethren assemblies even today that, as they find the Spirit of God at work, to try to fellowship with others even when there is not complete agreement, believing that if God has joined us together in the body of Christ we have the duty and the privilege of exhibiting the unity that we have in Christ by working toward even greater unity to which the Scriptures summon us.

These four principles, then, are among those that originally characterized the early Open Brethren and that characterize the movement to a greater or lesser extent today. They are principles that need to be continually re-examined. And we always need to recognize that throughout church history the tendency in groups has been to depart from their original ideals. We have no reason to think that we are immune from this prevailing tendency. But, under God, if we are conscious of it, the Holy Spirit is working just as much as He was back in Plymouth, Dublin, and other parts of the British Isles in the 1820s and 1830s to bring a visible testimony to the unity of believers in Christ.

*A Lecture given at Granville Chapel, Vancouver, B.C., Canada*

*December, 1971*

# RESPONSES TO PAPER BY DONALD TINDER

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## SOME INADEQUACIES OF PRESENT-DAY BRETHREN

My reaction to Donald Tinder's paper is that he has written an excellent article on the historical background of the Brethren movement. We all need to have our memories refreshed on the unique contribution that the Brethren have made to the life of the Church in the last one hundred and fifty years. As we all know, many of these ideas and concepts have become part of the world wide Church, thereby promoting the vigor of the fellowship of Christ's Body.

My own Brethren experience, unfortunately, has not led me to conclude that the current Brethren movement is any great champion of Christian unity, or one of great vigor. The Brethren, from my own personal experience, can be about as sectarian as ever the Christian faith produced. And this fact has certainly limited its vitality of late.

I have found that some belief in Tinder's "four principles" and interest in Christian unity are found in almost all Christian groups. Openness to these ideas seems not to come because of the group to which one belongs, but from an in-depth reading of the Scriptures and a sense of the forgiveness of sin.

My own concern for the Brethren movement is that they start to read the Bible again. The general ignorance of Biblical theology and content is appalling to say the least. C. I. Scofield has had a tremendous impact on the movement, so that all revert to his notes immediately if there is a question. This has negated fresh inductive study of the Bible, since Scofield "answered" most questions.

This lack of Bible study is leading to the powerlessness of many assemblies. Our Lord's description of the Sadducees in Matt. 22.30, that they "knew neither the Scriptures or the power of God", is chillingly close to being accurate of many Assemblies today.

I agree that we need to be reminded of Tinder's four principles. But unless the Bible is the foundation for life and service, these four principles will never breathe life into what once was a most vital part of God's church.

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## A MISSIONARY POINT OF VIEW

Most discussions of the distinctives of "the Brethren" become mired in confusion over which are primary and which are secondary characteristics. Donald Tinder skilfully avoids that by putting the movement into its historical setting and distilling four basic emphases present throughout the growth of the "Open Brethren", while noting the presence of many contradictory trends and ideas.

From a missionary point of view, it is essential to decide how much force to give to the various basic and secondary emphases of the movement. Away from the restraining influence of the homeland, one has the opportunity to correct false and contradictory emphases, or to repeat or intensify them.

Colombians often ask, "Who is your *jefe* (leader)?" When I reply that our *jefe* is Jesus Christ, they say, "Yes, but there has to be someone on earth who is the head of your group to tell you what to do". The idea that there is no hierarchy at all leaves them open-mouthed.

It is the absence of an effective hierarchy that enables the "Open Brethren" to follow the inclusive principal of unity with diversity, rather than the divisive principle of unity by conformity. There is no one in a position to enforce conformity or division throughout the movement. Anyone who insists upon rigorous conformity only isolates himself.

The absence of an over-arching hierarchy has two advantages which serve as checks upon each other. On the one hand, it assures the possibility of constant revitalization, because it permits unlimited attempts at innovation. Whenever there is a felt need, the effort often spent trying to convince a ruling clique to make or permit an innovation can be utilized in attempting the solution itself. On the other hand, the innovation must be successful and acceptable to a significant number of people in order to become a part of the general movement. This is a conservative principle that guards against ideas of a ruling few being forced upon all, as often happens in highly organized denominations. The freedom to innovate, the need to prove the value of the innovation by results, and the inability to impose theories from a distance are very helpful for the work of missions, because principles must be applied in widely varying cultures and local situations.

The four principles which Dr. Tinder enumerates as characteristic of the "Open Brethren" have distinct advantages for missions. The elimination of distinction between clergy and laity amounts to an authorization of all "laymen" to perform the functions usually limited to clergymen. A recent book, *Laitly Mobilized* by Neil Braun (Eerdmans, 1971), documents the necessity and urgency for such authorization of laymen for the Church to successfully obey the great commission in the world today. This distinctive guarantees a full church life to every group of believers from the beginning regardless of the availability or non-availability of specially trained or authorized persons.

The weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper in a simple way provides a focus of unity for new groups and centers their attention on the basics

of the Gospel. It also provides the minimum structure needed for a meeting without requiring the presence of anyone skilled in preaching or directing a meeting. Songs, simple prayers, testimonies, Bible reading with simple observations, and the focusing of attention on Christ by the presence of the bread and wine provide ample material for edifying meetings without the presence of missionaries or national workers. This is very important as the evangelical church is growing with phenomenal rapidity in many parts of the world.

The willingness to co-operate with other members of the body of Christ to the degree possible is also helpful, especially in areas where the Church is still a very small percentage of the population. It is often where the evangelicals are still a minority that they are seeing a high rate of church growth which strains their resources. Such a situation calls for co-operation.

Finally, the freedom from ecclesiastical tradition can be especially beneficial in the mission situation. Where this principle is given appropriate emphasis, it allows young churches to develop in the way most appropriate to their culture. Thus, the "foreign atmosphere" wears off more quickly and the style of worship and decision-making becomes more national—more Colombian, more Japanese, etc. This fourth principle is perhaps the least observed on the mission field. To have its full beneficial effect, it is necessary for churches to multiply rapidly so that the missionary is kept busy evangelizing and teaching rather than transmitting Anglo-Saxon culture.

A clear recognition of the basic distinctives of the "Open Brethren" and an energetic effort to put them into practice will make a decided contribution to the evangelization of the world. We welcome Dr. Tinder's contribution to such recognition and, by implication, practice.

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## GIFTS GIVEN TO THE CHURCHES

An historical spiritual movement spawned and sponsored by the Holy Spirit in the nineteenth century, source of much blessing and testimony through example, activity, and teaching, later, looking to its traditions rather than the One who engendered it, atrophied in many ways and became a source of scorn through its divisiveness. This is especially curious and dreadful, because “two of the key distinctives that emerged throughout the movement arose out of their desire to testify to their Christian unity”. How could this have happened, and what is the current status of this movement? Donald Tinder’s refreshingly honest and objective attempt to answer these questions is, in my view, not only refreshing but also one of the signs of the Spirit’s present breathing in many quarters within the movement at the present time.

Having been associated with this movement, and having written a paper at university on the origin of the movement, I appreciated very much Dr. Tinder’s emphasis on what the Assemblies stood for at the beginning, and the vigor of their love, unity, and service for God. It seems that one hundred and fifty years later these *sine qua non* are being reviewed to see if they still possess reality and vitality or whether they have become dead forms, allowing people to play Church. Instead of continuing as a group testifying to “purity” by separating from most other genuine Christians, there is a desire for “unity” with the diversity and strengths that this implies (instead of the “unity by uniformity” which led to much of the subsequent divisions).

Dr. Tinder concluded his helpful article by reviewing the four particular emphases or principles characteristic of the Open Brethren. Special attention must be given to his underlining of a strong biblical principle that is so sadly neglected in so many places today (and traditionally)—“some men (and women too) are to exercise their spiritual gifts on a full-time basis . . . the one who develops the gifts of others”. (Eph. 4: 11-12). Much of the activity in the Assemblies consists of theological entertainment (cf. Ezekiel 33: 30-32)—gifted teachers, or should one say “orators”, dazzle local saints with their knowledge and communicative skills, while these same saints stay in ignorance as to their role and contribution in the body of Christ. How many of the brothers and sisters scattered in numerous assemblies around the world really know what *their* spiritual gift(s) is (are)? And how much of the ministry is geared toward this end?

Dr. Tinder hit a nerve-end in saying that the Lord’s Supper “has become something which in its own way has developed its own ritual, its own traditions, and its own predictability”. How grateful we should be for men like this, who have had exposure and experience outside the confines of what is often another form of “denominationalism”, and who thus have a perspective to see things as they really are, and then speak honestly and bluntly, as the prophets of old, so that once again there can be conformity by the Spirit and not mere uniformity produced by the human spirit!

Having discussed the distinctives of a multi-gifted assembly in contrast to one where there is a clergy/laity difference, and having pointed out some

needed re-evaluations in another of the important distinctives, the Lord's Supper, the author next discusses the distinctive of co-operation. As a young man in the Assemblies, knowing something of the early emphases, I wondered why it was almost exclusively the "heroes" from the Movement itself that moved around from place to place, being wined and dined by the small-town folks. Why wasn't there more exposure from gifted men from other segments of the Body of Christ who came to teach and minister? The strong chain of Tinder's presentation finds a weak link at this juncture, for in illustrating how the Assembly saints participate in "transdenominational activities" by showing their involvement in various organizations, it must be admitted, these same illustrations could be applied to the denominations to which he referred as having an "all or nothing philosophy". There are Baptists in Billy Graham Crusades, Methodists in the Gideons, Presbyterians in C.B.M.C. More thought needs to be given as to deeper and more meaningful levels of co-operation, so that greater benefit can accrue from gifts and perspectives from other segments of the Body (as per the example already given by implication, more non-Assembly teachers in the pulpit).

The last distinctive, a wonderful one, is the centrality and ministry of the Holy Spirit. This emphasis seems sadly lacking today (as evidenced by the earlier mentioned "predictability"); with the Holy Spirit there can be freedom from this crippling tradition and a return to the diversity and spontaneity that results from letting Him "blow as he wills", not containing nor constraining, but responding. Freedom and reality in worship and activity, both at the individual and assembly level!

My prayer is that this article might serve as salt on some of the open and hidden wounds and sores that in our pride and selfishness and commitment to tradition we try to ignore, so that as this salt of truth stings we'll be forced to seek the healing available at the hand of the Head of the Body, through realization, confession, and restoration.

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*F.W.I.*

## SECOND THOUGHTS ON THE COMPREHENSIVIST CHURCH

The tenor of Dr. Tinder's article so thoroughly rejoices my heart that there is no comment on the article itself which I would wish to make. I should, however, like to extend its thinking beyond the theme of the article itself to pursue some lines of enquiry that seem to call for further exploration.

One has a sense, at the end of the article, that one is again in sight of the point where we first joined the circle. "Christianity began as a movement which called people *out* from the world": but this ideal changed to a comprehensive movement in a few centuries. The ideal of the Open Brethren, we read, is that of unity in diversity, but a unity of *believers*, like that of the New Testament: and their practice is that of expressing that unity. For that conclusion, one thanks God, but does this not begin to glance again at comprehensiveness?

The difficulty I think lies here: how do we identify the "believers" with whom we are united? In revival days, the answer *seems* to be easy: but the easy answer leads into tragic exclusivism, because it soon proves to be hopelessly narrow (which is possibly where the Open Brethren—so largely the adopted children of the nineteenth century awakening—went wrong). In *what* exactly does that response of faith lie that makes a man a child of Abraham, who had faith (Gal. 3: 9)? Here we run straight into the distinction between belief as opinion and belief as faith.

The difficulty becomes more intense, because we now find that it is tied in inextricably with the doctrine of human destiny. Who then shall be saved? A draught of the true Spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ surely forbids an answer to that, which is too limited or too lacking in His compassion for all men (and I am not hinting at universalism). Is it not perhaps just this sense of compassion that allowed the doctrine of the Church to become comprehensive just as soon as political circumstances so permitted: and that accounts for the apparently illogical—for so it seems to the adult baptist—adherence to infant baptism through such large areas of Christendom (for this adherence I believe to be basically emotional)?

Yet, oddly, as soon as comprehensivist Christian unity tries to work itself out in practice—and I talk here of the modern ecumenical movement—it seems to trap itself in structural dead-ends. As has often been remarked, church "unions" only breed extra divisions; where there were two churches, one tends to end up with three! The comprehensivist, because in going comprehensive he adopted a structured form of church life, proves to have barred the door to further advance to unity. It is the "separatist" idea of the gathered church that proves to have the potential to walk around the barriers! I believe that some of the Brethren have had the insight to see this: precious few others have done so. It is as though God is taking both ends of the Church (if I may so speak) and knocking their heads together for their foolishness. I believe that Brethren have sometimes seen what few others have seen in another aspect also—that true unity is not something

cultic (in unifying cult and structure) but active (expressed in actual action within the world, which is the only area where the ecumenicals, too, have had real success).

There is another danger with taking the separatist path too unheedingly. The ordinary man misunderstands the distinction between the Church and the world, has never heard of the doctrine of Common Grace, and soon ends up in a Manichean and Docetic trap. The human tragedies to which this gives rise, and the utter misrepresentation of the character of God and of our Lord Jesus Christ which result, need no further emphasis.

Should we perhaps ask ourselves a question which at first we might be inclined to reject impatiently? To what extent was the separateness of the early Church an essential part of its being: and to what extent was it a product of its particular historical environment and situation? We separatists incline to be too confined to the New Testament: but we need the Old Testament for more purposes than simply to typify the New!

I should add in closing that I know of at least one of the foremost scholars among Brethren today, who cuts the knot which I have tied in the earlier paragraphs of this comment by regarding our common teaching, that all who will be saved constitute the Church, as a Protestant perpetuation of the Roman error that "outside the Church there is no salvation" (the Roman version, incidentally, is now repudiated by the Roman church itself). The Church he understands (if I interpret him correctly) as an elect remnant within the body of the redeemed. (Because I have probably *not* interpreted him quite correctly, I do not quote his name!). It seems to me to get round the problem too easily—but the thought is thrown out.

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## INESCAPABLE PROBLEMS

This excellent survey has two obvious weaknesses, both probably in part due to the need for brevity.

Though an effort is made to place the Brethren movement against its historic background, this is inadequate. There is an inescapable problem that faces the Church once it has persisted for some generations, has grown to some size and is subject to only minor persecution. This problem grows even greater when the leaders of the civil community belong to it. Even when the local church is sufficiently aware of what is happening and is able to exclude the outsider who wants to join it for some real or fancied advantage, it cannot avoid the problem created by the children of its members, nor is there any evidence that it ever has. This is as true of Brethren assemblies as of any others. The "particular" group always tends to become to some extent "comprehensive". So the dividing line drawn in the survey is only a relative one.

Further, these "particular" groups have, with very rare exceptions, arisen in protest against the dominant pattern—the Brethren tried to avoid this but were not able to maintain their position for long. This element of protest has always subtly distorted both doctrine and practice. Further, they have rarely been in a position to claim to be the church in a certain locality according to the New Testament pattern. The main exceptions have been when they were the result of expulsion or flight from persecution, as in many parts of North America, or of work in the mission field. Then they rapidly become "comprehensive".

For this reason, even when such groups honestly tried to conform to the New Testament pattern in doctrine and practice, in this respect they failed. This was, of course, recognized by J. N. Darby in his doctrine of the church in ruins, but because he expressed it in an exaggerated form and used it for an evil purpose, it has never been given the attention in the "Open" assemblies that it deserves.

The second weakness is that the term "purity" is insufficiently wide to characterize the position of the "Exclusive" Brethren. It is true that in the early days "separation from" was their battle-cry, but we do well to look at battle-cries sceptically. They are very often masks for something deeper.

In the early nineteenth century, when the Brethren movement took its rise, the battle lines between the various Protestant churches and groups had been clearly drawn for a considerable period. The original Brethren principles and practices did not arise simply out of the New Testament; they were consciously intended to circumvent these areas of strife, and there was an implicit moratorium on any extremer treatment of them, something which has largely continued to this day. Most then rather naively imagined that a prayerful and spiritual study of Scripture would lead to reasonable unanimity in its interpretation of it, and so in all other areas of doctrine. It is true that in most cases the divisions were caused officially by practices, but these were probably never arbitrary, certainly not in the earlier stages, but were based on doctrinal concepts. In some cases, e.g. the controversy among the "Ravens" over the Eternal Sonship

of the Second Person of the Trinity, the division was caused by doctrine alone.

It would be fairer to say then that where membership of an "Open" or "Exclusive" assembly was not due merely to a local accident, the real dividing principle was the certainty of full possession of the truth on one side and the realization of human fallibility on the other. Where Christian life is made the norm of Christian fellowship, one has to bow to the strange (to us) willingness of the Holy Spirit to lead the children of God along different paths of behaviour and of understanding the Scriptures.

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## THE DIMINUTION OF THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

Any potted church history is bound to suffer defects, and to that extent it is perhaps unfair to comment on the presentation here, yet I think one point needs to be made. If, as would seem to be the case, a "biblical emphasis on the church" includes treatment of the "ministry" in the church and the Lord's Supper, it is not only unfair but also incorrect to state that the Reformers lacked an emphasis on the biblical position on the church. After all they did enunciate a new position on the "priesthood of believers", and, as Book IV of Calvin's *Institutes* would indicate, also had something to say on the sacraments! What I think Dr. Tinder means is that he does not agree with them as to where the main biblical emphasis lies—a rather different thing.

While one perspective on the discord which arose in the early days of the Brethren movement is that "the Enemy was at work", there are a number of other considerations which to me are pertinent. When a new movement emerges and allows its practice to polarise around certain key distinctives (even at times to allowing these matters to be the key to the exegesis of other parts of Scripture), it becomes less than fully Biblical and inevitably suffers. For example, the Brethren communion service depends for best "functioning" on an optimal relationship between the individual believer and his Lord; where this is lacking, possibly because of deficiencies in the local church situation (e.g. teaching and pastoral care), weakness ensues. Hence the overstress on certain aspects leads to a loss of Biblical wholeness in our practice of the truth. Another feature of this is the almost inevitable development in a movement that sets out to attain a NT norm for its practices, *viz.* that if such a norm is attainable, then it may be absolutised and imposed. Perhaps here a better understanding of the relationship of Law and Gospel would help.

Linked with this point is another which derives, I think, from the way our concept of the priesthood of believers seems in part to work out. There is a loss of the authority of Scripture. This may seem a strange thing to say about a movement which claims to be grounded in Scripture, but it seems to me to be true. In Paul's letters a clear note of apostolic authority rings out; other sections of the church have to some extent preserved this note of authority, e.g. certain presbyterians with their development of the office of the "teaching elder"; but in the doing away of the clergy-laity distinction the Brethren movement laid itself open to the diminution of the authority of Scripture and, in consequence, open to divisiveness for reasons other than earlier divisions in other sections of the church. Together with this, there comes a desire to re-create lost authority by investing it in men, and in the leaders of Exclusive groups we see this very tendency. Hence, it seems to me that there are reasons, inherent in the conception of the movement, that lead to division. I think it ought to be stated that in analysing "what went wrong" it may be that the desire to re-create an authority structure may be a more basic reason than the out working of the principle of unity by uniformity.

If the autonomy of the local congregation is to be a “necessary strength of the movement”, then in order to be of relevance to the body of Christ as a whole, two things seem to be required:

- (1) We need to enunciate what we understand the NT position to be; others will certainly expect this of us. Here a better appreciation of the role of the Jerusalem church initially, and then latterly of the Antioch congregation, may lead us to modify what we understand by “autonomy”. Are we prepared for this?
- (2) We need to express for our contemporaries what we understand by the “body of Christ”, because for many of them this is an issue we avoid too easily.

On the matter of “our heritage”, and the onward transmission of this, I question whether this ought to be our concern at all. Partly, Dr. Tinder’s view of this seems to be rooted in the conviction that God’s purpose for the movement is that it should be “a visible testimony to the unity of believers in Christ”; and that, it ought to be recognized, is an area where we have manifestly failed—perhaps to the point of no return. But more than that, any movement which sets out at some point to preserve “its heritage” stands in danger of becoming ossified on its own traditions. Where I would agree with him is that what we understand by the features that characterise us ought to be continually brought under the searchlight of Scripture, for only in Scripture can we find authority for our practice. To be fair, Dr. Tinder makes the point that there needs to be continual re-examination in the light of the Word of God; but his remarks occasionally leave it unclear how he envisages this being done today. He writes, for instance, that the movement “has to follow after the way that God seems to be working with the church at large”. This begs too many questions: how are we to envisage that working? (The Jesus people? The charismatic movement? The Ecumenical movement? Or?). This is not to say that we should not learn from what God is doing in the church at large, or from our many brothers and sisters in Christ, but rather that in whatever group we are, the Word of God ought to be normative.

Some comments on the four distinctives. First, one wonders to what extent we give the Lord’s Supper a fully Biblical content today in the assemblies. Some of the names currently heard in assemblies reveal our lack here—e.g. “remembrance-feast”. Here we have considerable need to learn from other traditions in the church who have insights into the Word on these matters that the Brethren movement lacks.

Again, on the matter of the Lord’s Supper, and the question of re-examining “our heritage”, can we be helped in our understanding of the relationship between liturgy and spontaneity in our celebration, by some of the recent scholarship on matters such as the words of the institution? One thinks here of the work of Jeremias, and his view that Paul’s formulation in 1 Cor. 11 derives from the Antioch congregational use, but in fact goes back to Palestinian usage, i.e. there was a “liturgical” formulation.

On the matter of co-operation with others, the question must be raised as to whether transdenominational efforts have been often engaged in in order that the individual might achieve some viable channel of service

which has been denied him or her in the local church, or because of the problems that often beset local churches. We need to distinguish between what we claim to derive from principles and what, in actuality, derives from practical reality!

One final comment, in discussing features that characterise the Brethren movement, one which is not mentioned by Dr. Tinder, but I feel ought to be, is the strong missionary impulse that has always characterised it.

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## A PARDONABLE BUT UNWARRANTED IDEALISM

It is most important to have this kind of work done on Brethrenism, as I believe the teaching of the Brethren on the nature of the Church, the gifts of the Spirit, and unity are a special emphasis they have to share with all the people of God. Under many pressures, Christians today are seeking for life in the Body of Christ in a new way, and here the teaching of the Brethren has been, and will increasingly continue to be, an important element. With this evident concern for the Body of Christ on every hand, one wonders if it is God's purpose for the Church to consider in a deeper and more scholarly way than ever its own nature. If this is true, then, again, I believe the essentials of Brethren teaching must be understood.

The statement that the Reformers recovered the biblical emphasis on doctrine, but not on the church, is surely worthy of some qualifications. The emphasis on the office of the eldership, the recognition that the pastor(s) were teaching elders, the opportunity for a man to discover whether he had the gift of the Holy Spirit in teaching which was allowed for by the interval between licensing and ordination, and the opportunity for the body of believers to recognize this gift by means of the call system seem to indicate that what are usually called the Reformed churches were moving in this direction, although biblical ecclesiology was certainly not their prime concern. It is even well to remember that there is some doubt whether Calvin was actually ever ordained.

It would be interesting to know the men that Thomas and Alexander Campbell were in contact with in England and Scotland. Was it Robert and James Haldane, whose ideas seem somewhat similar? If so, this would draw further attention to two men whose immense influence on nineteenth century evangelical life has too long been unrecognized or underestimated, and who had initially very close links with Edward Irving, and who were very much a part of the search for church renewal out of which the Brethren sprang.

If one is to refer to the descendants of the Campbellites, a little more information would be helpful. In Canada, at least, the group known as Christian Churches, with headquarters in Indianapolis, are also known as the Disciples of Christ, and have been the forgotten third party in what is usually designated as the United-Anglican union scheme. There is a large section of these churches in the United States which have maintained only the most tenuous relations with Indianapolis, jealously guarding their congregational autonomy both as a matter of principle and as a means of expressing their disapprobation of liberalism in high places. These non-co-operating congregations, as they are called, are often evangelical, and participate widely with other evangelical Christians. They operate a number of schools such as Milligan College in Tennessee, Cincinnati Bible Institute and San Jose Bible Institute, and share the usual North American church structure. The Churches of Christ, on the other hand, found primarily in the Texas, Arkansas, Oklahoma area, adhere closer to the original Campbellite pattern although pastors are distinguished from the other elders, teach a form of baptismal regeneration, and are

divided into the instrumental and non-instrumental groups depending on their attitude in congregational music. Harding College in Searcy, Arkansas, and Pepperdine in Los Angeles represent this section.

The interpretation of the early Brethren view of unity strikes me as a pardonable but somewhat unwarranted idealism. It is pardonable because every pressure group that wants to reform and re-invigorate its ageing wine-skins looks for some founding father or initial principle which gives patriarchal sanction and sanctity to its contemporary goals. But often these persons or principles did not become the dominant stream of the movement, and were not even so recognized by the first generation. In the case of the Brethren, this kind of interpretation does not seem much more warrantable than it usually is. A. N. Groves was revered by all as a saint, but for much of the time he was a saint half a world removed, and often not able to put into practice even there his own glorious ideals. And this was not altogether the fault of "the other guys". Darby's doctrine of the ruin of the Church, with all its tendencies to fissiparousness and Phariseism, seems to have been of much more importance ever since the movement jelled, in both its Exclusive and Open wings. Thank God for those around Bristol and elsewhere in England who sought to maintain the Groves approach, but I am not at all sure that they have the right to arrogate to themselves the claim of the original and authentic Brethren position. Nor do I see this pristine doctrine and practice as the dominant motif of the Opens after the Bethesda question, which was only submerged by the baneful emergence of the Needed Truths. If the Open Brethren were so eager about this principle then I would imagine they would have welcomed the Evangelical Alliance, formed after the rupture, and which embodies a number of things the supposed Open position was seeking. But I see not a hint of interest in this opportunity for manifesting unity on what should have been a congenial basis. Admittedly, Open Brethren have been very active more recently in the EA, but I think this represents more those who represent the position of the paper under review.

I also think the statement that the Open Brethren did not follow the path of unity by uniformity but unity in Christ is too idealistic in the light of the practical divisions among the Opens. In Winnipeg, where I grew up, the members of the three leading Open assemblies—St. James, Ebenezer and West End—never, as far as I knew, crossed one another's doorsteps in fellowship. And only some members of the first-mentioned would cooperate with other Christians in any venture. In Vancouver it is the same thing. What fellowship does Open 60th and Main have with Open Granville? It is only a small number of the Open assemblies who espouse the position taken in this paper, and I am by no means convinced that they represent the most authentic strain of Open Brethrenism.

In closing, I would suggest that more work needs to be done on the sociology of the early Brethren. To what extent did Darby's views on the church spread among people in Ireland, where the Established Church was in a most unenviable and moribund position, and in the South-west England diocese of Exeter, which was ruled with an iron hand by Henry Philpotts, who as an old-fashioned, autocratic, orthodox High Churchman

did everything in his power to drive Evangelicals into submission. And to what extent did Müller and Craik's openness depend upon their German and Scottish non-Anglican ancestry, which produced little reaction to the "apostate" Establishment?

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## UNITY ON THE BASIS OF THE COMMON LIFE IN CHRIST

Granville Chapel was fortunate to hear this lecture, and I for one am glad that it is gaining a wider audience through the journal of CBRF. I like it because it combines appreciation of Brethren strengths with a critical appraisal of their weaknesses, places the movement in a wide setting, and singles out for attention a number of key areas.

Of particular interest is the distinction between unity as the expression of a shared life in Christ and unity on the basis of agreement on “a long list of points”. The early Brethren themselves drew this distinction in their critique of existing forms of church life, and it is ironical that they generally failed to maintain their stand on the former as opposed to the latter. The question may be asked, however, whether this is really surprising. Unity on the basis of the common life in Christ is comparatively easy to express in interdenominational or undenominational terms. But when those who are one in Christ come together to form regular church fellowships it is difficult for disagreements to be ignored, particularly if they relate to church structures, forms of worship or even major doctrines. Sometimes they can be relegated to the background (as in the case of *household* baptism among the Exclusives) or even ignored altogether (as sometimes happens—or is in danger of happening—in the case of eschatology among Open Brethren). In some circumstances an uneasy compromise may be reached. Usually, however, one views triumphs at the expense of the other. After all, it is very difficult for opposing views and practices to be canvassed or observed within the same fellowship without endangering its very existence. Polarization on many issues took place early in Brethren history—earlier than Don Tinder seems to imply. And, as everyone knows, but for the Open Brethren insistence on local autonomy, both wings of the movement would undoubtedly have fragmented into rival factions.

Nagging questions persist. Can a local church exist on the basis of joint participation in life in Christ without agreement on a fairly long “list of points”? Have we reacted too strongly against denominationalism? Should we learn to live with it—even within our own “tradition”—by coming to terms with the existence of Brethren churches with differing emphases and varying practices? (Whether we like it or not, they do exist.) Should our main emphasis be the strengthening (or forming) of links of fellowship between churches (Brethren or brethren!) in a given locality?

“Throughout church history the tendency in groups has been to depart from their original ideals”. True, but to what extent should we attempt to perpetuate nineteenth century ideals? If fidelity to Scripture and to Christ is basic, then we are free to submit all other ideals to searching scrutiny. The self-criticism in which Tinder engages is a salutary discipline which could be carried even further. For example, the centrality of the Lord’s Supper in Brethren worship has produced an unbalanced view of worship as being concerned mainly—some would say entirely—with the Cross, or at most the Person of Christ. A large part of the wide sweep of the Biblical concept of worship is overlooked (which may be one reason why many Brethren worship services make little use of Scripture).

The reference to fear of being contaminated is worthy of fuller development. It was probably a major factor in the development of exclusivism, and it is a spectre outside as well as inside Brethren circles today. It seems to arise from a fundamental weakness in some forms of Brethren theology (as in others)—failure to make correct distinctions between the old and new covenants. Ceremonial contamination was certainly possible under the old covenant. But in the light of Mark 7.1-23 and Acts 10.1-16 it is no more than a bogey to those who are under the new covenant.

The Brethren movement could come into its own in the contemporary world if more were prepared to do what Tinder has done—apply its basic concept, the authority of Scripture, to all its lesser concepts—and, facing up to the new demands of the contemporary world in the same way, take action accordingly.

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## A GOOD STREET TO PASS THROUGH

I am honoured to have been asked to discuss Dr. Tinder's lecture. My difficulty in reviewing it is suggested by my private church history: as an "ex-Peeb", a certain small assembly will always be my Mother Church; as a Baptist pastor, I am trying very hard to act upon New Testament principles; as an interested observer, I have a fascination for church history. If the point of view from which I have reviewed the paper never becomes entirely clear, the reader will at least understand probable sources of bias!

I must confess disappointment at the overview of church history which the author has provided. While one recognizes that in a popular lecture there must inevitably be over-simplifications, one would have wished for a fuller review of the Anabaptist and Baptist movements as part of the necessary tapestry upon which the history of Brethren has been woven. While the "Restoration Movement" of the early Nineteenth Century in the United States is important and indeed significant in understanding American frontier religion, it must certainly take second place to the much more extensive work of the frontier Baptists. In reviewing British Baptist history, it is evident that amongst Particular Baptists there was some recognition of the unity of all believers. It is fascinating to observe at about the same time Craik and Müller moved to Bristol, Robert Hall at Broadmead Baptist Church, Bristol, was preaching fellowship with all who know our Lord Jesus Christ.

While the early Brethren movement certainly bore striking witness to that unity of the Body of Christ which is to be recognized in the Christian community, it was not the only movement of its time stressing the unity of the Body of Christ—the Oxford Movement arose at about the same time and involved some of the same families—notably the Newman brothers. That two movements so curiously diverse and yet so remarkably similar should have emerged simultaneously suggests that each had a set of important antecedents in the social, philosophic and theological culture of the day. We are waiting for an adequate comparative review of these two simultaneous and important movements.

Dr. Tinder's paper unintentionally emphasises the illogicality of the Brethren movement. So long as the movement—as in the early days in Dublin and Plymouth—drew Christians from many backgrounds to a common sharing in the Lord's Supper and in Bible study, it could indeed bear witness to the unity to be recognized; as soon as churches were formed on this basis the principle of uniformity was inevitable and so, despite Dr. Tinder's disclaimers, it has persisted ever since in the Brethren movement. No matter how lofty the phrase—and I know of none with a finer Brethren ring than "Meeting in the name of the Lord alone for the breaking of bread"—one recognizes the point of church gathering is the sharing of an ideal. The Brethren movement is thus indistinguishable from all other denominations of believers' churches in its "principles of gathering".

I wish also to take issue with Dr. Tinder in respect to polity—a term I know not usually considered polite amongst Brethren. Brethren claim not to hold the distinction between clergy and laity. On the contrary, in many assemblies there is a self-appointed clerical caste (known as the “oversight”, colloquially) who make decisions for the church in a manner worthy of the most monarchical clergy, and in a way which few clergy in contemporary churches would dare to attempt.

Further, the abuses of clerical titles and positions ought not to blind us to the fact the New Testament makes a clear recognition of “gift” and therefore of function. Brethren in the “Bethesda” tradition have recognized the need for pastor-teachers in the Assembly. The moral influence and real power of such men is in every way comparable to the power and influence of the pastor in a Baptist church.

I differ from Dr. Tinder regarding spontaneity of worship and participation in celebrating the Lord’s Supper. Amongst Brethren there has never been and there never is as spontaneous a celebration as most Brethren would like to assume. In the earliest days in Dublin—as Rowdon reminds us in his compelling history—the services were organized; and in the later Brethren movement the rigidity of liturgical scheduling is not exceeded by the Mass—witness the confusion which takes place when some brother has the temerity to give thanks for the Bread ten minutes early.

I have also many reservations as to the frequency of co-operation between Brethren and other Christians to the degree that is possible. Co-operation is by no means universal and, but for a minority of “open assemblies”, such co-operation is viewed with suspicion.

Finally, I dispute the statement that Brethren have been characterized by a freedom from bondage to ecclesiastical tradition and hierarchy. The hierarchy may be absent—I admit that it is not formalized; the traditions are the more shackling because they are unwritten and informal. While I acknowledge the diversity from assembly to assembly, I find as a Baptist that there is more variation between Baptist churches than between Brethren assemblies. Those assemblies which have discarded tradition are exciting and creative; they are scarcely representative of the larger movement.

Despite the great admiration which I have for the early Brethren movement I can only deplore the exclusivism which I consider to have been inevitable, given the principles which Dr. Tinder emphasizes. And I conclude in words attributed to Dr. Barnardo, “Brethrenism is a good street to pass through, but a poor street to live in”.

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## CHRISTIAN CHURCHES INSTEAD OF BRETHREN ASSEMBLIES

Tinder begins very properly by saying that the distinctive thing about the early Brethren was that they did not make any point of practice or doctrine a shibboleth as far as communion was concerned. Indeed, they went out of their way to arrange their meetings so that any Christian from any denomination could come to their celebration of the Lord's Supper. However, by the end of the paper he has produced four other "distinctives"—none of which to my mind are really distinctive any longer, even if they were once. The priesthood of all believers was discovered before 1830, and certainly informal participation at the Lord's Supper is no longer the preserve of the Brethren (even though this may partly reflect the influence they have had on the church at large). Similarly with co-operation in non-denominational activities, organizations like the Bible Society were in existence before the Brethren, and there are plenty of denominations that join in gladly. The fourth "distinctive" was independence and freedom. This is all very well, but there must be quite as many Christians who have founded a great work of the Spirit who did not start with the Brethren!

My own feeling is that Tinder's earlier observations are the most significant, and if we can recapture something of the original open communion we shall have regained something really worthwhile. A first step would be to arrange our Breaking of Bread at a different time from everybody else's—how about a sort of lunchtime breaking of bread (as simple as possible, to avoid the dangers that the early Corinthians fell into), where the bread and wine would be part of a fellowship meal?

One difficulty about this is that today there exist a large number of local evangelical fellowships that unite Christians of different denominations and organize "united communion services" from time to time. If for that reason the old quest of the early brethren is redundant, then perhaps the idea of the Brethren having a distinctive message for the church today is redundant too. Far be it from me to disagree with Tinder's exhortation at the end of his paper; it is all very applicable to Brethren assemblies and indeed all Christian churches. If however Brethren could get away from the idea that they have a distinctive testimony to the church and realize that all these "distinctives" are to be found elsewhere as well, then Brethren would have made the greatest contribution of all to the destruction of denominational barriers, barriers which they claim to abhor. They would in so doing have been prepared to be labelled as Christian Churches instead of Brethren Assemblies.

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## TO LISTEN AND OBEY, NOT TO PRONOUNCE JUDGMENT

“The Unity that the Brethren sought was to exhibit a unity that was already there, rather than to create one by seeking people to come to agree on a long list of points”, is surely the key statement of this study. That was indeed their distinctive, and to the extent some of them have followed it they have been a testimony for God to fellow Christians and to the world down the years. The disaster that overtook the movement was occasioned, as the author points out, by swerving from this Spirit-led reaching out for fellowship with other believers to a requirement of conforming to “a long list of points”.

Is recovery possible: such recovery as will give answer to our Lord's petition of John 17: 20-21? Yes, to the extent that the four principles of Open Brethren which the author touches on are adhered to or reaffirmed in practice. For these principles express the unity of all believers. They are, in brief: (1) Abolition of distinction between so-called clergy and laity, without ignoring the diversity of gifts given by the Holy Spirit for the edifying of the whole body of believers. (2) Observance of the Lord's Supper as a constant reminder of the price of our redemption and that by this sacrificial death, burial and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ we have through the Holy Spirit been amalgamated into one body in the Lord. (3) Co-operation to the degree possible without compromise of truth with all believers, irrespective of denominational affiliations. (4) Freedom from bondage to ecclesiastical tradition that can be as effective as an acknowledged hierarchy in stifling initiative and any movement of the Spirit to meet the issues of our day.

In passing it is worthy of note that at the beginning of the church age, while the faith of the believers at Rome was spoken of throughout the world and the Gospel was sounded out over a wide area by the church at Thessalonica, the great bulk of the work of pioneering evangelism was done by the apostles and their helpers and by individuals and teams who were not delegated to the task by their respective local churches, but on their own initiative as led by the Holy Spirit.

It is perhaps significant that, with the sole exception of the letter from the elders and brethren at Jerusalem to Gentile brethren confirming their liberty (Acts 15), no part of the New Testament consists of any communication from a local church or company of churches. The role of the churches is to listen and obey, not to pronounce judgment beyond their own immediate membership.

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## UNITY OF THE HOLY, CATHOLIC AND APOSTOLIC CHURCH

I should like to respond as an “insider” to Donald Tinder’s most interesting paper, “The Brethren Movement in the World Today”. I grew up in a family associated with two different groups of Exclusive Brethren, including the Raven-Taylor division. When I was in university the latter excommunicated me for meeting with students in the Inter-Varsity Fellowship, and they excommunicated my parents for taking my part in the dispute. Suddenly we found ourselves as a family in the “Open meetings”, realizing how restricted our conception of the Church had been all those years.

It takes a long time to reach any kind of objectivity with such a background. Because there was sincere faith and not simple legalism in my own family, there are to this day warm memories and lessons and truths learned early which still find use and give strength to faith. I still have a feeling of warmth, of security, of belonging to something very odd and yet very special, in Christian community. On the other hand, it also seems somehow absurd that people can acquire such strange notions of godly life and faith.

I think, however, that this early experience did give me a rather ecumenical outlook right from the beginning, and in the years that have followed I have never been able to look at the Open Brethren as “the correct position”—whoever wants the truth must fellowship with us—and so on. Rather, it was clear to me that if the Brethren movement has strengths they are to be found in the principles of unity and liberty in the Spirit of God, and not in a position or a fellowship as such.

For this reason I want to underscore a point made by Dr. Tinder in his paper. I have had ample opportunity in the twenty-odd years of my adult life to join a denominational church. I cannot say that I remain in the Brethren fellowship from any convictions that the denominations are “wrong”, or from any particular devotion to the ecclesiastical and liturgical simplicity of the Brethren. In fact, I rather like the Anglican liturgy, though I certainly am at home among Brethren. Nor is it the peculiar emphases of Brethren theology which attract me, even though I don’t differ too strongly with most of them; I’ve learned quite a bit from many different streams in the Church, including the Roman Catholics at some points. Nor do I have a particularly severe emphasis on “the principles on which we gather”—which some Brethren are forever congratulating themselves upon—though I do happen to believe that the four main issues and ideals marking Brethren, which Donald Tinder mentioned, are significant and valuable to the life of the Church. But I am well aware that church life and fellowship have existed and do exist even where these points are not clearly given recognition.

As far as I am concerned, the one principle which *really* matters is the unity of the holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. I think Dr. Tinder has correctly singled this out as the vital issue in the whole Brethren movement: “the unity the Brethren sought was to exhibit a unity that was already

there, rather than to create one by seeking people to agree on a long list of points". The strength of that principle is, that when Christians obey Christ by doing that, they soon find that there is communication in their fellowship, and they can begin to work out their differences and understand one another in real trust.

As important as the fellowship of the Brethren themselves has been the way the idea has reappeared in new contexts since, a wine too new for old bottles. Enlightened Brethren have played a significant role in many transdenominational types of enterprise—often a pioneering role—because they understood what the Brethren movement really means. I think of organizations like the Inter-Varsity Fellowship, the Union Missions in many city cores, or a new enterprise such as Regent College in Vancouver, Canada. These are not "Brethren" works, nor in many cases were they first conceived only by Brethren, but their success and vitality can in no small way be traced to the participation of Brethren in them and the influence of Brethren ideals and ways.

The challenge to the Brethren today is whether, by holding in a living way to that original principle, that the unity is already present, they will continue to influence the whole life of the Church; for, though they themselves are necessarily a limited and particular fellowship, yet the basis of the fellowship, and their real function as members in it, is the bearing witness to, and diffusing the idea of, the unity which is ours from God, in the entire Body of Christ.

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## THE NEED TO BE RIGHT

A question in two parts comes to mind as I ponder the remarks of Donald Tinder. The first part is, why do I find these principles he has enunciated so thrilling and the practice of our assemblies often so unattractive? The reason, it would seem, is that an unspoken principle is frequently at work in our midst, namely, the need to be right. The results of this need are seen in: (1) The restriction of our freedom to search the Scriptures to discover more of the truth of God with a view to experiencing deeper fellowship with Him. The Exclusive outlook is manifest among us in that some Brethren foster a particular system of theology or biblical interpretation, attended by a suspicion of all others. I suspect, e.g., that a lot of the *emotional* reaction to the current charismatic revival—and I am not a proponent of that movement—stems from the fear that perhaps there is something in which we are mistaken. (2) Fear of education, especially theological education, lingers with us. Our ecclesiology, after all, may not be able to stand in the crosswinds of theological debate. (3) A strong, emotional attachment is exhibited toward the cultural setting in which a given assembly may be found, to the degree that at times Brethren appear almost the opposite of the ancient Athenians, i.e., spending all their time in nothing else but preventing something new from being told or heard. Has the Holy Spirit nothing new to teach us from the Scriptures in the twentieth century that He could not teach the Brethren of the nineteenth simply because they were men of their time? Going back to first principles must not involve the uncritical acceptance of nineteenth century outlooks and methods.

The second part is an extension of the first. Are we who are concerned to foster the original principles of the Open Brethren reckoning with the fact that we, as well as the Christians mentioned above, feel the pressure of the need to be right? Consider the four principles in this light. (1) If God does not seem to pay attention to the categories of clergy and laity, it would also appear that He does not pay much attention to the lack of them. Witness the effective work being done by clergymen and those laymen who believe in that distinction which is repudiated by us Brethren. (2) If our manner of celebrating the Lord's Supper is found wanting by other Christians, presumably it is because their spiritual life is not being deepened at such a meeting. (To say all such Christians are spiritually immature is, at the very least, shortsighted.) They find that deepening in a more ordered service. (3) Other Christian communities not only accept all believers at the Lord's table, they often take the lead in transdenominational activities, and (4) have a sweeping disregard for hierarchical structure. In view of these ways in which the Lord is at work among other Christian groups, it behoves us to be delivered from our smugness.

My point is not that we in the assemblies have nothing to say to the Christian world. I concur with Dr. Tinder that we need to reaffirm the principles of the early Open Brethren. My point is that in the continual re-examination that is suggested, we must be aware of the motivating power of the desire to be right. It was present in the dispute of Darby,

Newton, and others. It is present amongst those Brethren who disagree with us. It is present among us ourselves. While we continue our discussion of Brethren principles and the Scriptures generally without due regard to the effect that our desire to be right can have on the results of that discussion, we lay ourselves open for the inroads of the Exclusive type of church life and the quarrels that inevitably arise from it. "Human nature being what it is", as Dr. Tinder put it, is an ever-present factor in our endeavours.

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## PLYMOUTH BRETHREN (CHRISTIAN BRETHREN)

by A. C. PIEPKORN

This brief study was prepared by Arthur Carl Piepkorn, graduate professor of systematic theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, U.S.A. and first appeared in *Concordia Theological Monthly*.

“Plymouth Brethren” is the popular designation for a religious movement that originated in England and Ireland in the mid-1820s. The early adherents were unhappy about the baleful effects of the intimate connection that existed between the Established Church and the government, about what they considered unspiritual ecclesiasticism and dead formalism in worship, and about the denominationalism that divided Christians from one another. They took the self-designation “Brethren” directly from the Sacred Scriptures; other names by which they were known were Christians, Believers, and Saints. The name “Plymouth Brethren” derives from the fact that the largest and most important of the early congregations, or “assemblies”, met in Plymouth, England. In the British Isles and Canada today many assemblies of “Open” Brethren (see below) call themselves Christian Brethren; in Canada they have registered themselves under this name with the Canadian government. The bulk of the Brethren in the United States call themselves Assemblies, and some use the designation “assemblies of Christians who meet in the name of the Lord Jesus alone”, but there is a growing tendency to answer to the name “Plymouth Brethren”. Nevertheless, the movement has never formally accepted any designation.

Early Brethren leaders included Anthony Norris Groves (1795-1853), an Exeter dentist who became the first of a long line of Brethren foreign missionaries, the German-born philanthropist-preacher George Müller (1805-1898) of Bristol orphanage fame, and, most prominently, John Nelson Darby (1800-1882). Darby, trained for the law and a graduate of Dublin’s Trinity College at 19, was briefly a clergyman of the Anglican Church of Ireland. By 1828 he had associated himself with the Brethren. He spent the rest of his life preaching, writing prolifically, and travelling tirelessly in behalf of the Brethren movement.

Beginning in 1848, a series of “divergencies” and secessions divided the movement. A split in the Plymouth Assembly led in 1848 to a fundamental division that persists to this day. It separated the “Open” Brethren from the “Exclusive” Brethren. In 1848 Open Brethren believed, as they generally continue to do, that they might receive to the Lord’s Table any believer who is personally sound in faith, even though the congregation or assembly from which he came might harbour erroneous teaching. The Exclusive Brethren, under the informal leadership of Darby, regarded “separation from evil as God’s principle of unity” and held that to receive to the Lord’s Table a brother from an assembly in which error is taught, even though he might personally reject it, disqualified the receiving assembly from participation in what often came to be called the “Circle of Fellowship”. This circle is a joint body of mutually approved assemblies, with the decision of one binding on all; the influence of an individual leader in such a body is of course sometimes very great.

The only formal division among Open Brethren took place in 1889. Limited largely to the British Isles, it resulted in the organization of a relatively small number (fewer than 100) of "Needed Truth" assemblies.<sup>1</sup> Otherwise all the schisms, from 1881 on, have taken place among the Exclusive Brethren. These divisions reflect the seriousness with which the Exclusive Brethren take their role of representing visibly the purity of doctrine and life that the church is to have.

The divisions relate more to church discipline than to doctrine. Although they admit a degree of variety in teaching, the Brethren are still all in substantial doctrinal agreement.

While many assemblies and individuals have published statements of their beliefs, the Brethren regard and refuse creeds as unnecessary. They look on the Bible as verbally inspired and inerrant in the original writings, and they take it as their only authoritative guide. They are Trinitarians. They stress both the deity and the complete humanity of Christ, as well as His virgin birth, resurrection, ascension, and intercession. They teach that God created the first human beings in His own image, but that as a result of sin all human beings have a sinful nature and are guilty, lost and without hope in themselves, and that they have incurred both physical death and the spiritual death of separation from God. In His amazing love God provided mankind with a Saviour in the person of His Son. Few Brethren would affirm a predestination to reprobation; rather, they hold, God's will is for the salvation of all human beings, but He will not force anyone to receive this salvation. A right relationship with God comes alone through faith in Christ's all-sufficient sacrifice and shed blood, apart from works. Christ's own resurrection is proof that God accepted His atoning work. Those who receive Christ by faith are in that act born again and become children of God. Good works are the fruit of faith. A true believer cannot be lost; he should be assured of his everlasting salvation, not on the basis of his feelings or his experience, but on the basis of God's Word. His life should be one of devotion to Christ and of separation from all that is evil in the world.

The doctrine of the last things plays a prominent role in Brethren thinking. Christ, they hold, will come again to the earth's air to catch up ("rapture") all believers, living and dead. The Great Tribulation of Revelation 6-18 will follow, climaxed by Christ's return to establish His millennial reign. During the millennium the redeemed and reconstituted nation of Israel will play a special role among the peoples under the sovereignty of Christ and His raptured church. A short-lived rebellion will close the millennium, and the eternal age of the new heavens and the new earth will begin. The saved of all ages will enter eternal life, and the un-

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<sup>1</sup>Variously known as the Churches of God in the Fellowship of the Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Churches of God in the British Isles and Overseas, this group has six churches in Canada and one in the United States (Trinidad, Colorado) with a total North American membership estimated at less than 300.

saved will undergo eternal punishment and separation from God in hell<sup>2</sup>.

The Brethren's doctrine of the church reflects Darby's spiritualizing ecclesiology and the central dispensationalist distinction that he made between God's dealings with the church and with Israel. Unlike Israel, the true church does not include all that are born into it but only reborn believers. To maintain the relative purity of their assemblies, Brethren require candidates for full fellowship to confess their faith in Christ as Lord and Saviour and give satisfactory evidence of the new birth. The Brethren receive them as members of Christ and do not think of them as having joined an ecclesiastical denomination. Brethren recognize that the overwhelming majority of those in the universal church are not Brethren.

Again unlike Israel, the church does not have a separate class of priests. This underlies the stress of the Brethren on the priesthood of all believers and their refusal to distinguish between the clergy and the laity. "Personal gift and spiritual power" from the Holy Spirit are proof of a call to ministry among the assemblies or on their behalf. Many Brethren preachers and teachers are not engaged in full-time ministries. Even those who do devote their full time to ministry are neither ordained nor salaried nor addressed by titles like "Reverend" or "Father". The means of support of these full-time workers are normally voluntary contributions from those co-religionists who care to "fellowship" with them, rather than stipulated remuneration. Unless they are engaged in missionary work at home or abroad, most full-time workers travel over a larger or smaller area. Brethren acknowledge and honor as elders and overseers (even though they may not always use the terms) the pious, gifted, and normally self-supporting individuals who provide for the assembly's spiritual needs. Brethren reject the idea of one person heading the congregation ("one-man ministry") as unbiblical and as inhibiting the exercise of the gifts that the Holy Spirit has imparted, but at the same time they do not practice an "any-man ministry". During the last generation a growing number of Open assemblies have invited full-time workers to associate themselves with a given assembly particularly, and these persons can become very much like conventional pastors. But even these men rarely do all the preaching or wholly give up itinerating, and they have no sacramental role.

The larger urban Open assemblies have often built attractive and functional "Bible Chapels". The smaller or rural Open assemblies and the

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<sup>2</sup>The doctrine of the last things here outlined is more or less common to dispensationalists generally and is not the exclusive teaching of Brethren. While modern dispensationalism traces its ancestry by way of the *Scofield Reference Bible* back to John Nelson Darby, there are today many more dispensationalists in Baptist, Dunkard, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, and independent churches than there are in Brethren assemblies. In the Brethren community itself there is not complete unanimity in this area. Most Open Brethren are dispensationalists, but many in the younger generation seem to give it less than a central position in their thinking. In the Brethren assemblies of Great Britain there is a tradition going back to George Müller and others of his generation that does not accept dispensationalism.

Exclusive assemblies frequently call their meeting places "Gospel Halls"; some meet in homes.

The Brethren observe two symbolical ordinances, baptism and the Lord's Supper. Open Brethren generally practice only believer's baptism by immersion. Exclusive Brethren allow and in some cases prefer infant baptism, also by immersion, of the children of parents in fellowship ("household baptism") on the analogy of Old Testament circumcision. Some Exclusive assemblies permit believer's baptism for those families who prefer it. In no case do Brethren think of baptism as conferring conversion. Brethren celebrate the Lord's Supper ("the breaking of bread") at a separate meeting—the only meeting at which Brethren take an offering—every Lord's Day, usually in the morning. Any male who feels led to do so by the Holy Spirit may pray publicly, read and comment on a passage of the Bible, suggest a hymn to be sung, give thanks for the bread and wine, or pass the elements. Women may not speak in these meetings.

The Brethren aim at "apostolic simplicity" in their worship; there is no formal ritual or stated order of service. Brethren Sunday schools and preaching services resemble the parallel activities of nonliturgical denominations.

Open and Exclusive Brethren came separately to North America after the middle of the 19th century. Itinerant preachers from Scotland and Ireland planted most of the early Open assemblies. Darby himself visited the Exclusive assemblies several times. After his death the latter began to divide, sometimes because of issues on this continent, sometimes because of controversies in the British Isles. The United States Bureau of the Census used arbitrarily chosen Roman numerals to differentiate between them, and this mode of reference has persisted.

Brethren I ("Grant Brethren") were restricted to North America. They began in 1884, when about half of the Exclusives sided with Frederick W. Grant (1834-1901), whom the British assemblies had censured indirectly. From the 1920s on this group moved more and more toward an Open position. By the mid-1930s many of their urban assemblies had become Open; the remainder had formed Brethren VII and Brethren VIII. Their historic publishing house, Loizeaux Brothers, now of Neptune, N.J., the activities of which three generations of the same family have directed since 1876, became Open at this time.

Brethren II are the historically Open Brethren, with which many of the assemblies formerly a part of Brethren I have associated themselves. They generally welcome any born-again believers, regardless of denomination, to the Lord's table on the basis of a common *life* rather than a common *light*. They have no "Circles of Fellowship" and hold that discipline is a local matter for which each assembly is directly responsible to the ascended Lord of the church. They generally practice believer's baptism, although some of the assemblies that were part of Brethren I still permit "household baptism". Increasingly during the last generation a large percentage of these Brethren have had fellowship with individual Christians in the denominational church bodies and have participated in joint endeavours,

such as Billy Graham Crusades, the Gideons, the Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship, and Christian Business Men's Committees with other theologically conservative groups. Because they stress the independence of each local assembly, there is considerable diversity in practice. A tenth or more of the assemblies in this group stress the "old paths" and view with concern the cited joint activities with other Christians, along with such activities and agencies as summer camps, a Bible school, and "expensive chapels". Although such assemblies appear in the same lists with other Brethren II assemblies, they have preachers, conferences, and magazines that serve them alone.

Open Brethren have no central organization, but various service agencies have arisen on a regional or national basis in response to felt needs. *Letters of Interest*\*, a monthly periodical, reports on the activities both of the assemblies of Open Brethren and of about 450 domestic full-time workers; its staff represents the Brethren with the national government concerned in such matters as the endorsement of military chaplains. The closely related Stewards Foundation in Chicago lends money for chapel construction or remodelling, issues bonds, and provides annuities for investors. It operates a few hospitals that are staffed as far as possible with Christian doctors and nurses and with one or more full-time chaplains, and it has become connected in an advisory way with a few Christian retirement homes. *The Fields* is another service organization; it publishes a magazine by that name that reports on the activities of over 1,200 Brethren foreign missionaries (some 400 of them commended by North American assemblies, the remainder by Brethren assemblies in other lands) in over 50 countries. In a purely advisory fashion, *The Fields* assists these missionaries in other ways as well, for instance by negotiating with foreign governments, receiving and transmitting funds, arranging for transportation, and aiding with furloughs. "Christian Missions in Many Lands" is a frequent designation for Open Brethren missionary activity. *Literature Crusades*, Prospect Heights, Illinois, is a newer, aggressive recruiter of young people for short-term urban missionary activity around the world; many of them become permanent missionaries. Another of its activities is sponsoring a World Missions Conference on a triennial basis.

In general, Open ministers are the only ones who go to the graduate theological seminaries, usually conservative interdenominational schools like Trinity Seminary in Deerfield, Ill., Dallas Theological Seminary, and Fuller Theological Seminary. Proportionately the Open Brethren send out many more missionaries than the Exclusive Brethren and are more likely to have a higher percentage (sometimes a clear majority) of communicants from non-Brethren family backgrounds.

Brethren III, called the "Continental Brethren" because of the relative numerical strength of their European counterparts, came into being when the Brethren who had rejected Grant divided among themselves in 1890 over the ministry of a British leader, F. E. Raven (died 1905). Brethren III

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\* Now *Interest*.

rejected Raven. In 1926 they united with the so-called "Kelly Brethren", a group that had come out of a schism in 1881 and that was limited to England. In 1953 Brethren VII joined this worldwide circle.

Brethren IV, called the "Raven Brethren" because they supported Raven in the 1890 schism, were at least until recently the largest group of Exclusive Brethren worldwide, although not in North America. Raven had a mystical inclination and was not always precise in his doctrinal formulation. When he died, a New York businessman, James Taylor Sr. (died 1953), gradually assumed unofficial leadership among Raven's followers, but certain doctrinal novelties that he introduced accelerated the alienation of the Raven Brethren from other Exclusives. His son succeeded the elder Taylor as unofficial leader of this group. The junior Taylor's demands for increasingly rigorous separation from other Christians, for withdrawal from professional associations, for resigning offices in business corporations, for disposing of stock in them, and for refusing to eat meals with anyone with whom the Brethren concerned were not in fellowship led to the schism that produced Brethren X. The leadership of the two Taylors has given Brethren IV the name "Taylor Brethren". In the United States the Taylor Brethren are strongest in New York, in the older industrial areas as far west as Detroit and Chicago, and on the West Coast. They are also well represented in Canada.<sup>3</sup>

Brethren V, served by Bible Truth Publishers, Oak Park, Ill., is probably the largest Exclusive group in North America. They withdrew from Brethren III in 1909, when they sided with the Tunbridge Wells assembly in a jurisdictional dispute in England. Most of the English counterparts of this group entered the Kelly-Continental group in 1940, so that the "Tunbridge Wells Brethren" are now centred in North America and in certain foreign countries where they carry on missions. They hold that whole "Circles of Fellowship" may not properly re-unite, but the reconciliation must take place on an individual basis.

Brethren VI, the "Glanton Brethren", no longer exist in North America as a group. They withdrew from the Raven Brethren in 1908 in a dispute about centralizing tendencies within this group. Never a large circle, the North American assemblies immediately began to look for ties with the Grant Brethren; Brethren VIII absorbed them completely by the end of the 1930s.

Brethren VII withdrew from group I in 1928. The occasion for the schism was this group's rejection of the ministry of a visiting English Glanton Brethren preacher, James Boyd, and by its advocacy of the case of an aggrieved Philadelphia businessman, C. A. Mory. In 1953 Brethren VII united with Brethren III.

Brethren VIII, served by the Erie (Pennsylvania) Bible Truth Depot, began in the late 1920s as the Exclusive remnant of Brethren I, after the

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<sup>3</sup>See Bryan R. Wilson, "The Exclusive Brethren: A Case Study in the Evolution of a Sectarian Ideology", in the volume that he edited, *Patterns of Sectarianism: Organization and Ideology in Social and Religious Movements* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1967).

Boyd and Mory controversies had caused many Grant Brethren assemblies to re-examine their principles and to become Open. At this time Brethren VIII linked up more closely with the Glanton Brethren in England. The most prominent preacher of the Brethren VIII circle was A. E. Booth (died 1950). Brethren VIII and Brethren III are now carrying on conversations looking to the possible union of the two groups.

Brethren IX is a small circle that withdrew from Brethren VIII around 1949, supporting a preacher by the name of Ames in his distrust of the teaching and practice of the British Glanton Brethren.

Brethren X withdrew from the Taylor Brethren around 1960 because of their dissatisfaction with the pronouncements of the younger Taylor. They consist of a few assemblies that maintain ties with a number of overseas assemblies of former Taylor Brethren who have not found their way into other congregations.

There may perhaps be other very small groups in the United States and Canada that have withdrawn from one or the other of the circles listed.

There are over 700 Open assemblies in the United States and over 350 in Canada, with an estimated 60,000 communicants. Information about the Exclusive assemblies is harder to come by. A responsible estimate puts the total number of Exclusive assemblies in the United States and Canada at probably no more than 300 with a total of less than 10,000 communicants.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>The estimates in this paragraph are for 1970. Students of comparative theology regularly lament the difficulty of obtaining authoritative information about the Brethren.

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