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THE MESSAGE OF BRETHREN IN THE CHURCH UNIVERSAL

by F. Roy Coad

READ - JOHN 21: 17 - 22.

The subject of this paper is vast, and almost pretentious. For that reason, we should notice that the passage which has been cited contains four important pointers to the Will of God:-

First there is the only satisfactory foundation for obedience - personal devotion to Christ. 'Lovest thou Me? ... Thou knowest that I love Thee'.

Second there is the way obedience is expressed - in serving others. 'You love Me? ... Then, feed My sheep'.

Third there is the context of obedience. Changing circumstances are the opportunity for new aspects of obedience. We must work out our obedience and follow Him, even though others gird us and carry us whither we would not - even to death itself.

Fourth there is the simplicity of obedience. It does not criticise the path of another: but looks only to its own. 'If I will that he ... what is that to thee? Follow thou Me'.

Today there are two great issues before the Church: one internal and the other external. Internally, there is the issue of Christian Unity. Externally, there is that of the relevance of the Gospel. The first issue is highlighted by the increasing strength of the ecumenical movement, particularly since the World Council of Churches was formed in 1948. The second challenges us in the blatant success of secular materialism: whether in the triumphs of communism, the stridency of nationalism, or the self-indulgence of western society.

Unity and Relevance. In the face of those two immense issues, this paper examines the question as to whether we, as a movement, have any distinctive word for the present day.

We can focus our answer on something which Anthony Norris Groves wrote in 1834. 'I am so sure of the truth of those blessed principles the Lord has taught me, that I glory in their propagation. Simple obedience to Christ alone; recognition of Christ alone in my brother, as the Alpha and Omega of terms of communion; lastly, unreserved devotion to Christ alone'. Here, in general terms, is the germ of an answer. To Relevance - 'simple obedience to Christ alone': the Gospel worked out in daily, ordinary life, until men are compelled to acknowledge its relevance. To Unity - the grand simplicity of Christ - 'Recognition of Christ alone in my brother, as the Alpha and Omega of terms of communion'. And, to unite them, the basic principle of 'unreserved devotion to Christ alone'.

With those as the generalities - generalities, thank God, not peculiar to Brethren - let us look for a more detailed answer.

The Unity of all believers was one of the strongest principles of all schools of early Brethren. It has often been remarked that our Christian faith is full of paradoxes, and one of them is the tension which exists in practice between the ideal of the realised unity of all God's people, and the ideal of a pure Church. The disputes among early Brethren left the movement which had started with such a sense of the unity of God's people, with an even stronger emphasis on the importance of doctrine. In the result, the perpetual tragedy of Brethren has been to find their expression of church life at that very spot where the tension between the two conflicting ideals of unity and purity is felt the worst. In passing, we can notice that this very tension lies behind current attitudes toward the ecumenical movement, in which many evangelicals feel that a show of unity is being sought at the cost of far too much indifference to doctrine. For this very reason, we may have something to say to our brethren in Christ.

Brethren have sought to solve the dilemma in two main ways. Darby, with his teaching that separation from evil is God's principal of unity, sought to find a solution in the holiness of God. Unity can be found, he taught, only if first there is a common renunciation of evil - in which term he included doctrinal error. Despite Darby's rejection of the visible Church as ruined, this solution worked out as something very similar to the attitude which extreme high churchmen still take. He opened his arms wide to all who would take his position, but felt bound to reject all those who, however sincerely, could not do so; and thus, in his view, compromised with evil. In brief: accept my views, or there can be no discussion between us. So Darby in practice reconciled the two ideals only by evacuating that of unity of all real meaning. We know how his extreme followers have reduced this position to an absurdity, which has offended many Christian consciences that are sensitive to their brother's needs.

The early leaders of Open Brethren found a very different answer. The clue to their answer is found in one obvious fact: that the blessing of God is plainly bestowed on different congregations of His people, with apparent disregard of their denominational labels or their forms of church order. Reading the New Testament in the light of this fact, men such as Groves and Craik came to the conclusion that there was one basic characteristic of a true local church: the experienced presence of God in a congregation of His people. Church order and denominational links might be important - and some such matters they considered very important indeed - but they are irrelevant to this matter of church-hood. In other words, these Brethren were simply taking up the classic principle of the gathered church, as Baptists and Congregationalists had also recognised it, and were making it their instrument of Christian unity. If the presence of Christ was plain in

a congregation of His people: there was a local church to be recognised as such. Other matters, such as denominational affiliation and forms of worship, were altogether secondary. To use a Latin expression - 'ubi Spiritus, ibi ecclesia' or, to go back to Ignatius, the father of episcopacy, himself - 'where Jesus may be, there is the catholic church'.

We do not claim that these brethren have said the last word. Indeed, Mr. H. L. Ellison's articles in the earlier 1962 issues of "The Witness" showed a radical development of this outlook, which has even more exciting implications for the subject of Unity. But so far as we have gone, we can begin to formulate the tentative answer to our problem.

It is tempting to follow the exclusives, and to charge these brethren with an error opposite to that of Darby's: with emphasising unity by deprecating purity. This would be to misrepresent their position. Purity was as important to these teachers as to Darby, and was to be safeguarded by a proper local discipline and government: but they realised that on their understanding of the gathered church, each individual could have no responsibility or mandate extending beyond the limit of the local church with which he associated himself. As Groves' widow preserves for us his characteristic teaching - 'People must come to my house if they wish to know the kind of discipline I adopt in my own family. No one would make another responsible for the evils in a house in which he was only a visitor'. On the other hand, in my public expression of unity with all the true people of God, Groves wrote in 1828, 'I therefore know no distinction, but am ready to break the bread and drink the cup of holy joy with all who love the Lord and will not lightly speak evil of His name. I feel every saint to be a holy person because Christ dwells in him, and manifests Himself where he worships; and though his faults be as many as the hairs of his head, my duty still is, with my Lord, to join him as a member of the mystical body, and to hold communion and fellowship with him in any work of the Lord in which he may be engaged'.

Let us go one step further, and apply this principle to the situation today. Around each local church are many other churches. Every such congregation in which Christ reveals Himself is thereby granted the imprimatur of Christ Himself. Each such congregation is the same concern to Him as is my own congregation. What must be my duty in relation to such a congregation?

We, as local independent churches, can only meet this problem at the local level. But what an opportunity and what freedom our very independence gives us! Provided that we in our own churches are absolutely loyal to the truths we treasure, we need not fear to go in and to bear witness to the practical outworking of Christian love and unity in every conceivable way, and to use for that purpose any instrument and association that does not require of us that we surrender some portion of our autonomy - which is not autonomy, but direct submission of

conscience to Christ alone.

The winds of change are blowing. Like it or not, the pressure of ecumenicity is growing: and its strength is just this, that the truth of the unity of all believers is a call which every one of us hears in his own conscience - and sometimes our consciences are uneasy.

Already posters are appearing on churches around us - 'Oikoumene: we belong to the World Council of Churches'. There will be no such poster outside our church building; and it is just here that the pressure of ecumenicity hurts. Yet what men think of us is in our own hands. Will we be regarded as an isolationist little group? Worse - as one of the strange cults? Or will they say - 'At least we know this about those folk - how they love Christ, and how warmhearted they are to all His people'. Other men are girding us, and perhaps they are carrying us whither we would not. Have we, in that situation, the courage to follow Him?

I have said little on the World Council of Churches itself, because it is really irrelevant to the points which I have been making. Evangelical misgivings are many and notorious: but it is for us to show that mere organisational union is irrelevant to unity. Whatever may be the position to which we are forced in other contexts, in the context of the local church we can have no answer but a local one. National and supra-national associations are meaningless: but at the local 'grass-roots' of unity we are free. Within our individual congregation there must be purity: but in our associations with all others we can only take to heart the maxim of Scripture - 'What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common'.

So we come to the second issue before the Church today - the external issue of the relevance in our modern world of the Gospel we preach. Here as Brethren we have one enormous advantage: our thinking is conditioned, not by the conception of a separate order of clergy, but by that of a church of men and women equal before God in their callings, secular and sacred. Other denominations have had this insight - but sometimes the pressures of professionalism tempt them so easily to let it slip. How we ought to show the Gospel living among men, working iteself out in the common life of men! We are all of us common or garden men and women, finding our place in a world where all men, to take the words of the author of 'The Gospel Blimp', 'work and play, raise children, buy automobiles and face the devil'.

What have we done with our special privilege? Let us face it: instead of showing the Gospel as a living force in all of life, secular as well as sacred, we have often tried to turn all Christians into pocket clergymen. We have turned our opportunities inside out. It is not without significance that the later ritualistic books of the Pentateuch have been prized reading among us - while the prophets, with

with out brother in Christ wherever he may be, and which allows the fullest scope to the gifts which Christ has given, in whomsoever they may be found.

What might we have done with that freedom! What have we done with it? Too often we have made ourselves a byword. In the biography of Barnardo - 'Father of Nobody's Children', we can see how the freedom of his Brethren connections permitted him in the early days to go out into the slums and start a social revolution, firmly anchored to the preaching of the Gospel, at a time when the older churches were often ready only to restrict and discourage. Yet Barnardo, after seventeen years of his work, left Brethren for good. Consider others who have been lost. An independent and critical thinker like F. W. Newman, repelled first by the inflexibility of his 'Irish clergyman' as he calls Darby - and ending in an abyss of dismal disbelief. The gifted Edmund Gosse, revolting from a narrow minded restrictionism (of 'Open' Brethren) into the loose literary society of his day. An inspired mystic such as Andrew Jukes, turning, in revulsion from the harshness of judgment he found among Brethren, to the vagueness of speculation. Perhaps it is unfair to saddle such failures on Brethren: perhaps they went out from us, because they were not of us. Can we be so sure? How many have been lost to our witness - to any sort of witness - because our God was too small?

The winds of change are blowing. Other men are binding us, and carrying us whither we would not. Shall we pray that in this eleventh hour the Holy Spirit will yet embolden us to be large enough, and bold enough, and our vision clear enough, to grasp the will of our great God, and serve our fellow men? We bring to that service 'THE FOUR FREEDOMS OF THE BRETHERN' -

- The freedom of the Word of God in my thinking.
- The freedom of the Lord Christ in my living.
- The freedom of the Spirit in my worship and service.
- The freedom of the whole Church in my fellowship.

their stirring calls to justice and righteousness in the common dealings of men with men, have remained as uncut pages of our Bibles (except where they add a recondite twist to our favourite piece of eschatology).

Let me quote from an unexpected source to show the importance of this. 'It is obvious that, if the Christian witness is to penetrate into all those areas where the work of the world is carried on, it must be carried there by laymen. They alone can bring Christian judgment to bear upon all the issues of life in the spheres of industry and commerce, scientific research and social organisation, and all the other activities which make up the work-a-day world. Their meeting points in the secular world can become real opportunities for the witness of a living Church in the midst of a busy world's life.

"To be truly effective, lay testimony must proceed from a thorough understanding of the Gospel, so that it may be clearly and forcefully articulated in language which the hearers can readily comprehend and which they will at once recognise to be relevant to their personal and social conditions. Only Laymen can speak to their fellows in terms of their common involvement in the work upon which they are engaged, and can demonstrate that the Gospel of Christ is highly relevant to this actual situation and not merely to some remote 'church' sphere or after-life".

"The Pastor and the layman must learn to work as a team, each recognising that the other has an essential ministry and gift of grace for his own special task in the one Body of Christ. There is an urgent need for all church members to recover the true meaning of certain words; to learn that the laity is really the Laos, that is, the whole people of God in the world, including of course those who have been ordained: to learn that ministry means any kind of service by which a Christian, exercising his particular skill and gift, however humble, helps his fellow-Christian or his fellow-men in the name of Christ".

The quotations are taken from 'New Delhi Speaks' - a report issued by the World Council of Churches itself: and their very source emphasises the importance of the contribution we can make to vital Christian witness.

We bring vital gifts to the service of the Church Universal. We bring a church outlook which historically took its first roots from the one foundation of deep personal devotedness to the Lord Jesus Christ. That means that we bring a witness which is absolutely loyal to His Word and His Gospel as that Word brings it to us. It ought to mean that we also bring the utmost compassion - His compassion - to all our fellow men. That devotedness should be fostered week by week by our unique form of communion service. Finally, we bring a form of church order which allows us the fullest freedom to recognise and co-operate