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WHY I HAVE STAYED WITH THE BRETHREN

(1) Prof. F. F. Bruce

Although this is a question I am asked from time to time, I find a difficulty in answering it because I have doubts about its implications. Ecclesiastically speaking, I belong (1) to the Church Universal and (2) to the local church which meets in Crescent Road, Stockport; and ecclesiastically speaking I belong to nothing else. The only alternative to staying in the Church Universal would be to renounce the faith once delivered; and if I am asked why I stay in the church at Crescent Road, Stockport, my reply must be: 'If you only knew that church, you would have no need to ask why I stay in it!'

I have been a member of the Crescent Road church for between five and six years, but for many years now I have belonged to churches of the same general pattern, and when people ask me, 'Why do you stay with the Brethren?' what they mean is, 'Why do you stay in the churches of that particular pattern?' And I have to think around for an answer, for it has never occurred to me to seek membership in a church of any other pattern. No doubt inertia has something to do with it; people tend to remain in the church fellowship in which they began unless they have some compelling reason for changing, and I have never been conscious of any such reason.

But, as I think the matter over, I discover some positive reasons for staying, and I can mention two which have considerable importance in my eyes.

One is that in these churches I am encouraged to recognize my membership in the Church Universal. It is never suggested to me that 'our denomination' or 'our circle of assemblies' has a special claim upon my loyalty, beyond the claim in which my fellow-Christians everywhere have a share. Here is a setting in which true Christian unity can be sincerely and unreservedly practiced. To a church of this pattern all believers in our Lord may come and be sure of a welcome for His sake; and I should find it intolerable to belong to a church which would not receive all whom Christ has received. From a church of this pattern I can go and have fellowship with all believers in our Lord, without any compromise of 'denominational principles', because in such a church there are no denominational principles to compromise. It is, indeed, against the background of wide experience of occasional fellowship in churches of many different orders that I rest in the conviction that, for me, a church of this pattern is the right one.

The other positive reason is that in these churches I have found an atmosphere of spiritual and intellectual freedom so congenial and indeed exhilarating that I doubt if it could be matched elsewhere. I know, too,

that this experience is not peculiar to myself, or to the churches of which I have had the good fortune to be a member over the years. In a letter which he sent as Chairman of the Committee to members of the Young Men's Bible Teaching Conference in 1961, Dr. W. M. Capper said: 'One of the things that attracts many of us to the Christian Brethren is its breadth, not its narrowness'. With proper reservations about this usage of the phrase 'the Christian Brethren', I say Amen to these words.

(2) A. L. Elvidge

I am not sure that I know why I have not left the Brethren. At the close of the war I was interviewed by a Joint Selection Board choosing candidates for the Baptist and Congregational Ministries, and I was accepted for training for the Baptist Ministry. When I was asked to choose a Theological College, however, I decided to remain with the 'Brethren'. And yet I have departed, in my thinking, from many of the traditions of historic Brethrenism. I am at variance with myself. I think that I am still with the 'Brethren' because:—

(a) My roots go deep into the soil of Brethrenism. All my life I have been with them and for nearly forty years a member of an Assembly. As a child I first respected, then loved, the brethren and sisters who made up my religious world. When I was saved, their joy knew no bounds, and when I was received into fellowship they welcomed me with warm and genuine love. These same people instructed me in the Scriptures, encouraged me in Christian Service, and helped me to become a useful (I hope) member of the assembly.

Their successors have been equally kind, and recently recognised me as an elder in the Church. Although, to some, my churchmanship now seems a little 'high' they are patient and understanding. Their fellowship is warm, vital and valuable. I love them in Christ.

(b) The process of conversion (in the context of this series of articles) is painful and exhausting. Mental reservations are easy to make, but the last step away from people, principles, and institutions you have known and loved into a new society is, for me at least, a desperately hard one to take. I confess that, in spite of what I have said in (a) I have moved a long way along this road, but I draw back as yet from that last step. To cause pain and disappointment to one time friends is unpleasant indeed. The possibility, too, of others following my example is always in my mind and I would not like to lead one soul from Brethrenism. My difficulties are my own, and must always remain such. It is, or ought to be, possible for a Christian to decide on such a course of action whilst discouraging others from merely following. But one cannot be certain that this will be the case.

What, then, makes me unsettled?

I believe that Brethrenism is in danger from itself. Its basic principles are excellent, but to these it adds principles for which it claims scriptural authority which, in fact, does not exist. These principles may be excellent under certain conditions and are certainly not unscriptural but they have

not the force of scripture claimed for them. An example of this brings me to my second unsettling point.

I feel that the attitude, generally, of the assemblies to a full-time salaried, pastoral ministry is prejudiced rather than scriptural, and the assemblies suffer therefrom. Why an itinerant, non pastoral, ministry should be considered good and a resident, pastoral ministry bad, is beyond my understanding. The advantages to be gained from the ministry of a man with time for sermon study, and time to shepherd the flock of God are obvious to me.

Failure to recognise that orders of service and systems of church government may differ from theirs and still be scriptural keeps the assemblies aloof and weakens their influence. There is an ecumenical movement in evangelical churches which is good and should be encouraged. A Prayer Book order of service, devoutly and sincerely used, can be just as acceptable to God as many of our Breaking of Bread services where so many seem to have so little to contribute. Beauty in a service is not necessarily carnal, neither is austerity necessarily spiritual.

But we must guard against comparing the poorest that Brethrenism can offer with the best that other Churches can offer. There is a movement towards Brethrenism as well as away from it. Christian people still find deep satisfaction in it, and I shall stay until I am certain that I ought to move on.

(3) K. G. Hyland

One is inevitably the product of one's historical background, and in my case a determining factor is that I am a third generation 'brother'. My maternal grandparents on grounds of conscience left the 'establishment' and were thereby cut out of a will, and lost a sizeable fortune. They were received into the Walham Green assembly to which, in those days, was attached one of George Müller's Day-Schools.

Here, my parents first met each other and were influenced by the influence of many eminent brethren, including Sir Robert Anderson.

Later in Wimborne, Dorset, my father commenced an 'open' gathering and, rather than the financial loss referred to above inducing a spirit of intolerance, he became the instigator of a wide fellowship of true evangelicals of all communions.

As a student in Bristol it was my privilege to be in fellowship with one of the Bethesda group of churches, in all of which the elders were men who had served their apprenticeship under George Müller and Henry Craik. Dr. Rendle Short, as he then was, was at the height of his powers. His influence, and that of the early M.S.C. Conferences were to us young men of incalculable value. It was at those Conferences that he saw to it that, among other important matters, Biblical reasons for our ecclesiastical position were clearly given and discussed.

In addition the student fellowship, which later became a part of I.V.F., and student conferences, effectively acted as antidotes to any narrow views of the body of Christ.

To-day, the church to which I belong is a member of an Evangelical Council of some twenty churches in the area. I have served on this council for some fourteen years and the net effect has been to deepen my convictions as to my ecclesiastical heritage.

To turn to Biblical reasons. I am where I am to-day by deep conviction. Moreover, in all the churches of 'brethren' with which I have been associated it has been my good fortune to be where the following principles have obtained; principles which I believe profoundly to be Biblical.

1. The lordship of Christ alone, over His Church, is acknowledged; this being mediated to us in the sole authority of Holy Scripture. Professor Rendle Short used to indicate that the New Testament alone decides church order. He used to enquire—'Where would you go to find a pure specimen of water from the Thames? London Bridge? No!' he would say, 'you would follow the stream until past the last house, you would come to the source'. So, we return to the spring in the New Testament rejecting not only that which has been deducted from what is found therein, but also that which, by a doctrine of development has been added. I would say that the church where I now worship has never been freer, or more disposed, to modify its thinking and practice by a developing understanding of New Testament principles.

2. We hold, as against the Constantinian and Reformed position, that the church is not co-extensive with the total community; but is composed solely of the re-born. For this reason we believe that baptism is to be administered as a result of the free choice of the candidate on personal confession of Christ as Lord and Saviour. This position derives from the New Testament's clear distinction between the church and the world, involving the freedom of the church from the state.

3. We believe that whoever possesses a living faith in Christ is thereupon baptized by the Holy Spirit into the one body of Christ. I Cor. 10: 16, 17 and I Cor. 12: 12, 13. Therefore 'we ought to receive all whom Christ has received' (G. Müller) and so we practise open communion irrespective of the Christian communion to which anyone belongs, on confession of his or her personal faith. I Cor. 11: 28.

4. We believe in the autonomy of each local church as individually linked with and responsible to Christ the Head. Rev. 1: 12, 13. We therefore reject any form of linking organisation or grouping, beyond a living and spiritual fellowship between individual congregations. This has two important effects. First it means that division is almost automatically obviated. It is not possible to divide what does not exist! Second, in the words of A. N. Groves, 'It enables one congregation to give to any other congregation the status Christ gives it'.

5. We believe, not in theory, but in practice, in the priesthood of all believers, and, by implication, in the absolute rights of the Holy Spirit in the House of God to raise up gifts in His Church as He will. I Cor. 12: 4-11. Therefore we believe that those to whom the Spirit has given different gifts should be recognised by the rulers of God's House, and in

addition those in whom the Spirit is developing His gifts. Matt. 25: 14, 15. We believe therefore in a recognised, but not exclusive ministry. The defect of the latter, as Professor Bruce has put it is 'that the minister is required to exercise not only the gifts God has given him, but also all the others God has not given him'.

6. We believe that there should be a godly rule in God's House. Heb. 13: 17. That the affairs therefore of a congregation are cared for by the offices of elders and deacons; an amazing blend of theocracy and democracy. Acts 6: 1-6. We believe that the main duty of elders is the shepherd care of the flock; especially as to an adequate and expository ministry of the word. Luke 12: 42. John 21: 15-17. Acts 20: 28. I Peter 5: 1, 2.

Perhaps I may be allowed to close with the four freedoms of the 'brethren' as formulated by Mr. F. R. Coad (CBRFJ 1.10):—

1. The Freedom of the word of God in my thinking.
2. The Freedom of the Lord Christ in my living.
3. The Freedom of the Holy Spirit in my worship.
4. The Freedom of the whole body of Christ in my fellowship.

(4) D. K. Sanders

When contemplating this question I am aware that I can only give the reasons why I remain in the particular assembly with which I am associated and, moreover, that the conditions which make this fellowship so attractive are certainly not to be found in every local gathering of 'Open Brethren'.

I would not be happy in any church where the authority of the Word of God was not acknowledged or where the priesthood of all believers was not only taught but was upheld in practice. These two principles are important, but a third essential requirement is that I must be able to introduce to the church the young Christians who come under my care as a Crusader leader, and to be assured that it will be to their spiritual good.

Twenty years experience of the work has taught me that if these young folk are to stand, and to go on towards spiritual maturity, they must be given a real understanding of the basic truths of the faith, a love for Bible study together with a working knowledge of elementary Christian apologetics, and I know of no better way of developing these characteristics than by encouraging them to take part in the ministry of an assembly. To be dependent on lay-ministry has its problems but under the firm and prayerful direction of elders whose vision is wide and whose aim is to provide an instructive and thought provoking ministry it can be a greater source of strength.

In our assembly we believe it is our responsibility to provide systematic Bible teaching and have integrated with the Worship and Breaking of Bread Service a period of planned teaching; the subjects for which are co-ordinated with those for the week-night meeting to give a balanced ministry of the Word. We still have much re-thinking to do but I am

convinced that, if like-minded fellows can get together and use the intelligence that the Lord has given them for the guidance of the local church, such can be a very great blessing.

I therefore remain where I am because I have found that an assembly can be, I repeat can be, an effective body in the Lord's service for worship, for witness and for the development of its members; and I recommend those who are tempted to leave to examine the possibility of joining or helping to form one of those truly open and enlightened meetings before they abandon the whole assembly position.

(5) Dr. Stephen S. Short

The basic reason why I have remained in the fellowship of the assemblies of 'Open Brethren' is because I believe that there is a closer approximation to the Biblical teaching concerning the Church in these assemblies than can be found elsewhere. This, to me, is the paramount consideration when determining the particular association in which a Christian should make his spiritual 'home'. Considerations such as: 'Which church order appeals to me most?' 'Where can I hear the best preaching?' 'Where can I find most scope for exercising my gifts?' 'Where can I find the most congenial companions?' 'To which kind of church do I "feel called"?' etc. weigh very little with me. Believing that Holy Scripture has been given to Christians by God, not only for guidance in general matters, but for guidance also in the ordering of church life, I consult it to discover what principles it lays down with regard to this matter, and then the church to which I attach myself is the one which, in my judgment, makes the sincerest efforts to put those principles into effect. Until I come across some churches which I consider to do this more adequately than 'Brethren' churches, I propose to stay with them.

That, in many Brethren churches, there is an element of failure due to the 'human factor', I acknowledge; (and the same, of course, applies in churches of all types and associations); but I am far more influenced by the kind of thing that is being attempted (i.e. being true to the Word of God), than by the particular degree in which such an aspiration is in fact realised. I can nevertheless testify, as one who is in personal contact with hundreds of Brethren assemblies throughout Britain, and as one too who has had many happy associations with Christians from other denominational groups, that, even in the realm of practical outworking, taken as a whole, Brethren assemblies do not seem to me to suffer adversely by comparison with the rest. The number of towns and villages, for instance, where the Brethren assembly is the only place where there can be heard a clear statement of the Christian Gospel is considerable.

It is not altogether surprising that the Anglican communion should present a strong attraction for those seeking congenial Christian fellowship, for this communion has some fine qualities, and in its evangelical wing there are some outstanding personalities and preachers. Among, however, the reasons why, without presuming to judge others, I personally would not feel free to become an Anglican, are: (i) its being a 'State

Church', with its principal officers appointed by the secular authorities, (with all the confusion that inevitably results); (ii) its doctrine of 'baptismal regeneration', (so explicitly taught in the Prayer Book); (iii) the virtual impossibility of local churches in its communion being able to reform themselves by the Word of God beyond the position of the Prayer Book formularies.

Whilst I am convinced that Brethren assemblies have more truth concerning the Church still to learn from God's Word, I believe nevertheless that they stand up to the test of Scripture better than do the other church bodies, and so long as this is so, I intend to remain among them.

(6) F. F. Stunt

It seems to me that I must have been more fortunate than many. For in my home and in the local church fellowship the principles which the early 'Brethren' originally stood for were both understood and practised. It was not uncommon to have an Anglican clergyman joining with us at the Lord's Table and freely ministering if he so desired. Christians of many denominations were welcomed and we joined with such for united witness, Keswick meetings, Bible Society and other undenominational activities. Many came to our meeting-place to hear special ministry, the like of which they said was unobtainable elsewhere in the district. Some came to stay, joining the fellowship. They spoke of their trials having to listen to the same voice and (sometimes) the same formularies week after week and month after month. My mother had had such an experience having left the Church of England some years before she met my father.

At home the Rector of the Parish was a regular visitor. Our neighbour, the Bishop of the newly-created diocese, was a friend with whom my family joined for special prayer sessions (the Great War was then taking place). Another Clergyman (later to become the equivalent of a Dean) of the adjoining County Town, was an extremely high Anglican but was also, in some ways, my father's best friend. He unburdened himself to my father about the 'low church' influences in the diocese, and the 'low church' people did likewise about the 'ritualists'. Baptists and Congregationalists alike sought advice from my father about the 'modernist' teachings which were splitting their congregations. He knew and loved them all as his Christian friends and brethren, members of the Body of Christ, and he and others of our fellowship regularly preached in their village chapels.

My father was thirty-eight when I was born. I was given his confidence from a very early age. I went with him to worship and on preaching expeditions. The high church Dean coached me in Latin and I knew much of what was going on. So the divisions which had afflicted the 'Brethren' were seen by me in their true perspective. Divisions (though lamentable) were common amongst Christians and our job was to endeavour to keep the unity of the Spirit.

I do not know when I first realised that I was a Christian resting in the work of Christ but I confessed this in baptism when I was thirteen. My 'Exclusive' friends (for we knew and loved them as well as the others!) were very cold when I told them about it. Later the Dean assured me that as the proper formula had been used I was indeed a Child of God. I found myself telling him that my new birth was 'by faith'. I was then fifteen and thought I would like to join the Church of England, mainly, I confess, because the music was of the highest quality! My father had told me I should need to be confirmed and so I went to his friend the Dean, for preparation classes. It was soon apparent to me that the catechism did not 'gee' with Scripture and the dear man avoided further argument by telling me that in any case schism was wrong whether in family or Church, and I found I had to renounce the music and sometimes endure ministry which was ungrammatical and boring!

Divisions between Christians seemed to me inevitable. Such things were recorded in the New Testament. But their evil effect was restricted where the local church was independent and the need for independency was explained to me by the elder brethren and I have since realised how important it is to avoid any attempt to group churches together in any constitutional or ecclesiastical system or even in World Councils. The only true unity is that of Children of God through Christ—a family which includes people from the whole gamut of ecclesiastical association, from Roman Catholic to Open Brethren.

About this time I discovered that Christian graces were more frequently manifested by the 'poor' and uneducated 'rich in faith' than by the cultured and 'better class'. A converted drunkard who could not read or write became my firm friend and prayed me through all my examinations. I discovered a heart-reality of worship and Christian living in the local church (or Assembly) which compared very well with what I saw going on around me in the 'denominations'. And I also found that, with all their imperfections, the 'Brethren' were honestly seeking to fulfil the example and precept of the Apostles and sometimes succeeding to a surprising degree. It was clear that they were more likely to succeed by God's grace if I gave my whole-hearted support, and I have never regretted trying to do so. I still meet with some who 'gave up'. I doubt if they are happier.

WHY I JOINED THE BRETHREN

(1) E. G. Ashby

Brought up in the Church of England, passing various diocesan examinations in the history of the Prayer Book, in my later teens I felt a growing dissatisfaction with the Church and its service. This was doubtless due to a number of contributory factors, amongst them being the substitution of a Crusader Class with its vivid study of Bible passages for a Church Sunday School where a Collect was learnt but there was little or no real teaching about the Bible. Further it was becoming clear that in