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THE EARLY BRETHREN AND THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD

Harold H. Rowdon

Sir Robert Anderson is said to have remarked: 'The Brethren believe in ministry, but not in ministers'. Certainly, the early Brethren believed in the former. For them, ministry of the Word was a sacred function which they were not slow to discharge, both in speech and in print. Other forms of ministry, such as pastoral care, occupied them extensively. These things were essential ingredients in their spiritual life-blood. But they also believed in ministers—and settled ministers at that!

There is considerable evidence to support this assertion. It is fairly generally known that at Plymouth Newton exercised a mainly localised ministry, and that at Bristol Müller and Craik functioned as pastors—they were listed in *Mathew's Directory* among the nonconformist ministers of the city. This pattern—or variations of it—was repeated again and again. Hall at Hereford; Rhind at Ross; Wigram at Rawstorne Street, London; Hargrove at Gower Street, London; Heath at Hackney; P. H. Gosse at Torquay: the list is almost endless! Both friend and foe spoke of the situation in terms which suggest the existence of a settled ministry. Harford-Battersby, when curate at Keswick, may have read something into the situation when he wrote that the Brethren there have 'an admirable minister'¹; but it was none other than Andrew Miller who, in his account of '*The Brethren (Commonly So-called)*', referred to Maunsell as 'the active brother for a long time' at Limerick.²

It is true that some Brethren exercised a partly or even a mainly itinerant ministry. But even Darby, who is said to have abstained from marriage in order to remain free to itinerate,³ sometimes spent considerable periods of time in one place, as for example Lausanne.

What was their thought, as well as their practice, in such matters? How did they view the ministry? How distinctive were their ideas and their practices; and how scriptural were they? What have they to say to us to-day? These are some of the questions with which we will now be concerned.

THE BACKGROUND TO THEIR THINKING

In order to gain a balanced understanding of their positive contribution to evangelical thought on the subject of the ministry, it will be necessary to look briefly at some background factors in the thinking of early Brethren.

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Rejection of Current Conceptions

The first of these is their rejection of current conceptions of the ministry.⁴ The idea has got around that, in its early years, the Brethren movement enjoyed a wholly positive attitude towards existing churches, and that it was only with the development of 'exclusivism' that Christendom was viewed in a critical light. It is of course true that the dominant purpose from the first was to draw together all believing people into a warm spiritual fellowship. But it is also true that, to some extent at the very beginning, and certainly as soon as the infant movement was seen to be a kind of alternative to existing church fellowships, the claims of such churches to be adequate expressions of Christianity was hotly contested. We must remember that it was an immense step for men deeply rooted in the established church, some being ministers, others in training for that vocation, men of breeding and culture, and men deeply concerned for the unity of the Church, to appear to go into schism and to become linked in the public eye with the somewhat despised dissenters. It was not so difficult for men like Chapman, Müller and Craik, who were already dissenters, and it is therefore not surprising that it was the ex-Anglicans who expressed themselves most astringently. What is remarkable is that Groves, formerly a convinced Anglican with deep prejudices against dissent, was able to take so restrained a line—though even he spoke out strongly on occasions.

As far as the ministry is concerned, Brethren rejected both the apostolic and the congregational theories of the ministry as unscriptural and therefore unacceptable. They discerned elements of truth in both positions, but were unable to accept either as it stood. Furthermore, they repudiated the almost universal distinction between clergy and laity; reacted against the virtual monopoly of spiritual functions by clergyman or minister; and introduced into their church life that 'social worship' advocated, and to some extent practised, by evangelicals such as the Haldane brothers and James Harington Evans. Finally, they renounced fixed salaries and the levying of pew-rents that were in fairly common practice.

In ways such as these, the Brethren broke with tradition, and this fact must be borne in mind when considering their positive views of the ministry. Since they had made such a clean break, they felt obliged to avoid anything which would appear like compromise. So they refrained from doing things which they might have felt at liberty to do in other circumstances. Laying on of hands was probably a case in point.

Tensions within the Movement

The tensions within the movement constitute the second background factor which must be taken into account in any evaluation of Brethren ideas and practice of the ministry.

For example, the breach of confidence between Newton and Darby, which can be traced back to 1833, which created a personal crisis about 1841, and which lay behind the open rupture of 1845, had its effect on ideas of the ministry. True, there were other reasons for Newton's empha-

sis on the need for recognition of the standing and functions of settled teachers in a local church, as there were for Darby's insistence on the need to preserve—if not to extend—freedom for any who felt 'led' to minister. But it is at least arguable that these opposing emphases were accentuated as a result of the controversy between the two men. Thus Newton's emphasis was strengthened by his determination that only those who held his views on dispensational matters should teach at Plymouth, and that of Darby arose in part at least from his concern to preserve opportunity for what he regarded as sound doctrine to be given by visiting brethren. There is ample evidence to show that Newton did not renounce *in toto* the open form of worship (that is, during his 'Brethren' years), and that Darby realised that there must be limits to this openness. But the conflict between the two men caused them to emphasise opposing aspects of the same matter. The distorting effect of this background factor is seen in a remark of Sir Alexander Campbell, a supporter of Darby in the time of crisis. In answer to the question whether he believed that there should be 'godly order' in the Church, Campbell replied: 'My course for the last ten years would be a sufficient reply; but I believe, that *at the present time*, a careful and discriminating answer is needed'.⁵

Again, the tensions between the more 'exclusive' attitude which was shared by both Darby and Newton, and the more 'open' outlook of men like Groves, Müller and Craik, should not be overlooked. Incidentally, we should observe that the lines of demarcation have been partly blurred by the quite extraordinary influence of J. N. Darby. Thus, some of those who have from time to time dissociated themselves from 'exclusive' Brethren and consorted with 'open' Brethren, have retained some aspects of Darby's teaching. I speak not only of prophetic matters but also of ecclesiastical. Yet there was a world of difference between the two points of view. For example, Darby and Newton argued that, in the present 'ruined' condition of the Church as a visible entity, any attempt to restore the outward forms prescribed in the New Testament is not only doomed to failure but also in itself a mark of apostasy. Men like Müller and Craik, on the other hand, felt no such inhibitions. Indeed, at one point, Müller and Craik went into retreat for a fortnight in order to hammer out from the Scriptures the form which church life at Bethesda, Bristol, should take.

Sole Authority of Scripture

This brings us to a third background factor which is of the utmost importance—the insistence by Brethren of all shades of opinion on the supreme, and indeed the sole authority of Scripture.

This insistence is so obvious as to need illustration rather than proof. Groves looked upon Scripture, as opposed to tradition, as the only sure guide in all matters relating to the ministry.⁶ The title of Beverley's book, *An Examination of the Scriptures on the Subject of Ministry* shows where he looked for direction. And it was undoubtedly the conviction that Scripture is a sufficient as well as the sole guide, rather than the intention of drawing up a rigid system to be put into action, that caused one contributor to *The Christian Witness* to draw up a comprehensive list of 'Church Canons', using the words of Scripture alone.

Although all Brethren were agreed on this point, they did not all arrive at the same conclusions on the subject of ministry. Other factors may have entered in, but the chief reason for this seems to be that they differed on some important matters of Biblical interpretation. Darby, and those who thought with him on this, claimed to find evidence in Scripture—as well as in church history—which caused them to regard New Testament instructions regarding the outward form of church life as relevant to the Church only in its ‘unfallen’ condition. They did not conclude that the New Testament had nothing to say to the Church in the nineteenth century regarding its corporate life. For instance, they believed that spiritual gifts would continue to be given—though not the full range, since some were appropriate to the Church only in its pristine glory. With regard to the ministry, it was held that gifts were to be expected, but office was in abeyance. So, as the second half of that statement indicates, it was held that some of the clear instructions of the New Testament were not to be followed, since they were no longer relevant. They had been intended for the Church in her unfallen state, and they fulfilled their function in the canon of Scripture in the nineteenth century by serving as a standing condemnation of the apostasy of the visible church.

‘Open’ Brethren saw things rather differently. Though they shared to a very considerable extent the diagnosis of contemporary ecclesiastical malaise made by their brethren, they did not share all of their conclusions. This was largely because they acted on the principle that the Scriptures which were able to make them ‘wise unto salvation’ were intended to teach them how they ought to behave in the house of God (I Tim. 3: 15). So they were reluctant to write off New Testament practice and precept in ecclesiastical matters. Not that they imagined that the New Testament provided a detailed blue-print for nineteenth century church life. But it was their desire that their practice should be in harmony with the principles enshrined in New Testament teaching and history.⁷

Victorian Attitudes

One thing more must be said at this point—even though it is said in parenthesis. I should not be surprised if it were not of some significance that the Brethren movement developed in Victorian England. This may have inclined Brethren to argue that elders must necessarily be elders in age, rather than raise questions about the youth of Timothy! It may also have led them to emphasise verses such as ‘Let your women keep silence in the churches’ (I Cor. 14: 34) rather than the one containing the words ‘every woman that prayeth or prophesieth’ (I Cor. 11: 5)! And it may have affected them in other ways also.

THEIR VIEW OF THE MINISTRY

With all this in mind, we may proceed to deal with the Brethren theory and practice of the ministry. In doing so, we shall draw mainly upon those Brethren who contributed most to the development of a positive attitude, except to substantiate positions held generally by them all.

Need for Ministry

It is abundantly clear that they fully realised the need for ministry. After a short, but significant dallying with the idea, they rejected the notion that the whole range of spiritual gifts bestowed in New Testament times were to be expected in their day.⁸ But they took it, almost for granted, that those gifts necessary for the 'edification' of the Church would continue to be given; and they were encouraged in this belief by the fact that spiritually gifted men were raised up in their midst.

Training for Ministry

A little more must be said about training for the work of ministry, especially as this is a matter in which I personally am involved! At the outset, we must remember that the views of Brethren were highly coloured by their knowledge and personal experience of contemporary training for the ministry. As far as the established church was concerned, the universities were virtually the sole theological colleges of the day. Next to no specifically theological or pastoral training was provided; the required testimonials were given with astonishing readiness—it was something of a scandal at Oxford when Newton was there; and the examination of ordinands was often farcical. Furthermore, the universities were very largely the preserve of the wealthy and privileged classes. Dissenting colleges were sometimes better—but not necessarily so.

It is hardly surprising, then, to find Borlase, for example, inveighing against a church which required her ministers to be of good birth and means, to have talent and learning, and to have spent a period of study in a place fraught with temptation.⁹ To the former dissenting minister, Dorman, it was the emphasis on intellect as 'the supreme object of admiration' that was so wrong.¹⁰ Brethren did not always make it clear that what they were really objecting to was the *substitution* of such things for spiritual qualities. Thus Groves argued from I Cor. 1 that 'no stress is to be laid on human wisdom, talent, eloquence, wealth, rank'.¹¹ The operative word was probably 'stress' rather than 'no'. This is certainly the case with Craik, who clearly reveals that the Brethren were reacting. He admitted that 'ardent feelings' together with 'defective knowledge' were dangerous, but continued, 'there has ever been the still commoner danger lest men should enter upon the work of the Christian ministry on the strength of a course of education, supposed to be a necessary preparation for so high a service'. But he quickly regained his balance and summed up the whole matter by concluding: 'First let there be the higher qualifications of simple faith, and conscious dependence upon the strength that cometh from above; and then let all the helps connected with mental attainments and diligent study of the Scriptures, be rendered available for the furtherance of the Gospel'.¹² Thus Craik brought a necessary emphasis into equilibrium. The fact that so many of the early Brethren were themselves highly trained men is significant, yet not decisively so, since it is open to a trained man to repudiate his training.

Call to Ministry

Having taken issue with the major current theories of the ministry—the apostolic and the congregational—the Brethren were compelled to formulate an alternative. They did this by taking one aspect of the matter, that was in practice relegated to the periphery in other systems, and making it central. Sometimes this was done almost to the exclusion of other considerations, but bearing in mind the fact that this was done in reaction against contrary views, it may properly be regarded as *central* to Brethren thought on the subject, rather than the sum total of it.

We may take as our text this extract from Groves's *On the Liberty of Ministry*¹³: 'In fact neither here [I Cor. 12] nor in the 14th chapter, nor in Eph. iv. 4-14, is any idea of human appointment, but simply the Lord's appointment, and every man's duty is to minister according to the ability God giveth'. In other words, the call to ministry comes not from man (whether patron or congregation) but from the Lord, by virtue of the bestowal of the requisite spiritual gifts. Groves went so far as to say that the machinery by which appointments were made is 'of little matter', provided the man appointed is 'a man of God, fitted by the Spirit for the office'.¹⁴ In similar vein, Craik argued that in the early days of the Church, 'the fact of positive appointment was evidently regarded as secondary to the possession of gifts for service'.¹⁵ It was this emphasis on the *central* importance of the possession of the requisite spiritual gifts that is so characteristic of the Brethren position. Our teachers, as well as our doctrine, Groves averred, must be God-given.¹⁶

It was felt that this inward call of Christ would be known first of all by the one to whom it had been given. It was this appointment by Christ, which would be accompanied by the granting of the requisite spiritual gifts, and this alone, which made a man a minister of Christ. But if a man were to come into relation with a particular 'flock' as a 'bishop', then he must have at least 'the goodwill and consent' of that flock.¹⁷ Thus, on the one hand, a minister must be assured that he is called of God, and on the other, the church must decide whether or no to accept him.¹⁸

But by what criteria is this decision to be reached? Groves deduced two very simple scriptural tests: namely, the character and the doctrine of the man in question.¹⁹ He pointed out that Paul did not question Apollos as to his ministerial status, but judged him by his character;²⁰ and that the apostle himself was willing to be judged by his teaching and labours.²¹ No machinery was suggested by which this recognition might be given or withheld, and it is at this point that a clean break was made with congregational practice.

Brethren in general had a rooted objection to the practice of voting in the church. In part, this may have been due to antipathy to the democratic principle. Both Darby and Newton made no bones of their dislike of it.²² In justification of their hostility to it, Brethren often drew attention to the disputes to which it so frequently gave rise.²³ But they also felt unable to accept that it was a scriptural practice. They did admit that deacons were chosen by the church, as at Jerusalem (Acts 6), but they

rejected the argument that spiritual ministers (i.e. elders) were so chosen.²⁴ In fact, they probably felt that no machinery was needed! Groves considered that the possibility of a man presuming in error that he had been called to the work of the ministry would be slight, if the financial rewards of his ministry were likely to be small and his social status unchanged! So, no-one except a palpably false teacher was likely to put himself forward in error, and consequently the church would normally receive with gratitude such ministers as were raised up within it.²⁵

It was not denied that Paul and Barnabas had appointed elders to minister in the churches that they had founded, but it was asserted that they had not passed on to others the right of appointing. They had acted, not as apostles, but as missionaries or evangelists. From this the deduction was made that any who were used of God to found churches might do the same—but only they.

So, while elements from current views of the ministry were incorporated, and indeed, the Brethren view of the call to ministry drew very heavily on that held by congregational churches, yet the centre of gravity was moved. It was moved from appointment by authority on the one hand and congregational election on the other, to the inward call of Christ, known by the minister, and recognised by the church to which he ministers through the quality of his life and teaching.

Ordination and Setting Apart

The Brethren reacted rather strongly against current ideas of ordination and setting apart to the work of the ministry. Groves asserted that the Biblical term—or rather, the five Greek words translated ‘ordain’ in the New Testament—did not require laying on of hands, did not signify that a man could not exercise spiritual functions until ordained, and did not mean that a man was then brought into a situation which he was to retain for ever after.²⁶ Groves again provides a convenient summary, fairly characteristic of Brethren views, of the practice of laying on of hands. It was the Jewish form of commendation, to which corresponds our prayer-meeting (just as the kiss of peace was the equivalent of our hand-shake); it is not exclusively connected with entry to the work of the ministry, since Paul and Barnabas had been engaged in that work for years before hands were laid on them (Acts 13.3), and it may be repeated (Acts 14.26; 15.40); it may be done by inferiors to superiors (Acts 13.3); and it never conveys authority, though in some cases it does convey power, as in imparting the Holy Spirit and in commending to the Lord’s care.²⁷ The case of Paul who had received the Holy Spirit by the laying on of hands by a layman, prior to his baptism, was often used as an argument against the High Church position.²⁸ With regard to the imparting of the Holy Spirit, the position taken was that this was a prerogative of the Apostles which had not been handed on. The claim to convey the Holy Spirit in such a way to-day was therefore regarded as void, though Beverley shrewdly pointed out that it does rest upon the right principle—viz. *‘that the Holy Spirit is the Author of ministry in the Christian Church’*.²⁸ Dissenting ordination rites were dismissed as mere imitation of the

practice of the Apostles. Beverley argued that if the Church had the power the rite should be used, but since she does not possess the power the rite should not be used.³⁰ Not all were as forthright as this, and there are hints that some would not have objected to the practice of the laying on of hands if it were possible to dissociate the act from the idea of the transference of divine grace from one individual to another.³¹

Here, as always, the thing that mattered to the Brethren was not so much the outward form as the inward reality. Since the former was valueless apart from the latter, it was largely immaterial—unless it conveyed the wrong impression. So, Brethren seem to have reasoned that if a man is conscious of the divine call and the divine enabling he may pursue his calling provided he enjoys the confidence of those to whom he ministers. If formal setting apart gives rise to misunderstanding it may be dispensed with.

Financial Support

In their views on the support of ministers, Brethren were once again reacting against a current conception which they regarded as a misconception. This was the idea that the ministry is a kind of profession, conferring social status and carrying a fixed salary. Though this applied more particularly to the Anglican ministry, it was also to some extent true of ministry among the dissenters. But, however shocked they were, it is an exaggeration to say that they would have none of it. The important thing to notice is the shift of emphasis.

They did point to Paul's refusal to accept wages. But Groves, for example, went so far as to underline the fact that the labourer is worthy of his hire, and continued: 'If also a pastor be worth having, he is worth paying, and wherever there is much spiritual work to be done, it is bad economy to let much of his valuable time be employed in mere labouring for his earthly sustenance'. However, he concluded on this note: 'these considerations are not such as *he* is to urge on *them*, but which *they* are to urge on *him*; and I would have the minister of Christ infinitely above a thought about it'.³² It was the striking of bargains, the looking to men with all that follows from the element of truth in the saying, 'He who pays the piper calls the tune'—as well as the tendency to encourage clericalism—which caused Brethren ministers to look to the Lord to supply their temporal needs through the free-will gifts of His people. Though they renounced fixed salaries, they did not renounce the scriptural principle that the labourer is worthy of his hire.

The Work of the Ministry

But what was understood by the term 'ministry'? What precisely was the work of the ministry to which a man might be called, for which he might prepare himself, and in which he might be supported by those to whom he ministered?

Early Brethren gave careful study to the scriptural idea of ministry. In general, they came to the conclusion that it comprehends 'any service of the saints to God and His Church'.³³ They did not regard it as a tech-

nical term for a particular form of service rendered by a special class of persons. The work of the ministry was taken to include pastoral care, ministry of the Word, and rule in the church.³⁴ Beverley saw it as specially linked with the fostering of love (Eph. 4.1-4 and I Cor. 13), and the edifying of the Body of Christ (Eph. 4.16 and Col. 3.15).³⁵ In short, ministry was seen as the exercise of spiritual gifts, the nature of the ministry deriving from the nature of the gift or gifts.

The strongest exception was taken to the practice of confining the celebration of 'sacraments' to specified ministers. Groves did allow that if any of the 'bishops' were present, he should preside at the Lord's Supper, but in the absence of such, any 'saint' might do so.³⁶ Indeed, he argued from I Corinthians, and in particular the exhortation to 'tarry one for another', that there was no recognised administrator at Corinth. He argued similarly in the case of baptism.

Settled Ministry

We come at last to the question of what is sometimes called 'settled ministry'. In connection with this, we shall ask two questions: 'itinerant or settled?' and 'one or many?'

There is abundant evidence to show that, in the cause of evangelism, Brethren were tireless travellers. While still Baptist ministers at Teignmouth and Shaldon, Müller and Craik used to travel widely in order to preach the gospel. From Plymouth, brethren used to travel on horseback to distant places for the same purpose. The practice was repeated at Hereford, to which place Capt. Hall removed from Plymouth in 1837. Similar methods of evangelisation were doubtless used elsewhere.

But it is equally clear that, once a church had been established, it was regarded as basically self-sufficient—in the best and Christian sense of that term. It was confidently expected that within it would be raised up those gifted to care for the flock and to engage in evangelistic ministry. We may see this illustrated in the life and work of that little-known evangelist, Robert Gribble. Gribble worked in the villages and hamlets of North Devon and later West Somerset. His method was to settle in a suitable centre, from which he would travel round to neighbouring villages. As soon as tiny churches were formed and men gifted for spiritual leadership emerged, he would move to another centre and repeat the process.³⁷ It was clearly the aim for such churches as he established to be self-sufficient as far as ministry, both pastoral and evangelistic, was concerned. This seems to have been common practice. At Barnstaple, Chapman ministered the Word regularly, and evangelistic preaching was normally undertaken by local men—often by the same man on a more or less regular basis.³⁸ The Minute Books of the Assemblies at Hereford and at Orchard Street, London, show that Brother X would ask for the use of the Room on Sunday nights for a specified period of gospel preaching. This accorded with Brethren theory. Groves, for example, specifically speaks of the 'minister of Christ' presenting himself before the church 'as moved by the Holy Ghost to take on any ministry in her'.³⁹

This is not to say that outside help was not received and appreciated.

Brethren saw the Church in its universal, as well as its local, aspect, and tried to give effect to this in respect to the ministry. Men like Darby drew a distinction, strikingly similar to that drawn by the German church historian, Adolf von Harnack, between those with spiritual gifts responsible for exercising them in the context of the universal church, and those appointed to local charges. Since Darby came to hold the view that appointment to office is not now God's will, he was left with the first category only, and came to regard any kind of settled ministry as little more than a temporary localisation of gift given for the edification of the Church as a whole. As already insisted, however, 'open' Brethren did not fully share this view. Nevertheless, they were well aware that the Church has a 'universal' as well as a 'local' manifestation. As a result, they made room for 'external' as well as 'internal' ministry. Indeed, as I hope to show in a forthcoming issue of *The Witness* (December, 1966), they welcomed ministry, not only from other Brethren (with a capital B), but also from brethren (with a small b)! One cannot help surmising that it has been the development of modern means of transport, as well as fear of neo-clericalism, that has led to ministry by visiting preachers becoming the norm.

We may sum up our answer to the question 'itinerant or settled?' in this way. Whereas the 'exclusive' tradition tended to emphasise itinerant ministry at the expense of settled ministry, the 'open' tradition emphasised settled ministry without excluding itinerant ministry.

Our second question concerning settled ministry is 'one or many?'. Here, no doubt—to use the modern phrase—is the 'crunch'. For it is on this question, more than any other, that Brethren stand virtually alone. We must therefore give it our careful attention.

Tregelles had passed out of the orbit of the Brethren movement when he wrote: 'An individual may stand alone in pastoral care and teaching; in other places, several may be associated'.⁴⁰ But the quotation will serve as a text! At Barnstaple, Chapman was at first a lone figure in the ministry. But it seems true to say that he regarded this situation as temporary, and he certainly looked for the emergence of others who would share with him the pastoral, teaching and evangelistic ministry for which he was so richly gifted. He was, in his own eyes at least, no more than 'one elder among several at Grosvenor Street'.⁴¹ At Bristol, Müller and Craik formed their famous partnership of two. But they were at pains to show that they did not regard themselves as exclusive pastors of the church of Bethesda. This may be seen from the lengthy letter addressed 'To the Saints in Christ Jesus assembling at Bethesda Chapel, Bristol' which they issued to the local press on 7 July, 1841.⁴² In the course of this letter they enumerated their reasons for removing the boxes which had been put in the chapel to receive gifts for their support. They stated: 1. The placing of their names on the boxes 'has the appearance of elevating ourselves above all the other brethren, and of *assuming office* to ourselves, instead of just seeking to fill the place which the Holy Ghost may have given us in the body'. 2. Others may be called to exercise spiritual leadership, and it may be difficult for them to be '*fully* recognised by the saints generally as occupying, equally

with ourselves, the place in which the Lord may set them'. 3. Others do, in fact, undertake spiritual leadership in the church, though not in a full-time capacity. 4. The boxes cause some to regard Müller and Craik as 'ministers' whose duty it is to do all the pastoral visitation needed. This they explicitly disavow.

With a single voice, Brethren declared themselves unable to find in the practice or precept of the New Testament any support for confining the regular ministry of a local church to a limited number of men, whether one or several. Instead, they found support along two lines for a plurality of ministers. In the first place, they pointed to the fact that elder-bishops always functioned in groups.⁴³ Secondly, they showed that spiritual gifts were distributed widely among the members of the Church (Romans 12 and I Cor. 12 being among the proof passages), and argued vigorously that there should be 'liberty of ministry' for their exercise.⁴⁴ These two lines of argument are not all that easy to keep parallel, since recognition of a body of elders may impinge on liberty of ministry. It was part of the ecclesiastical achievement of Müller and Craik that, to some extent at least, they avoided this danger. So, E. K. Groves, the eccentric son of A. N. Groves, could claim that the ministry of Müller and Craik did not impinge on the freedom of others to exercise 'a like privilege'.⁴⁵

The blending of authority and freedom is ever a delicate matter, and never more so than in the spiritual realm. The phrase 'stated ministry' as opposed to 'exclusive ministry' was one attempt to formulate the Brethren synthesis. This phrase, which seems to have been coined by one, Edward Foley (of whom we could wish to know more), was used by some to indicate their position. This was, that in any given local church there should be a group of spiritually gifted men whose ministry should be recognised and accepted by the church. But this would not be taken to exclude other spiritually gifted persons from playing a part in the corporate life and worship of the church and of emerging as spiritual leaders.⁴⁶

In fine, on this question of settled ministry, the practice and doctrine of the early Brethren come down on the side of a ministry which, while not excluding external help, depends mainly on the exercise of the spiritual gifts found within the confines of the local church fellowship. In a given situation, as a temporary or emergency measure, such as the early days of a new church or the revitalising of an established one, ministry is not to be withheld because it can be exercised only in isolation or in a partnership of two. But this is not to be regarded as the norm, and anything that would give this impression is to be eschewed. For ministry is the service, not of one, or of a few—not even of the many—but of all who are conscious of being spiritually gifted, and who are prepared to use their gifts for the common good and the glory of God. Some may do so in a full-time capacity and be supported by those to whom they minister; others may serve in their 'spare time': all are ministers. This does not mean that the Brethren exchanged a 'one-man ministry' for an 'any-man ministry'. A man's ministry must be in accordance with his spiritual gifts. Some have one gift, some another, and some may have more than one. It requires spiritual discernment on the part of individuals and churches for these to be discerned, encouraged, used to the full, and appreciated.

BRETHREN AND THE MINISTRY TO-DAY

What can we learn from our expedition into the past, that will be of value to us in our present situation? I suggest that three points of great importance emerge in connection with our practice of ministry.

1. There is a place for the exercise of spiritual gifts in the context of a local church by individuals who are conscious of a divine call thereto, and whose call is recognised by their brethren.
2. Such ministry may be full-time, and those who exercise it may be supported financially by those who profit from it.
3. Care must be taken lest such ministry should in any way impede the ministry of others, whether they be fellow-elders with recognised gifts of ministry, others in the church with such gifts, or those whose gifts are not yet apparent.

It behoves local churches to take these matters to heart. A series of questions should be asked, and answered with scrupulous honesty.

1. Is the church being tended and fed, and is the ministry of the gospel effective?
2. If so, is this being done in the right way? For it is possible to do the right thing in the wrong way, with serious consequences for the future. So we must ask ourselves subsidiary questions, such as: is too much reliance being placed on help from other churches? (or, alternatively, too little?); and, is too much reliance being placed on one man or a few men within the church?

If the answers to such questions are unsatisfactory, we must ask further questions.

3. Are the men available, but either too lazy or too preoccupied with personal affairs or Christian activities external to the local church? If this is so, steps should be taken by prayer and teaching on the subject to remedy the situation.

If the shortcomings are due to a genuine shortage, or even absence of spiritually gifted men, then the church is in a critical situation which it should face up to and meet with appropriate measures. These may include:

- i. Definite and persistent prayer to God.
- ii. Self-examination by each member of the church and the stirring up of spiritual gift (more on this in a moment).
- iii. Seeking outside help. We do this on an occasional basis for evangelistic preaching and general ministry of the Word. Is there any reason why this should not be done on a more permanent basis? A hint as to the way in which it could be done is given in the centenary pamphlet ([E. T. Davies], *Bethesda Church*, p. 19). This says: 'This church has never given an invitation to anyone to labour amongst us, but it is known that the door is open for any accredited servants of Christ called of God to come among us and labour in the Word and doctrine as the Lord may direct'. Surely this is also the principle on which our missionaries operate overseas.

One can imagine some of the ways in which this might work out. For example, a group of small churches might welcome a gifted expositor into their midst. A church in a large housing estate where there is an ear for the gospel could be an invaluable base for an evangelist. A flourishing church in an extensive area of spiritual need could utilise a team of men—evangelist, youth-leader, expositor, pastor, or any combination of these. Some men, like Robert Chapman, might be gifted as evangelist, pastor and Bible teacher; others might be ‘specialists’. There must be flexibility, and spiritual commonsense, and each—like missionaries overseas—must aim to ‘work himself out of his job’.

And now, what about the individual Christian? What questions should he ask? I suggest three.

1. What gifts have I been given, or, what is my function in the church?
2. Are God’s gifts to me being developed and, if necessary, trained?
3. Are they being used? It may be that I am the weak link in the chain, and that my local church is suffering because of my neglect or misuse of the spiritual gifts that have been given me.

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1. Letter of 29 January 1850. *Memoir*, p. 66.
 2. P. 26.
 3. G. H. Lang, *The Disciple*, Vol. 1, no. 2, October, 1953, p. 16.
 4. Full documentation for this paragraph and the next will appear in Appendix 1 of my forthcoming book on the origins of the Brethren.
 5. *To the Saints meeting for Worship in Ebrington Street, Plymouth*. 3 (my italics).
 6. *Liberty of Ministry*, pp. 1-9.
 7. Cf. H. Craik, *New Testament Church Order*, pp. 3ff.
 8. On this, see in particular, [G. V. Wigram?], ‘The Verity of the Revival of the Apostolic Church in Newman-Street and Elsewhere’, *Christian Witness*, II (1835). 154-187.
 9. *Christian Witness*, I (1834). 350, 351.
 10. *Principles of Truth*, pp. 91-93.
 11. *Liberty of Ministry*, p. 8.
 12. *New Testament Church Order*, pp. 21, 22.
 13. P. 30.
 14. *Ibid.*, p. 72.
 15. *New Testament Church Order*, p. 54.
 16. *Liberty of Ministry*, pp. 46, 47.
 17. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
 18. *Ibid.*, p. 10; cf. H. Craik, *New Testament Church Order*, p. 54; Müller’s *Narrative*, I. 276ff.
 19. *Liberty of Ministry*, p. 37.
 20. *Ibid.*, pp. 38, 39.
 21. *Ibid.*, pp. 14-17.
 22. J. N. Darby, *Collected Writings*, XXXII. 506-511; B. W. Newton. *Letter to Sibthorp*, pp. 8, 9n.
 23. E.g. R. M. Beverley, *Examination*, pp. 76ff.
 24. W. H. Dorman, *Principles of Truth*, pp. 76-83; R. M. Beverley, *Examination*, p. 54n; R. Howard, *Church Principles*, p. 42; E. K. Groves, *Bethesda Family Matters*, p. 74; *et alia*.

25. A. N. Groves, *Liberty of Ministry*, pp. 10, 66, 72, 73; G. H. Lang, *A. N. Groves*, p. 149.
26. *Liberty of Ministry*, p. 18; cf. R. M. Beverley, *Examination*, pp. 49-54.
27. *Liberty of Ministry*, p. 23.
28. E.g. R. M. Beverley, *Examination*, pp. 54ff.
29. *Examination*, p. 59.
30. *Ibid.*, pp. 61, 62.
31. If memory serves me right, Darby somewhere makes this point explicitly.
32. *Liberty of Ministry*, p. 51; cf. E. K. Groves, *Bethesda Family Matters*, pp. 77, 103.
33. R. M. Beverley, *Examination*, p. 36.
34. *Ibid.*, pp. 70ff.
35. *Ibid.*, pp. 63ff.
36. *Liberty of Ministry*, p. 73.
37. R. Gribble, *Recollections*, *passim*.
38. F. Holmes, *Brother Indeed*, p. 52.
39. *Liberty of Ministry*, p. 10.
40. *Pastoral Relations*, p. 21.
41. F. Holmes, *Brother Indeed*, p. 73.
42. Müller's *Narrative*, I. 409-411.
43. A. N. Groves, *Liberty of Ministry*, p. 67; W. H. Dorman, *Principles of Truth*, p. 84.
44. [J. N. Darby], 'Christian Liberty of Teaching and Preaching the Lord Jesus', *Christian Witness*, I (1834). 162ff.; *et alia*.
45. *Bethesda Family Matters*, p. 18.
46. For a full discussion of 'stated ministry' see C. Hargrove, 'Some Thoughts on Ministry in connection with Gift, and without it', in J. Hargrove (ed.), *Notes on the Book of Genesis, with some Essays and Addresses by the late Rev. Charles Hargrove*, III. 125-176.