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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.¹ 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-

¹Variously 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 hell².

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

²The 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

* 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.³

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

³See 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.⁴

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