

Who are the Brethren?

exploring their origins and history, beliefs and practices, present condition and future prospects, lessons to learn and conclusions to draw

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Introduction

What follows is an account of a group of Christian believers who have often been referred to as the "Plymouth Brethren" (PB), from which two distinct, separate branches have arisen: "Open" (OB or "Christian") and "Closed" (or "Exclusive" (EB or XB)). Although there have been many groups, down the ages, who have been called "Brethren" or have practised PB principles (some argue, including the early church), these do not fall under the PB banner and will be discussed only in passing. Both PB strands will be considered, although concentrating on the Open, nowadays much the bigger of the two groups (although not when the division occurred).

The term "Brethren" will be used as it conveniently identifies our subjects, just as one would need to do so in order to satisfy officialdom (for example, those signing up to serve in His or Her Majesty's Armed Forces might have had Plymouth Brethren stamped over their papers, under the heading of religion), although many members, maybe most, would prefer not to be so labelled. Many do not want to be seen as a member of a particular denomination, whereas others want to avoid the negative connotations associated with this label. Ask most members and they would likely identify themselves as a believer who belongs to an assembly (or increasingly more often these days, church, fellowship or similar title) in a particular location, typically

associated with the name of a street or district. The word “Brethren” is unlikely to feature in most descriptions.

Mindful that much of what one reads about the Brethren is subjective in nature, this account has been written from an intentionally objective (albeit English and OB) and balanced perspective although, to make sense of the present and contemplate what might lie ahead in the future, a degree of subjectivity cannot be avoided. Moreover, it is human nature to see things in terms of one’s own experience, beliefs and prejudices or the preoccupations, ideology and concerns of the age and society one lives in. This is true when considering what the Brethren movement stands for, now or in the past, and this writer too is not immune from such influences. This account does, however, attempt to fairly and fully answer the question “Who are the Brethren^[1]” while recognising the differences in outlook and varieties of Brethren experience that have always been present. And while there is much diversity within Brethrenism^[2], especially these days, there are many common factors as well. All these aspects have to be addressed.

The history of the Christian Church contains many examples of new movements that address some need or condition of the time, which then went on to have a considerable impact on church and society, for example the Methodists in the eighteenth century, the Puritans in the seventeenth and the Reformers in the sixteenth. Often, these have built on, challenged or responded to the insights and contributions of earlier movements. This is true of the Brethren, even though their numbers were fewer than many older Protestant traditions, such as Anglican, Methodist, Reformed or Baptist. Some argue that, like many a vibrant new movement, the emergence of the Brethren was because the Holy Spirit prompted men to address the need of the hour, although, like most of those who went before, they have lost, over the years that followed, some of the original vitality, as well as becoming trapped in their past and failing to address the issues of the present. It will be argued that, in spite of these shortcomings, members of the Brethren have made significant contributions toward building God’s Kingdom and could continue to do so in the future.

Perceptions

Some outsiders have looked upon the Brethren with wariness, deeming them to be rather narrow in outlook. Some insiders have been frustrated that, while holding correct precepts, these have not always been worked out practically within the movement. Some have left disillusioned with negative experiences. A few Brethren believers have had a bad press because of their extreme fundamentalism and harmful practices, such as excluding family members and cult-like brainwashing of members. One ought not defend the indefensible, for there are aspects of Brethrenism that are wholly unacceptable. Yet negative must be balanced by positive elements that were and are present. Many have held the Brethren with a good deal of respect, recognising their desire to be faithful to the Word of God and that they have also done a lot of good.

What does concern though is the widespread ignorance of what the Brethren were and are about (even though the same could be said for much else concerning Christianity), including among their own members, as well as prominent Christian leaders, and a bias against assemblies, from those who should know better, when depicting what individual churches stand for. There seems little around to challenge the myths and misconceptions that have come about. These deficiencies need to be remedied. It is intended that anyone wanting to know more about the Brethren, whether they be engaged in academic research or simply

wanting to know more about the Brethren, whether they be engaged in academic research or simply laypersons who for whatever reason are interested, will be well informed after reading what follows. Young people are also invited to read this description as part of their studies, although it should be borne in mind that, while this is a factual account, it does include a significant amount of theological and analytical content. This is not meant to patronise, for the young often have more acumen than they are credited with. If the Lord tarries, they will be the ones who will set the future agenda for the church, more than most, and better they do so having understood the past, warts and all, than having been kept in the dark.

The reasons for people not knowing the truth about the Brethren are many, public disinformation for one thing. Also, the Brethren have not spoken with one voice, for there has been wide diversity in practices and beliefs, as well as the notion of the autonomy of the local assembly in the Open group and opposing factions in the Closed, thus blurring the overall picture. Given members reluctance to adopt the “Brethren” label it has been difficult to identify them as Brethren. They tended not to record events for posterity or attempt public relations exercises aimed at informing or placating outsiders. The Open group, especially, were more concerned about doing the Lord’s work than writing about it, conscious He may return at any time.

It is not easy, therefore, for the interested observer or student of church history, to find out “Who are the Brethren”. In order to fully answer this question, we will need to refer to material that complement and elaborates upon what is written here, including much that is available (and accessible) via the Web. Hyperlinks to websites containing helpful, supplementary information are provided, although, like much on the Web, these are subject to change^[3]. Although there is much material in non-electronic form that ought to be studied to give the full picture, it is understandable that most will not access this due to lack of availability and access.

Origins

The Brethren Assembly movement emerged around 1826-27 (although it was not seen as such until a few years later), when a few met together in a private house (later, as numbers grew, it was in a hired hall) in Dublin, not to start a new sect, but for the purpose of Christian fellowship, to study the Bible and (later) to share in the Lord’s Supper. They felt that their spiritual aspirations and concerns for God’s work to prosper could not be addressed in the churches they came from, and had a spiritual hunger that needed to be satisfied. Not being under any particular leader, all were at liberty to contribute and did so, for among other things theirs was a reaction against clericalism or minister domination and a movement for spiritually empowering the people. (The extempore nature of Christian gatherings was an important Brethren principle, in order to allow for God’s leading. But the need or desire for organisation and order was never far away. Putting into practice this principle gave rise to some of the tensions and conflicts that later followed.)

While the constitution of the original group was fluid, and not all were always able to attend the irregular meetings, most having other church commitments, it is generally agreed that the core members were John Nelson Darby, Anthony Norris Groves, John Bellet, Edward Cronin and Francis Hutchinson (Turner mentions also a Mr. Brooke^[4]) plus a few ladies. Others soon became involved, notably John Parnell (later he was Lord Congleton). Prominent among the first group was Darby, an Anglican clergyman, who seceded from that church a few years after those Dublin meetings^[5]. He is seen by many to be the leading light behind the Brethren movement which was to emanate from those house meetings

the Brethren movement, which was to emanate from those house meetings.

J.N.Darby (1800 - 1882) wrote prolifically, and many of his writings have been preserved and are published and available today (thanks particularly to the efforts of his prodigy, William Kelly, and to modern day devotees). He has also been much written about, both favourably and unfavourably. He had connections in high places. His father was a wealthy landowner, his uncle, Admiral Sir Henry Darby, commanded the Bellerophon in the Battle of the Nile, and his godfather was the national war hero Lord Nelson (thus his middle name). Darby's brother-in-law was the Lord Chief Justice of Ireland and no doubt Darby too, who had an early promising legal career, could have rose to the top of that profession.

Darby was no mean scholar, writing profoundly on many theological subjects as well as commentating on the entire Bible. He translated the original Hebrew and Greek text of the scriptures into English, French and German. He wrote numerous hymns and kept up a voluminous correspondence throughout his life. He chose a simple life-style and had a particular empathy with the poor and weak and children. There have been many recorded instances of his kindness, notably toward those who opposed him. He vigorously defended what he believed and opposed what he saw to be evil even if, as often transpired, it led to relationships irretrievably broken. He loved the Lord and His people and was tireless in His service. He travelled extensively and was instrumental in establishing some 1500 Brethren assemblies world-wide. He held dogmatic beliefs and did not compromise (even over what many would consider inessentials or where a continuing relationship was desirable). As for those who did oppose him, he could be ruthless in his dealings.

He was an enigmatic character who inspired devotion to Christ in many and influenced many toward accepting his views, yet not a few have come to reject elements of his teachings and point to grave flaws in his character. Much good, as well as bad, in Brethrenism was a product (at least in part) of Darbyism. As early as 1838 he began a work establishing assemblies in Switzerland. One of those who came to oppose Darby there was the well respected Professor Herzog, who wrote: *"Moreover we must distinguish in him, up to a certain point, the teacher, the head of a movement, and the simple Christian. Christian charity requires us to make such a distinction. Essentially our charge against him is that these three characters are not found in perfect harmony in him. From the point of view of his general Christian character he deserves the most honourable witness. His sermons, as well as his pastoral activity, in so far as they relate to what really belongs to the Christian life, are also worthy of great praise; Mr. Darby can edify very well when he wishes; he excels in treating certain thrilling truths of the Gospel; and both by this means and by his pastoral care he has done many people good, and has been, under God, the means of the conversion of some. But when in his teaching he broaches ecclesiastical questions, when he appears as head of a party, and when he endeavours to unite under his banner souls already converted, then he decidedly falls below his own level. Our criticism relates almost exclusively to his ecclesiastical system, and to his position and his proceedings as director of a particular society^[6]".* Others subsequently had cause to share his perceptive observations.

The following (from three of his hymns) reveals something of Darby's own spiritual outlook^[7]:

<i>This world is a wilderness wide:</i>	<i>There is a rest for the weary soul,</i>	<i>I'm waiting for Thee, Lord,</i>
<i>I have nothing to seek or to choose,</i>	<i>There is rest in the Saviour's love;</i>	<i>Thyself then to see, Lord;</i>
<i>I've no thought in the waste to abide</i>	<i>There is rest in the grace that has made</i>	<i>I'm waiting for Thee,</i>
<i>I've nought to regret, nor to lose.</i>	<i>me whole -</i>	<i>At Thy coming again.</i>

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*... 'Tis the treasure I've found in His love,
That has made me a pilgrim below...
...Till then, 'tis the path Thou has trod
My delight and my comfort shall be...*

Who are the Brethren?
*That seeks out those that rove.
There is rest in the tender love
That has trodden our path below...*

*Thy glory'll be great, Lord,
In heavenly state, Lord;
...Caught up in the air, Lord
That glory we'll share Lord...*

Yet it would be wrong to see the Brethren as a product of Darbyism as many do. A.N.Groves (1795 - 1853)^[8], is often deemed to be a balancing influence and voice for moderation within the movement. Groves began his working life as a dentist in Exeter, and could have become prosperous in that profession. However, he felt God's call toward mission and offered himself initially for holy orders (his coming to Dublin was for the purpose of theological training). Groves' treatise: "Christian Devotedness", gives us much insight into his own early spiritual outlook, with his call for dedicated discipleship. It begins: "*The writer of the following pages has been deeply affected, by the consideration of the strange and melancholy fact - that Christianity has made little or no progress for fifteen successive centuries: and having, as he trusts, perceived, in an attentive perusal of the Gospel History, that primitive Christianity owed much of its irresistible energy to the open and public manifestation by the early disciples, of their love to their Redeemer and King, and to one another, by the evidence which they gave of it in their conduct, and being moreover convinced that the exhibition of this love tends directly and most powerfully to augment the prosperity of the Church of Christ within its own bosom, and to extend its influence throughout the world in all ages; he ventures to lay the result of his reflections open to the candid consideration of the sincere disciples of that Saviour, "who, though he was rich, yet for our sakes became poor, that we through his poverty might be rich" (2 Cor. 8. 9)^[9]*".

Whereas Darby could see much evil around that one needed to reject and be separate from, leading to the increasing isolation from other believers, Groves could see the importance of the common life that true believers shared, and made much effort to cultivate this. In a letter he wrote to Darby in 1836, Groves declared: "*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*" and "*so long as we judge Christ to be dwelling with man, that is our warrant for receiving him*"^[10]. J.G.Bellet, who stood by Darby throughout the turmoil that later followed, too had a deep sense of the divine and had a largeness of heart toward his fellow believers. He was respected throughout all sections of the Brethren and the wider church for his moderate and gracious behaviour.

It would also be wrong to see the original group as fully united in a common understanding of the situation they found themselves and what needed to be done. Their unity could be seen in terms of the evangelical discontentment they all shared and their growing awareness of how the church should and could be, freed from existing ecclesiastical constraints. Although they were well versed in scripture, the set of common distinctive Brethren beliefs, that all subscribed to, were in the early days limited in scope. These tended to evolve over time, both as individual understanding developed and others were added to the group, and as individuals, notably Darby, became more influential. And there was much diversity, before, but especially after, the division occurred.

Neither should they be seen as a group blessed with exceptional spiritual energy. Neatby quotes both Cronin and Hutchinson to demonstrate that they at least perceived the spiritual atmosphere of the group in the web.archive.org/web/.../brethren.htm

and Hutchinson to demonstrate that they at least perceived the spiritual atmosphere of the group in the beginning to be fairly limited and ordinary^[11]. Nor were those who met swift in relinquishing existing church affiliations, which often continued to be maintained for some time after. Finally, the emergence of this group was not unique at that time. Both Neatby and Stunt refer to other groups that had similar concerns and practices, but important differences also^[12].

Influences

The early Brethren could be seen to be a product of their time. They were reacting against what they saw as a lack of life, and compromise and corruption within the Establishment and Dissent alike. They felt the Establishment were too accommodating to outside interests, to the detriment of the work of the gospel, and the Dissenters were too involved in political activism and had succumbed to democratisation, seen to be man centred and usurping the place of God. Two instances of Anglican compromise had disturbed Darby, while he was serving as an Anglican curate in Ireland. In 1827, Archbishop Magee of Dublin required converts to take the oaths of allegiance and supremacy (to the English king, considered insulting to many Irishmen, then as now). Darby saw this erastianism as unnecessary interference and harmful, for it stopped his hitherto successful efforts to convert Roman Catholic peasants. Then in 1832, Archbishop Whatley moved forward proposals to restrict scripture teaching in schools, in deference to Catholics.

On the question of church membership, the Brethren objected to the Establishment's practice of accepting those who were not true believers, and the Dissenters' insistence that, in order to be fully accepted in that church, those who were visitors had to become members of that particular church and denomination to the exclusion of any other and adopt their beliefs and practices too, even those not mandatory from the scriptures. (Ironically, when free churches later began to remove the restrictions objected to and become more open toward other denominations, some Brethren believers moved in the opposite direction.) The vision these men had for the church was one of inclusion for all true believers and exclusion of all that was not in accordance with God's word, and the removal of unnecessary restrictions and ceremony.

The movement began at a time when Higher (Biblical) Criticism was beginning to gain prominence and engage people's thoughts, eventually leading to many churches' adopting a more liberal theological outlook. This tendency, the Brethren resolutely continued to resist. The ruling classes, which included Brethren leaders, tended to be fearful of the mood of revolution and radicalism that was in the air (seen by the far-reaching legislation that was being passed by Parliament) and opposed the move toward democracy (seen as propagating the will of men and abandoning the rule of God), whether it was to do with government or church. They had a profound sense of the growing tide of evil. Although wanting godly principles to permeate society, they had no great desire to overturn the existing social order, yet were conscious of their responsibilities toward those who were less well off, which they conscientiously discharged.

The Brethren were also influenced by other (radical) Evangelical groups of the period, both at home and abroad. E.H. Broadbent identified a long constant movement within Christianity of radical dissent and spirituality and in that context linked the Pietist, Moravian and Brethren movements^[13]. There also existed a romantic tendency, which in other manifestations profoundly affected the arts. For the Brethren though, this was not woolly sentimentality or vague pantheism but based on their belief in the historical Christ. The

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was not woolly sentimentality or vague pantheism but based on their belief in the historical Christ. The romantic cult of sensibility, other-worldliness and a tendency toward heroic abandonment and nostalgia for the past, was in marked contrast to the cult of reason and spirit of scepticism that was associated with the Enlightenment that preceded it, and that has continued to affect western thinking ever since.

For the Brethren, as with the Oxford (Tractarian) Movement within the Church of England, and also the Irvingites (a forerunner to the modern Charismatic Movement), which all emerged around the same time, their desire was for a purified, visibly united church (or at least not disunited through sectarianism), which alone could combat this deeply-held sense of a growing tide of evil and promote a less compromising and more vigorous, God-honouring brand of Christianity. While a detached modern view might discern that there was much in these groups that was common and point to similar inspirational roots, the Brethren, Tractarians and Irvingites did follow different paths and often vigorously opposed one another. But in the main, the Brethren never foresaw a complete abandonment of denominationalism and false religion taking place and considered their own number would always be a poor, persecuted remnant, albeit loved and preserved by the Lord.

The Brethren could not subscribe to the Tractarian belief in the continuity of the church when they could see so much falsehood being embraced by the major Christian groups, in particular the Catholic and Orthodox, which had dominated much of the preceding period. As for Irvingism, the belief in the restoration^[14] of spiritual (sign) gifts and apostolic offices could not be reconciled with the notion that these applied only to the New Testament church and not to the “church in ruins”^[15] of the day. It is likely that many Tractarians saw both the Brethren and Irvingites as extremist sects, who were part of an unwelcome tendency toward schism and a further undermining of the authority and unity of the universal church.

Although a number of plausible reasons have been advanced as to why the Brethren movement emerged at this time and subsequently grew, seemingly spontaneously and with such speed, these are not the only influences that help to explain this phenomenon. What social historians generally fail to recognise is that there is a spiritual dimension. However, this is not a constraint for the majority of authorities within the Brethren movement, from across its whole spectrum of belief and history, who considered the reason why the Brethren emerged and enjoyed a measure of prosperity was because it had been led to do so by the Holy Spirit and that it was obedient to the divine agenda in a way that many other Christian groups were not.

Before turning to consider the many significant developments that arose out of such small beginnings, it is well to reflect on the fact that the majority of the early Brethren leaders were young men in their twenties and thirties. Normally, it might not be unreasonable to have expected these to work out their spiritual aspirations within the churches they each came from, as others have done before and after, yet the impetuosity of youth is often such that their impatience with reactionary forces leads them to do things not bound by unnecessary restraints. Similarly, in our modern era, others have done the same, for example many of the leaders of the new Charismatic Movement have or had Brethren roots. Indeed, like many a radical group who challenged the existing status quo, these men saw there was no other alternative but to secede in order to propagate what they saw as a God given agenda for the Church, although in the case of several there was a gap, sometimes years, between their starting to meet along “Brethren” lines and their severing links with the churches they had belonged to altogether. In the purest sense, they were motivated by a desire for Spirit led ministry of laymen, having concluded that this would likely not take place within existing church structures.

Developments

Following those Dublin house meetings, many others soon became involved, often quite different in personality and outlook, yet many making significant contributions to the development of the early Brethren movement. Some like Müller and Chapman were already leaders of congregations, and effectively brought these into the Brethren fold, although depending on ones perspective they either added to the rich diversity within Brethrenism or something which was outside of the Brethren^[16]. Many of the early leaders shared an interest in unfulfilled prophecy and participated in conferences to study such matters, along with other non-Brethren leaders.

(On the Open side) key figures included George Müller, a man of outstanding faith who, having seen the need, went on to found orphanages, which helped thousands, Henry Craik, a man who had a deep, practical theological understanding and Robert Chapman, a man of quiet piety and renowned spirituality. (On the Closed side) there were George Wigram, a man from a privileged background and no mean scholar but also a devoted man of prayer, contributing much in the establishing of assemblies, and from the next generation there was William Kelly, Darby's heir apparent, a renowned intellect yet a faithful, god-fearing man and Charles Mackintosh who wrote so profoundly and beautifully on devotional topics (both born in 1820)^[17].

The spiritual aspirations and practices of this small group quickly spread to several other places in the United Kingdom, and not long after overseas, with meetings commencing in Germany and Switzerland. After starting in Dublin, a thriving meeting began in Plymouth (in 1831) and then spread to places such as London, under the able leadership of G.V.Wigram, and becoming relatively strong in the West Country. (To avoid any semblance of religiosity, the term "meeting" was often used to denote a gathering of believers or a service. Most Brethren referred to their local congregations of believers as "assemblies" rather than "churches", that term being more associated with buildings or organisations.) The Plymouth meeting attracted many with outstanding gifts and personalities. Interestingly, a number of key figures had earlier met at Oxford University (a centre for much of the new vigorous religious activity taking place at that time), including J.N.Darby, B.W.Newton, J.L.Harris and G.V.Wigram. Other Oxford notables from around that time, who were particularly associated one way or another with this group as well as the general evangelical scene, included H.B.Buteel and F.W.Newman, and there were also more tenuous links with some of the Tractarians, including J.H.Newman and E.B.Pusey.

The centre of Brethren activities was shifting from Dublin to Plymouth. Both places had active evangelical, ecumenically minded, communities and were conducive settings for this new movement. Considering the Acts 2 account of the origins of the early church, elements of the early Christian experience could be seen (at least in the early days) in the Plymouth meeting^[18]:

2:42 *And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.* These principles were keenly practised.

2:43 *And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles.* While signs and wonders did not seem to feature much, there was godly fear

signs and wonders did not seem to feature much, there was godly fear.

2:44 *And all that believed were together, and had all things common.* They did meet regularly and there was unity. Although common ownership as such was not practised, many, notably among the wealthy, did live simply and readily gave up their possessions for the Lord's sake.

2:45 *And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need.* There were many instances of possessions, such as jewellery, being placed in "collection box" and the proceeds from their sale being used to help the poor.

2:46 *And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart.* Although not meeting daily or in temples, they did meet together regularly, and informally, in homes, specifically for the purpose of Christian fellowship. (For practical purposes they later had their own meeting hall where main meetings were held). One senses a joyous unity among them.

2:47 *Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.* The assembly was well thought of in the surrounding area and well beyond. And those being saved were added to their number.

The early Brethren were earnest in their desire to adopt New Testament principles, even though, as will be discussed, there was not always full agreement on what these were. They came from a wide range of church backgrounds (both Dissent and Established) and were often in positions of leadership. They had a passionate desire to be true to the scriptures, live lives uncorrupted by the world, be led by the Spirit, follow a simple form of corporate worship, preach the gospel, enjoy God's grace, encourage spiritual gifts (although not after the manner of modern Pentecostalism), share fellowship, uphold the spiritual priesthood of believers and follow the example of the early church. They desired that the church of God be one, in both scriptural precept and practice, being mindful that a good deal of purported visible unity was based on falsehood and apostasy.

Division

Around 1845 the Brethren suffered a schism over differences in styles of leadership and understanding of eschatological theology, although the dispute was further intensified (in 1847) when some judged that the main leader, Benjamin Newton, had taught error in suggesting that Christ had shared something of man's guilty human nature^[19]. It was J.N.Darby who primarily opposed him. While it was the latter issue that sealed the split, the break was likely inevitable given Newton's opposition to Darby's dispensational views, and Darby's dislike of the autocratic way which, in his opinion, Newton led the Plymouth meeting, by then having grown to 1200. He saw this as tantamount to clericalism, in that it prevented those who could contribute within the meeting from doing so. The dispute spread beyond to other Brethren meetings, coming to a head at the Bethesda meeting in Bristol (in 1848), where Müller and Craik ministered.

It was at Bristol that some who had been associated with Newton, who had been earlier accused by the Darbyites of propagating evil doctrine, were received into fellowship. Concerning the false doctrine in
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Darbyites of propagating evil doctrine, were received into fellowship. Concerning the false doctrine in question, the Bethesda meeting, the new members and likely eventually Newton himself, all rejected this teaching. The question, which caused so much consternation, was whether believers should associate with those who themselves were associating with those who had adhered or were (supposedly) adhering to false doctrine. Entrenched positions were taken on what has been referred to as the "Bethesda question". This led to the "Open" and "Closed" (or "Exclusive") groups of Brethren, the former considering it was not their place to pronounce judgement on what went on elsewhere, especially if not in full possession of the facts, and the latter believing it was necessary to disassociate from all evil, particularly if it had been judged as such by the wider church, even if, as often it later transpired, it would be over a seemingly minor issue or lead to a severing of relations between believers, sometimes from the same family.

F.F.Bruce has suggested that there were two particular strands of teaching, held in some sort of tension, in Brethrenism up to 1845^[20], both of which related to the principle of Christian unity: separation from evil, and the common life of the family of God. Although it may be an over-simplification, the Closed group emphasised the need for separation from evil, whereas the Open group emphasise the importance of the common life of the family of God. Yet, both groups of Brethren were keen on Christian unity, and both saw that it could not be at any cost, and then only with true believers. After the split, the Closed (the larger faction) and the Open groups went their separate ways, both enjoying a measure of recovery and prosperity, with loose links between the two groups being frequently found thereafter. J.N.Darby became the effective leader of the Exclusive Brethren, until his death in 1882, and theologically had a significant influence on the Open Brethren too (although they were also influenced by others whose theology was not entirely compatible with, and sometimes contradicted, that of Darby).

The strife that began in Plymouth and came to a climax in Bristol was a tragedy for the Brethren Movement, and one that it likely never fully recovered from. Many have debated the rights and wrongs concerning the issues that were raised and the stands made, and these have been well elaborated elsewhere, although there are widely differing interpretations of events^[21]. One cannot but help feel that these issues could have been resolved among themselves, without the acrimony that ensued. Overall, the whole matter was not handled satisfactorily. Quite likely the worst was brought out in some, notably Darby, who forced the outcome and arguably resorted to duplicity and undue harshness to promote his particular aspirations for the movement. Others acted with honourable intentions, looking to reach a just settlement regarding this matter.

The differences in eschatology and styles of leadership were perhaps secondary issues and with wise and gracious counsel these could have been reconciled. The matter regarding the nature of the person of Christ was a more serious one and all sides of the split were agreed that Newton had gone too far and the implications of teaching such falsehoods were potentially grave. In Newton's defence, it could be argued that he was treated abysmally (although he may not have acted or reacted in the best possible way), and that he was a gifted, well-proven and able Bible teacher cannot be denied. It is likely that he, nevertheless, "*continually affirmed the catholic doctrine of the Person of the Saviour. Christ was to him very God of very God, yet truly man, free from all taint cleaving to fallen nature, having no sin, original or otherwise*^[22]". However, he did overstep the mark, but many good men, wanting to come to terms with the profound concepts of the coexistence of the divine and human aspects of Christ's nature, have done so before and after.

Possibly Newton could have been corrected with him responding positively, Darby not allowed to dominate proceedings in the way he did and an agreement reached acceptable to all, with the movement emerging stronger as a result. But regrettably it did not happen and likely given the circumstances and personalities involved the outcome was inevitable. Indeed, the conundrum of how to answer the Bethesda question (or similar) has reoccurred throughout church history. While the Closed have often derided their Open Brethren for undermining sound church order by being too lenient, the subsequent damage caused in the Closed group in applying their separatist criteria has been enormous. It seems that few at the time had a full grasp of all the relevant issues and implications or achieved the right balance of grace and truth and wisdom and neither was there the means in existence for effectively dealing with disagreements. The rift having began, widened, and so it seemed could not be reversed, for there was nothing to bring about healing or ensure a satisfactory resolution of the entire matter.

Closed and Open Brethren

Both groups of Brethren reacted against being labelled as a denomination. Even the report accompanying the 1851 Religious Census recognised that “Brethren” was more a description of how its members saw their relationship to one another, rather than the name of a denomination. Rather than yet another sect, their existence was a reaction against sectarianism and a yearning for the true Church of Christ to be visibly one^[23]. Both groups demonstrated that oneness by their regular celebration of the Lord’s Supper, which was central to the life of the assembly, and the importance they attached to open ministry. “*The weekly breaking of bread service with its twin emphasis on remembering Christ and experiencing his immediate presence lay at the heart of Brethren spirituality*^[24]”. They considered much of professing Christendom was based on falsehood yet recognised within it there remained a remnant of true believers.

They were acutely aware of and willingly responded to their heavenly calling. They looked forward to Christ’s coming again for His Church. They considered themselves *ambassadors for Christ* (1Corinthians 5v20), *not of the world* (John 17v16), and *strangers and pilgrims on the earth* (Hebrews 11v13). They felt beholden not to be *yoked with unbelievers* and to *come out from them and be ye separate* (2Corinthians 6v14, 17). Mindful of the Lord’s own sufferings and rejection, they recognised the need to *go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach* (Hebrews 13v13), that *in the world ye shall have tribulation* (John 16v33) and in the last days (and according to their scriptural understanding, those were the last days) *iniquity shall abound, and the love of many shall wax cold* (Matthew 24v12)^[25].

Socially, the Brethren have sometimes been regarded as a middle class movement. A number of its early leaders were from the upper classes, usually well educated, often of independent means and having connections with the establishment. Many who came later were businessmen and professionals^[26]. Yet at its most vibrant, the Brethren attracted a significant number of working class people and helped bring many of the poor to faith in Christ. While it was rarely their intention to challenge existing social order through human endeavour, they took seriously the scriptural teaching that in Christ barriers of class (as well as race, age and gender) were broken down, even though elements of social snobbery have been found in their meetings (especially as members became more affluent and succumbed to an increasingly materialistic culture).

Practical examples of Brethren classlessness included their addressing one another as brother, simple life style, notably among the wealthier members, opposition to systems of pew rents, repudiation of caste systems and welcoming warmth to visitors irrespective of status. Regarding social mix, there have been many instances of those, considered dregs and outcasts in society, being converted through Brethren gospel outreach and having their lives transformed.

There has been a tendency for many in the Brethren to withdraw from worldly affairs, other than when fulfilling obligations in the work-place, being good citizens and neighbours, and to distance themselves from those churches that they felt had compromised their testimony. Members' efforts would normally be directed toward those activities specifically relating to the life and mission of the assemblies. The fact this tendency existed helps to account for the suspicion with which they have often been viewed by and the misrepresentation from some non-Brethren quarters, both Christian and other. Even so, the Open group, although strict by many standards, tended to be more accommodating toward Christians holding different views and did associate with non-Brethren groups as well as individuals enjoying deep spiritual relationships with those from other church traditions. Despite being called Exclusive and a tendency not to associate with outsiders, a number in the Closed group too did welcome visitors and allowed members of other denominations to break bread with them.

Members of open assemblies were often involved with inter- or non-denominational organisations and initiatives, particularly for the purpose of evangelism. They were often among the most enthusiastic supporters of large inter-church evangelistic crusades, such as those involving D.L.Moody and Billy Graham as the preachers. Some Open groups, however, were as strict as the Closed groups, having little to do with those who did not share their outlook, differing mainly on the issue of independence and aspects of ecclesiology. Some Closed groups have accused Open Brethren of being too lax and prepared to compromise over key issues of principle, while Open groups have viewed Closed practices as being unduly restrictive and imposing. Mainly for these reasons, a reuniting of Closed and Open groups has not occurred and the two have followed mostly distinct and separate paths, from the time of the split until now.

The main distinction between the two groups is that the Open Brethren advocated (often fervently) that each assembly should have autonomy over its own affairs, usually with a non-paid plurality of elders (or overseers) appointed from within the assembly (usually co-opted on by the existing oversight, sometimes voted on by members). More recently, some Open assemblies have employed full-time, paid workers to work alongside those who were not paid. The Closed Brethren rejected formal oversights and considered that the whole church (effectively all within their group) should be involved in overseeing the affairs of the assemblies, although in practice an inner group of recognised decision makers did emerge. They believed assemblies needed to be interdependent rather than independent, including the need to hold the same beliefs and adopt the same practices. Assemblies and individuals who did not conform to the official line were frequently excluded, depending on the issue and the policy of the other assemblies involved.

Survey of the Closed Brethren

The Closed group subsequently suffered several more damaging splits, often over what appears to have been some obscure point of doctrine or personality clash, and on occasions fell into disrepute through its web.archive.org/web/.../brethren.htm

some obscure point of doctrine or personality clash, and on occasions fell into disrepute through its narrowness and hostility toward outsiders, as well as the excesses of some of its leaders. The groups that arose would often be referred to by the name of the main person of influence in that group, for example: Lowe, Kelly, Taylor, Mory, Grant, Stuart. Sections of the Closed group insisted that adherents adopt specific teachings and lifestyles, supposedly determined by the whole body, although in reality as laid down by one or more dominant persons. They tended to have little to do with those who did not believe and act as they did. There was an insistence on strong links and interaction between the different meetings. Yet there were many included in its ranks that were concerned for Biblical holiness, fidelity to the Word of God and sound assembly practices and order, and were deeply devoted to the person of Christ.

The devotional writings of some of the Closed Brethren of the nineteenth century are felt by many to contain particularly profound and sublime Biblical insights and thoughts concerning Christ, which have been rarely surpassed^{[27][28]}. Latterly, there has been a reuniting of many of the groups that had previously separated from each other and a distancing themselves from some of the excesses that in the past. For an account of how the various strands of Closed Brethren have come into being, refer to <http://www.storm.ca/~sabigail/1870his.htm> which provides a clear, candid, conciliatory and contrite account of what went on. It seeks to continue the story of the Brethren from 1870, after the time Andrew Miller's account of the Brethren finished^[29].

Survey of the Open Brethren

The Open group (and to an extent the Closed) helped to stimulate and benefited from the revivals and mission activity which took place in the second half of the nineteenth century, and were as much in tune as any Evangelical group with the massive social changes taking place, desirous of and successful in reaching the people with the gospel. Because they were a new, young group they did not feel restricted in the way they went about attracting converts. Those, whose main employment was secular, along with "full-time workers", planted and established assemblies in areas that hitherto had no evangelical witness. While many were added to their numbers from the existing churches, attracted by this fresh radical approach, many non or lapsed church or chapel goers also joined them, having become converted to the Lord.

The buildings used to hold meetings were often called "Gospel Halls", appropriately named since these were usually simple and unadorned (other than a few texts painted on the walls), where the main function was to do with proclaiming the gospel. (Nowadays, many assemblies have dropped this title in favour of something like Chapel, Fellowship or even Church, in an attempt to be more in tune with modern sensibilities.) As a consequence of their sincere, simple, direct approach, the Open Brethren experienced considerable expansion from the middle of the nineteenth to the middle of the twentieth centuries. They were active in mission, both at home and overseas, invariably with the primary aim of bringing people to a saving knowledge of Christ. During this period many specifically Open practices and traditions gained acceptance, for example the timing and formats of meetings, often becoming unofficially mandatory among many assemblies, and these continue in many places to this day, even when the rationale has long been forgotten or no longer applies.

One reviewer has requested that the author "*write of the love, life, liberty and lowliness of mind pervading gospel hall fellowships which preached the gospel freely to whosoever will without any*"
web.archive.org/web/.../brethren.htm

pervading gospel hall fellowships, which preached the gospel freely to whosoever will, without any fund raising which could embarrass the impecunious who rightly explained that they couldn't afford to go to church... In its devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ's honour and glory the assembly movement has never been surpassed or possibly even matched. Its origin came not from, firstly, concern for social needs, but from a desire for the one and only Head of the Church to have sole control and that Church by His direct presence and leading in all the worship, edification and witness of the assembly. The active benevolence followed quickly afterwards^[30].

Open Brethren worldwide expansion

As early as 1829, a small missionary band (later joined by others), together with their families, led by A.N.Groves, set out from the UK to start missionary work in Bagdad. They suffered much, including the death of Groves' wife and baby daughter through plague, and in human terms seemed to have achieved little, but this venture did set the tone and provide the inspiration for much overseas mission activity that came after. Those who later joined the party included Edward Cronin, John Parnell and Frank Newman (brother of John, the eminent cardinal). Although Newman was later to lose his faith (perhaps to regain it at the end of his life), others were to begin pioneer missionary activity elsewhere, notably Groves, who played an important part in helping to start the assembly movement in India.

The extraordinary explosion in missionary enterprise during the nineteenth century was due, to a significant extent, to the contribution of dedicated Brethren missionaries, supported by their home sending assemblies, more than is commonly recognised. Some of the outstanding, sacrificial efforts of people such as F.S.Arnot, F.W.Baedeker, H.Bird, H.St.John and C.R.Marsh have been chronicled^[31], but there were numerous others besides these, whose outstanding contributions have remained mostly unheralded, including not a few single lady missionaries. It has been reckoned that at one time 1 in 100 assembly members served as long-term overseas missionaries (a ratio that is far greater than that found in most other denominations).

Many new overseas assemblies were formed, eventually coming under local oversight, who themselves were engaged in missionary activity. At the same time, schools, colleges, hospitals, clinics, orphanages and other compassionate ministries were also started, and these provided an important and much valued service to the surrounding communities. Whole areas were transformed by becoming christianised, where hitherto there had been no Christian witness. By the end of the nineteenth century Brethren assemblies had been established in a large number of countries, in all parts of the world^[32].

For over a hundred years, following the 1848 split, the Open Brethren experienced growth^[33]. The Open Brethren movement (and to an extent the Closed) spread to many countries throughout all parts of the world, in no small part because of the sacrificial labours of Brethren missionaries, followed by the efforts of strong local leaders. Many Open assemblies were formed, applying Brethren principles within the particular surrounding cultural settings, and continued to maintain a vibrant gospel witness, being active in various forms of evangelism.

Emanating from these were plantings of further new assemblies as well as numerical expansion of existing

ones. The members have been successful in leading many to Christ and establishing believers in the Word. A consideration of the similar and distinct ways the movement developed, in the many countries where it has taken root, would provide a fascinating further study and would be a much welcomed contribution to one's understanding of the Brethren movement world-wide^[34]. Echoes has provided some helpful publications relating to Brethren missionary activities and some of the key personalities involved, including a book produced to coincide with their centenary: "Turning the World Upside Down", albeit written from a missionary perspective^[35].

Cohesiveness of the Open Brethren

Despite each Open assembly's freedom to determine its own affairs, links and interactions among them were strong, especially when one assembly was a "plant" of another. Reasons for this closeness and similarity in outlook included the high value members placed on the important principles they fought so hard to establish, deeming these to be based on scripture, being drawn together by a common purpose, an acute awareness of outside opposition and their lack of acceptance by denominational churches. As with the Closed group, there was often a view that the local assembly was the best setting for manifesting the visible unity of the church, even though individual churches were autonomous in the way they conducted their affairs.

A practice of recognising teachers, evangelists and preachers, who influenced how assemblies thought and acted, grew up. These highly respected brothers would minister among assemblies and this often led to a convergence in what was taught and thought. Also, there were several magazines and other publications, often addressing various aspects of "assembly truth", and these were widely circulated among the assemblies^[36]. Members often shared a common interest (and views) concerning Biblical prophecy, especially that yet to be fulfilled, seeing their time to be the Last Days and eagerly expecting the Lord's imminent return. While it was recognised that the timing of the Lord's coming could not be predicted, believers were conscious that they needed to be prepared and faithful in His service.

Agencies such as (in the UK) "Stewardship Services" (financial and property management), "Echoes (of Service)" (overseas mission) and "Counties" (home evangelism) evolved and these represented the interests of many assemblies in a serving capacity, thus further bringing members together, even though the principle of local assembly autonomy was too strong to yield to any interfering outside body. Finally, assembly members attended the meetings and conferences held by other assemblies, as well as centrally organized conventions, such as the annual London Missionary Meetings^[37], and co-operated in evangelistic outreach and supporting mission.

When members of one assembly travelled or moved to another area, they normally met with the nearest assembly, usually presenting a letter of commendation from the assembly they came from, and there they would be welcomed to the meeting and often afforded hospitality in homes. Until relatively recently, it would have often been possible for a visitor to attend Brethren meetings anywhere in the world and find a common pattern of meeting and the same distinctive beliefs, practices and attitudes that were in existence back home.

However, there has always been diversity in beliefs over what might be deemed as secondary issues.

Members differed, for example over the events surrounding the Second Coming or to what extent they should relate to those believers who did not adopt assembly principles or whether assemblies should be "Closed-Open", "Wide Open" or somewhere in-between. Mostly, that diversity was contained within the movement and tolerance was exercised, although there was usually a strong consensus over what comprised sound doctrine. Factions did occur in the Open Brethren, although to a lesser extent than with the Closed. For example, the "Needed Truth" movement, begun in 1889, adopted an ecclesiastical hierarchal form of church government and did not allow those outside their group to participate at the Lord's Table, but those practices were not acceptable to the majority of Open assemblies.

Open Brethren practices

[38] Meetings: Open assemblies conducted many meetings, during the week as well as on Sundays, catering for all ages and both genders, with meetings among the young and women being both regular and many (for social, evangelistic and teaching purposes). Prayer, Bible teaching, and sometimes Bible studies, where all (men) would be invited to contribute, typically took place on at least two nights of the week. Meetings were usually well supported (although many came to lament that prayer meeting attendance was far less than that of the Sunday morning worship meeting). A brother from the assembly or neighbouring assembly, and on occasions a visiting ministering brother, normally led meetings where the Word was expounded. The assembly program placed a strong emphasis on Bible study, prayer (and praise), fellowship and evangelistic outreach. The preaching of the Word was given a prominent place, with male members, notably among the young, encouraged in their preaching endeavours. Many well known (and capable) preachers could identify their spiritual roots within the assembly movement^[39].

Other churches: Many meeting patterns were similar to what one might find in other Evangelical set-ups; including a mix of hymns (and choruses), prayers, announcements, Bible readings, reports and testimonies, with a lengthy (Bible based) sermon, usually at the end. Given the importance attached to extempore ministry, there was an absence of formal liturgy and set prayers, including the Lord's Prayer, even though a predictable pattern could often be discerned. Other than strict observance of the Lord's Day, special days, including Christmas and Easter, tended not to be kept, although these days some assemblies are more in line with general Evangelical thinking when celebrating special days. Although in the past the Brethren tended to mix mainly among themselves, there has been an increasing tendency for members of less "tight" assemblies to associate with other Evangelicals. Many a Brethren stalwart, finding himself in a situation without a thriving assembly, has transferred to a non-Brethren church, and often this was Baptist. Many who became active in and sometimes led other churches had Brethren roots.

Women issues: Women were normally not permitted to exercise a teaching or pastoral ministry (or even lead in prayer) in a mixed setting, since this was seen to be contrary to the Bible's teaching. Yet they played an active part in assembly life, even though their role was often a silent one. As with most churches, over half of the membership was women. Gifted sisters led women's meetings and helped with the children's work. They undertook an important role in entertaining and providing hospitality. Many provided significant (behind the scenes) assistance to their husbands in their more public ministries. Some have observed, with a degree of irony, that women through their husbands ran many an assembly. Many a lady undertook a major part in ensuring a small and struggling work kept going. It has also been the norm for women to wear head coverings.

ensuring a small and struggling work kept going. It has also been the norm for women to wear head coverings during meetings. In some assemblies, there were more opportunities for women to actively participate, especially by leading in prayer and giving reports and testimonies, and exercise a more public role, especially in recent years, although the issue of where the boundaries lay has, as in other places, been a contentious one and is sometimes still to be resolved.

Church government: Each assembly was usually led by a plurality of unpaid, often secularly employed (or retired from paid work) elders, who between them were responsible for its spiritual oversight, although there has been an increasing tendency to include paid elders, often taking on specific administrative, pastoral and ministerial duties. The Brethren have tended to reject an episcopal style of church government as well as more democratic styles, as practised in many Nonconformist set ups, as being unscriptural. New members of overights were usually invited to join by existing members, based on their perception of who would be most fit for eldership, although the process by which these were appointed was by no means infallible. The eldership met together regularly, according to each assembly policy, to pray and discuss ministry, pastoral, financial and other practical matters. Sometimes deacons assisted in practical matters.

Elders and leaders: Many a new assembly (or mission) was led by a missionary, pastor, evangelist or brother from the nearby mother assembly. It would be wrong though to equate eldership with leadership for those who were not elders led many of the assembly activities and played vital parts in the life of the assembly. At their best, overights encouraged and facilitated such activities and enabled individual members to fulfil their spiritual potential. It was generally determined not to create a separate minister class, even though a single person or family has come to dominate many an assembly. Often, by default, that was the corresponding brother, who was the one that interacted with those outside the assembly. As for the Closed group, they tended not to appoint elders, deeming that a "church in ruins" was not qualified to do so and pointing to abuses in the Open system in sometimes appointing inappropriate persons.

Open ministry: It was the principle of open ministry, which was often fervently promoted, that made assemblies so distinctive from other denominations. Taken to one extreme, some assemblies sometimes refused to pre-book speakers for meetings or prearrange programmes, believing the Holy Spirit will control proceedings and lead the ministry, although some went to the opposite extreme and held tight control over meetings. Most could see that there were potential pitfalls with an entirely open approach, for example inappropriate ministry or none at all. Mostly there was a degree of openness, with opportunities for individual brothers to share, but there was planning and structure too. Many an assembly held conversational Bible readings where different members would comment on a passage of scripture or some devotional topic. The prayer meeting was usually seen to be very important (at least in theory), and again any brother could lead in prayer. The most significant opportunity for open ministry was during the Breaking of Bread meetings. However, there has been a tendency in recent years to curtail opportunities for open ministry. Reasons include the numbers able or willing to minister in this way have declined and a cultural tendency that favoured more organisation and structure. Even so, the principle of every member being encouraged to contribute continues to be maintained, at least in theory.

Breaking of Bread: The centrepiece of assembly life and worship has tended to be the weekly Breaking of Bread meeting and this was the setting where open ministry was most likely to take place, although there were

opportunities at other times. The focus of this meeting was primarily on Christ and His death, as symbolized in the elements of bread and wine. Any male believer could in principle participate at those meetings, usually by announcing a hymn, leading in prayer or reading or expounding a passage of scripture, and they were encouraged to contribute, including administering the bread and wine. Often there were opportunities for any who were so exercised to give a word following the communion. In the past, singing was mostly musically unaccompanied, although these days an organ or piano and sometimes various other instruments are also employed. The desire was for the Holy Spirit to direct proceedings and lead each participant.

Community involvement: Active benevolence, such as helping the poor and needy in the community, was much in evidence. Members were often involved within their local community although they tended not to be political or social activists. They did support compassionate ministries, although this was often directed toward those whose main purpose was to preach the gospel. More likely, they tended to look upon Christian Socialism as a contradiction in terms and a product of humanism and yet were unlikely to endorse any political party. In some cases members did not vote at all, seeing this as a worldly activity not appropriate for believers. But, in the main, Open believers did exercise their democratic obligations. It was likely that when votes were cast more were for “conservative” than other candidates, even though representatives of all shades of political opinion could be found among their numbers.

Matters of conscience: Brethren believers have tended to have tender consciences, preferring to suffer for Christ rather than compromise their testimony for the Lord. Their passion for the gospel often led them to be isolated from other believers, preferring to be ridiculed or rejected, even by other believers, than give in on important principles, seeing this as sharing their Lord’s rejection and a necessary consequence of Christian discipleship. Regarding work, complete honesty and commitment to their employers was the norm. Many have refused to join Trade Unions for that reason (although many others have felt it right to participate). A number have refused to join strikes and suffered by being ostracised by their colleagues, because they considered the wider harm caused was greater than the principles over which the strikes were made. On the matter of serving in the armed forces, some have declined to do so; registering as contentious objectors, although others have willingly served, and some have done so with great distinction.

Culture: Brethren believers were not normally patrons of the arts and were inclined to see this as a distraction that tended toward frivolity and worldliness, but they did contribute, notably by writing (usually metaphysical) poetry and hymns containing sublime sentiments concerning the Lord. Included in their number were talented (usually) amateur artists and musicians. While there has been a tendency for outsiders to see members of the Brethren as cultural Philistines, such a view is perhaps unfair and, as this writer can testify, a number of them were (are) highly cultured^[40]. Although attitudes these days are more relaxed, there is still a tendency (stronger in the past) to frown upon much that was found in popular entertainment as being worldly and leading to an arousal of the senses in a way that was not conducive to godly living.

Evangelism: Great store was put on evangelistic outreach, including open-air meetings and visitation of peoples’ homes and institutions, and the gospel meeting, aimed at challenging the unsaved to repent and be converted by inviting “whosoever will” to follow Christ. Evangelistic enterprises, at home and abroad, were usually well supported. The gospel meeting, often held 6.30 each Sunday night, has often been seen to be a Brethren distinctive. These meetings comprised prayer, hymns and bible readings, but the main activity was

preaching the gospel. On these occasions sinners would be urged to trust in the Christ, who died on a cross for their sins, for salvation. In the early days at least, these were often successful in achieving that aim, although the effectiveness of such meetings have been, in the main, significantly reduced in more recent times. Yet assemblies have often been at the forefront of finding innovative ways of reaching neighbours and the various sectors of society with the gospel.

Hymnology: Hymns formed an important part of assembly worship. Many of the great evangelical hymns, by writers such as Isaac Watts, John Newton and Charles Wesley, were loved and used. Many in the assemblies wrote hymns, in particular reflecting on the glory of Christ and the Christian pilgrimage (suffering, overcoming and triumph). While most of these are little known outside the assemblies a number are^[41]. Many a gospel meeting made wide use of Sankey's "Sacred Songs and Solos", with its emphasis on inviting sinners to respond to the gospel. Many a breaking of bread meeting used hymn books that were normally only used by assemblies, for example "Hymns of Light and Love", since these contained many hymns, not found in other hymn books, considered to be particularly appropriate in supporting the act of remembering the Lord Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, many of the popular evangelical hymn books have been employed in Brethren meetings, and increasingly, these days, modern songs and choruses.

Full time workers: Many enthusiastically volunteered to do the "Lord's work" full-time, often without a guaranteed income (having been encouraged to look to the Lord for their support, including not making their needs known), and receiving only limited earthly reward or status (although widely respected). Their training tended to be the "on the job" type or as a result of the (limited) teaching provided by the assemblies, although later formal college based training became more acceptable. Many were inspired by Brethren pioneers, who on seeing an opportunity or need and sensing God's prompting to serve Him, got on with the job, without ostentation, looking to the Lord to provide for their own day to day needs.

Giving money: While tithing tended not to be widely taught or practised as such, members often were generous and unostentatious in their giving, specifically for the work of the assembly, missionary enterprises and to support the compassionate ministries of the assembly. Assemblies were usually self-supporting, although there were often generous benefactors and support given to other assemblies when the need arose. Collections tended to be taken only at those meetings that were arranged for the believers, particularly the Breaking of Bread meetings. There was a feeling that although the gospel is not cheap, it is free and visitors need not contribute.

Christian living: Those who were saved were exhorted to live holy lives, obeying God's commandments, as befits believers. Often one's Christian duty was emphasised and some would say at the expense of the grace of God that enables one to live the Christian life. Sometimes there was an emphasis on negative aspects, things believers should not do, since doing these things were often seen to be detrimental to one's walk with the Lord. Private as well as corporate prayer and reading the Bible were encouraged as was testifying for the Lord and doing works of charity. Knowledge gained from studying the Word needed to be applied and believers were expected to live accordingly. While fasting tended not to be taught, some practised this. Many wanted to be shining witnesses to the Lord Jesus Christ in this evil world. They believed in the importance of Christian fellowship and dependence on the leading and empowering of the Holy Spirit.

Baptism: Once someone accepted the Lord he was normally expected to be baptized in water. Whether this took place immediately after conversion (as was the early church practise) or after a period of reflection (and sometimes instruction) varied according to assembly. There was usually a concern to ascertain that those who professed faith were genuine. Significantly, Darby continued to advocate infant baptism. This practice was widely adopted in Exclusive Assemblies, whereas the vast majority of Open Assemblies practised only believers' baptism by full immersion, considering this to be the only form sanctioned by scripture. Baptism was considered important because it is the scriptural means of initiation into the church, identifies the baptizand with the death and resurrection of Christ and is a matter of obedience to the Lord, even though the act itself was seen primarily as an outward sign of an inward reality, and nothing more.

Saved by grace: The Brethren emphasised the all-sufficiency of God's grace and Christ's blood to save (past, present and future), and the urgent need for men and women to make a personal response of faith in Christ. This was because death could occur or the Lord might return at any time, after which there is no further opportunity to respond to the gospel appeal. They took the view that all they thought or did had to be based on God's Word, which was studied and expounded with much vigour. The preaching of the cross was the principal activity in assembly life and witness. The central focus was on the person and character of Christ and devotion to Him.

Open Brethren doctrines

The importance placed on adhering to sound doctrine has always been a major Brethren concern. Sometimes this was seen as even more important than spiritual life. Theologically, the position of most Open Assemblies has been (and still is) mainstream Christian, conservative Evangelical, and moderately Calvinist, Puritan and Reformed, although these days a more liberal and ecumenical, less doctrinaire and rigid outlook can often be discerned. They were able to subscribe to most of the historical articles of faith^[42]. They generally opposed Catholicism for adding to the gospel, and Liberalism for taking away from the gospel. The tendency to distance themselves from those not sharing their beliefs was done in order not to present an unclear message. David Bebbington has identified the following central and distinctive Evangelical beliefs: conversionism, activism, biblicism and crucicentrism^[43]. Brethren believers believed lives needed to be changed through a personal commitment to Christ (conversionism), were dedicated in their efforts to make this so (activism), earnestly sought to be subject to the tenets of scripture (biblicism), and continually returned to the theme of Christ dying on the cross to save sinners (crucicentrism).

The term "fundamentalist^[44]" has sometimes been used to describe Brethren teaching, since they believed that an understanding of and agreement on fundamentals was needed and that, in the main, the Bible must be taken literally. Adherence to conservative Evangelical doctrine was maintained even though, for much of the period following the emergence of the Brethren movement, liberalism gained much ground in many churches. Certain beliefs about how an assembly should function had as much to do with the assembly culture that evolved as with scripture, for example the timing and format of the Breaking of Bread and gospel meetings was more a consequence of nineteenth century preoccupations, life-style and sensibilities as anything else, and do not necessarily relate to the needs of the twenty-first century. Even so, there was a deliberate attempt to do that which was based on scripture and principles such as open ministry and plurality of elders are arguably scriptural and had hitherto been neglected by Evangelicals. The conundrum whether faced or not was (ic) web.archive.org/web/.../brethren.htm

scriptural and had hitherto been neglected by Evangelicals. The conundrum, whether faced or not, was (is) distinguishing cultural and scriptural factors.

A detailed study of ecclesiology^[45] (the doctrine of the church), and what precisely the Brethren believed concerning this, is outside the scope of this account, yet needs to be considered, albeit briefly, since this differed, sometimes significantly, to what other churches believed^[46]. The importance of the church has tended to be stressed by Catholics and neglected by Evangelicals, yet it was generally emphasised by the Brethren, although there were differences in Closed and Open Brethren beliefs. Catholics tend to believe that theirs is the visible church (although reluctantly recognising other communions), it is joined by baptism, all members are also children of God, and salvation can only be found through the church, usually their church. Evangelicals tend to emphasise the invisible Church, which a person automatically joins when he or she makes a personal commitment to Christ, believing each congregation includes those who are saved and called by the Lord, who alone knows who belongs to (His) Church.

While the Brethren, particularly the Open section, have had more in common with the Evangelical view, they also promoted the notion of the visible church. Although recognising there were and would continue to be true believers in all the denominations, the Brethren tended to believe that the assembly (*ekklesia*, i.e. those who have been called out of, the gathering of (God's) people) represented God's pattern for believers coming together. They considered that the local church, even though it was only a shadow of what was to come and in a weakened state compared with New Testament times, ought to be visible insofar it ought to comprise only those who are saved, adopt all (and only) those beliefs and practices that are entirely compatible with scripture, be united together in God's love and maintain a testimony that honoured Christ.

Regarding the charismatic question, which in recent years has affected all groups within mainstream Christianity, the Brethren tended to be less than sympathetic, and sometimes they were openly opposed. Many took a "cessational" position, based on their understanding that once the canon of scripture was complete the more spectacular gifts, such as tongues, prophecy and healing, normally no longer featured. Additional reasons why it was felt miraculous spiritual gifts were normally not applicable for the present time included a belief that there were no longer apostles, a view that the church after the first century had been corrupted and a perception of misuse elsewhere. One stumbling block for Brethren believers was the notion put about by many charismatics that not all believers had received the Baptism of the Holy Spirit, it being argued that this happened subsequent to, not at, conversion. Also the more exuberant charismatic worship was in marked contrast to the more dignified Brethren worship, and was sometimes seen as tending toward emotionalism. Yet the need for the Holy Spirit to operate in the life of assembly believers has always been deemed to be important. Interestingly, a few of the early Brethren had charismatic sympathies, for example P.F.Hall, and so have not an insignificant number of others subsequently. Latterly, many have come to value the contributions of and minister along side charismatic believers and sometimes embraced their beliefs too.

One belief, not shared with the majority of Evangelicals, was that of "dispensational pre-millennialism", although several Evangelical groups later came to adopt these views. This was the accepted orthodoxy (until recently) of most (although not all) Open as well as Closed Brethren. Here, the views of J.N.Darby had a profound influence: God deals with mankind in different ways in different epochs and Christ will come secretly to take the Church prior to the Great Tribulation (a seven-year period which includes the rule of the Antichrist

and the conversion of the Jews). He will then return with His saints to establish His millennial rule on Earth. This will be followed by a final showdown between the forces of good and evil, and then the Last Judgement, after which the saved and the lost go to their respective eternal destinations. Expectation of Christ's imminent return has long occupied thoughts and conditioned attitudes of Brethren believers. It also helps explain why a long-term strategy for the movement (for example establishing educational and other institutions for the community and systematically evangelising every people group) has tended not to exist. The study of unfulfilled prophecy, of which the scriptures abound, has been widely recognised as a particular Brethren interest from the outset.

In recent times some members have challenged the "haphazardism" that seems to have been an intrinsic part of Brethrenism and urged more structure and planning in order to be more effective and have greater impact on society. They lamented the fact that, while the Open Brethren recognised assemblies should be inter-dependent, more could have been achieved in terms of effective ministry and strategic mission if a more systematic, co-operative approach had been adopted. Others have resisted a tendency toward more management, arguing such a worldly-wise approach limits the sovereign role of and restrains the liberty that comes from the Holy Spirit, noting that assemblies were most effective when minimal organisation was involved.

There are other notions and emphases out of step with mainstream Evangelicalism, which would require more study and need to account for the wide diversity of beliefs among Evangelicals. Yet most members had a simple faith that was both practical and spiritual in nature. It has often been acknowledged that Brethren believers were generally well versed in scripture, yet they were not trained theologians, often having an aversion to theological institutions, considered by some to be unhelpful. Latterly, a number have received formal training and several Brethren Bible schools have begun. Among both Open and Closed Brethren have been those who made outstanding contributions in the area of Biblical scholarship and exegesis^[47].

Finally, although the Open group were more in tune with mainstream Evangelicalism than the Closed, theologically the Closed and Open groups had much in common. But concerning the doctrine of the church, there were significant, irreconcilable differences. The nineteenth-century Catholic revival, as manifested, for example, by the emergence of the Oxford movement, did much to challenge Evangelical notions of private judgement and individualism, re-emphasising the importance of tradition and the authority of the church. The Closed shared the Open Brethren disdain for things specifically Catholic, yet (in varying degrees) the prominence they gave to their own traditions, the exalted status afforded to the Breaking of Bread meeting, their own form of apostolic succession when it came to recognising new leaders, the authority of their church in matters of doctrine and practice and in advocating theirs to be the true church, the edicts emanating from their leading brethren, and the threat of excommunication for "erring" (from the official line) members (all of which elements can be discerned in sections of the Open group too) might be considered to be more Catholic than Evangelical.

Today's Open Brethren - the UK

Over the past forty years there has been a general decline in church membership in the UK, although this has been particularly marked among the Brethren. Some assemblies have closed or are having problems
web.archive.org/web/.../brethren.htm

been particularly marked among the Brethren. Some assemblies have closed or are having problems maintaining a viable work. Some are now much restricted in what they can now do, having been reduced to a small, often elderly membership. Reasons given for this decline include: a general drift in society away from traditional Christianity, a lowering of the spiritual temperature within the assemblies including their becoming side-tracked by non-essentials, a reaction against the lack of systematic ministry, frustration with a “bootstrapping” (it all depends on us) theology that produced discouragement rather than spiritual victory, assemblies failing to address the massive cultural and attitude changes taking place in society, members leaving to join more “successful” existing denominational churches or the emerging new charismatic churches (many of which have adopted significant elements of Brethren teaching), dissatisfaction with the weakness of assembly life and a desire for something livelier and more culturally relevant.

The “success” of the Brethren in the past was in no small part due to the time and energy freely given by its members to serve the assembly, undertaking a wide range of tasks, who were often able to so arrange their affairs and in a financial position to do so. One aspect of life in the western world since the Second World War has been that the number of those who were in a position to provide such a service has greatly diminished and therefore much that used to get done no longer happens or only if there are paid workers to do the work.

Some of those who remained in the assemblies have come to terms with the decline, seeing this as part of the “falling away” to be expected in the last days, suspicious concerning the compromises made to achieve “success” elsewhere. Often outsiders fail to understand the resolve of small assemblies to maintain a testimony and remain faithful, even though in decline, for they have wanted to hang on to beliefs and practices long deemed important by the Brethren, resisting sacrificing important principles, which they considered had been ignored by the more popular fellowships, often feeling unable to fit in elsewhere. Others assemblies have fought to maintain an energetic effective witness, often seeking new ways of reaching out to the local community, often adopting radical new ideas and methods and forging partnerships with other groups. Some assemblies have in recent years been reborn and have had a fresh surge of life, often having earlier experienced decline and, after a painful period of change and transition, seen the work grow. Some assemblies have resisted the pressure to make changes for changes sake, preferring instead to concentrate on being faithful to the Word, and they too have experienced a measure of growth.

The contributions of agencies with strong links to the Brethren, such as “Counties”, who support evangelists working at the cutting edge of evangelism, and “Echoes”, who facilitate support of overseas missionaries, continue to be significant. Many non-Brethren agencies and churches owe much to the contributions of past and present members of Brethren assemblies. Many have served as teachers, evangelists, administrators, city missionaries, open-air workers, children, women and students workers, leaders of works Christian unions, home and hospital visitors and colporteurs, often under the auspices of those outside of assemblies. Some fellowships with Brethren roots have thrown off this connection altogether and have sought identities outside the Brethren, abandoning many of those practices not strictly required by scripture, often becoming aligned with other evangelical, charismatic or community groups. There have been many groups adopting “Brethren” principles (although they have frequently added their own), often led by those coming from a traditional Brethren background, yet do not come under that label. These include independent Bible or fundamentalist churches and organisations of churches (both charismatic and non-charismatic) embracing inter-dependent

fellowships, often having a hierarchal leadership structure and maintaining their own distinctive testimony.

In recent times, the cohesiveness that once existed has gone from UK assemblies, each principally relating to those who shared their particular outlook, Brethren or otherwise, or becoming isolationist. Open assemblies might nowadays be deemed to be either “traditionalist” or “progressive”. (Here) traditionalist (some less charitable might use the word “reactionary”) refers to those who have looked to maintain those assembly principles and practices that have long been widely accepted, whereas the progressives (some less charitable might use the word “retrogressive”) are those who have often looked beyond the Brethren Movement for their inspiration and have looked to accommodate other church traditions when deemed appropriate, often dispensing with Brethren traditions and Brethren-speak like “assembly”. Most assemblies fall somewhere between the two tendencies, although those who regard themselves as an assembly tend to be more mindful of assembly tradition.

The strength of the traditionalists may be their faithfulness to the Lord and His Word and adherence to New Testament principles when all around is compromise. Their weakness may be their reluctance to make changes when needed, a failure to recognise what God is doing outside their circle and an emphasis on doctrine over life. The strength of the progressives may be their willingness to make changes when needed and accommodate, work with and learn from believers from other churches. Their weakness may be they have too readily abandoned their Brethren heritage, adapted too freely to contemporary culture and preferred ecclesiastical correctness over doctrinal soundness in order to be seen as respectable or be more widely accepted.

Examples of traditionalist Brethren teaching can be found in publications emanating from “Precious Seed”, (see www.preciousseed.org). Examples of progressive Brethren teaching can be found in publications emanating from “Partnership” (see www.partnershipuk.org). (The Partnership website also provides details of the Brethren Archivists and Historians Network (BAHN).) While there seems to be a big gap, there is much common ground shared by these representatives of two Open Brethren wings. Both are faced with the challenge of working out issues and concerns that have always occupied the hearts and minds of Brethren believers and within cultures that are, at the same time, open, hostile and ignorant toward authentic Christianity.

Today's Open Brethren - worldwide

While in decline in some countries, the Open Brethren movement continues to grow in others and maintain an effective outreach to the local community. It is impossible to generalize, as each country differs, as does the degree of freedom assemblies are afforded by the governing authorities. In many places there is persecution but this is by no means confined to Brethren believers. Yet the assemblies in many countries of the world are strong and vibrant. They often have more in common with the ways of the founding fathers and are often working together, more so than do many of today's UK assemblies. In such countries Brethren believers are making significant inroads in spreading the gospel and helping the poor and socially marginalized.

While often appearing more traditionalist in their outlooks, these are not necessarily narrow-minded or bound by unprofitable controversy. Having sought to adapt to contemporary culture in order to provide an effective

by unprofitable controversy, having sought to adapt to contemporary culture in order to provide an effective witness and impact upon the surrounding communities. Nevertheless, there is generally a great need for visionary and spiritual leaders and gifted and trained teachers and preachers. Throughout the world the needs and opportunities in the gospel field and for compassionate ministries are enormous. Overall, there is a great deal of diversity and breadth of outlook among today's Brethren, both in the UK and the rest of the world. Shawn Abigail's website, <http://www.storm.ca/~sabigail/faqs/brethren.htm>, provides interesting figures concerning the number of Brethren assemblies in many countries. For example, in the four southern states of India: Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, he states there are currently (conservatively) estimated to be 400, 400, 500 and 200 Brethren assemblies respectively^[48].

Basic details, e.g. name, location, contact person(s), of many of the assemblies in some of these countries can be found in directories produced by the Steward's Association^[49], or similar such bodies that work among the assemblies, and in some instances published on the Web, although these are rarely comprehensive. Detailed statistical data concerning individual assemblies, types of activities, attitudes, numbers involved, trends etc., do exist (this has been done for the UK^[50]), although likely only in a few areas. A conservative estimate is that around one million people in the world would see themselves or be seen as Plymouth Brethren, although there are many who would likely not be, or wish to be, labelled "Brethren", yet have Brethren associations.

What of the future?

Given the issues and concerns detailed elsewhere, some may feel there is not much future for the Brethren and they will eventually fade and die. Yet the way of assimilation into more popular Christian groups is not an option for many, who consider principles as faithfulness to the Word too important to relinquish, merely in order to appear successful or gain popularity, and look with consternation at the compromise that seems to be taking place. Some onlookers have critically assessed small, struggling fellowships when there are lively, expanding fellowships nearby, with which these could join forces. Here is not the place to judge what should be done other than make three observations. Firstly, one needs to understand the members' fears that their heritage and concerns will be ignored. Secondly, the wider body of Christ ought to respect and care for the needs and aspirations of the weaker members. Thirdly, while the Brethren have understandably shunned ecumenicalism in the past, insofar it forced those who partook to associate with false doctrine, an alternative approach with churches working together, based on things they have in common, respectfully agreeing to differ on things they do not have in common, is the way to go.

But there are also evidences of life in every quarter and many fellowships are flourishing, suggesting that the movement will be around for a while yet. But in what form, only God can determine. One looks forward to a time when denominational barriers are broken completely and the Church of Christ functions as one. There seems little point harking back to a golden age of Brethrenism (if indeed such an age has ever existed); for the world of the third millennium is a far different place from that of the 1820's. While God, the gospel and people's need have remained ever the same, their attitudes, situations, expectations and experience have not and the approach that needs to be adopted, in order to reach them for Christ, must reflect this. The author proposes that in order to address the current situation, the following needs urgent attention:

Firstly, the Word of God (Genesis through to Revelation), comprising the whole counsel of God, must be faithfully and correctly taught, understood, studied and applied to all areas of Christian experience and address each and every issue that faces the world today. There is a huge need for teachers who profoundly understand and powerfully teach that Word.

Secondly, priority must be given to living the spiritual life, practical holiness and being obedient to the Lord, where there is spiritual fruit and gifts, prayer, worship and humble, honest humanity; all of which relates to meeting people's spiritual needs. People ought be attracted to Christ through His people. Neither should the charismatic dimension be shunned. If the Holy Spirit is operating today in signs and wonders and other gifts then it is necessary to be part of it. It is a great tragedy that many of God's people are not wholly involved in what He is doing today in His world.

Thirdly, the whole Church must be recognised, encouraged, served and supported. There is great diversity in the spiritual perceptions and approaches among the various church traditions. We need to learn and embrace what is best from each of these. As the forces of darkness intensify, the children of light must unite to confront and overcome these for the glory of Christ. Ignoring and not responding to what is going on in the wider Christian community cannot be an option. Fellowship has to be fervent and real but never at the expense of the truth.

Fourthly, the need to be involved in mission that reaches all in society, home and abroad, holistic and culturally relevant (but not succumbing to the ungodly elements in society), compassionate and gospel-centred, is great. There is a need to identify need and for opportunism to seize opportunities that arise. The gospel must be boldly proclaimed, including declaring man's sinful depravity, his hopeless state outside of Christ and his need to be saved. Man's felt needs must also be met. Although holding sound doctrine is important, spiritual life is even more so.

Fifthly, God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) must be at the heart of all things thought, said and done. And if all that means radical change (providing it is compatible with God's will and is not change for sake of change and does not pander to a secular agenda) then let it be so^[51].

All sections of the Brethren (and Christ's Church) must willingly go in to the world and serve as His representatives, prepared to suffer the shame of the Cross. An outpouring of the Holy Spirit is needed so the Father's *will be done in earth as it is in heaven* (Matthew 6v10), to win people for the Son and manifest His abundant life, so God may be glorified. All need to see themselves as His "unprofitable servants" who comprehend but a small part of the overall picture, yet look to the Lord in humble faith and obedience. The hope of Christ's imminent return ought to captivate and comfort all. By faith and His grace are all things possible. And only God can do it.

The subject of change is a preoccupation of our times and this has spilled over into a consideration of the strategy that needs to be adopted among the churches to address changes in societies' culture. The views of two highly respected pundits from different strands of Open Brethrenism are pertinent. C.E.Hocking has noted that we live in a constantly changing world and that *the conditions abroad in our generation cause*

many a heart to faint and fear and the spirit of any given generation tends to affect the attitude of God's people living in it. He warns, however, against Christians being pressurised into making changes that mimic the conditions abroad in the world, whether secular or religious, and which go to undermine a spiritual work, and can only tend to disaster. Instead, we are invited to look at that which does not change: the Lord who changes not (Malachi 3v6), the Lord Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, and today, and for ever (Hebrews 13v8), and the unalterable Word of God revealed in the Bible^[52].

H.H.Rowdon has noted that whilst other churches have experienced significant growth in recent years it can be scarcely denied that the segment of God's people in UK today, commonly called 'Brethren', stands in dire need of revival ... from constituting probably the most virile evangelical and evangelistic force in the land before the war and immediate post-war years, they have been reduced to a shadow of their former self. The number of their 'assemblies' has fallen by at least a quarter, with perhaps another quarter reduced to a handful of mostly elderly believers struggling to maintain some kind of witness. He has observed that those churches which are experiencing the most spiritual blessing are those which have been prepared to make changes and be changed, having learned the principle of bringing even the most hallowed of traditions to the bar of scripture, and the cardinal 'Brethren' principle of sitting loose to tradition^[53].

It is perhaps possible to address the concerns of both Hocking and Rowdon. There is no easy solution about what one must do to safeguard the future other than to be true to oneself but more important to be true to the Lord and listen to what He is saying. The traditionalists should stop wasting time dressing dead corpses of past preoccupations that no longer matter and pursuing secondary issues and start addressing the pressing needs of the present that do matter. The progressives should stop striving for evangelical respectability and blindly following what goes on elsewhere and adopt their (the Lord's) own radical agenda, without fear or favour. Their spiritual forefathers should inspire both as to what needs to be done in order to build Christ's Church.

There is a need to raise a godly standard against this present evil age and thus glorify Christ, addressing the present situation void of any rule other than that which comes by the Spirit and the Word, being prepared to be led in any way the Lord may choose, even it be ever so different to what went on in the past. As for the future, whether or not the Brethren will do what is needful and how society, the church and the Brethren will fare, only the Lord knows. One can only entrust all these things to Him, reliant only upon that grace by which anything and all things can be done.

Concluding remarks

The Brethren (Open and Closed), undoubtedly, are not without fault. Even discounting the harmful, cult-like practices found in some Exclusive settings, there are many who have had negative experiences in other assembly settings. There has been elements of autocracy, arrogance, complacency, divisiveness, individualism, intransigence, legalism, lifelessness, materialism, megalomania, narrowness, nepotism, elements of spiritual pride, lack of sensitivity toward peoples' needs and aspirations, failure to recognise and encourage what God was doing among those outside the assemblies and a reticence to get involved in a needy world and apply biblical truth. Sometimes assemblies found themselves in a rut and lacked spiritual vision and impetus.

biblical truth. Sometimes assemblies found themselves in a rut and lacked spiritual vision and impetus. Sometimes, established members propagated a tradition of meetings that included a significant element of silence, solemnity and sobriety, and crushed those who suggested that a more exuberant, energetic and experimental approach was needed. There have been differences that led to splits in assemblies, often over personalities or minor issues, often with the party representing the more radical element leaving. Such splits might have been avoided if grace, truth, understanding and godly discipline had been exercised and an acceptable middle-way found.

There has been a tendency to de-emphasise the need for believers to confess and repent of sin, rather than to aspire to a deeper spiritual life, and avoid close personal relationships. (However, the opposite of all these tendencies has also been the case. For example, a significant number supported the Keswick convention (more recently it has been Spring Harvest), with its emphasis on spiritual oneness and sanctification.) They have at times opposed Pentecostalism but lacked the power of the Holy Spirit; taught simply but did not explore the breadth and depth of Christian doctrine; pursued excellence yet settled for mediocrity; preached free grace to sinners when saints practised the works of the law; talked of entering the Most Holy Place but did not stay around to worship; resisted change when change was needed; tackled minor issues and did not see the big picture; opposed sectarianism yet claimed a monopoly on truth; rejected worldliness yet succumbed to materialism; claimed to be led by the Good Shepherd but failed to provide pastoral support; spoke of a heavenly calling but neglected earthly duties; rejoiced in past glories but ignored present realities; preached inclusiveness for all believers but practised exclusion. While this may seem to be a harsh and unfair indictment of Brethrenism, these and other faults, even if present in a small measure, have existed. These are to be regretted and ought to be repented of.

The Open Brethren preoccupation with local assembly autonomy often at the expense of working together to fulfil the "Great Commission", and the Closed Brethren preoccupation with assembly interdependence, which has often placed members under spiritual bondage, suggests neither group achieved the right balance. Some Brethren theology may have been misconstrued and lacking necessary balance and this inevitably has had ramifications in practical matters. At times, their other-worldly emphasis failed to address the reality of this present world. There has been a degree of narrowness due to a tendency that ignored 2000 years of Christian thought and experience.

The shortcomings of the Brethren cannot be condoned or ignored, but then all Christian groups have fallen short in one way or another. The entire history of the church is a demonstration of good and bad, triumph and disaster, success and failure existing side by side and, all too often, not making the most of the opportunities that have been presented and not maintaining a right balance between doctrinal understanding and practical outworking. Besides which, Brethren believers, along with believers from every age and denomination, have often not lived consistently according to the faith that they professed, and have missed out on much of the blessing God wants to bestow. God loves and wants to bless the Church (His elect, the redeemed, the followers of Jesus), and that will include suffering. Through the Church, God wants to bless and reach all the nations of the earth with the gospel, and for her to be presented to His Son as His holy bride *without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless* (Ephesians 5:27) when He returns.

But neither should the Brethren's contribution be dismissed or overlooked. They have been active in mission

and evangelism. *They devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer* (Acts 2v42). They have been self-financing, members alone contributing to support the various ministries. Throughout the world groups of Brethren believers gather together, simply and without ceremony, to diligently study God's Word, encourage and support one another, joyfully worship the Lord around His Table and earnestly seek His face regarding the manifold needs around them. Many have been brought into God's Kingdom, in every corner of the world, as a result of the faithful and frequently unsung witness of its members. They have challenged and fought the forces of darkness, resolutely withstood persecution and ministered to some of the enormous needs of the poor, wounded and vulnerable of society. The Word of God has been boldly and uncompromisingly proclaimed and sincerely applied in many practical ways that has had an incisive impact well beyond the confines of the local assemblies. Members have drawn strength and inspiration from their assemblies, where they have learned to value and understand the Word and come to know and love the Lord.

They have led decent, peaceable lives, mindful of the need for practical holiness, being good fathers and mothers, husbands and wives, employers and employees, neighbours, citizens and assembly workers. Many have been struck by their gentle nature, quiet demeanour, gracious spirit, courteous behaviour and warm hospitality. They have helped to shed much needed light on the nature and significance of the Church. The people of God have been encouraged to minister as part of Christ's body. They have sought to exalt the risen Christ. They understood something of man's utter depravity outside of Christ and had a profound experience of God's amazing grace by which alone one can be forgiven of sin and live a full life pleasing to God.

H.H.Rowdon's observation is no doubt pertinent: *"The contribution of the Brethren... has been out of all proportion to their numbers. They have held to the authority of the Bible during a time when it has been under constant fire. Many of their members have had leading positions in inter-denominational agencies. They have been active in evangelism and have drawn attention to the church as the body of Christ, made up of all true believers and equipped with spiritual gifts distributed amongst the members."*^[54] Indeed, many of today's Christian leaders do have Brethren connections, often through generations of family involvement. In spite of all their faults, the Brethren contribution to Christ's Church and society has been significant and worthy of consideration and, although it may seem that the gospel torch has been passed to other radical evangelical groups to bear, they still have a part to play in extending God's kingdom.

Professor Bruce wrote *"the Brethren are a diverse lot, and I suppose no two of us would give exactly the same account of ourselves"*^[55]. Similarly an account of what the Brethren assembly movement stands for will vary according to who writes it. The following account is the author's understanding of the important distinctive (but not unique) tenets of the Brethren^[56]:

Firstly, it is the responsibility of the local assembly (or church or fellowship) to organise its own affairs in obedience to Christ and the scriptures.

Secondly, the leadership of each assembly ought to be shared, and involve only those who are spiritually qualified, with no distinction between clergy and laity.

Thirdly, each assembly must be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit in all matters pertaining to its worship, work and witness, with individuals exercising their gifts to the benefit of all.

Fourthly, each assembly has a responsibility to preach the gospel of how God saves sinful men and women, not because of their good works but by his grace and because of what His Son accomplished by dying and being raised from the dead, and as they come to trust and follow Him.

Fifthly, it is the privilege and responsibility of each assembly to recognise and share fellowship with God's people everywhere, irrespective of their denominational affiliations.

Sixthly, the spiritual unity each assembly member feels and is bound to uphold is demonstrated in the regular Breaking of Bread meetings, where Christ is remembered, just as he commanded.

Seventhly, assembly members ought to seek to understand, teach and apply all the truths of the scriptures, being careful to hold only that which pertains to sound doctrine.

Eighthly, assembly members need to live in a manner that befits a child of God.

Ninthly, the assembly exists to exalt the Lord Jesus Christ.

Tenthly, assembly members need to live in the expectation of the Lord's imminent return.

Few churches around 1830 adopted all those principles. Nowadays, many more do so. In trying to identify "Who are the Brethren", it would be easy to accept the view of some that they are those who firstly claim to be Plymouth (or whatever) Brethren or are joined to a (Brethren) assembly, secondly make a conscious effort to adhere to traditionally held assembly practices and thirdly are deemed to be bon-a-fide PBs or assemblies by their peers. This would, however, unfairly rule many out who might otherwise qualify, in particular those who adopt the afore-mentioned principles. One might even argue that many a traditional assembly has departed from certain of these principles, for example by becoming increasingly detached from other believers; for the Brethren pioneers, including Darby (at least in his early days), had an inclusive vision for the Church.

What the Brethren did in the beginning was to challenge believers concerning those very principles, for these had largely been neglected by the churches of the day, and then began to effectively apply those principles. Their failure is that practice did not always match intention and that other important principles have been neglected. Their success is that they have been a positive force for God's Kingdom and have influenced many, not claiming to be of their number, to adopt those same principles. Arguably, any such could be identified as "Brethren". For surely all have a right (and a need) to lay claim to their spiritual heritage. More important than this even are the words of Jesus, who said His brethren are *whosoever shall do the will of God* (Mark 3v35) and *one is your Master, even Christ, and all ye (all his followers) are brethren* (Matthew 23v8).

More information

To understand Brethren history and thought can be a problem, since much has not been recorded, but more information is available. Two books written in the 1960s, Harold Rowdon's "Origins of the Brethren" and Roy Coad's "History of the Brethren Movement", provide excellent general accounts of the Brethren (albeit written from an Open stance), but both works are now out of print. Timothy Stunt has recently produced a substantial scholarly account that records and analyses the contributions of early nineteenth century (radical) evangelicals, including coverage of the early Brethren but within the context of a European wide socio-religious scene, with its many and intricate inter-relating facets (influences upon the emerging Brethren movement being greater than is commonly realised)^[57]. This, plus other works giving a (usually) Closed perspective upon Brethren history, e.g. Noel's "The History of the Brethren", Miller's "The Brethren", and Turner's "John Nelson Darby", and other Brethren writings, both in book form and also on CD-ROM, can be obtained by ordering from the "Chapter Two" website: <http://www.chaptertwo.org.uk>.

William Blair Neatby's book, which provides an early history of the Brethren, has recently been made available on the Web: http://www.cloudnet.com/~dwyman/neatby_toc.htm and has also been reprinted. Despite not covering a century's worth of history and reflection, a tendency to concentrate on the Exclusive side at the expense of the Open and critically over-dwelling upon the more negative aspects, Neatby's account, overall, does provide a fair balance, much meticulous and pertinent detail and valuable analysis and insight^[58]. Dick Wyman's website is particularly fascinating as it provides much useful detail about aspects of Exclusive Brethrenism (especially the Taylor branch) although it can be quite scathing, understandably though, as it is aimed at past and current members who have suffered from damaging Exclusive Brethren excesses.

One website detailing the excellent resource material available at the Christian Brethren Archive in Manchester, England is: <http://rylibweb.man.ac.uk/data2/spcoll/cba/>. (A visit to the CBA, under the able custodianship of Dr. David Brady, is recommended to anyone wanting to seriously research Brethren history.) This website also provides links to other Brethren websites, and from these one will be referred to yet further websites where one will find much useful material concerning the Brethren, although these tend to represent a particular aspect, and sometimes an American view of Brethrenism, more often than not from an Exclusive or more traditional perspective or coming with its own particular "spin", and sometimes lacking sufficient rigour.

The Web provides a rich source of information concerning the Brethren, including the writings of its principle exponents. Using search engines to find examples of Darby's writings resulted in several "hits" being made, e.g. <http://biblestudy.churches.net/ccel/d/darby/synopsis/index.htm>. A fair assessment of Darby's life and impact, albeit brief, can be found at: <http://www.cloudnet.com/~dwyman/darby.html>. This writer has also produced a paper contrasting J.N.Darby with E.B.Pusey: <http://freespace.virgin.net/john.barber1/darbyandpusey.htm>. Both men lived 1800-1882, making profound contributions in their respective spheres, and, while at opposite ends of the ecclesiological spectrum, had much in common. Finally, there is much material in non-electronic form relating to the Brethren, but most of it is available only in specialist libraries, archives and bookshops. In keeping with the modern trend, a number of Brethren assemblies, agencies and individuals have also produced their own websites^[59].

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And finally on a personal note

What began as a simple exercise, to answer a straightforward question, has turned out to be a much bigger task than I had first envisaged, and still there is much that could (maybe should) be added. I am conscious the international dimension is weak and the credibility of my conclusions would be improved if these were better supported by statistical evidence. I have deliberately emphasised the Open Brethren because that is what I know best, considering too that many aspects of the Closed Brethren should be treated separately, although I appreciated the gracious help given by some "Closed" brothers. I gladly acknowledge my debt to all who commented, provided information, or instilled ideas and inspiration. I realise my own preferences and limitations have inevitably affected the content and conclusions, despite setting out to be objective and even handed. Even the selection of material shows what a writer considers to be important (or not). Many have different perceptions from my own, so I hope not to have unduly offended. I will gladly make amends if anything has been written in error or inappropriately. Although not intending to be disrespectful or over-indulge the too often human fondness for the sensational, it has been necessary to address negative aspects in order to arrive at a proper understanding.

It seems to me that the only thing that must remain sacrosanct is the character of our Lord and His gospel, and this we must jealously uphold. But the old adage applies: "*in essentials unity, in non essentials liberty, in all things charity*", although we need to humbly beseech the Lord as to what He views as essential and not essential. Certainly, we must not give offence if at all possible and let: *no man put a stumblingblock or an occasion to fall in his brother's way* (Romans 14v13), yet the truth (providing it is tempered by love) is too important not to pursue, and must always win through in the end. Besides which, all of us need to be challenged and all of us need to make an appropriate response. Some will see little point delving into the past. Maybe they have a point. After all, the only judgement that matters is the Lord's and, as *every one of us shall give account of himself to God* (Romans 14v12), we need to be about His business, for the time is short.

Yet understanding these matters are important, for in so doing we understand ourselves, and especially so if it is part of our own heritage. Throughout the history of man there has been a conflict between good and evil. The early Brethren understood that only the light of the gospel could dispel the darkness in the world and were ardent for this to happen. Despite all their faults, the Brethren have been one of those that have made significant contributions in spreading the Word. We do well to acknowledge that and learn from them. But about where right and wrong lay concerning some the debates and actions taken (or not) in the past (as well as the present or future), is something we may never be able to get to the bottom of, at least this side of eternity. Let us therefore simply trust and humbly obey the Lord, and look to Him, for if we do so we will not go far wrong. It is a tremendous privilege and an awesome responsibility to be in His Royal Service, to be His representatives, to minister in His Name and to lead others to Him.

I have been associated with the Brethren since my youth and have witnessed for myself many of its faults. But I do have a high regard for many of its past and present members, and recognise that within Brethrenism lie many of my own spiritual roots and pre-occupations. Many assembly brothers (and sisters) have helped, encouraged and inspired me down the years. These and the rest of them were (are) also flesh and blood who

encouraged and inspired me down the years. These and the rest of them were (are) also flesh and blood who can laugh and cry, having distinct personalities, human qualities and strengths, weaknesses and preferences, faults and frailties, as well as that significant spiritual side that made them what they were (are). One of them is Varghese Mathai, a sincere, simple, humble, humorous, compassionate, conciliatory man, diligently working as an evangelist among the assemblies in Kerala, India, who is well respected within his own local community and is earnestly and faithfully following his Lord and leading others to Him. He also happens to be my father-in-law. I work (to support my family) as a computer consultant and am currently a member of a (these days) small, one hundred year old, “middle of the road”, Open, English assembly, where it is my privilege to serve as its missionary secretary^[60].

While wanting to write something that is balanced, fair and objective, covering the whole movement, worldwide, throughout its history, I recognise that in a deliberately short account such an undertaking is virtually impossible, even if I did possess the entire big picture (which is far from the case). Besides which, despite the many common factors within Brethrenism, one cannot generalise due to the wide diversity of attitudes, interests, practices and spirituality prevailing among the assemblies throughout the world. I would welcome any feedback (you can always e-mail me: john.barber1@virgin.net). I want there to be a correct, wider and fuller understanding of “Who are the Brethren” and for them to be an effective force for the gospel, under whatever guise, label or identity they are found these days or may find themselves in the future.

The fact that some have commented, even if to suggest how I could improve my appalling grammar or better express myself, is one reason why this submission has gone through several drafts. Another is I wanted to further explore different aspects and pursue new insights and fresh ideas about the Brethren. I also admit to an obsession of wanting to cover all the significant points and write perfect prose. Particular thanks go to David Brady, Timothy Stunt and a brother from my own assembly who prefers not to be named, all grammarians of the old school and all having a deep understanding of the Brethren movement, for all have liberally commented.

In closing, I would beg the indulgence of the reader in order to let me explain how I came to write this piece. I was once asked to publicise where people could go in order to find out about the Brethren. After trying to find the answer, I came to realise that most of the relevant published material was largely unobtainable, what was available via the Web tended to be subjective and only partly covered the pertinent issues, often missing important aspects that people needed to know, and there is much diversity in peoples’ understanding. Despite being involved with technology most of my working life, I still prefer history. This, together with my own PB roots, a concern for the cause of Christ, an interest in theology, especially ecclesiology, an unease that Brethren matters have been misrepresented including by those inside the movement, a fondness for dealing with knotty problems, a longing for answers, a sense that I ought to use my gifts to serve others, all led me to take up the challenge, investing significant time in an attempt to deal adequately with my subject (considerably more than I had at first envisaged), conscious there was much else I could, maybe should, do in His service, and there is a much more that I need to study and understand before I can claim to have mastered my subject.

Another reason for writing was for personal therapy, but always I had in mind people, especially those associated with the Brethren. We all need to be exhorted and encouraged, and especially so in these dark days, so we can love the Lord more, serve Him better and be His victorious overcomers. Moreover, I count

myself at the top of that list of needy people. I also wanted to provide a needed corrective, enthused by the prospect that anyone, anywhere in the world, could read this account of the Brethren (via the Internet), together with much of the referenced material, from the comfort of their own computer terminal. But there is, in this age of multi-media, information overload and aversion to serious reading, scope for presenting the pertinent facts in other, more palatable, ways and we need to do this. Finally, I have during the course of my research had interesting and valuable exchanges with people from various backgrounds and viewpoints, and have provided a healthy stimulus. I hope what I have written will prove helpful.

At the risk of being dismissed as a spiritual schizophrenic by my readers or a heretic by my (Plymouth) brothers, I am inclined toward a vision of the church that is Catholic in spirituality, Liberal in social activism, Reformed in doctrine, Charismatic in experience, Evangelical in zeal, Puritan in living, Methodist in organisation and Brethren in ecclesiology, but above all passionate for Jesus. Finally, although an enthusiastic researcher of Brethren history who is keen to “get it right”, I am much more concerned that **men and women, and boys and girls, walk the way, trust the truth and live the life of the Lord Jesus Christ** (John 14v6); and may He be exalted, by whatever instrument He chooses, Brethren or otherwise. And may all God’s people receive a touch from heaven so that they may touch earth in His glorious cause. O Lord grant us grace to lose what is dear, so we may gain Him who is dearest, and may Thy Kingdom come!

John Barber, 10 July 2001, <http://freespace.virgin.net/john.barber1/brethren.htm>

[1] (Unknown to this writer in the beginning) some distinguished authors have written under this title (or similar), notably W.H.Soltau, F.F.Bruce and H.H.Rowdon.

[2] This term “Brethrenism” is not meant to be used in any pejorative sense, but is used in the same way as an academic, sociologist or historian would use it, i.e. to encompass the entire Brethren set of beliefs and practices, and their particular mind-set and culture.

[3] This account is produced so it can be easily updated and made accessible via the World Wide Web. MS Word 2000 has been used to maintain the source document, which is then saved as HTML (correct but awful code) and FTP’d to the host ISP’s Web server. The Web seems to be the ideal publishing medium for works of this nature.

[4] W.G.Turner, *John Nelson Darby - a Biography*, pp19-20.

[5] W.G.Turner’s biography provides a sympathetic account of Darby’s life and work.

[6] Neatby, W.B., *A History of the Plymouth Brethren*, see chapter 5.

[7] Darby, J.N.: *Song of the Wilderness*, 1849, *Rest*, 1879 & *The Soul’s Desire*, 1881.

[8] G.H.Lang’s *Anthony Norris Groves* provides a detailed study of the life and work of this man.

[9] <http://web.ukonline.co.uk/d.haslam/groves/Anthony%20Norris%20Groves.htm> provides the text of Grove’s *Christian Devotedness* (1825).

[10] Letter from A.N.Groves to J.N.Darby, March 10th, 1836. The whole letter is contained in Lang’s book, op cit, ch 9. Extracts from this letter are often quoted e.g. Dyer, K.G., *Must Brethren Churches die*, p12. The letter is important in that he helps to illustrate the contrasting outlooks of Darby and Groves.

[11] Neatby, W.B., op cit., see chapter 2.

[12] Neatby, W.B., op cit. and Stunt, T., *From Awakening to Secession - Radical Evangelicals in Switzerland and Britain 1815-35*.

[13] Broadbent, E.H., *The Pilgrim Church*.

[14] Callahan argues in his *Primitivist Piety: Ecclesiology of the Early Plymouth Brethren* that while PBs wanted to return to a primitive (and thus purer) form of Christianity, they were not, in the main, restorationalist.

- [15] The notion of the “church in ruins” was a key element affecting Darby’s ecclesiology; for examples see Darby, J.N., *The Faith once delivered by the Saints, The Nature and Unity of the Church of Christ and Separation from Evil: God’s Principle of Unity* as well as his other writings.
- [16] Some EB’s e.g. C.H.Mackintosh looked upon Müllers congregation as being Baptist.
- [17] H.Pickering’s *Chief Men among the Brethren* gives brief accounts of 64 (OB & EB) outstanding personalities.
- [18] As well as Neatby, W.B., op cit, see also <http://landow.stg.brown.edu/victorian/religion/plymouth.html> and G.H.Lang, op cit, Appendix
- [19] George Müller commented that this implied that the Saviour himself would need saving.
- [20] See F.F.Bruce’s preface to Rowdon’s *Origin of the Brethren*.
- [21] The rights and wrongs behind the OB / EB split continues to be a hotly debated subject among the few who are interested. Understandably, commentators from either tradition tend to defend the position taken by their group. Of the texts referred to in the Bibliography, Miller, Turner and also Huebner (*Precious Truths Revived and Defended Through J.N.Darby, Volumes 1, 2, 3, Present Truth Publishers, 1994*) support the stand made by, and defend the character of, Darby as well as the position of the Exclusives on the Plymouth issue, the ‘Bethesda question’, and subsequent events, whereas Neatby, Coad, Lang and Rowdon are more critical.
- [22] Neatby, W.B., op cit, chapter 7.
- [23] From Horace Mann’s report accompanying the census results concerning the church going activity for the whole UK population as measured on one particular day. The most remarkable result of the census was its demonstration that just over half the population did NOT attend church or chapel that day.
- [24] Alastair Noble, *Breaking Bread at His Command, Partnership Perspectives*, April 2001. The author is agreeing with a proposition presented by Neil Dickson in his PhD thesis of the Open Brethren in Scotland (University of Stirling, 2000).
- [25] All Bible quotations are from the Authorised (King James) version, which was (and often still is) that most commonly used by PBs, although some EBs preferred to use Darby’s translation.
- [26] Including members of the aristocracy and those eminent in the business, educational, legal, medical, military, political and scientific worlds, e.g. Lord Congleton (Peer), Sir John Laing (Construction), Sir Robert Anderson (Police) and General Dobbie (Army) and Professor Rendle Short (Medicine).
- [27] J.G.Bellet’s *The Moral Glory of the Lord Jesus Christ* and C.H.Mackintosh’s *Notes on the Pentateuch* are splendid examples of EB devotional writing at its best.
- [28] For example, Gordon Rainbow’s EB site *My Brethren*: <http://www.globalserve.net/~mybrethren/index.html> includes many examples of EB devotional writing and much else besides.
- [29] Miller, A., *The Brethren*.
- [30] The author is grateful to Winston Chilcraft for writing this corrective (May 2001).
- [31] Various, *Turning the World Upside Down* and H.Pickering, op cit.
- [32] <http://www.pobox.org.sg/home/kian/History/1991-5.htm> provides a helpful chronology of how the Brethren movement started in specific countries. It also provides an example of traditionalist Brethren thinking.
- [33] Evidenced by an increase in the number of UK assemblies e.g. 1440 in 1922 and 1739 in 1933 (ref. Brierley, Peter, *Christian Brethren as the nineties began* (Carlisle, 1993)).
- [34] Chapter 12 (Worldwide Growth) of R.Coad’s *History of the Brethren Movement* begins to address this.
- [35] Various, *Turning the World Upside Down*.
- [36] The circulation of the influential *The Witness* magazine increased from 16,000 in 1914 to 30,000 in 1929.
- [37] A good account of these meetings can be found in D.J.Beattie’s *Brethren: the story of a great recovery*.
- [38] While this section is written mainly in the past tense it should be borne in mind that many of the practices discussed are still applicable today, albeit for some of these to a lesser extent.
- [39] Well known and respected Brethren gospel preachers include: Richard Weaver, Henry Moorhouse, Watchman Nee, Luis Palau and Dick Saunders.
- [40] Edmund Gosse’s book, *Fathers and Son*, about his father, the eminent scientist Philip Gosse, has contributed to the

popular misconception that the Brethren were anti-culture, although this view has been partly refuted, most recently by Timothy Stunt in his article: *Brethren or Philistine* (BAHN review, vol2, no 1, 2000).

[41] Popular hymns by Brethren hymn writers include Francis Trevor “*O the deep, deep love of Jesus*” and Joseph Scriven “*What a friend we have in Jesus*”. Brethren hymn writers of languages other than English have also been influential, for example many of the hymns sung by Malayalie (Kerala) Christians, in all denominations, were composed by Brethren believers.

[42] But for some minor exceptions, the OBs would have had no problem agreeing with many of the ancient catechisms and creeds, e.g. the Apostles and Nicene creeds. While agreeing with much in the Thirty-nine articles of the Church of England, they would have had problems with sacramentalism (Article 19), interference from outside of the local assembly (Articles 20 & 21), baptismal regeneration (Article 27) and sacerdotalism (Article 36).

[43] Bebbington, D., *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*.

[44] The term “fundamentalist” is often used in a pejorative sense, implying narrowness, bigotry and anti-learning. The author, however, is inclined to agree with Dr. J.I.Packer and link this to conservative evangelical beliefs.

[45] According to the Concise Oxford dictionary ecclesiology is: 1. the study of churches (especially buildings and decorations) or 2. theology as applied to the nature and structure of the Christian church. It is this second definition that is applicable here and is the one generally used by commentators when discussing the doctrine of the Church.

[46] For a consideration of Closed Brethren notions on the church refer for example to Darby’s writings, detailed elsewhere, and for Open Brethren notions refer to W.E.Vine’s *The Church and the Churches*.

[47] Brethren Bible scholars include: G.V.Wigram, S.Tregelles, W.Kelly, W.E.Vine, F.F.Bruce and H.H.Rowdon.

[48] Other figures include 173 assemblies in South Korea, 80 in Malaysia, 530 in Germany (300 are EB), 800 in Brazil, 150 in Mexico, 85 in Bolivia, 261 in Australia and many more in North America and Africa.

[49] The Stewards Association of India have produced a *Directory of Brethren Assemblies & Institutions in India*. It records 1988 (over 800 in Andhra Pradesh) assemblies (with an average of 60 believers in fellowship) and 76 institutions (including schools, hospitals, orphanages, literature publishers and Bible schools).

[50] A survey on UK Brethren is about to be published. Earlier surveys were undertaken by P.Brierley (op cit) and *The Brethren Today - a Factual Survey* by Graham Brown & Brian Mills (Paternoster, 1980).

[51] A consideration of some of the modern day issues that need to be addressed, albeit written from a more progressive perspective can be found: <http://www.pastornet.net.au/jmm/alpt/alpt0113.htm>.

[52] C.E.Hocking, *Church Doctrine and Practice*, Precious Seed, 1970.

[53] H.H.Rowdon, *Revival in our Churches*, Partnership, 1999.

[54] H.H.Rowdon, *The Brethren*, The History of Christianity, Lion Publishing, 1977, pp. 520-521 (revised 1970).

[55] P.Cousins, *The Brethren*, Pergamon Press, 1982, part of F.F.Bruce’s foreword.

[56] See also P.Cousins, op cit, p54.

[57] Stunt, T., op cit.

[58] Neatby, W.B., op cit.

[59] Two websites serving Indian assemblies are www.brethrenassembly.org and www.brethrenassembly.com.

[60] Barber, J.R., *Coleman Street’s Children*. See also <http://freespace.virgin.net/john.barber1/csc.htm>. The book provides a history of the author’s own and neighbouring assemblies.