

RICE THOMAS HOPKINS 1842–1916: AN OPEN BROTHER

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Rice Thomas Hopkins was born at Plymouth in 1842 of Welsh Congregational parents during the first golden years of the Brethren Movement. He received a thorough education in classical languages at Plymouth under such teachers as his Headmaster Dr R.F. Weymouth, later a member of the New Testament Revision Committee, and Dr Samuel Tregelles, ‘old Treacles’, of New Testament criticism fame. He became a Christian in 1858 following a near-fatal drowning accident at sixteen years of age, and the death of his brother William, just as the second great Evangelical awakening, and the second Brethren golden era, began in Britain.

Immediately he began to preach Christ, indoors and outdoors, at fairs, in prisons, at race-courses, regattas, even at the hanging of the five Flowery mutineers, to Great Exhibition crowds, against much opposition but also with much fruit, alongside Gavin Kirkham of the Open Air Mission, his life-long friend Harrison Ord and others. Though a student at Spurgeon’s college, he continued to identify himself with the Congregationalists; nonetheless he and another life-long friend Samuel Blow were baptised by Charles Haddon Spurgeon in 1862. At about this time he received the truth of our Lord’s return also.¹

The world his parish, Rice Hopkins centred his activities at Ipswich in the eastern counties in 1865, where he was described as ‘a young man of good presence and strong voice.’² He preached extensively with fellow evangelist John Vine. The following year he went to Scotland to join the well-known and free-ranging evangelist Duncan Matheson, who regarded his younger colleagues as ‘the Hallelujah Band’.³ Matheson died soon after, and Hopkins continued evangelising with James Boswell, among the converts the wife of John Ritchie, the future publisher. He spoke also in Orkney in 1866-7 with Donald Munro, achieving remarkable results.⁴ Some troubles occurred in local churches, but the cause appears to have been the divisive effect of simple Christian conversion rather than that of alternative ‘church truth’. He was not yet associated with the Brethren: the evangelists preached wherever they could. But his indefatigable efforts and his clear, powerful preaching inevitably led to informal contacts. These matured into closer association with Brethren assemblies about the late 1860s, mainly as a reaction against what he

1. Richard Graham, ‘Rice Thomas Hopkins’, *The Believers’ Pathway*, 37 (1916), pp. 54-6; Samuel Blow, *Reminiscences of Thirty Years’ Gospel Work and Revival Times* [c. 1903], reprint (Glasgow, 1988), pp. 25-29, 46-56, 87-90; Chadstone, Australia, writer’s collection, Hopkins’ family private papers: Will Hopkins, untitled twelve-page reminiscences (unpublished typescript, n.d.). Will Hopkins was Rice Hopkins’ son.

2. “‘Lay’ Preaching at Ipswich’, *The Revival*, 14 (1866), p.361.

3. Writer’s collection, Duncan Matheson to R.T. Hopkins, 19 August 1867 (photocopy of private letter).

4. John Vine, ‘Orkney Islands—Mr. Vine’s Tour’, *The Latter Rain*, Vol. 2 (March 1869).

perceived as massive religious confusion elsewhere. He evangelised in the Scottish northern isles with Vine and Harrison Ord. In 1876 the Earl of Carrick sent him from Ireland £100 for the building of a chapel in Whiteness in the Shetland Isles.⁵

Until this time, Rice Hopkins saw himself as a Baptist. He then confronted what the present writer calls ‘the ‘Brethren’ dilemma’: in what ways and to what extent may a worker fellowship with Christians with whom he does not fully agree, for the sake of that with which he does agree? He chose to draw the line well within the area of Brethren doctrine and practice, citing all manner of irregularities elsewhere.⁶ It seems clear that Scottish Open Brethren assemblies were the product of the revival of 1859 (the ‘Second Evangelical Awakening’) rather than of proselytising among existing Christian groups in earlier years. The repellent features of legalism arose a generation later when revival fires died down.⁷

Rice Hopkins’ links with the Brethren deepened thenceforth. He took part in the establishment of a testimony in Birkenhead, Liverpool, in 1878. He and Alexander Marshall brought reviving to Kilmarnock in 1879. He preached in Orkney again with James Boswell in 1881. Following Harrison Ord (an engineer), who migrated in 1876, and John Hambleton in 1879, the Hopkins family reached Australia in 1882. Harrison Ord met them at the wharf, and provided provided hospitality for six months until the family moved to St. Kilda; they subsequently settled in Camberwell. Rice Hopkins was the Melbourne agent for the Scottish textile firm of J. & R. Archibald, with offices in Sydney and Melbourne.

Sadly, various Brethren histories do not accord him the honour given to such as Richard Weaver, Harry Moorhouse, Russell Hurditch, John Hambleton and others, though his preaching is of comparable rank.⁸ This is probably because his connection with assemblies was less well defined than theirs in early days, and after that he seemed to others to be one with the minority ‘Needed Truth’ faction. Later, of course, he ministered less visibly, at the other end of the earth.

The question of reception to Open Brethren assemblies had surfaced under John Caldwell, James Boswell and others in the Scottish monthly magazine *The Northern Witness* in 1876. The key point was the vexed one of whether a believer in a locality, being a member of the Body of Christ, was therefore necessarily also a member of one unique biblical local assembly.⁹ Alexander Marshall attributed the origin of this quaint proposition to Rice Hopkins. Hopkins taught that a whole assembly might receive a believer to ‘stedfast continuance’ rather than ‘occasional fellowship’, and every resident and

5. Writer’s collection, [Earl of] Carrick to R.T. Hopkins, 11 October 1876 (photocopy of private letter). See Henry Pickering, (ed.), *Chief Men Among the Brethren*, [1918], reprint (London, 1961), pp. 147-149. Carrick evidently followed Hopkins’ career with prayerful interest.

6. Alexander Marshall, “*Holding Fast the Faithful Word*”: or *Whither are We Drifting?* (Glasgow, c.1908), pp. 16-17.

7. Neil Dickson, ‘Scottish Brethren: division and wholeness 1838-1916’, *Christian Brethren Review*, 41 (1990), pp. 5-8, 11-16. See J. Moir Porteous, *Brethren in the Keelhowes: or Brethrenism Tested by the Word of God*, 6th edn (London, 1876); or A. M[arshall], *Wandering Lights: a Stricture on the Doctrines & Methods of Brethrenism. A Review*, 3rd edn (Glasgow, n.d.) from the same period, to see ourselves as others saw us.

8. Hopkins, untitled reminiscences. Regrettably, no edition of Pickering (ed.), *Chief Men* accords Rice Hopkins a place, nor does F. Roy Coad in *A History of the Brethren Movement*, 1st edn (Exeter, 1968).

9. R.T.H[opkins], *Fellowship Among Saints: What Saith the Scriptures?* (Glasgow, 1884), pp. 4-16. This paper takes a stronger view of elders’ authority than that of 1898.

obedient Christian should take advantage of this.¹⁰ In this he differed from the great contemporary Scottish evangelist Donald Ross, who was a close friend of Duncan Matheson; though Ross moved toward an assembly position after Matheson's death.¹¹

Alfred Holiday, John Caldwell and others canvassed the point more or less ineffectively until the new magazine *Needed Truth* appeared in 1888. The distinction between the Church and the churches which it discussed, the need for rigid practices of reception to secure uniformity, and levels of eldership to maintain order, so polarised the Open Brethren, that intercommunion between assemblies on the two sides ceased in 1893. This gave rise to the aphorism of Napoleon Noel (the 1936 Kelly-Lowe historian) that the Open Brethren possessed two 'R.H. parties'—a restrictive one derived from Rice Hopkins, and the other from Russell Hurditch (editor of *The Latter Rain* and *Footsteps of Truth*), whose position remained 'consistently open'.¹² But Noel is in error. Rice Hopkins refused the 'Needed Truth' presumptions of 1893, and for that reason is better identified with careful open beliefs.¹³

'Needed Truth' leaders have been inclined to claim Rice Hopkins as their own on the ground of the acceptance of his articles by the editors of that magazine, and to say: 'Unhappily he went off the rails in doctrine, going backwards towards his old beliefs and practices and left the Fellowship in 1899.'¹⁴ The present writer protested against this on the ground of lack of evidence. Indeed, it is obvious from Rice Hopkins' handwritten comments in the margins of his own bound volumes of *Needed Truth* that he questioned seriously the position taken by James Boswell on the church and by Dr Luxmoore on eldership. The 'Needed Truth' faction divided in 1904 over the problem of who disciplines an erring elder, bringing the 'Green Pastures' (or Vernalite) group into being. Further divisions occurred in 1917 and in 1934. Legalism can never guarantee unity. It can only maintain the illusion of the rightness of its existence.¹⁵

In point of fact, Rice Hopkins was less involved in these matters than his brethren. He was making a new life with his family in Australia. His long and happy marriage would yield four sons and two daughters whose hearts would be given to our Lord Jesus Christ. But the Scottish attitudes to the nature of the local church travelled fast to the ends of the earth (in 1879 Donald Ross migrated to the United States, Alexander Marshall to Canada and Charles Hinman to New Zealand).¹⁶

On Sunday 19 August 1883 in the assembly at Protestant Hall, Exhibition Street, Melbourne, a sister of undoubted godliness but unknown to the

10. R.T.H[opkins]., *Remarks on a Letter: What Does "Separation" Mean?* (Melbourne, 1888), pp. 1-16. This paper describes Hopkin's pilgrimage on the matter of 'separation'.

11. 'A word to assemblies', *The Northern Assemblies*, 1 April 1873, quoted in Dickson, 'Scottish Brethren', p. 26; also *ibid.*, pp. 16-20.

12. Napoleon Noel, *The History of the Brethren*, 1 (Knapp, Colorado, 1936), pp. 273-274.

13. Manchester, Christian Brethren Archive, 2409, Alexander Marshall to P.F. Bruce, 12 October c.1926/7; see also *idem*, "Holding Fast", pp. 16-17.

14. J.J. Park, *The Churches of God: their Origin and Development in the 20th Century* (Leicester, 1987), p.92; and the writer's private correspondence with present 'Needed Truth' editors. Mr. Park is now deceased, and the mistakes in his book stand.

15. A.T. Doodson (ed.), *The Search for the Truth of God*, reprint (Bradford, 1959), pp. 34-76. This little book gives a definitive statement on present 'Needed Truth' thought.

16. Coad, *Brethren Movement*, p. 182. Perhaps they left the U.K. to escape bigotry, but it is more likely that they were caught up in the migratory spirit of the time.

assembly at large, was presented for fellowship and received.¹⁷ After the breaking of bread Theo Kitchen, a brother of decidedly open persuasion forced the assembly to take a public vote without prayer or discussion, on the rectitude or otherwise of her reception. A strong majority supported him. Harrison Ord was present, and objected publicly to this procedure; but Rice Hopkins was not.¹⁸

The vote had the effect of polarising open believers generally for and against, not so much as to the matter of reception, but the manner of deciding how it should be managed. It gave rise to two groups of open assemblies in Melbourne, and in northern Tasmania, Sydney, New Zealand (Armagh St., Christchurch) and elsewhere, with varying identifying names, as the news spread. The degree of intercommunion between any two of them depended, in practice, on two factors. One was geographical location, namely a Christian would be expected to seek fellowship in an assembly where he might find a warm welcome, if he could reach it. The other was the reputation of the believer seeking fellowship. If his reputed beliefs or activities could embarrass local Christians, grace on his part might well keep him away, no matter what blessing he might otherwise bring.

Rice Hopkins' sympathies lay with those who took reasonable care in extending communion to strangers, and with deciding matters by careful consideration of the whole assembly. Early in 1883 he preached twice on the propriety of deciding church issues by public voting; and on reception soon after.¹⁹ Thus it appears that, however loosely he identified with Brethren in Britain, he associated himself exclusively with assemblies in Australia. These acknowledged his prominence as a teacher. Yet a degree of independence remained; he built, at his own expense, a hall in the Melbourne suburb of Balaclava to which some hundreds of brethren came each Monday evening for several months each year to hear God's Word. Later a book appeared by Alan Janes and Stafford Ross, *Papers on Assembly Doctrine*, with a foreword by Rice Hopkins' son John. This book became the definitive 'Hopkins Brethren' statement. But the present writer wonders if John's father might have found its inward-looking rigidity a burden too grievous to be borne.

Discussion on voting at secular elections also took place, possibly because of the controversy which began in the assembly. Brethren tended to follow individual conscience on this, and on the allied topic of military service. Few were conscientious objectors, but many chose to serve in non-combatant units.

'Needed Truth' gained their name from the magazine, a quarterly, which brethren published first in 1888. Rice Hopkins' answers to questions on reception, his devotional articles, and the long review of references to baptism in Exclusive writings, appeared in 1892-5. The editors appear to have regarded him as a spokesman on 'church truth'. But in a letter published in the final issue of 1895, he took issue with James Boswell's notion that an informal 'two or three' could never be regarded as a local church. He declined to take the 'Needed Truth' side in the division of 1893, and, though his articles still appear in 1896, they ceased soon after. Alex Marshall likewise declined, and

17. Protestant Hall was built in 1847, rebuilt in 1882 and again in 1934. Fire destroyed all its records of tenancy. It is now the headquarters of the Liberal Party in Victoria.

18. Writer's collection, G.A. Edwards, 'The breaking away of what is known as the Open Meeting from the Assembly August 1883'. These notes exist in various versions, some with names, some without. Edwards was an eye-witness

19. Writer's collection, from list of Rice Hopkins' ministry topics 1882-99 in his own handwriting.

Needed Truth editor L.W.G. Alexander followed them in 1903.²⁰ Indeed, the brothers Horne of *Oversight Among God's People* fame travelled from Scotland to reconcile the Australian assemblies to the 'Needed Truth' fold, but failed because this difference came between them. Thus Rice Hopkins rejected the *Needed Truth* editors' tenet that new assemblies may come into being only in fellowship with existing ones, and that authoritative eldership achieves and sustains such results. He asked that they 'refrain from trying to put 'elders' and 'elderhood' in everywhere' and to 'occupy Christians more with the 'needed' truth concerning the Lord Himself, and thus give their minds a very needed rest from the constant dwelling on a subject what has outgrown with them all proportion'.²¹

Rice Hopkins also rejected the London Exclusive tactic of publicising every act of discipline unless believers elsewhere had a need or right to know. He advocated the refusing of fellowship to any stranger, however godly, whose motivation in seeking fellowship was other than simple communion with fellow believers. He held consistently that the local church, being truly constituted in Christ's Name, was competent to decide such matters on the Biblical precedent that 'it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us'.²² Most assemblies today take this straightforward approach, except that, because of the stronger emphasis on the unity of the church in a locality, 'Hopkins' assemblies brought all members of nearby assemblies into matters of general interest.

The Melbourne 'Assembly of Believers Trust' document enshrined this idea, creating an artificial situation when the trust was wound up in 1988, by requiring the trustees to obtain a majority vote of members of now defunct 'Hopkins' assemblies. We may conclude that it is best to act graciously toward disorderly believers who take up no permanent spiritual home, and wander aimlessly from place to place. We may lovingly point out to them that a better way is 'stedfast continuance' rather than 'occasional fellowship'. We must always cope with ignorance in love and lowliness of mind, not in arrogance and conceit.

One of Rice Hopkins' most detailed, scholarly writings demonstrates the regrettable motivation of J.N. Darby and F.W. Grant in teaching the high church notion of household baptism. This required analysis of minor references in their writings back to 1832, since Exclusive Brethren avoided explicit discussion of the question.²³ These imply that they saw baptism as a means of securing believers to their distinctive communion by creating a sense of reliance upon it as an introductory rite. His own view, as we expect, is standard Open Brethren teaching.²⁴ Even this, when insisted on without leaving the newcomer a choice, partakes of Darbyite legalistic overtones.

20. *Needed Truth*, 1-10 (1888-98), eds L.W.G. Alexander, J.A. Boswell, J. Brown, R.T. Hopkins (Vol. 7 only), W.H. Hunter, C.M. Luxmoore. The writer has Rice Hopkins' bound volumes. His annotations are generally directed to J.A. Boswell's views on the nature of the church. L.W.G. Alexander in *Discerning the Body* (London & Glasgow, 1907), Hopkins and Alexander Marshall all published refutations of their earlier position.

21. R.T. Hopkins., *Notes on Comments made by the Editors of 'Needed Truth' on C. Morton's Paper on Rule, Occasional Papers No. 3* (Melbourne, 1898), pp. 25-39.

22. Writer's collection, typed notes of Rice Hopkins' teaching from Acts 15 given in 1898.

23. Hence Darby's acerbic reply to the question of what William Kelly held concerning baptism: "He holds his tongue", W. Blair Neatby, *A History of the Plymouth Brethren* (London [1901]), p. 238.

24. R.T. Hopkins, '*A Review of Letters on Baptism, etc.*' (London, 1894), pp. 1-78. This was reprinted from *Needed Truth*.

The present writer views Rice Hopkins as always an ‘open brother’. He met with open assemblies during his visits to Britain, and delighted to preach in his old open-air venues such as Hyde Park. He regarded as orthodox the assemblies which received only from others of like mind, subject to visitors’ problems of distance and reputation. Open Brethren assemblies which cared less about such things were, of course, free to go their own way. Inevitably, since he was the most capable teacher among them, certain more conservative assemblies in Australia became associated with his name. Probably the greater restriction within these assemblies was not so much on those who might be received, but on involvement by gifted ‘Hopkins’ brethren in evangelistic endeavours elsewhere. Adherence to the notion of the ‘one assembly of God in the town’, and conformity to published beliefs and practices, were regarded as essential to continued fellowship in it. Evangelism was to be conducted only in fellowship with that assembly.²⁵ As one of the most zealous evangelists our assemblies have seen, and who served in happy fellowship with many of like mind outside the assembly, Rice Hopkins would scarcely have endorsed these rigid and reactionary views without reservation. Inevitably a number of brethren of like mind transferred to Open meetings over the years because of them, and ultimately all but a few assemblies seceded as a whole.

His wife died in 1909, and he in 1916; the remains of both lie in the Society of Friends section of the Melbourne General Cemetery in Carlton. Rice Hopkins declined to have his name on his grave lest this attract visitors to a place whose occupants are really with Christ. But this was hardly worth while, as it seems likely that the present writer has been the only visitor for many years, and the graves are neglected. He has seen, in Rice Hopkins’ handwriting, a poem of unknown author (perhaps himself) which may well express his feelings near the end, when his health was indifferent:

I am no longer eager, bold and strong.
All that is past.
I am ready not to do
At last, at last!
My half day’s work is done,
And this is all my part:
I give a patient God

A patient heart.

Perhaps he had learned something more. John Ritchie wrote of Rice Hopkins after his death to his son Will: ‘He was one of the hardest workers I ever knew’.²⁶

As time progressed, it became obvious that the degree of piety and care for our Lord’s honour in the assemblies was much the same whether they were called ‘Hopkins’ or not. By our Lord’s grace, general intercommunion was resumed in 1961, with some minor exceptions, to the profit of both communions and the honour of Christ.

What do godly brethren learn from all this? It is not clear from the records

25. A.D. Janes and S.W. Ross, *Papers on Assembly Doctrine* (privately published, Prahran, c.1935), pp. 40-41, 55-63.

26. Writer’s collection, John Ritchie to Will H. Hopkins, 7 March 1876 (photostat copy of original letter); the letter also acknowledges Rice Hopkins’ part in the conversion of Ritchie’s wife. Hopkins and Ritchie exchanged hospitality at their homes in Birkenhead and Kilmarnock.

that the liberty and productiveness of Rice Hopkins' early evangelistic ministry continued in later years, though, like Harrison Ord and John Hambleton, he gave himself indefatigably to travelling throughout Australia under primitive conditions to teach God's Word. Indeed, on occasions (e.g. Sheffield, Tasmania, in about 1888, and in an area evangelised by John Hambleton), brethren rejected even his moderately restrictive ideas.²⁷ If we are to be zealous for truth, then we must be constrained by Divine love. If our motivation is Divine love, then men and women will be attracted to Christ. If we substitute zeal to establish a doctrinal or ecclesiastical position, however correct we may be, men and women of lesser spiritual attainments will devote their energies to promulgating the position instead. Then, should controversy come, they will fight and not love; and the wonderful testimony to the unity of the Body of Christ first entrusted by Him to the Brethren movement will be once more destroyed.

27. Alan F. Dyer, *God Was Their Rock* (Sheffield, 1974), pp. 30-2, 41.