

**YOUR CITIZENSHIP IN HEAVEN:
BRETHREN ATTITUDES TO
AUTHORITY AND GOVERNMENT**

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Separation and/or subjection: this was the dichotomy faced, though not always recognised, by early generations of Brethren. For many less well-educated Brethren, the two strongest points that emerged somewhat simplistically from any teaching on these subjects were submission to the powers that be, and separation from the world. How they were to enact these principles created tension when it came to decisions about war service, which I will (DV) discuss in a future paper. This paper will look at the way that Brethren wrote and argued on the topic of relations with secular authority. It probably goes without saying in a Brethren journal that no one viewpoint or interpretation of Scripture can accurately reflect 'Brethren thinking' on any topic.

At the outset it should be emphasised that, for British Brethren writers and preachers, their relationship with the state was not a major concern, perhaps because nineteenth-century Britain was a relatively stable society and they were able to pursue their absorption in what they saw as the more pressing spiritual issues. Even though Brethren writers generated an enormous amount of written material in comparison to their proportion of the population, comparatively few works addressed the question.

Many books on Christian living or 'church truth' do not even mention the topic, or refer to it only in a page or less. In the collection of tracts bound into thirteen volumes by Rice Hopkins, an evangelist and Bible teacher in the UK and in Australia from the 1860s until his death in 1916,¹ only two were on this topic. As Peter Brock comments, 'Darby was an enormously prolific writer; but unfortunately his voluminous *Collected Writings* [34 volumes] shed little light on his opinions on peace and war.'² My own perusal of many Brethren bookshelves confirms this view. Much was taught on 'separation', understood as separation from 'the world'; but this was not often explicitly extended to teaching on the state or politics.

Given the social position of many of the authors, it is not surprising that

1. Cf. Ian McDowell, 'Rice Thomas Hopkins 1842-1916: an open brother', *Brethren and Archivists and Historians Network Review*, 1 (1997-8), pp.24-30.

2. P. Brock, 'The peace testimony of the early Plymouth Brethren', *Church History*, 53, no. 1 (1984), p. 34.

many of the early tracts speak from the ruler's point of view rather than the ruled: 'Is it fitting for heaven-born men to be worldly legislators and politicians?'³ The answer was clearly 'no'. Captain Percy Hall, an early member of the Plymouth assembly, in *Discipleship!* (1835) stated that the Bible allowed Christians to use authority 'in the three special relations of Father, Husband, Master... but never as kings, or magistrates, or as holding any authority in the world.'⁴ Hall in fact put the question in somewhat emotional terms as well:

For what is a "christian magistrate" to do when a broken-hearted man pleads for his wife and starving family, acknowledges the sinfulness of his heart... and prays for pardon? Will he say, "No, you are guilty, and I am not the minister of mercy, but the law; you must go to the hulk, or the jail, or it may be to death?" Is it grace? and is such a person a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ *in the act?*[writer's italics]⁵

This argument was followed by the anonymous author of another tract, who wrote that Christians were 'most unfit to hold positions of power... They have a master to serve whose laws are quite opposed in principle to those of the world. The magistrate must execute the world's laws, as being the world's servant.'⁶

This author also articulated the teaching which was at the base of much Brethren reaction to the state and its demands, especially when war came. Who may take part in the government of a country? Natives only, not strangers... Your concern is the kingdom of God, your city the one to come, your citizenship in heaven. Refrain from the world's politics, for Jesus was no politician. Refrain, else you mar your witness to the world, that it is evil and lying under judgement. Are you not a stranger and a pilgrim? Then meddle not with that world which you have left.⁷

It is exactly this viewpoint which the authorities administering conscription in the twentieth century found so hard to cope with, and so it is worth examining further. It can be seen later in various forms as one of the responses made by men appealing against conscription. It is found in almost all earlier Brethren writing on this topic. For example, '...are we not... aliens in this country in which we dwell, belonging in heart and interest to another and better country...?'⁸ And again, in the 1930s:

If a man is a citizen of one of the kingdoms of this world he has a duty to do what he can to keep order and to better its corporate affairs, in which case

3. J. L. Harris in the *Christian Witness*, 1 (1834), p.458, quoted in H. H. Rowdon, *The Origins of the Brethren 1825-1850* (London, 1967), p. 304.

4. P. F. Hall, *Discipleship! or Reasons for Resigning his Naval Rank and Pay*, 2nd edn (Plymouth, 1835) p. 29, quoted in Rowdon, *Origins*, p. 305.

5. Hall, *Discipleship!*, p.26, quoted in F. R. Coad, *A History of the Brethren Movement: Its Origins, its Worldwide Development and Its Significance for the Present Day*, 2nd edn (Exeter, 1976), p. 61.

6. Anon., *The Christian and Politics* (n.d.); this tract, almost certainly from the nineteenth century, is in a collection bound by Rice T. Hopkins and is in the possession of Ian McDowell, Melbourne. It is unpaginated.

7. *Ibid.*

8. F. L[awson], *The Believer and War* (Glasgow, n.d.), p. 5.

he will vote in elections; but if he is only a subject, living for a time under this or that government, and presently going on to his own country, he has no business with those affairs. He will do what may be in his power to help anyone, but as a foreigner his ways of so helping will be limited, and will not include interference with matters public.⁹

Those not in the Brethren might well see this as theological hair-splitting, but the analysis was helpful to many law-abiding Brethren.

This theme of the sojourner whose citizenship was of another country resulted in not only an abrogation of political office but also abstention from voting. (The disenfranchisement of imprisoned conscientious objectors, for example in New Zealand, was thus somewhat ironic and redundant as a punishment in the case of Brethren!) While there was respect by most Brethren for the individual's conscience in these matters,¹⁰ the general advice in many quarters was to abstain from voting.¹¹ Writing before the First World War, Rendle Short, a Brethren surgeon, wrote,

The majority of Brethren seeking to follow His steps, refuse to ally themselves to any political party, and have incurred much reproach by doing so... Few, if any, Brethren speak on political platforms; a fair number use their vote, but probably the majority abstain.¹²

A British book review in 1939 stated that the believer should not only refrain from all active military service but also from world politics and worldly ways.¹³ As late as 1947 a writer in New Zealand said that the 'ballot box was a snare to the people of God.'¹⁴ As recently as 1982 an English writer said that 'Brethren have a tradition of not taking part in politics, and many do not even vote.'¹⁵ Though this is generally not true now,¹⁶ it was certainly so for the decades leading up to the First World War. Since the Second World War, the question of political involvement has been canvassed in magazines,¹⁷

9. G. H. Lang, *The Christian Relation to the State and to War* (Walsham-le-Willows, 1937), p.15. It should be emphasised that Lang was deeply impressed and influenced by Groves, though an independent thinker himself with strongly held principles.

10. Voting could be the cause of division at times, such as that which took place in the Hopkins meetings in Melbourne in the 1930s, where a small group opposed to voting (or even it being left to the individual conscience) formed a separate assembly.

11. This appeared for instance in the New Zealand magazine, *Treasury* (1899), pp. 139, 185, (1909) p.161, (1912) pp.152, 167, (1926) p.162. E. Read to the writer, 14 August 1994, 'heard awful warnings against the awful danger if one voted, and the candidate for which one had voted failed to win, one had been guilty of opposing God.'

12. A Younger Brother [i.e. A. R. Short], *The Principles of Christians called 'Open Brethren'* (Glasgow [1913]), p. 124.

13. Review of G. W. Bell's booklet *Christian Citizenship, The Believer's Magazine*, 49 (July 1939), p. 179.

14. *Treasury* (1947), p. 152.

15. P. Cousins, *The Brethren* (Exeter, 1982), p. 50. This view of the Brethren is quite prevalent, and has been reinforced by the publicity given to the Taylorite Exclusives, who en bloc do not vote.

16. An interesting example of political involvement came from a New Zealand questionnaire respondent, Joy Marks. She was 'active politically all her adult life, and was the first woman Branch Chairman in her electorate. When Tarawera... was a brand-new electorate, the Christian M.P. (Presbyterian) had a Brethren Electorate Chairman, and a Brethren Sec./Treas. [Marks]. It was recognised that this M.P. had the most supportive executive of any behind him...'

17. E.g. *Harvester* (May 1964), p. 75; (September 1974), p. 235; (August 1973), p. 177; *The Believer's*

and the consensus (albeit a cautious one!) would now be that Christians should use their political rights for good, as ‘salt and light’ in the world.

Brethren belief in withdrawal from the world was also due to two other factors. One was their view of the future, based on a premillennialist interpretation of Biblical prophecy; the other was their preoccupation with evangelism.

J. N. Darby’s influential teaching left its impress not only on the Exclusive wing but also on Open Brethren. In 1827 he had been horrified at the requirement of the Archbishop of Dublin that all converts from Roman Catholicism should take the oaths of allegiance and supremacy. He saw this as a disaster for the work of evangelism then making some headway, and as a quite unwarrantable subservience of Church to state, and circulated a protest among his fellow-clergy. The incident started him thinking on lines which eventually led to his resigning his curacy.¹⁸ Thereafter he was an exponent of the separation of Church and state, and given his influential position his views permeated the Brethren movement.

Darby’s teaching on prophecy, evolved in the late 1820s and early 1830s, partly through the Powerscourt conferences and contact with Edward Irving, was seminal both among Brethren and eventually among fundamentalists in general.¹⁹ As Ian Rennie sums it up,

To a spirituality which was Puritan in its seriousness and and Bible-centredness, premillennialism added a note of profound pessimism concerning the fortunes of Christianity in this age of the church and society... [Darby] laid great stress upon a seven-year tribulation, to be followed by the millennium in connection with the second advent.²⁰

This resulted in the doctrine of the ‘ruin of the church’ (that the institutional church was irretrievably corrupt) and the apostasy of society, which made withdrawal from society the only possible act for those believers ‘gathered out’.²¹ Rennie’s conclusion is perhaps overstated, but is nevertheless broadly

Magazine, 72 (June, October, November, 1962).

18. Coad, *Brethren Movement*, pp. 26 - 28; H. Pickering, *Chief Men among the Brethren*, 2nd edn (London, 1931), p. 12.

19. The theory of dispensationalism was spread and popularised by its use in the notes of the Scofield Bible (1909).

20. I. S. Rennie, ‘Aspects of Christian Brethren spirituality’, in J. I. Packer and L. Wilkinson, *Alive to God: studies in spirituality presented to James Houston* (Downers Grove, Illinois, 1992), pp. 198, 199. It is hard for anyone not brought up among Brethren (in any generation before this current one) to comprehend the fascination with prophecy and the charts of the dispensations (another legacy of Darby’s), the many fine lines of interpretation, and (despite ‘separation from the world’) the constant but cautious equation of world events with Biblical predictions. Anne Arnott (in describing W. E. Vine at Manvers Hall, Bath, without naming him) writes of ‘the chief of the elders, an erudite learned Greek scholar, with a vast knowledge of Biblical exegesis ... [whose] mission, drawing conclusions from Biblical prophecy and world events, and Scriptural allusions to the Jews return to Palestine, [was] to remind us constantly of the possible imminent appearing of our Lord.’ A. Arnott, *The Brethren: An Autobiography of a Plymouth Brethren Childhood* (Oxford, 1969), p. 24.

21. Some Brethren hymns reinforced this position. The third verse of Alexander Stewart’s ‘Lord Jesus Christ, we seek Thy face’ (*Believers Hymn Book* (Glasgow [1885]), no. 129) begins: ‘Shut in with Thee, far, far above /The restless world that wars below ...’ The tune given is ‘Retreat’.

true: 'So the Brethren movement, numbering many cultured people, withdrew from politics, community life, and culture in general, to await the return of Christ.'²²

This is the more significant when one considers the station in life from which many early Brethren were drawn. Mrs Trotter's opinion in *Undertones of the Nineteenth Century* (1905) was that many of the men attracted to the early Brethren movement were

men of brain, men of birth, and of large means, scholars, and students, who would have made their mark at any time and in any walk of life; lawyers of critical judgement, officers of promise in both services, large land-owners, with the cares and responsibilities of property.²³

This assessment is born out by the biographies in *Chief Men Among the Brethren* (21931).²⁴ Over half of the men described come into these categories, despite the fact that some of the biographies do not give this sort of detail. To these could be added such people as Lady Powerscourt, at whose home several seminal conferences on prophecy were held in the 1830s. These were the people from whose class in British society magistrates, justices of the peace, and members of Parliament were then expected to come. However, only two of those listed accepted these responsibilities, although Lord Congleton did take his seat on the cross-benches of the House of Lords as

22. Rennie, 'Brethren spirituality', p. 200.

23. E. Trotter, *Undertones of the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1905), p. 26.

24. The analysis is as follows:

Military and naval men: Captain T. H. Hull, Captain W. G. Rhind, R.N; these all resigned through ill-health etc.; several others have been noted in the text above.

Lawyers: J. G. Bellett, R. C. Chapman, Gordon Forlong, H. W. Soltau, T. S. Henry, Sir Robert Anderson (Chief of the CID, Scotland Yard, 1880-1901). J. N. Darby had trained as a lawyer originally.

Clergymen: J. N. Darby, Richard Hill, J. L. Harris, J. M. Code, William Trotter (Methodist), W. H. Dorman (Congregational), F. W. Grant, William Lincoln. Several others gave up plans or studies for ordination on coming in contact with Brethren.

'Men of birth'/land-owners: John Parnell (Lord Congleton), Capt Hon. W. H. G. Wellesley, Sir Edward Denny, Somerset Richard Maxwell (Lord Farnham), Count Guicciardini, Francis Hutchinson, the Earl of Cavan, William Talbot Crosbie, John N. Scobell, F. C. Bland, Richard J. Mahony, C. E. Stuart, the Earl of Carrick, Lord Adalbert Cecil. There was also Baron Radstock.

Scholars/students: Henry Craik, G. V. Wigram (who financed *The Englishman's Greek and English Concordance to the New Testament*, etc), John Eliot Howard F.R.S., Thomas Newberry (editor of the *Newberry Bible*), William Kelly, F. W. Baedeker Ph. D.; also S. P. Tregelles, who worked on the *Concordance*, and became a noted Biblical textual critic.

MP: Somerset Maxwell.

Businessmen: J. E. Howard, John Morley, Andrew Miller, William Yapp, Henry Frowde (manager of the Oxford University Press 1874-1913).

JP: J. N. Scobell.

Doctors: Edward Cronin, Thomas Neatby, H. H. Snell, W. T. P. Wolston, J. L. Maclean, Robert M'Killiam, A. T. Schofield, David Anderson-Berry.

Peter Embley makes a similar point, with less detailed analysis, in 'The Early Development of the Plymouth Brethren', in B. R. Wilson (ed.), *Patterns of Sectarianism: Organisation and Ideology in Social and Religious Movements* (London, 1967), pp.215-6. I had done this breakdown before I obtained his article. Our figures differ at some points but the gist is essentially the same. Elizabeth Isichei, writing about the Quakers, says that 'A sect which is administered in the leisure-time of its members tends ... to become dominated by a leisured class', E. Isichei, 'Organisation and power in the Society of Friends, 1852-59,' *ibid.* p. 202.

being in a sense ‘an appointment of God beyond his control’.²⁵

In fact, involvement in politics (with the implication that this would improve the world) was often equated with postponing the return of Christ. As David Martin puts it: ‘They [the Brethren] entertain a lively anticipation of the Second Coming, and therefore regard secular politics and attempts at reform as misguided tinkering with a world under judgement.’²⁶

Nevertheless Brethren sometimes took quite an interest in politics, albeit from an outsider’s point of view. This is shown by a comment in *The Witness* as late as 1956: ‘Most Christians have some interest in the passing events of the news, however much they may disclaim any participation in political affairs.’²⁷ As noted above, the keen interest in prophecy gave spice to their observation of world events. This was particularly the case with the issue of the Jews’ return to Palestine, seen as a precursor to the Second Coming. This was preached about well before the First World War and the Balfour Declaration, but was particularly evident between the wars.²⁸

That there were differing views on political involvement is shown by a European example later in the century; Teodorico Rossetti was a great influence in building up assemblies in Italy, with an interest in affairs of the state. According to F. A. Tatford,

he insisted that a Christian could not ignore his responsibilities as a citizen, although he declined personally to become a candidate for political office, arguing that his calling was to preach the gospel. He did, however, contribute to the semi-official journal *Rivista Contemporanea*, propounding economic, social and political solutions to the various problems of southern Italy.²⁹

Another Italian, Bonaventura Mazzarella, was active politically.³⁰

There may have been one Brethren member of the House of Commons in the nineteenth century, a Joseph Brotherton who was a retired cotton manufacturer.³¹ In the twentieth century there were a few members of Parliament in Britain from among Brethren: Sir John Sandeman Allen, Sir

25. Henry Groves, *Memoir of Lord Congelton* (London, 1884), p. 90, quoted in Rowdon, *Origins*, p. 306.

26. D. A. Martin, *Pacifism* (London, 1965), p. 188.

27. [J. B. Watson], ‘The Witness Watchtower’, *The Witness*, 76 (November 1956), p. 225; this is from a regular column which commented on world events and things of topical interest.

28. References to this are too numerous to mention. They recur throughout periodicals, and the topic was often raised in question times at conferences, apart from its mention in messages. My father (Amel R. Gordon) used to comment on his feeling of excitement when the Jewish state was established, having heard it predicted from Scripture so many times as he was growing up. A good example of this sort of teaching is found in W. C. Irvine’s *Riches of the Gentiles* (Belgaum [c. 1935]), Part IX: ‘Prophecy and the Second Coming’, pp. 123-142.

29. F. A. Tatford, ‘An Italian centenary’, *Echoes of Service* (July 1984), pp. 311.

30. J. D. Douglas (ed.), *New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Exeter, 1974), p. 646.

31. Handwritten notes from Harold Rowdon give the reference *Record*, 6 (September 1852). The DNB says Brotherton was a Bible Christian, and a ‘lay’ pastor of a congregation in Salford when not in London attending Parliament. It is possible this congregation became aligned with Brethren at some stage.

John Henderson, and Sir Peter Mills, all Conservatives.³² A Conservative Minister for Transport, Brian Mawhinney, was formerly with the Brethren (now an Anglican). In recent elections in Italy Professor Domenico Maselli of Lucca was elected to the lower house and another Brethren man from Florence to the upper house.³³ In 1998 in Australia a Conservative, Liz Cunningham, held the balance of power in the Queensland state parliament. But these cases were and are exceptions rather than the rule.

However this gives a somewhat distorted picture of Brethren involvement in the community. During both centuries Brethren have been to the forefront in evangelism and missionary work—extending the kingdom of God, the one kingdom that mattered. This was the other motivation for withdrawing from worldly affairs: such material matters were just not important from an eternal perspective. This is typified by a remark in the biography of Dr Baedeker; although the author believes Baedeker’s work may have contributed to the advances of liberty and justice in Russia, the writer also states: ‘He was far too busy with urgent spiritual concerns to give his time to political affairs. He was never a meddler.’³⁴

Ian McDowell has written:

Because of their strong ‘futurist’ belief in the imminent return of Christ to judge the contemporary world system and to institute His Kingdom, and in the calling of individuals as citizens of heaven rather than of earth, and in the Biblical commands not to be part of this world system, one would expect them to have little influence upon society around them.³⁵

However he goes on to point out their considerable contribution to children’s welfare in particular, with George Müller, J. W. C. Fegan, and Thomas Barnado all being instrumental in setting up and running large orphanages (all still in existence in some form).

He also notes the egalitarian nature of Brethren assemblies, where ‘social barriers between fellow members... were explicitly refused.’³⁶ This point is also made by Harold Rowdon, who shows how several renounced their fortunes for the sake of the gospel, and that some wealthy members (e.g. Lord Congleton) deliberately lived extremely simply, including eating with their servants.³⁷ Despite the atypically obsequious remark in Sir Edward Denny’s entry in *Chief Men Among the Brethren* (‘...one whose advantages of birth,

32. Handwritten notes from Harold Rowdon give references *Who Was Who* 1929-1940, p. 19, and obituaries in *The Witness*, 65 (July 1935), and *The Christian Graphic* (August 1935), for Sandeman Allen; *Who’s Who* 1986 for Mills. Roy Coad confirms the information about Henderson in a letter; for a discussion of Henderson, see N. T. R. Dickson, ‘The History of the Open Brethren in Scotland 1838-1999’ (University of Stirling Ph D. thesis, 2000), pp.397-8.

33. Roy Coad to the writer, 28 July 1994.

34. R. S. Latimer, *Dr. Baedeker and his Apostolic Work in Russia* (London, 1908), p.41. Interestingly Dr. Baedeker made full use of his aristocratic contacts to help in obtaining permits to visit the prisons, and indeed believed God had placed them in their position of influence for that sort of purpose.

35. Ian McDowell, ‘The influence of the ‘Plymouth Brethren’ on Victorian society and religion’, *The Evangelical Quarterly*, 55 (1983), p. 211.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 213.

37. Rowdon, *Origins*, pp. 303-4.

fortune, and title raise him above the level of his fellow-believers'),³⁸ a fair reflection of Brethren attitudes would be that fellowship was on the basis of their standing in Christ, not rank or class (not the norm in such a class-conscious era). General Halliday's entry is more typical: after describing his career and accomplishments, it states:

Yet with all this he was an earnest and faithful witness for the Lord Jesus Christ, exhibiting great humility of spirit, and ever ready to company with fellow-believers, regardless of social position ... by whom he was greatly beloved.³⁹

One author, G. F. Trench, took a slightly different slant on the Christian's relation to the state, and may well be representative of a certain minority school of thought, although I have not been able to find any other examples. He believed his views to be the result of a correct interpretation of Scripture, reinforced by 'the sympathy and concurrence of some whose mature spirituality and Christian separation from the world makes their approval most valuable.'⁴⁰ Trench, writing probably towards the end of the nineteenth century in *God in Government; or, The Christian's Relation to the State* (the title is significant), also recognised that 'some for whose opinions I cherished deep respect... differed... with the conclusions I expressed.'⁴¹

His emphasis was on the sovereignty of God, and he adduced examples from the Old Testament (e.g. Daniel and his companions) as well as the New. He summarised his position thus:

(1) God alone is the author of power; (2) The powers are of God's appointment; (3) The object of government is the punishment of evil-doers, and the praise of them that do well; (4) The Christian is to acknowledge the institution as one provided 'for his good'; (5) The Christian is to be in subjection, and to make rulers the subject of his prayers and thanksgivings.⁴²

It would probably be safe to say that practically all Brethren would agree with this summary, then and now.

However, because he saw God as the fountain of authority, he believed that 'it is impossible... to avoid the conclusion that godly persons are best fitted for its administration.' He quite agreed with the concept of heavenly citizenship, but thought that 'on earth we all occupy a double position.'⁴³ He therefore said that 'so long as in the calling of God, who appoints all to their places, he [a Christian] occupies socially a position of influence and authority in relation to others, the responsibilities of rule connected therewith remain,' and he adds in a footnote

...I speak chiefly of magistracy, [but] the passages of God's word to which I point apply equally to judgeships in all courts, to every office of government in the state, and down to the common juryman, the night-watchman, and

38. Pickering, *Chief Men*, p. 44.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 208.

40. G. F. Trench, *God in Government; or, The Christian's Relation to the State* (London, n. d.), pp. iii-iv.

41. *Ibid.*, p. iii.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

policeman.⁴⁴

He was careful to maintain the principle of separation; while believing that it was not wrong to accept a position of authority if it arose in the normal circumstances of life, he would not advocate that a believer seek such a position.

Along with the attitude of separation, Brethren held strongly to the concept of obeying the powers that be, which are ordained of God.⁴⁵ (That the two mindsets existed in some tension with each other did not become evident until the First World War.) Darby wrote, 'What then shall we do with governments? Why, submit to them, since God orders them; and when they impose tax, pay; and make supplication to God for kings, and all in authority.'⁴⁶

The dichotomy between separation and subjection was well expressed by J. R. Caldwell, editor of *The Witness* from 1876 until 1914:

When Paul touches upon the subject of human government, he does not legislate, for the Church is absolutely separate from the world's government; but he calls upon the believers to recognise and be subject to those in authority...⁴⁷

Rowdon says that 'it was, of course, agreed that subjection to 'the powers that be' is mandatory; but it was held that there was no Scriptural warrant for a Christian attempting to secure privileges by political means, or administering political authority.'⁴⁸ This is reinforced by Rendle Short's statement that

[in the New Testament we find not a trace] ...of political energies, of taking of sides, of appeals to rulers, of attempts to raise the popular indignation against abuses... The fact is, that Christ and the Apostles did not desire to work through political parties. They proposed to bring blessing to the world by the method of individual regeneration, not by what we now call Act of Parliament.⁴⁹

Brethren would always be very careful to pray for those in government. As this was a biblical command given at a time when those in power were despotic and the state opposed to Christianity, it was clearly relevant whether or not one agreed with government policy. However Brethren have tended to have conservative sympathies in general. A writer in the *Treasury* in 1926 praised the Conservative New Zealand Prime Minister William Massey (1856-1925) as a 'God-fearing man'.⁵⁰ Several other comments over the years enjoin people to pray, both for the government and the king.⁵¹ This was also evident in the war years, for example in *Australian Missionary Tidings* in April 1940: ... intercessory prayer should be constantly ascending on behalf of those in

44. *Ibid.*, p. 21, 20.

45. Romans 13:1.

46. Quoted by Lang, *Christian Relation*, p. 30.

47. Editor's note [J. R. Caldwell], *The Witness*, 39 (1909), p. 19. This comment was made in an answer to a question about capital punishment, in which he says he believes it has scriptural warrant.

48. Rowdon, *Origins*, pp. 304-5, citing several authors.

49. [Short], *Principles of Christians*, p. 123.

50. *Treasury* (1926), p. 32.

51. *Ibid.* (1930), p. 50; (1939), p. 46; (1943), p. 57.

places in authority that they may be given wisdom and courage to do what is right and to rule in the fear of God.⁵²

Thus we can see that some writers, such as Darby, took a strong view of separation from an evil society and a ruinous church, involvement in which only delays the return of Christ, whereas others viewed human government as necessary for the administration of society and not intrinsically evil. The meeting point between eschatology and theology could therefore be contentious.

The issue which forced Brethren to think about their relationship to the state was that of wartime service. This was particularly the case in countries which enforced conscription—that is, most European countries before the First World War, and then to many people's consternation, Britain and some of the Dominions. Though many would not have realised it, it was an issue which went back to the roots of the Brethren movement.

For instance, Roy Coad states in the opening sentence of his history: 'It is odd that a cavil of conscience should bring matters to a head.'⁵³ He is referring to the fact that pacifism was the catalyst which caused Anthony Norris Groves to abandon his plans for ordination in the Church of England. Groves subsequently advocated in Dublin meeting on a non-denominational basis.

The relevant passage from his journal, printed in the *Memoir of the late Anthony Norris Groves by his widow*, reads:

[Hake] called on me, and asked me if I did not hold war to be unlawful. I replied, 'Yes.' He then further asked, how I could subscribe to that article which declares, 'It is lawful for Christian men to take up arms at the command of the civil magistrate.' It had, till that moment, never occurred to me. I read it; and replied, 'I never would sign it'; and thus ended my connection with the Church of England, as one about to be ordained in her communion.⁵⁴

Brock believes that 'Due to Groves' dynamic personality the idea of rejecting war took hold of his colleagues and became a fixed tenet of the emerging sect.'⁵⁵ Those who know the Brethren know that 'fixed tenets' are not a distinguishing factor! Nevertheless, of the formative years of the Brethren G. H. Lang writes:

It was a usual thing for army and navy officers to resign their commission upon conversion among Brethren. An instance was Captain F. Lane, whose daughter... told me that the same night her father was converted he sent in his resignation. The First Lord of the Admiralty... was a personal friend, and viewed the resignation as a hint that he wished for a better post, which was offered, but to no purpose.⁵⁶

52. *Australian Missionary Tidings* (1 April 1940), p. 65.

53. Coad, *Brethren Movement*, p.15.

54. Mrs Groves (ed.), *Memoir of Anthony Norris Groves: Compiled Chiefly from His Journals and Letters*, 3rd edn (London, 1869), quoted in G. H. Lang, *Anthony Norris Groves: Saint and Pioneer* (London, 1939), p. 165; Coad, *Brethren Movement*, p. 22; P. Brock, 'Peace testimony', p. 31.

55. Brock, 'Peace testimony', p. 32. I have not given the detail I might on this earlier period, because Brock's comprehensive article covers the nineteenth century admirably.

56. Lang, *Groves*, p. 166. Elsewhere Lang quotes W. B. Neatby's *History of the Plymouth Brethren*, 1st

The only person to write a tract giving his reasons for resigning his commission was Captain Percy Hall, R.N., who published *Discipleship! or Reasons for Resigning His Naval Rank and Pay* in 1833.⁵⁷ Judging from the comments in *Chief Men Among the Brethren*, which appeared in 1931, this was seen as a little eccentric, at least from the viewpoint of nearly a century later: the tract was ‘favoured by some and condemned by others, although none questioned his sincerity and devotedness’; Hall was described as being ‘of a very independent temperament’.⁵⁸ Groves, in arguing that preaching on baptism did not make him a sectarian, wrote that ‘as well might our dear brother H. have been told not to publish his tract against war, lest he should be identified with the Society of Friends.’⁵⁹

In *Chief Men Among the Brethren*, eight out of the one hundred men described are mentioned as having given up a commission.⁶⁰ Given the somewhat uneven nature of the contributions, there may have been more, though the nineteenth century was a time when Britain was formally at peace and there was no conscription. On the other hand, two of the men described were long-serving, high-ranking officers,⁶¹ and in the twentieth century, General Dobbie, the ‘Defender of Malta’ was another such person.⁶² Nevertheless, the balance would seem to have been towards resigning a

edn (London, 1901), p. 271: ‘The bar and the services were absolutely banned, and barristers and military and naval officers generally abandoned their careers if they joined the Brethren’, Lang, *Christian Relation*, p. 25. This seems an exaggerated view of the situation.

57. British Library catalogue no. 4375.b.48 (1).

58. Pickering (ed.), *Chief Men*, p. 20.

59. Lang, *Groves*, p. 353.

60. John Parnell (later Lord Congleton) refused to take up the commission his father had purchased, although this was before he had joined up with Brethren, and Brock (‘Peace testimony’, p.33 n. 9) states that this was not ‘from pacifist scruples... [but because even then he believed] his vocation lay in spreading the gospel’. There is also Captain Percy Hall, R.N., J. G. Deck, Captain Hon. William H. G. Wellesley (nephew of the Duke of Wellington), Captain R. F. Kingscote, Captain J. L. Maclean. Others who gave up their army positions before coming in contact with Brethren were G. V. Wigram and Leonard Strong. Others not mentioned in *Chief Men* were Baron Radstock, who ‘used to say that when he resigned his Colonelcy of the London Volunteers, he lost his last shred of respectability in the eyes of the world.’ (A. Miller, *Short Papers on Church History*, 3, (London [1928], p. 1065), and Sir Charles Brenton, whose ‘father, grandfather, and his uncle, as well as his wife’s father and grandfather, were all admirals’ but who did not follow suit (Brock, ‘Peace testimony’, p. 40 and n.).

61. General John S. Halliday and Major-General Sir Charles Scott (who married General Halliday’s daughter).

62. David Brady, the archivist of the Christian Brethren Archive at Manchester University, says in correspondence with me that ‘W. G. S. Dobbie was a relative of Orde Charles Wingate [of Burma fame] ... The family has, in fact, a long Brethren tradition and many of its members became leaders in military uniform. They seem to have been associated with a Brethren meeting in Woolwich (near the Arsenal?), and, judging by my reading of notes in a journal that circulated around the 1880’s, *The Eleventh Hour*, it would seem that there were quite a number of military men in that assembly.’ (Letter 19 July 1994). Wingate’s parents, Colonel and Mrs George Wingate, are mentioned in Arnott, *The Brethren*, p. 57. The great-grandfather and great-uncle of Professor R. M. Thomson, University of Tasmania, were both ‘strict Brethren’ and professional soldiers (personal conversation, August 1994, History Department, University of Tasmania.) Roy Coad states that ‘... as the movement developed, a considerable number of senior military men were associated with it—as was the case later in Germany’, ‘Into a changing future’, Lecture 4 in ‘The shaping of the Brethren movement’, lectures delivered at Regent College, Vancouver, 1990, p. 7.

commission on conversion, especially earlier on, and not taking up an army career. This is supported by an article in *The Northern Witness* (the precursor of *The Witness*) in 1885, which '[sympathises] with the difficulties of those who have been converted in the Army [and have problems getting a discharge, [but] state[s their] conviction of the SIN AND SHAME of a Christian deliberately choosing the Army as his profession, or volunteering to qualify himself for warfare.'⁶³

The lack of occasions for demonstrative pacifism, such as conscription and major military conflict, meant that before the First World War magistracy was much more of a live issue than pacifism. In the Crimean War period, Brock could only find information on three Brethren (Sir Charles Brenton, and Philip and Emily Gosse) who wrote against the war.⁶⁴

Apart from these, the only other person in the nineteenth century who seems to have commented on the Christian's position in war-time was Darby, in response to the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. As Brock says, his letter, to French Brethren, is 'cautious though unambiguous'.⁶⁵ Its main points were that 'a Christian, free to do as he will, could never be a soldier' and must bear the consequences of conscience if 'forced to it'; that he should not be possessed by the idea of patriotism; that 'if consistent, declares plainly that he seeks a... better, that is to say, a heavenly country'; and that he should recognise the hand of God in these things (i.e. an external threat to the country).⁶⁶ In this letter the themes of simple pacifism, conscience, separation, and submission to authorities and the sovereignty of God are juxtaposed. These issues were the ones that continued to be brought forward, with the emphasis varying with the writer's standpoint.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century the demographic profile of the Brethren was changing somewhat, with the influx of more working- and lower middle-class converts following the revivals. This was particularly the case in Scotland, and in the colonies. In Scotland, some groups came into being who did not originate with English Brethren and who came into fellowship with them when they recognised they were operating on the same principles.⁶⁷ Many of these newer assemblies had a vigorous evangelistic concern, coupled with a strong view of separation (epitomised in the development of the 'Needed Truth' wing in the 1880s).⁶⁸ They were often unaware of the so-

63. *The Northern Witness*, 15 (1885), pp. 95-6, quoted in H. Beattie, *The Christian and War* (Glasgow, n.d.), pp. 117-9.

64. Brock, 'Peace testimony', p. 41.

65. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

66. *Letters of J. N. D.* (Stowe Hill, n.d.), pp.110-11, quoted in full in Lang, *Christian Relation*, pp. 27-29. The letter appears in collections of Darby's letters (there are various editions), almost obligatory in many Exclusive households, and common in not a few Open ones of an earlier era.

67. F. F. Bruce, 'Foreword' in Coad, *Brethren Movement*, p. 9: 'In... North-East Scotland many of these independent churches... came into existence... without any prior knowledge of the independent churches formed earlier in Dublin, Plymouth and Bristol.'

68. G. Willis and B. R. Wilson, 'The Churches of God: pattern and practice', in Wilson (ed.), *Patterns of Sectarianism* (London, 1967), pp. 244-286.

called ‘pacifist’ stance of the early Brethren, and were from a different social class, but their orientation also was towards separation from the world (and from the ‘sects’), and their preoccupation was with bringing people into the heavenly kingdom. Some of the most popular periodicals came from Scotland—*The Witness* and *The Believer’s Magazine*—so these sorts of emphases were widely disseminated.

The onset of the First World War triggered many tracts and even books written on this subject—of course broadened to the Christian and war. More were written before the Second World War. However it is interesting that in a survey conducted for my thesis on which this paper is based, very few respondents seem to have read them; at least they do not mention them as having had an influence. An exception is E. W. Rogers’ *The Christian Believer and Military Service* (1937), which was mentioned by two of them.

Nevertheless many other concerns were to the forefront in the Brethren position on war. Many of these were perhaps encapsulated in an article by John Ritchie, an influential Scottish publisher and editor, reprinted in *The Treasury* in 1915. He stated that ‘Subjection to ‘powers’... is, as a principle, always right. But when they ask the Christian to do what he cannot do without disobeying God... he puts the higher claim first.’⁶⁹

The themes of separation, subjection to the powers that be and the resultant possible conflict of conscience, the problems involved with fighting and taking the oath of allegiance, the sovereignty of God, the dispensations, and constant reference to the Bible as the word of God, definitive for decision making, are all taken into account and are common to all the tracts or books I read.

That of separation was probably fundamental. It is what underlies the article in *Australian Missionary Tidings* in April 1916: ‘Their Kingdom, of course, is not of this world, consequently they [i.e. believers] are supposed to hold a ‘benevolent neutrality’ toward this world’s combatants.’⁷⁰ Lang wrote twenty years later that ‘[the believer] must be walking in a humble but practical separation from this world, its politics, its trade societies, its pleasure clubs, and so forth.’⁷¹ Separation was the most obvious response, given Brethren teaching over the previous century. ‘It is a grievous sin for a Christian to fight in the battles of the World, for he has been chosen out from the world’ began a 1916 English booklet.⁷²

Another author defined the world as

that earth-wide system, the animating principle of which is Man’s will and not God’s... It is from such a world that we are called upon to separate ourselves... Can... a believer... be assimilated in mind and interest with a world judged guilty of rejecting his Lord and Saviour?... or have sympathy with the schemes, the policies, the aims and ambitions of the nations of that

69. *Treasury* (1915), p. 166.

70. *Missionary Tidings* (April 1916), p. 770.

71. Lang, *Christian Relation*, p. 6.

72. C. S. Utting, *The Christian and War* (Norwich, 1916), p. 3.

world?... Is it the occupation of believers to assist in setting this world in order, either by political or military methods,—a world which is passing to its doom at the hands of the Lord Jesus Christ...?⁷³

Behind all this was the teaching of the Christian's citizenship being in heaven, as we have seen. A New Zealand author wrote

...we should remember that we are the citizens of a better, a heavenly, country. While it is not ours, as Christians, to volunteer to help fight the battles of the world, we should be much in prayer before God that He will overrule for His own glory...⁷⁴

The New Zealand document quoted above stated: 'It is not our place to involve ourselves in earthly troubles.'⁷⁵ An English author asked rhetorically, 'are we not... aliens in this country in which we dwell, belonging in heart and interest to another and better country...?'⁷⁶ E. W. Rogers, another English writer, noted in 1937, that

The Church... belongs to no one nation, and has no specific land on earth. Consistency with such a call requires that the members of that body take no voluntary active part in the government, politics, or conflicts of any one nation. [his italics]⁷⁷

Most Brethren writing did face this conflict, and usually extended the verse in Acts 4:19 ('We must obey God rather than men') to cover situations other than the proclamation of the Gospel which had first occasioned it.⁷⁸ A. F. Jack wrote that 'We must be obedient to [earthly rule] always, unless and until its commands conflict with His own commands to us.'⁷⁹ Rogers goes further to argue that the word 'submission' 'is not intended to convey an injunction of unswerving and unquestioning obedience to everything enjoined' and states that where people choose to obey God rather than men, they must also be prepared to submit to 'the consequences as enacted by the authorities'.⁸⁰

Another question involved with military service was that of taking the oath. The early inclination of Brethren was to avoid making any kind of oath; Sir Edward Denny wrote a tract on the subject, arguing that the believer should not take the oath in court.⁸¹ While some later writers did not agree with him, feeling that it was acceptable to make a 'solemn invocation of God to witness the truth of a formal declaration on a special occasion',⁸² they were

73. L[awson], *Believer and War*, p. 3-5.

74. F. Bates, *Treasury*, 16 (1914), p. 136.

75. *The Christian and his Relation to War and Military Training* op. cit.

76. L[awson], *Believer and War*, p. 5.

77. E. W. Rogers, *The Christian Believer and Military Service* (Kilmarnock [c. 1937]), p. 6.

78. E.g. Utting, *Christian and War*, p. 31: 'When Caesar forbids the Gospel, or commands Christ's servants to fight, then the answers of the Apostles ... must be acted upon.'

79. A. F. Jack, *The Church and War* (Glasgow, n.d. [First World War]), p. 12.

80. Rogers, *Military Service*, p. 14, 12-13.

81. E[dward]. D[enny] (1796-1889), *On Swearing* (n.pl., n.d.); it is in Rice T. Hopkins collection of tracts held by Ian McDowell.

82. 'The Christian and War', *Tidings* (September 1942), pp. 204-5; the article quotes excerpts from C. F. Hogg and J. B. Watson, *On the Sermon on the Mount* (1933). Hogg and Watson were respected English Bible teachers. G. H. Lang agreed: see *Christian Relation*, pp. 19 - 25.

generally relieved that believers could take advantage of the right to affirm, and most were unhappy with the military oath. The issues were both adherence to the Biblical teaching on oaths ('Swear not at all ...'), and the surrender of one's actions to the direction of someone other than God.

One group of Brethren which did have a firm policy were the Exclusive Brethren. They canvassed many of the same texts and arguments, with an emphasis that 'government is from God and had authority from Him',⁸³ but were firmly against enlisting or agreeing to active service. They took advantage of any conscience clauses in relevant legislation, as a way for every instructed believer, rightly feeling that he could not with a good conscience take life, to preserve his conscience and at the same time accord to the authorities whom God has placed over him the subjection that the will of God requires.⁸⁴

However if these were not available, non-compliance was enjoined:

A good many of our younger brethren in the United States and Canada are now in Service. They are generally bearing a good testimony, but some are under much pressure because of conscience. The military laws of Canada do not provide for conscientious objectors and one of our brothers... is at present in prison.⁸⁵

Exclusives in general particularly used the text 'Be not unequally [or diversely, as Darby's version puts it] yoked together with unbelievers' (1 Cor. 6:21).

Notwithstanding the foregoing, there was a strand of Brethren thinking which allowed for active service. This is implied by the questions that many of the writers quoted above seemed to have been answering. It hardly appeared at all in the periodicals, although the fact that the issue was discussed shows that the debate was alive. The main proponent that I have found was Major-General Sir William Dobbie, who wrote *Christianity and Military Service* in the 1930s.

Dobbie argued from similar premises as his fellow-Brethren, especially in basing his points on Scripture ('the only safe course is to bring all... to the touchstone of Scripture.').⁸⁶ His conclusion was that

Scripture indicates that the profession of arms is an honourable and lawful one; the use of force and material weapons is not incompatible with faith in God; that God is a God of order and that in this present dispensation He has ordained that human governments shall maintain order by force...⁸⁷

The only other document I have seen which supports this position is one

83. *Letters of J[ames].T[taylor].*, 2 (Stow Hill, 1956), p. 174. The idea of authority seemed to sit well with the Exclusive "structure". It is more pronounced than in Open Brethren writing.

84. A. J. Gardiner, *The Recovery and Maintenance of the Truth* (Kingston-on-Thames, 1951), p. 223. Some may feel this reads rather oddly. Darby was noted for his convoluted phraseology, and generations of Exclusive writers seem to have followed suit, perhaps in unconscious imitation, or as a result of the extreme introversion of their fellowships.

85. *Letters of J[ames].T[taylor].*, p. 296. It is clear from the context of the letters that 'in Service' means as non-combatants.

86. W. G. S. Dobbie, *Christianity and Military Service* (London, 1936), p. 6.

87. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

issued by Tory Street Hall, Wellington, which emphasises the defensive aspect of war as a means to ‘put down a nation which... has set itself up in defiance of principles of Divine Government for which governments are ordained’ and as a ‘function of Divine judgment upon nations who oppose God.’⁸⁸ Given the principle of submission to authority, they thought that ‘a man may serve in a righteous defence in any capacity’. However, if he still had conscientious qualms, he could engage in non-combatant service.

It is evident from the foregoing that a considerable range of opinion and Scriptural interpretation existed, with potential for debate and even division. A future article will (DV) examine what did occur in the two World Wars, and how Brethren struggled to discern the will of God and to cope with the idea that it might, apparently, be different for different people. The strong emphasis on reliance on Scripture as a basis for life and worship, on the leading of the Holy Spirit, and on the autonomy of assemblies, meant that most people had to chart their own course between the somewhat paradoxical claims of subjection or separation.

88. Untitled duplicated open letter from ‘leading and responsible brethren from Tory Street Hall, Wellington’ (New Zealand), Second World War.