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Who are the Christian Brethren

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Continued from Oct 5

The meetings of Open Brethren vary in every kind and degree from the 'tight' gatherings which will not receive anybody unless he first separates himself from everybody else, to those which are in effect interdenominational movements of the present day, and receive any stranger without question to the breaking of bread. Between these two extremes there are large numbers of meetings that are - locally- run on fairly sound New Testament lines. However, the Open Brethren are basically conservative evangelical Christians and are in substantial agreement with other conservative evangelical Christian groups. Rather unexpectedly in view of their great diversity, there is one doctrine and practice which is held by all Open Brethren assemblies which is that baptism must be only for believers of a responsible age on confession of faith. Many meetings refuse to allow a person to break bread unless he has been baptized as a believer, and if he was baptized as an infant it does not count in their eyes. The doctrine of household baptism is rigidly rejected and no teaching of it would be allowed. Some meetings might tolerate an individual who held such a view, but he would have to keep quiet on the subject.

The buildings Brethren used to hold meetings were often called "Gospel Hall". There has been a tendency in England, the U.S.A., Singapore and The Bahamas for some of the places of worship to be changed from being called 'halls' to 'chapels'. As the years past, some assemblies even dropped this title 'chapel' in favour of something more modern like "Evangelical Church", "Community Church", "Bible Church", "Bible Fellowship", "Bible Chapel", or "Centre".

Interdenominational activities have been much increased since the mid 1940s. Increasingly a large percentage of the Brethren have fellowshipped with individual Christians in the denominational church bodies and have participated in joint endeavours, such as



Billy Graham Campaigns, the Gideons, the Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship, and Christian Business Men's Committees with other theologically conservative groups. Some of the tight "old paths" gatherings view with concern the cited joint activities with other Christians.

In general, Open Brethren go to graduate theological seminaries, usually conservative interdenominational schools like Trinity Seminary in Deerfield, Illinois, Dallas Theological Seminary, and Fuller Theological Seminary. Some attend the Open Brethren seminaries like Emmaus Bible College, Regent Bible College, etc.

The influence of the Plymouth (or Christian) Brethren upon evangelical Christianity exceeds their relatively small numerical proportion. In considering all of the contributions of the Plymouth Brethren movement to the evangelical church, it may be that expository preaching and writing is its most enduring legacy. Men of God with such names as J. N. Darby, William Kelly, C. H. Macintosh, R. C. Chapman and others were noted and exceptionally gifted expositors of the Bible. The Brethren have been productive writers and publishers including

Men of God with such names as J. N. Darby, William Kelly, C. H. Macintosh, R. C. Chapman and others were noted and exceptionally gifted expositors of the Bible. The Brethren have been productive writers and publishers including W.E Vine's "Dictionary of New Testament Words." The writings of the Brethren had a broad impact on evangelical Protestantism and influenced ministers in the United Kingdom such as C. H. Spurgeon and in the United States such as D. L. Moody, James Brookes, J. R. Graves, A. J. Gordon, and C. I. Scofield. The Bible teaching among the "Brethren" was considered to be the richest and most spiritual available in that day.

A number of doctrines that are now widely held within evangelical circles were first discovered by the Brethren or were promoted and propagated by the Brethren. In no particular order these include:

pre-tribulational rapture

dispensationalism

priesthood of all believers

difference between the Church and Israel

lack of a clergy/laity division

Some well known members of the "Brethren" are:

Brenton, Sir Lancelot - translator of what is probably the most widely available Greek-English edition of the LXX.

Bruce, F.F. - Bible commentator and former editor of the New

International Commentary on the New Testament series.

Darby, John Nelson - inaccurately referred to as the founder of the "Plymouth Brethren". This former Church of Ireland clergyman preached, wrote, planted churches and translated the Bible into English, German and French. He also wrote a number of hymns.

Elliot, Jim - Missionary martyred in Ecuador. Well known for his statement, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

Francis, S. Trevor - composed the hymn "Oh the Deep, Deep Love of Jesus".

Groves, A.N. - pioneer missionary in India

Ironside, H.A. - well known Bible commentator. Ironside started with the Salvation Army, became a "Brethren" worker and finally the pastor of Moody Memorial Church.

Kelly, William - authored many Bible commentaries

MacDonald, William - author of the Believers Bible Commentary which has just been printed by Thomas Nelson

Mackintosh, C.H. - wrote "Notes on the Pentateuch" and "Miscellaneous Writings"

McCulley, Ed - one of the 5 Martyrs of Ecuador

Miller, Andrew - author on Church history

Muller, George - lived in Bristol England and ran a chain of orphanages which operated on the principle of faith

Newberry, Thomas - well known for the Newberry Reference Bible, which uses a system of symbols to explain verb tenses

Scriven, Joseph - composer of "What a Friend We Have in Jesus"

Strauch's, Alex - his book, on Biblical Eldership, has become a manual used in evangelical circles outside the Brethren movement.

Tregelles, Samuel - noted scholar of Biblical languages

Vine, W.E. - author of "Vines Expository Dictionary" and numerous commentaries

Wigram, G.V. - author of "Wigrams Hebrew/Chaldee Concordance" and "Wigrams Greek Concordance"

The Brethren have an outstanding place in the history of parachurch movements. They have consistently produced men and women of vision who have been able to build international missions, found evangelistic agencies, create unprecedented

projects, and enterprises. Many leaders of the contemporary evangelical movement have come from Plymouth Brethren backgrounds, for example, Geoff Tunnicliffe, CEO of the World Evangelical Alliance; Brian McLaren of the emergent church "conversation"; Dr. Anthony T. Evans of the Urban Alternative; and Evangelist Luis Palau of the Luis Palau Association.

In terms of leadership the Brethren have caused views in the evangelical church to change dramatically in the last few years.

Anglican and Baptist churches have begun to appoint elders, and adopt a style which allows much more lay participation than ever before. What has happened over the years is that a small number of churches and denominations have adopted or adapted a number of the distinctive hallmarks of Brethren identity. Shared leadership, open worship – often associated with breaking of bread – and clear evangelistic preaching on a regular basis are cases in point. These churches and denominations have learned these things from the Brethren and more importantly they have learned them from a common source – Scripture. So, more and more Anglican churches are developing team ministries using not only salaried full-time clergy but also lay readers, catechists, lay elders who share in preaching, teaching and pastoral care of the parish. They may also include periods of open worship in their services. Even some churches question the traditional practice of baptizing infants and, increasingly, is being superseded by a form of dedication which differs very little from the dedication (thanksgiving) for a newly born child which is offered in many Brethren churches. In addition, an increasing number of Baptist churches are appointing elders to assist the minister in pastoral care, and some of them make provision for open worship, often in the context of breaking of bread. More and more churches outside the Brethren movement are embracing beliefs and practices that used to be regarded as distinctively Brethren.

The Plymouth Brethren have made significant contributions to Christian hymnody, particularly on the subject of the person and work of Christ, and hymns for use at the Lord's Supper.

The Plymouth Brethren are the oldest of the Fundamentalists and Bible Churches. There are several Christian groups or denominations today that hold similar beliefs and practices to the Christian Brethren movement. A Bahamian Open Brethren stalwart in a U.S. town or situation without an active Open Brethren assembly, would transfer easily in a non-Brethren church belonging to a denominational group like the American Christian Evangelical Churches, Baptist Bible Fellowship International, Baptist Missionary Alliance Association of America, Christian and Missionary Alliance, Conservative Baptist Association of America, or the Independent Fundamental Churches of America (IFCA) International.

The Brethren have always manifested globally a supreme lack of

interest in their numerical strength. Their numbers are difficult to assess because no precise statistics are available and because there is no hard-and-fast line of demarcation between Brethren assemblies and other independent evangelical churches. Countries where "Open Brethren" churches are relatively strong include Singapore, South India, Malaysia, Congo, Chad, Argentina, Scotland, Papua New Guinea and New Zealand. A conservative estimate is that there are around one million people in the world who would call themselves or be called Plymouth Brethren, although there are also a large number who would likely not be, or wish to be, labelled as "Brethren" yet have strong Brethren associations.

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