

The Church Life of the Early British Brethren

The New Testament unequivocally reveals the church's oneness, both spiritually and practically, which reflects the inclusion of all believers in Christ. However the history of ecclesial practice has been mainly one of division. Modern ecumenical efforts, which primarily seek increased institutional association through mutually agreeable doctrinal pronouncements, overlook the fact that by excluding many genuine believers and often including unbelievers, the overly narrow or broad bases of Christian organizations represent the main obstacle to the practical oneness of believers. Although the British Brethren of the nineteenth century are mainly acknowledged for the far-reaching influence of their dispensationalist eschatology, this small group represents a milestone in church history principally due to their early practice of the church life, which was motivated by a desire to include all believers according to the scriptural definition of the church, and which was carried out by gathering simply in the Lord's name according to His promise in Matthew 18:20. Meeting in this way involved abandoning inherently divisive denominational names in order to receive all fellow believers in communion. In spite of the Brethren's latter history of division and exclusivity, their initial vision and application of the way to meet according to the Word of God are invaluable guideposts for Christians who seek a scriptural church life today.

The Originating Impetus—a Revelation of the Oneness of the Church

The first manifestations of the group that would come to be known as the Plymouth Brethren are characterized by a deliberate move toward practical oneness with all believers. Newly arrived in Dublin in 1826, Edward Cronin, formerly a Roman Catholic, visited various denominations but was eventually "denounced from one of their pulpits" for not seeking formal association with one (*Interesting Reminiscences* 15-16). His response encapsulates the originating principle of the Brethren: "With the strong impression...that the Church of God was one, and that all that believed were members of that one Body, I firmly refused special membership" (15-16). Cronin's stand for oneness prompted the Brethren's first meetings, which began in Dublin in 1827. According to participant John G. Bellett, these meetings were specifically for "communion in the name of the Lord with all, whosoever they might be, who

loved Him in sincerity" (6). A few brothers and sisters met in "simplicity" to break bread in remembrance of the Lord, read His Word, and seek Him in prayer (10, 14-16). Other notable attendees were Anthony Norris Groves and John Nelson Darby.

Although the first Brethren called attention to several major unscriptural practices in contemporary denominations, such as Erastianism and requirements of ordination, "special membership was the primary and most offensive condition of things to all our minds" (17-18). Their renunciation of such membership was because it cut them off from fellow believers who were not members of the same denomination. Accordingly, they met merely as believers—those who shared the basic Christian faith. In 1863 Groves recalled, "I ever understood our principle of union to be the possession of the common life...of the family of God" (Coad 288). When Groves was asked if he had become a Baptist by being baptized as an adult, he responded, "No!...I would not, by joining one party, cut myself off from others" (Rowdon 291). Robert Chapman, George Müller, and Henry Craik, whose congregations in Barnstaple and Bristol joined the Brethren movement in the early 1830s, were aligned with Groves in their views on church practice (292).

Darby recounted in a letter the circumstances and considerations that led to his joining the first Brethren meetings in Dublin. As a young Anglican priest, he began to study the Bible in depth and saw in it "the church of God...composed only of those where were [through faith] united with Christ," the oneness of all believers as members of the Body of Christ, the contrast between the "practical picture of the early church" in Acts and "its actual present state," and the prevalent "disunion of the body of Christ" in denominational Christianity (*Letters* 3: 298, 301). Like Darby, the other Brethren clearly based their vision of Christian unity on the New Testament teaching of the apostles and the pattern of the first churches.

At its core the Brethren movement began as an attempt to scripturally define the basis of inclusion in church communion. The answer these seekers found was that the church includes all genuine believers—those who hold the common Christian faith—and excludes

unbelievers. In 1827 Darby wrote that it is “common faith” that unites those whom Christ has redeemed with Him in one church (*Writings* 1: 5). Historian James Patrick Callahan notes that Groves, Müller, and Craik expressed the same inclusive vision of the church (45-47). Henry Borlase, the first editor of the Brethren quarterly *Christian Witness*, wrote in 1833 that the “terms of Church-fellowship” could be nothing other than “salvation by faith in Christ” and plainly defined the church as “a gathering together of believers upon the ground of *the common salvation*” (44).

The Brethren found no existing ecclesial structures that applied the biblical definition of the church as including all believers and believers only. In 1828 Darby charged established and dissenting denominations with sinning by their “insisting on things indifferent and hindering the union of believers” (*Writings* 1: 31). *Things indifferent* refers to all but the essential items of the common Christian faith. Chapman joined the chorus of the early Brethren leaders in rejecting the closed communion of extant denominations (Callahan 84). As historian Harold H. Rowdon neatly puts it, “Whereas the Church of England was too comprehensive for the Brethren, dissent was too restrictive” (277). Rowdon cites writings of Darby, Cronin, and Borlase to evidence the Brethren’s realization that “membership in one dissenting body necessarily involved separation from all other bodies of Christians: party names were involved and the shame of Christian disunity advertised” (276). According to Callahan, “Although Groves and Müller are usually touted as the most catholic and generous of the early Brethren, they were stringent in their rejection of the very nature of the Established churches” (77).

The Brethren were labeled as schismatic from their inception and were sensitive to this charge, responding to it defensively in numerous tracts. Even historians who seek a balanced approach to the Brethren’s separatism seem to overlook the fundamental reason the early Brethren felt constrained to separate from all denominations, which was their unscriptural stand that cut off believing non-members from fellowship. Although the Brethren did not begin as a reactionary impulse, carrying out the positive vision they saw required that they withdraw from representations of division. This did not imply separation from believers who were still involved with denominations but was in fact necessary for the receiving of all believers.

The refusal of the Brethren’s contemporaries to accept the straightforward logic of separating from divisive grounds in order to practice the church life in oneness may have eventually led Brethren writers to emphasize other problems in the denominations of their day. This growing emphasis in Brethren publications engendered a skewed historiography regarding their fundamental rea-

son for separating from existing ecclesiastic institutions. One of the few who have sought to rectify this misunderstanding, historian Peter Embley, writes, “[The] earliest Brethren...sought to demonstrate positively the truth of the unity of Christian believers rather than to witness against what they felt to be error in the churches” (Callahan 97).

The original aim of receiving in fellowship all who by faith were joined to Christ continued to underpin the Brethren movement as it grew. After Darby visited Müller and Craik’s Bristol congregations in 1832, his only concern pertained to “largeness of communion” (Rowdon 121). In 1838 William Dorman explained his recent departure from a clerical position in a denomination to join the Brethren by appealing to “the simple principles of *Christian* unity” and assessed the Brethren’s “only bond of union” to be “love to Jesus Christ” (Callahan 110-111). It was Christianity’s “divided...state” that most grieved Dorman, and he declared, “The only name by which believers in Christ ought ever to have been known in the world, is that of *Christians*,” concluding that denominational names and “causes” replace Christ (113). Dorman went so far as to call for “a visible unity of all believers in their geographic localities” (114). Darby states in an 1840 letter, “I could not recognise an assembly that does not receive all the children of God, because I know that Christ receives them” (*Letters* 1: 34).

The early Brethren shared the conviction based on Scripture that faith unites believers to Christ and causes them to become members of His Body, which is one and should not be divided in ecclesial practice. The earliest iteration of the Brethren unmistakably identifies the group first as Christian believers gathering together outside of any and all formal, organizational systems but only in the common factor of their belief in Christ and the Bible as God’s Word. It further highlights the fact that their separation from existing organizations was not seen as an end in itself but primarily as a necessary step toward oneness with all believers who desired fellowship.

The Practical Means—Gathering in the Lord’s Name

Given the Brethren’s earnest desire and intention to practice the oneness of the church by receiving all believers, it is important to see the basis they took for their meetings in order to realize this aim. They found this basis in Matthew 18:20, where the Lord said, “Where there are two or three gathered into My name, there am I in their midst.” The Brethren applied the pattern in this promise as the basic principle of their meetings and persistently trumpeted it as the primary positive course of action that believers should take in the light of God’s Word given the present state of the church.

According to early participants' distinct recollections, the first Brethren meetings in Dublin were for "communion in the name of the Lord" (*Interesting Reminiscences* 6). These meetings were based on the "truth, which really was the Oneness of the Body and the presence of the Holy Spirit, also seen by us very clearly" (16-17). The oneness of the Body was practiced in the receiving of all who shared the common faith, and the presence of the Spirit was seen as the fulfillment of the Lord's promise to be wherever two or three were gathered into His name (Darby, *Synopsis* 138).

In an 1855 letter Darby recalls how he had finally been able to appease his conscience "according to the light of the word of God" after being inwardly afflicted for some time by the great disparity between the scriptural revelation of the oneness of the church and the state of Christianity (*Letters* 3: 301). He explains, "A word in Matthew xviii. furnished the solution of my trouble: 'Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them'" (301). Again Darby recounted in 1868 the considerations and scriptural discovery that led him to join the first Brethren meetings in Dublin, writing, "When I looked around to find this unity [of the church as the Body of Christ] I found it nowhere: if I joined one set of Christians I did not belong to another...I found however that wherever two or three were met in Christ's name He would be in our midst" (1: 515).

Although these recollections are decades removed from the events they describe, a much earlier work confirms the key Scriptures that furnished the Brethren the way to meet in oneness. In what is considered to be the Brethren's first published work, entitled "Considerations on the Nature and Unity of the Church of Christ" and issued in Dublin in 1828, Darby begins by quoting the Lord's prayer in John 17:21 for His believers to be one as a witness to the unbelieving world (*Writings* 1: 20). Darby clarifies that "unity of mind" among believers cannot answer this prayer, for something invisible cannot serve as a testimony (24). He argues that the basis of fellowship ("bond of communion") for the various denominations is not the scripturally revealed union of believers but in fact "their *differences*," noting that such "bonds of nominal union" or "different grounds" actually "separate the children of God from each other" and cautioning

against "a formal union of the outward professing bodies" (22, 24). Darby laments that seeking "the interests of any particular denomination" and cutting oneself off from any fellow Christian "precludes that order to which blessing is attached—the gathering together in the Lord's name" (24-25). He expands, "No meeting, which is not framed to embrace all the children of God..., can find the fulness of blessing" (25). Darby's foremost positive recommendation for the practical church life is for "two or three" to gather in the Lord's name. Darby's 1840 "On the Formation of Churches" references the words of Matthew 18:20 in nine separate portions within five pages, including once in the heading "The Children of God have Nothing to do but to Meet Together in the Name of the Lord" (148-152).

As strikingly as Matthew 18:20 stands out in Darby's ecclesiastical publications, the frequent references to it in his epis-

tolary recollections and pastoral advice witness to the practical application of this word in early Brethren meetings and his unflinching belief in its fundamental importance for any local assembly seeking a scriptural way to meet. According to the index of *Letters of J. N. D.*, Matthew 18:20 is referenced more often in the three-volume collection spanning half a century than any other



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verse in the Bible (3: 505). Furthermore, Darby was not alone among early Brethren writers in emphasizing the fundamental importance of Matthew 18:20 for meeting in a way so as to receive all believers. Rowdon notes, "Newton and Borlase spoke in terms of the gathering of 'two or three', and held that such gatherings should be open to all sincere believers, if they were to be of value as a witness to Christian unity" (290). Thus, "gathering in the name of the Lord" can fairly be called the rallying cry and motto for the early Brethren.

What did gathering in the Lord's name mean to the Brethren in practice? Positively, it meant meeting as Christians and only as Christians in order to receive any believer in fellowship. Meeting as "two or three" gathered into the Lord's name also meant expecting and seeking His presence as the Spirit. Brethren writers were careful to shun lifeless imitation of ancient forms. Darby warns against "the pretension of imitating the primitive church" without "the power of the Holy Spirit" (*Writings* 1: 151). He emphasizes the need for the Spirit to guide and empower the believers in the present day as to the

application of the teaching and normative pattern established in the New Testament (24, 31, 151-152).

Negatively, gathering in the Lord's name implies not only forsaking denominational names but also refusing to invent a designation for the Brethren's own gatherings. Although they became known as the Brethren because others heard them referring to one another as such based on Matthew 23:8, they are famous for refusing to apply a new denominational name to their own assemblies. Callahan quotes "a reliable...[nineteenth-century] secondhand account" that says, "To set up a new Church...was not only far from their purpose, but was jealously watched against" (5). Callahan concludes, "The reluctance of the early Brethren to form merely another dissenting meeting was based upon their desire to practice the soteriological unity that belonged to the true people of God" (18). Their desire to practice this unity of all believers was realized by their refusal of any inherently divisive name and by their gathering instead in the Lord's name alone.

A Significant Shortcoming regarding Practical Oneness

Despite the Brethren's originating vision of the oneness of all believers and their application of this vision by meeting only in the name of the Lord, their history soon came to be characterized by division and narrowness. Accepting, rather than denouncing, one of the crucial principles of church practice that the Brethren saw in Scriptures may have prevented this regrettable outcome. A key passage in Darby's "On the Formation of Churches" shows that the Brethren recognized the ground of locality as the scriptural ground of oneness for the church in practice. Although they saw that the ground of locality was practiced without exception among the New Testament churches, they denied its applicability to the present. Darby writes,

This truth of the gathering together of God's children is in Scripture seen realised in various localities, and in each central locality the Christians resident therein composed but one body: Scripture is perfectly clear on that head. It has indeed been objected that such union is impossible, but no evidence is produced from God's word in support of the assertion. It is said, How could it possibly be in London or in Paris? Now the thing was practicable at Jerusalem, where there were more than five thousand believers: and even though meeting in private houses and upper rooms, Christians were nevertheless but one body, under the guidance of one Spirit, with one rule of government, and in one communion, and were so acknowledged. Thus, at Corinth, or elsewhere, a letter addressed to the church of God would have found its way to a known body...

Having fully recognised these weighty truths; namely (1)

the union of all the children of God; (2) the union of all the children of God in each locality; having, moreover, acknowledged that they are so seen in the word of God—the question might seem to be settled. But here we pause.

It is indeed undeniable that this state of things, appearing in God's word..., has ceased to exist, and the question to be solved is...: How ought the Christian to judge and act when a condition of things set before us in the word no longer exists? You will say, he is to restore it...Your answer takes for granted two things: firstly, that it is according to the will of God to re-establish the economy or dispensation on its original footing after it has failed; and secondly, that *you* are both able and authorised to restore it. (*Writings* 1: 141-142)

Darby's basis for rejecting the possibility that the divine will, power, or authority exists for the church life to be practiced on "its original footing" was his dispensationalist hermeneutic, which posits that God's people in each age inevitably and irreversibly enter into apostasy (125-129). Darby's early sense of the "ruined condition" of Christianity in light of New Testament church practice and apostolic teaching coupled with his recognition of the repeated failures of God's people in earlier dispensations prompted in him a response not of hope for recovery but of despair (149).

The Brethren's antirestorationism may also have been conditioned by their response to contemporary reform movements, such as the Oxford Movement, within "established" (national) and "dissenting" churches. Because these denominational structures remained firmly rooted on divisive grounds, the Brethren knew that no amount of internal reform could bring them into a practice of the church life in line with the scriptural definition of the church as inclusive of all believers. Nevertheless, congregations, like those served by Müller and Craik in Bristol, that dropped divisive grounds and opened to receive all believers based on the oneness of the faith were embraced by the Brethren.

According to Callahan, most Brethren agreed with Darby with regard to antirestorationism (184). In 1834 Newton and Borlase wrote that the "Church has lost her power and her unity [and] there is no remedy for the dispensation at large" (200). When Groves's longings for restoration were published in *Christian Witness*, the editor emphasized that they expressed the view of the author only (165). Newton, Borlase, Charles Hargrove, and other Brethren writers concurred with Darby in denigrating any attempt to take the position of a church, primarily because of their contention that a dispensation that has entered a state of apostasy cannot be restored (197).

Although historians note the Brethren's unwillingness to

take a denominational name, they generally fail to recognize antirestorationism as the basis for the Brethren's refusal to use the term *church*, even generically, to refer to themselves. The Brethren's antirestorationism with its basis in strict dispensationalism is significant because it prevented them from applying the scriptural ground of oneness to local church practice, despite their acknowledgement that there is only one church in any locality in the New Testament records and that such a pattern is normative.

After confirming that "universal restoration" was impossible, founding Brethren member George Wigram wrote that "partial renewals" should be hoped for and expected, and Darby similarly spoke of "partial revivals" initiated by God for the sake of "His testimony" (200-201). Nevertheless, they insisted that no group of believers could claim to be the church in their locality. Darby's understanding of the practical oneness of the New Testament church in each locality caused him to not only recommend the receiving of all believers but also to condemn the presumptuousness of appropriating the title *church* by any local group that did not include every Christian within the borders of its locality (*Writings* 1: 142). He felt that such comprehensive inclusion was impossible given the present state of the church. Moreover, he argued that a group calling itself the church in its locality automatically implied that any believer not in its meetings "was no member of Christ's church at all" (143).

Darby and the other Brethren overlooked the possibility that a group of believers can meet as the church in their locality not only to stand on the scriptural ground of the church but also by so doing to declare their openness to receive every believer based on no other factor than the common faith. This oversight on the part of the Brethren is all the more surprising given the prominent 1838 article in *Christian Witness* that drew a positive analogy between the position of the believers seeking to obey God's will in the present time and the remnant of the children of Israel under Nehemiah's leadership (Callahan 195). That small group in the Old Testament was not acting presumptively or disavowing their scattered compatriots by returning to the ground of God's choosing and rebuilding His house there or by faithfully appropriating original designations such as *Israel*, *Jerusalem*, and *the temple*. Separation is indeed necessary to leave improper grounds, but exclusion is not inherently implied by standing on the proper ground as the church in a locality, nor is pride necessarily the source of faithfully applying scriptural designations.

The Brethren were overly cautious in their view that using the term *church* to describe a group of believers (as well as other New Testament terms, such as *elder* and *apostle*) was sinfully presumptive. Even though gathering in the Lord's name with the aim of receiving all believers

was a major milestone of recovery, the Brethren were blind to further steps toward practicing the church life in oneness. Thus, they opened a door to division, which soon had disastrous and well-known consequences for their own assemblies.

Conclusion

Although the British Brethren of the nineteenth century may be best known as the source of dispensationalism, the group's truly identifying characteristic and significant contribution are their early vision and practice of the believers' oneness. It was their desire to be practically one with every fellow Christian who desired fellowship as members of Christ's Body that led to their meeting in simplicity outside of existing, divisive ecclesiastic organizations. The Brethren's originating impetus to receive all believers by gathering in the name of the Lord alone was unquestionably based on their desire to apply rediscovered New Testament truths. Their unprecedented return to the Bible as the sole legitimate and necessary source of truth for the church opened the way for further recovery. Other major items recovered from the Word by the Brethren include the priesthood of all believers, which stands in opposition to the clergy-laity system, and an accurate understanding of many biblical types and prophecies. In spite of the Brethren's failure to follow the scriptural ground of the local church, their formative vision and pursuit of the practical oneness of the church by meeting in the name of the Lord alone in order to receive all Christ's members signify a crucial milestone in the recovery of church practices.

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