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WHY I JOINED THE BRETHREN

(1) H. L. Ellison

Or did I? In 1936 I was working in the mission field as an ordained clergyman of the Church of England. The compulsion of an inner voice, which to this day I am convinced was Christ's, caused me to receive 'believer's baptism'. My bishop refused to recognize that I had any standing in the Church of England either as clergyman or layman. He indubitably exceeded his authority, and had I returned to England I should doubtless have found a bishop ready to ignore my action. My staying on in the field made acquiescence in his action inevitable. The nature of my work made it possible for me to adopt a completely independent position having fellowship with all Protestants in the area including Anglicans.

I came home in 1939 and by the spring of 1940 discovered that there was no hope of going out again. I could have made my peace with the Church of England, but I already felt that 'Too much water has flowed under the bridges', to use a phrase I employed about 1956 when one of the evangelical bishops asked me to let bygones be bygones and to come back. This meant that I had to find regular Church fellowship.

From my conversion till now, and I trust to my dying day, I have been able to enjoy Christian fellowship wherever Christ is truly preached and served; I have preached gladly wherever liberty has been given me to proclaim the truth as I have come to understand it. But denominationalism, i.e. the restricting of fellowship to less than the totality of true believers and the stretching out of one's hands to others who share in these limitations and not to those who do not, has been from the earliest days of my spiritual life an abomination. I was able to be ordained in the Church of England just because it professed to be the Church of all believers in England—that it has in recent years virtually abandoned that position is another matter.

The local churches round me gloried in belonging to denominations. There were only two possibilities open to me. There was a small independent church, where I should have been like a whale in a goldfish bowl, a position that held no attractions for me. There remained the assembly.

It would be easy to draw up a list of its faults and that would be poor gratitude for over twenty-five years of fellowship. Let me rather say that, in spite of tradition, they recognized that their only binding authority was the Bible as interpreted by spiritual men. In spite of varying views they cordially welcomed all whose lives showed the fruit of the Spirit. Whatever this one or that one might do himself, they recognized the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit in guiding those in fellowship along varying paths. I did not join them, they received and welcomed me.

To those that can see only the spots and not the glory which reveals the spots I would say, 'Where else could I have found these things?' It is not in Brethren Principles that I am primarily interested; they can co-exist with a dead orthodoxy, which is a thousand times worse than a dead heterodoxy. I am concerned with the spiritual life that can use these principles to the glory of God and the building up of His Church.

(2) P. D. Warren

I joined 'the Brethren' when I was in my late teens, largely as a result of the influence of one who was in the assemblies, and who under God was the last link in the chain that led to my entering into assurance. I had been brought up in the Church of England, and had been baptised and confirmed. I was also considering going into the ministry, so the step was a far-reaching one for me.

The matters which convinced me that it was a right step for me to take were firstly negative and secondly positive. I felt that the Church of England through its baptismal teaching in the Prayer Book and as given in its churches clouded the issue as to the way of salvation, and however the baptismal service could be explained by Evangelicals a great deal of misconception had and would flow from the words of the service themselves and from the teaching that was normally given.

Also I felt that a state Church to which all who went through the ceremonies belonged, without any proper enquiry as to spiritual experience, (I recognised that there were exceptions) was far too mixed a multitude to purport to represent the gathered Church as conceived in the New Testament, and that although I recognised that mistakes could occur, profession of faith was the only safe entrance requirement, with baptism as its outward and visible sign.

The positive points in favour of the Brethren's claim for my allegiance were first their emphasis on the priesthood of all believers and practical expression of it in the freedom given at the 'open' worship meeting. I valued the centrality of the Lord's Supper which I had found in High Church circles, but missed in Evangelical Churches (established and free). I felt also that the Brethren gave full opportunity for the exercise of spiritual gifts, which were found in differing measure in all believers. I had noticed that some ministers were good preachers but no good at visiting, and others were good visitors but no good preachers. But under the system each had to do both, while gifted laymen were not given any encouragement or opportunity. Among the Brethren, however, the gifted Bible Teacher had full scope, even though he had not had a University education. (In those days, educational barriers were more formidable than today.)

Lastly, I was impressed by the Brethren concept of the oneness of all believers, and their practice of receiving to the Lord's Table all true believers without regard to denominational affiliation.

I was duly baptised and received into fellowship (actually in reverse order, because of parental unhappiness about my being baptised), and have now been among Brethren some 30 years. Of course I soon discovered that all is not gold that glitters. Unhappily quarrels soon appeared among the elders of my assembly, and I realised in more than one situation the perils of a false literalism. Judgments were issued in the name of Scripture, which persons outside the assembly felt were scarcely Christian.

Furthermore I found that in spite of their acceptance of the oneness of all believers, they would not invite a local Evangelical Anglican church to join them officially for a Gospel campaign in the local Cinema, for that would involve fellowship with the 'God dishonouring sects' (a phrase often used by one of the elders), though the believers from that church were welcome as individuals. I also discovered that in other assemblies open reception was not practised. In fact mine seemed then (the late 1930's) to be in the minority.

I felt confident however that as every assembly professed to regulate its affairs by the New Testament and believed in the regular study and exposition of the Word of God, these were aberrations from New Testament teaching that, if realised, would be put right. Experience has shown that I was rather optimistic about this, but in any case the other denominations had similar restrictive practices.

On the other hand, I became the more impressed with the value and spiritual blessing that flowed from our open worship service and the centrality of the Lord's Supper, and with the value for the development of gift of our rejection of a clergy/laity distinction.

I have also come to see more and more the value of the independent church principle, first as a safeguard against disunity, which has wrecked many denominations and formally linked fellowships of churches even in recent history, and secondly as a basis from which relationships of fellowship may be made with other congregations without involving other 'assemblies'.

Lastly, I have come to realise that no church or identifiable group of churches is perfect, that the choice of one's own local church is the vital matter for oneself and one's family, and that having made that choice, one gets out of it in proportion to what one puts in.

Accordingly, in spite of imperfections, I am happy to remain in my own local assembly (not the one referred to above!), and to seek to serve the Lord there and in the wider sphere as the Lord enables, but with a special sense of the privilege and responsibility of serving among the assemblies, which, if guided aright on principles which make them open to receive any fresh light that the Holy Spirit may give from the Word of God and to receive all true believers in His name, seem likely to have a tremendous lot to offer the Church Universal in the future.