

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for the *Christian Brethren Research Fellowship Journal* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_cbrfj.php

COMMENTS

(1) Prof. J. W. Fairbairn

Some of the criticisms centre round Ministry and Church order, and raise the question whether the New Testament gives any detailed pattern at all for these important activities. It is clear that the local churches gathered together for various purposes: such as the Breaking of Bread, prayer, one-man (or two-man) ministry meeting (Acts 11: 23-26), missionary meeting (Acts 14: 27), Bible reading (Col. 4: 16), disciplinary meeting (I Cor. 5: 4-5) for speaking in tongues and for 'open' meetings (I Cor. 14). No details for the conduct of these meetings is given, *except for the latter two*, and this fact in itself ought to make us take I Cor. 14 and associated chapters seriously. The instructions given cannot be brushed off because they refer to a local or temporary situation, because the Epistle itself is unique among Paul's writings in being addressed to 'all who in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord'. Furthermore, the instructions themselves are specifically stated to be the commandments of the Lord (I Cor. 14: 37), so that is it not possible that they give us the pattern for the normal gatherings of the Church? And do we know any denomination which seriously attempts to put them into practice, apart from the Brethren and the Pentecostal Churches? (It seems clear that public speaking in tongues is a sign of immaturity and edification by prophecy is much to be preferred, but we ought to remember the Lord's commandment, 'Covet to prophesy but *forbid not* to speak in tongues'). This willingness to go all the way with New Testament teaching on church order and ministry is a strong feature of the Brethren movement, and ought to be maintained not only because God requires faithfulness to His Word, but because it works. It may be inappropriate to speak of the 'efficiency' of ecclesiastical systems, but it would be interesting to relate the amount of human effort expressed as money spent per 100 church members on such things as buildings, colleges, salaries and administration, with the spiritual results. I think that any hundred members of the assemblies would compare favourably with an equal random group from other denominations with regard to general Bible knowledge, sense of Christian responsibility, devotion to the Lord and support of evangelism at home and overseas. And all this is achieved without an expensive apparatus of human organisation. God's methods do work best in the long run. There have been numerous instances of failure; the initial enthusiasm may long have run out, but the remedy is surely to pray that God will revive *us*, rather than attempt to change the pattern.

Nevertheless, the attitude that we have arrived at, that no outsider can instruct us on these matters, is greatly to be deplored. Almost half of those who wrote last time left us because of a remarkable blind-spot in the Brethren view of the ministry, namely the fruitful possibilities of a local full-time pastorate. I have much sympathy with this idea, but it can only hope to win a hearing if it can be shown to be Biblical. Maybe the C.B.R.F. could help by studying and expounding this theme. It is clearly stated in

I Tim. 5: 17 that the elders that laboured (locally) in word and doctrine were to receive a double stipend (NEB), and surely this implies full-time (or part-time, but paid) pastors in the local Church.

The difficulties about women's ministry and headgear arise largely because the Brethren take the N.T. instructions seriously. Although it is an unpalatable fact in this century of sex equality, the N.T. clearly requires a difference between the sexes to be observed in Church order and ministry. This difference is based on such fundamental aspects of the divine economy as creation (I Cor. 11: 2-14; I Tim. 2: 13-14), the Law, the Word of God, and the Commandments of the Lord (I Cor. 14: 34-37). We should certainly welcome help from all sources on this problem, but our instructors will have to produce more weighty arguments than references to women chattering in Jewish synagogues or prostitutes in Corinth going about unveiled. I personally would welcome sober advice, for if my four daughters develop like those of Philip the Evangelist I wonder how the assemblies would take it!

As the problem of our Gospel meetings was also raised by some, it should also be noted that a 'Gospel meeting' is not included in the list of N.T. church activities. The Good News was spread either by mass evangelism with specially gifted speakers, or by lay evangelism in which every church member presumably participated (Acts 2 and 8: 4: see also I Thess. 1: 5 and 8, in conjunction with Acts 17: 2-4). An increase in weekday activities which would involve us all in going 'everywhere' with the gospel could allow us to concentrate on regular Bible exposition on Sunday evenings. Although this would be primarily for the edification of the saints, it need not lack evangelistic fruit; the only references I know to unbelievers coming to Church in the N.T. is when they come to a meeting for edification . . . and *there* they are saved! (I Cor. 14: 24-25.)

A final point arises from the contributions of Mr. Cochran and Miss Morris, who draw attention to some all too familiar weaknesses especially in the worship meetings. They imply that the pattern is faulty, but I suggest that, in these very instances, the pattern is right if for no other reason than that it acts as a sensitive barometer reflecting the low spiritual state of the church. To advocate a formal system which would mask this spiritual weakness hardly seems consistent with the genius of Christianity, whose emphasis is on truth in the inward parts, and which so vigorously warns against anything merely outward. One answer to our problems would be to pray earnestly that we may live what we know, and be that which we say we are.

(2) Kingsley G. Rendell

Revival or retreat?

In recent years an increasing number of brethren employed in full time itinerant ministry among the assemblies, have left to undertake pastoral ministry in churches, whose form of church government is congregational. It is quite possible that this drift from the assemblies will continue. Indeed, it is probable that it will gain momentum, especially

since an increasing number of our young men are likely to undertake theological studies in the rapidly growing number of Bible Colleges in the country.

To a young man, on the threshold of life, with a zeal for God, full time ministry in a settled pastorate seems particularly attractive. Those of us, who have undertaken such work in favourable circumstances, have indeed found it most rewarding. There is undoubtedly great satisfaction in exercising a systematic ministry of the Word, witnessing souls saved and edified in the faith. By contrast, the lot of a Brethren evangelist or Bible teacher is apparently most unenviable. He has to live out of his suitcase. He is constantly on the move. While he may have the joy of seeing decisions for Christ recorded, he does not have the opportunity of following up his evangelistic work. When he leaves the sphere of his evangelism, he may have grave doubts as to whether his converts will be followed up by the assembly responsible. It is relatively easy for the bachelor to exercise an itinerant ministry, but the family man is often harassed by the thought that he is neglecting his wife and family—God given responsibilities.

Some of our brethren maintain that there is need for some form of settled ministry in the assemblies. They argue, that there is no difference of principle in inviting a brother to minister to the assembly for three weeks, or three years. The time factor is quite irrelevant to principle. Those who are of this opinion assure us that there need be no danger of clericalism, nor indeed need the assembly leave the ministering brother to shoulder all the tasks of the assembly, exercising a one man ministry. These brethren certainly have history on their side, since many of the early assemblies, such as those at Plymouth and Bristol, had recognised pastors and ministers of the Word. In the heyday of exclusivism there was drift to the 'any man ministry'. Now, in our rejection of this unhappy state of affairs, the idea of some form of settled ministry might be reconsidered. It might be argued that many of our assemblies are so small, they could not support a brother engaged in full time work, but it must be remembered that many a brother who has submitted himself to Biblical study, either at home or in some Bible college, would most willingly like Paul pursue his 'tent making', providing that his gift of ministry were recognised by the assembly. Alternatively, a number of assemblies might covenant to support a brother engaged in full time work for the Lord in the locality. This is the case in a number of districts, with most pleasing results.

What of the brother who seeks to serve the Lord elsewhere? Alas, he may not fare so well. Undoubtedly, if he is an able and gifted brother he will not find any great difficulty in receiving a call from a church. However, once he is inducted and ordained, he may find that in the denominational fraternal, he has to live under the shadow of being a 'back door man', that is, one who has not come into the ministry through the recognised denominational channels. If he is a sensitive soul, he may find that this breeds in him an embarrassing sense of inferiority. If he has been fortunate to receive a call from one of 'the plums' of the denomina-

tion he may well incur the jealousy of older and more experienced, but less gifted men, who have been forced to toil faithfully in the smaller churches, dependent upon denominational aid, and only able to offer the minimum stipend.

It is only the 'back doors' of those churches with a congregational form of government, which are open to those brethren seeking a full time ministry in the churches. Those denominations with a more centralised form of church government, exercise greater control over entrance into the ministry. They demand, and it seems quite logically so, training in a denominational seminary before a man can be accepted and ordained to the ministry of the church.

Not a few, who have left the assemblies for the ministry of a church whose ecclesiastical pattern is independency, and whose government is congregational, have been disillusioned. They discover that far from being a servant of the Word, they are the servant of the local church. Some have found it is by no means a happy experience having to submit to the dictation of an unspiritual and unprogressive deacons' court. Others have found their spiritual energies diverted into the raising of money for church funds, mainly in order that their monthly stipend might be forthcoming. Those of us who are able to stand back and view the movement of ministers impartially, see a steady stream of men leaving the free churches for the establishment, both in England and Scotland, while their ranks are filled by aspirants from mission halls and brethren assemblies.

Undoubtedly many of our full time evangelists and ministering brethren have much of which to complain within our assemblies. There is often as much lack of vision as in the churches, but we hold a charismatic view of church fellowship, and an allegiance to the Word which is the envy of our brethren in those denominations which have most in common with us. It is so tragically easy, Esau like, to sell our birthright for a mess of pottage. Those of us who have been nurtured in Brethren circles owe our forefathers a debt we shall never be able to repay.

In view of the modern mania for ecumenicity, who knows, but what within a generation the whole denominational landscape will be radically altered. From every Protestant denomination there may well be evangelical remnants eager for united fellowship according to the principles of the New Testament. A revived and progressive Brethren movement could be used by God as a centre of fellowship for all evangelicals.

It is a well known fact of ecclesiastical history that, within a century movements raised up by God for some specific purpose to emphasise some neglected truth, lose their spiritual force and become formal. Organism degenerates into organisation. Is the Brethren movement fossilising? If so, then we must raise our heads from the sand and face the fact. We must campaign for its rebirth, and pray that it might again be used by God. It is surely better to reform than retreat.

(3) Herbert E. Pope

The town with no assembly

What happens when a Christian's work takes him to a town where there is no Assembly? The majority of contributors to CBRFJ viii who 'left the Brethren' would presumably have no problem; they would see the occasion as a happy release and move to the house next door (where we trust they would not be too pained to find that Bp. Ryle's phrase cuts both ways). This contribution is offered to plead for more patient and persevering prayer about these weaknesses in our practice—the Lord is so good at removing mountains, we have found,—and, without reiterating principles already well expressed, to commend two virtues that have come into sharper focus since our own small company made a fresh start and began to break bread together seven years ago.

The first of these is the flexibility possible when believers start from the simple practice of Acts 2:42. No law here that requires your own hall, with perhaps its burdensome mortgage; no veto on an instrument to help the small company make true melody in praising God; no restriction to one or two old and over familiar hymn books; no hour of the day prescribed; no rule about whether the breaking of bread should precede or follow or divide periods of ministry, or whether that ministry shall be prearranged or unpremeditated; no requirements that unbelievers shall be invited under your roof at a certain hour once a week or that the Gospel shall be preached to them even if they are not there. Starting from scratch permits an emancipation from dead tradition, and,—an important and enriching experience this,—enables us to give a lead to united activities among true believers in all denominations. If we are freed from mechanical routine, no one is better placed than we are to encourage united prayer and witness as a demonstration of the oneness of all believers and a denial of sectarianism, two tenets of our belief which have so often been theoretical rather than practical.

The second point that stands out, especially at the stage of small beginnings, is the spiritual stimulus of an open gathering. It seems undeniable that the vitality of a company of Christians is the sum total of what they each contribute rather than the dynamism of a single leader: to us this *responsibility to give* generates a greater spiritual appetite and eventually a greater spiritual output than the *opportunity to get* afforded in churches where the existence of a responsible leader, paid or not, may encourage indolence and lack of responsibility.

One further point. No optimum or minimum size is prescribed for the local church, and I wonder why it should be assumed that the best witness is a large and apparently flourishing company. The blessing that accrued for example in Barcelona during the Civil War, when believers were forced to meet from house to house, could remind us it was not God's purpose that the salt of the earth should be collected in ever bigger and better salt-cellars, and that perhaps the earliest pattern in the Acts was the best. Why not then a number of small cells for worship and witness, with of course occasional united gatherings for fellowship, teaching, and no

doubt thanksgiving? May I suggest that there is a better way of 'leaving the Brethren' than swelling the numbers of other and more prosperous churches: it is to pray into existence a fellowship of like-minded believers (this took four years in our case), and humbly seek God's grace to practise the principles of Scripture and avoid the mistakes we think we see in the practice of others.

(4) Robert Boyd

Do criticisms cut both ways?

Several of the writers seem to fall into the error of assessing their old and new homes by different measuring sticks. They generalise when they write of the assemblies they have left, but when admiring some excellent virtues in the new church, they seem to forget that this church may have a sister only a few streets away which follows a pattern and doctrine very different from its evangelical relative.

I wonder if it is not the case that all the complaints made by the letter writers are being made simultaneously by old members of the denominations to which they have gone. Many of them are expressed to me. I hear of a kirk session where every evangelical elder is balanced by the appointment of an unconverted one with Masonic backing in the struggle for power. I hear of 'legalism', 'rigidity of outlook', 'male dominance', etc., etc., in many places. I have, however, heard young members complain of boredom because their minister followed a series of consecutive studies. One teen-ager was heard saying 'Oh boy!' when she learned that the minister's studies were to be interrupted by the visit of one of the Brethren who indulged in an itinerant ministry!

It would be interesting to know the feelings of the writers about unconverted members and office-bearers. One church known to me where the membership is strict relaxes things for its office-bearers. The treasurer is not a member, whilst the precentor, or leader of praise, was for some time another non-member whose Saturday drunkenness was well-known. They had an excellent evangelical minister, but the use of such non-members was excused on the grounds of fewness of numbers.

Having said all this, I must remark that I am pleased to have read the eleven articles, and trust that many of us who remain will redouble our efforts to contribute better to the improvement of our assembly's testimony. It is so much easier to grumble about the squeaky door than to take the trouble to find and use an oil-can on the hinges.

(5) G. F. Fowler

On the importance of prayer

It is evident from the criticisms voiced in this series that we are apt to forget one of the basic principles on which we gather; that the Lord Jesus Himself is the Head of the Church, both universal and local.

It is seen from the New Testament that the Lord hands down His authority to the elders in each local gathering of believers. It is inconceiv-

able to me that if we fully recognize the Lord's authority in the life of the assembly there would be anything in its affairs that should merit criticism. The breakdown occurs when the elders ignore the Lord's authority, and rule in their own.

When we see that the Lord's authority is being abused, surely it is our duty to bring the matter to His notice in prayer, asking that this intolerable position be brought to an end, that the reproach be removed, and that the Lord's authority be re-established. He is waiting for someone to lay hold on Him in prayer to intervene. Without this He may leave the assembly to itself to drift gradually away, but with the prevailing prayer of one believing soul He will surely come to the rescue; and nothing can stay His hand! The results may not be swift, but they will be sure, and possibly terrible. He always acts in mercy, but where mercy is scorned judgment will swiftly follow. He will plead with the oversight to mend their ways. Those who resist, He will remove, by circumstance, sickness or death. Those who are willing to yield and learn, He will nourish up to full spiritual strength and vitality, bringing blessing and freedom to the whole assembly.

Surely the Lord will not let us down! or leave us to a choice between two evils! or force us to give up scriptural principles just because our fellow believers let us down! We should not keep our eyes on our stumbling brethren and run away, but fix our eyes on Him, and He will surely lead us forward.

(6) H. Lowman

On false doctrine

None of the leavers tell us how they have succeeded in 'blinking' the *very serious* false doctrine and thoroughly unscriptural practices which exist in the communities to which they have gone (I think of the 'Established Church'—the 'great tree' in which any clerical bird up to Archbishop or layman may roost, whether modernist, spiritist or person with no beliefs at all as to the Deity, the Holy Scriptures, the Cross, etc. How do the leavers reconcile themselves to the everlasting 'vain repetition' from the prayer book, altars, vestments, and so on?)

Is our attitude to these things, or our being linked in the same communion to be of very trifling consequence? Are a careful observance of Scriptural appointments whether as to doctrine, or, say, as to the observance of the Lord's Supper in *simplicity* (not as a Mass), baptism by immersion, and other things merely immaterial, provided we are with nice people, whose beliefs are not too hard and fast, and who, if it comes to it, are willing to be as wide as the world on any doctrine or practice?

(7) J. S. Short

A reply to the preceding comment

It is not difficult for anyone with his eyes open to observe, as the contemporary condition of the Established Church is surveyed, that there is more to repel than to encourage. It is lamentably true that false doctrines

are abroad and unscriptural practices are openly tolerated. But it would be incorrect for the observer to conclude that those who, like myself, have joined the ranks of that Church have done so only at the expense of the truth.

In order to appreciate how those with an ‘assemblies up-bringing’ are able, in all good conscience, to become full members of the Church of England, it is important to recognise what the doctrinal position of that Church really is. It is not a free-for-all for those ‘whose beliefs are not too hard and fast’. Neither does the doctrinal position of the C. of E. consist of the sum of opinions held by the most voluble members of its clergy. The doctrinal limits of the Church have been formulated clearly and written down in the *Thirty-nine Articles of Religion*, which are to be found at the back of any copy of the Prayer Book.

These Articles are statements of Biblical, evangelical doctrine, as Article 6 emphasises:—

‘Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation’.

Concerning principles of church practice, Article 20 declares that although ‘the Church hath power to decree Rites or Ceremonies . . . , it is not lawful for the Church to ordain anything that is contrary to God’s Word written’. Thus, for the Church of England, Scripture is the only authority in matters of faith and practice.

In order to substantiate this specifically, one or two examples may be cited. Masses (to which Mr. Lowman refers) are firmly rejected as ‘blasphemous fables and dangerous deceits’ (Art. 31), whilst Purgatory is rejected simply because it is ‘grounded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather (is) repugnant to the Word of God’ (Art. 22). Salvation hinges on the fact that ‘we are accounted righteous before God, only for the merit of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ by Faith, and not for our own works or deservings’. (Art. 11); and this has been made possible by the death of Christ alone (Art. 31). I have found the theology of the Articles throughout to be good, Biblical, evangelical.

In common with your correspondent, the C. of E. believes in baptism by immersion (‘dip him in the water’), but it does not insist upon it (‘or pour water upon him’: quoted from the rubrics to the baptism service). Many weighty works have been written on this subject and I can do no more here than to observe that, since down the ages equally godly men, whose reverence for the Lord and His Word are beyond question, have come to opposite conclusions on this matter (and on that of infant baptism), we do well to be cautious before emphatically insisting that only one interpretation is correct. Some difficulties are inevitable, since Scripture (much to our annoyance, perhaps!) does not explicitly state that the baptizand must be immersed completely.

My own position concerning baptism generally is that, whilst maintaining my belief in ‘believer’s baptism’, I also accept that there is a sound

Scriptural case for the baptism of the children of believing parents. The validity of this case, as I understand it, depends on maintaining that the relationship of children to God under the Old Covenant has a direct parallel under the New—an interpretation which commends itself to me as a reasonable one, but one which in no way absolves the grown child from exercising faith in Christ in order to be saved!

With regard to the use of set forms of worship, as in the Book of Common Prayer, it is, perhaps, necessary to point out that no detailed pattern of worship, as regards outward form, is detailed in Scripture; what is insisted upon is that everything must be done in an orderly fashion, with the edification of the church mainly in view. (I Cor. 14.) The people of Israel used set forms in their worship (e.g. the Psalms), just as much as all modern-day users of hymn books do. I personally am equally happy, in principle, with liturgical and non-liturgical worship; neither can justly claim more scriptural support than the other. For worship is to be 'in spirit and in truth'; it is with the content and quality that the Lord is concerned, not the mere outward form.

There is, I freely admit, plenty of scope in the use of the Prayer Book for what your correspondent describes as 'vain repetition', but the mere use of written forms by no means reduces the level of worship from what it would otherwise be. Indeed, it frequently enriches it. And yet truthfulness compels me to recall that I have probably experienced as much repetition in Brethren services as in Prayer Book ones, although I would not dare to write off this 'extempore repetition' as vain. What concerns me in the manner of worship is not the form itself so much as the Scripturalness of what the form contains; and it would be difficult to find a more Scriptural emphasis than is to be found in the Book of Common Prayer. Similarly the normal Brethren forms are Scriptural too.

Your correspondent will now want to ask (if he is still reading) for a big explanation. He will want to know how I reconcile the doctrine of the Church of England's formularies with the spiritual condition of the vast majority of its members. The painful answer, which is all too clear to see, is that the C. of E. at large (but by no means in its entirety) has departed from the doctrines which its ministers have pledged themselves (many of them falsely) to preach. Nevertheless, the 39 Articles remain as the standard of doctrine for the Established Church. The ship, it has been said, is sound enough, but the crew have mutinied. But I praise God that there are many exceptions to this, who remain true to the Lord and to His Word.

What is one to do with such a Church? The alternatives are clear. One is either to give this 'great tree' a thoroughly cold shoulder and leave it to rot on the spiritual slagheap of our national decline, thus enabling oneself to worship in peace and quiet somewhere else; or one is going to strive, for the sake of the nation, the church and the populace of this land to restore the message of the Articles (which is the message of the Bible) to the pulpits which at present are under the control of the powers of darkness. A third alternative is, perhaps, to strive for the latter end without becoming personally involved in the National Church, but I

regard this as impossible, or at least unlikely to be effective.

I trust that what I have written will at least clear the leavers of the stigma of having entered the Church of England with parts of their doctrinal vision intentionally blurred in order to salve uneasy consciences. I testify to a good conscience toward God and toward man. And while the Established Church remains in any state of corruption and darkness it is my prayer that the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Mt. 5: 13, 14) will be on the spot to purify and to lead it back into the paths of the Lord. At the same time, I readily appreciate that many believers, such as your correspondent, could not under any circumstances bring themselves either to depart from the Brethren or to join the C. of E. Such convictions I warmly respect. May we all spend our days in mutual love, the one for the other, bearing out the truth of the old but valuable dictum which enjoins 'in essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity'.

The First C.B.R.F. Competition

Two prizes, consisting of book tokens to the value of £10 10s. 0d. each, are offered for the best papers on each of the following topics. Contributions should be typed, double spaced, on one side only of quarto sized paper, and should be submitted not later than 30th June, 1966 to the editor of the *CBRF Journal*, 29 Crossways, Sutton, Surrey. (An extension of time will be granted to overseas members, provided they notify the editor by air mail of their intention to submit a paper, before 15th March, 1966.) Members may submit papers on either or both topics.

Suitable papers will be published in the *CBRF Journal*, whether prize-winners or not, at the discretion of the council of the Fellowship.

Dr. Stephen Short and Mr. G. C. D. Howley have agreed to act as judges of the competition:

SUBJECTS:—

1. **THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD.** Being a critique or discussion of the paper by Dr. Stephen S. Short published as *CBRF Occasional Paper No. 1*. Aspects which may be dealt with (although competitors have complete freedom in this respect) are:—
 - (a) The practice and principles of different denominations in relation to the matters dealt with in the paper.
 - (b) Further exegesis of the relevant scriptures, in the light of doctrinal and practical developments within the New Testament.
2. **BRETHREN PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES.** Being an analysis of the contributions to *CBRF Journal* issues 8 and 10, bringing out and discussing:—
 - (a) The main concerns over practical church matters which are expressed in the contributions.
 - (b) The differing ideas on church doctrine which lie behind the contributions.
 - (c) Such other points as the competitor feels may usefully advance objective discussion and study.