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RESPONSES TO PAPER BY DONALD TINDER

SOME INADEQUACIES OF PRESENT-DAY BRETHREN

My reaction to Donald Tinder's paper is that he has written an excellent article on the historical background of the Brethren movement. We all need to have our memories refreshed on the unique contribution that the Brethren have made to the life of the Church in the last one hundred and fifty years. As we all know, many of these ideas and concepts have become part of the world wide Church, thereby promoting the vigor of the fellowship of Christ's Body.

My own Brethren experience, unfortunately, has not led me to conclude that the current Brethren movement is any great champion of Christian unity, or one of great vigor. The Brethren, from my own personal experience, can be about as sectarian as ever the Christian faith produced. And this fact has certainly limited its vitality of late.

I have found that some belief in Tinder's "four principles" and interest in Christian unity are found in almost all Christian groups. Openness to these ideas seems not to come because of the group to which one belongs, but from an in-depth reading of the Scriptures and a sense of the forgiveness of sin.

My own concern for the Brethren movement is that they start to read the Bible again. The general ignorance of Biblical theology and content is appalling to say the least. C. I. Scofield has had a tremendous impact on the movement, so that all revert to his notes immediately if there is a question. This has negated fresh inductive study of the Bible, since Scofield "answered" most questions.

This lack of Bible study is leading to the powerlessness of many assemblies. Our Lord's description of the Sadducees in Matt. 22.30, that they "knew neither the Scriptures or the power of God", is chillingly close to being accurate of many Assemblies today.

I agree that we need to be reminded of Tinder's four principles. But unless the Bible is the foundation for life and service, these four principles will never breathe life into what once was a most vital part of God's church.

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A MISSIONARY POINT OF VIEW

Most discussions of the distinctives of "the Brethren" become mired in confusion over which are primary and which are secondary characteristics. Donald Tinder skilfully avoids that by putting the movement into its historical setting and distilling four basic emphases present throughout the growth of the "Open Brethren", while noting the presence of many contradictory trends and ideas.

From a missionary point of view, it is essential to decide how much force to give to the various basic and secondary emphases of the movement. Away from the restraining influence of the homeland, one has the opportunity to correct false and contradictory emphases, or to repeat or intensify them.

Colombians often ask, "Who is your *jefe* (leader)?" When I reply that our *jefe* is Jesus Christ, they say, "Yes, but there has to be someone on earth who is the head of your group to tell you what to do". The idea that there is no hierarchy at all leaves them open-mouthed.

It is the absence of an effective hierarchy that enables the "Open Brethren" to follow the inclusive principal of unity with diversity, rather than the divisive principle of unity by conformity. There is no one in a position to enforce conformity or division throughout the movement. Anyone who insists upon rigorous conformity only isolates himself.

The absence of an over-arching hierarchy has two advantages which serve as checks upon each other. On the one hand, it assures the possibility of constant revitalization, because it permits unlimited attempts at innovation. Whenever there is a felt need, the effort often spent trying to convince a ruling clique to make or permit an innovation can be utilized in attempting the solution itself. On the other hand, the innovation must be successful and acceptable to a significant number of people in order to become a part of the general movement. This is a conservative principle that guards against ideas of a ruling few being forced upon all, as often happens in highly organized denominations. The freedom to innovate, the need to prove the value of the innovation by results, and the inability to impose theories from a distance are very helpful for the work of missions, because principles must be applied in widely varying cultures and local situations.

The four principles which Dr. Tinder enumerates as characteristic of the "Open Brethren" have distinct advantages for missions. The elimination of distinction between clergy and laity amounts to an authorization of all "laymen" to perform the functions usually limited to clergymen. A recent book, *Laitly Mobilized* by Neil Braun (Eerdmans, 1971), documents the necessity and urgency for such authorization of laymen for the Church to successfully obey the great commission in the world today. This distinctive guarantees a full church life to every group of believers from the beginning regardless of the availability or non-availability of specially trained or authorized persons.

The weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper in a simple way provides a focus of unity for new groups and centers their attention on the basics

of the Gospel. It also provides the minimum structure needed for a meeting without requiring the presence of anyone skilled in preaching or directing a meeting. Songs, simple prayers, testimonies, Bible reading with simple observations, and the focusing of attention on Christ by the presence of the bread and wine provide ample material for edifying meetings without the presence of missionaries or national workers. This is very important as the evangelical church is growing with phenomenal rapidity in many parts of the world.

The willingness to co-operate with other members of the body of Christ to the degree possible is also helpful, especially in areas where the Church is still a very small percentage of the population. It is often where the evangelicals are still a minority that they are seeing a high rate of church growth which strains their resources. Such a situation calls for co-operation.

Finally, the freedom from ecclesiastical tradition can be especially beneficial in the mission situation. Where this principle is given appropriate emphasis, it allows young churches to develop in the way most appropriate to their culture. Thus, the "foreign atmosphere" wears off more quickly and the style of worship and decision-making becomes more national—more Colombian, more Japanese, etc. This fourth principle is perhaps the least observed on the mission field. To have its full beneficial effect, it is necessary for churches to multiply rapidly so that the missionary is kept busy evangelizing and teaching rather than transmitting Anglo-Saxon culture.

A clear recognition of the basic distinctives of the "Open Brethren" and an energetic effort to put them into practice will make a decided contribution to the evangelization of the world. We welcome Dr. Tinder's contribution to such recognition and, by implication, practice.

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