

I do not know when I first realised that I was a Christian resting in the work of Christ but I confessed this in baptism when I was thirteen. My 'Exclusive' friends (for we knew and loved them as well as the others!) were very cold when I told them about it. Later the Dean assured me that as the proper formula had been used I was indeed a Child of God. I found myself telling him that my new birth was 'by faith'. I was then fifteen and thought I would like to join the Church of England, mainly, I confess, because the music was of the highest quality! My father had told me I should need to be confirmed and so I went to his friend the Dean, for preparation classes. It was soon apparent to me that the catechism did not 'gee' with Scripture and the dear man avoided further argument by telling me that in any case schism was wrong whether in family or Church, and I found I had to renounce the music and sometimes endure ministry which was ungrammatical and boring!

Divisions between Christians seemed to me inevitable. Such things were recorded in the New Testament. But their evil effect was restricted where the local church was independent and the need for independency was explained to me by the elder brethren and I have since realised how important it is to avoid any attempt to group churches together in any constitutional or ecclesiastical system or even in World Councils. The only true unity is that of Children of God through Christ—a family which includes people from the whole gamut of ecclesiastical association, from Roman Catholic to Open Brethren.

About this time I discovered that Christian graces were more frequently manifested by the 'poor' and uneducated 'rich in faith' than by the cultured and 'better class'. A converted drunkard who could not read or write became my firm friend and prayed me through all my examinations. I discovered a heart-reality of worship and Christian living in the local church (or Assembly) which compared very well with what I saw going on around me in the 'denominations'. And I also found that, with all their imperfections, the 'Brethren' were honestly seeking to fulfil the example and precept of the Apostles and sometimes succeeding to a surprising degree. It was clear that they were more likely to succeed by God's grace if I gave my whole-hearted support, and I have never regretted trying to do so. I still meet with some who 'gave up'. I doubt if they are happier.

WHY I JOINED THE BRETHREN

(1) **E. G. Ashby**

Brought up in the Church of England, passing various diocesan examinations in the history of the Prayer Book, in my later teens I felt a growing dissatisfaction with the Church and its service. This was doubtless due to a number of contributory factors, amongst them being the substitution of a Crusader Class with its vivid study of Bible passages for a Church Sunday School where a Collect was learnt but there was little or no real teaching about the Bible. Further it was becoming clear that in

the New Testament a local church was a company of regenerate believers not merely a collection of those baptized in infancy, and I have never found evangelical attempts to explain away the difficulties of infant baptism very convincing. In addition there was a strong personal element, for a Bible Class leader may exercise a potent influence subconsciously however much he may seek not to sway his flock unduly in favour of his own personal opinions. In brief, I made the change in search of the spontaneous and vital to replace a dead formality.

Doubtless I was as unfortunate in my Anglican connections as were some of your previous contributors in their Brethren environment and fortunate in their change to the established church or elsewhere. I am convinced that a true man of God, really filled with the Spirit can and will be a power for God in whatever regiment he may find himself. But will he be *equally* effective in all such settings, or do some offer greater spheres of usefulness? Are all churches equally close to the pattern of the New Testament? Did I find among the Brethren the living power I sought? To answer the middle question first, there are some who deny that the New Testament offers any specific pattern, in which case, as Dr. Streeter says, quoting *Alice in Wonderland*, 'Everyone has won, and all shall have prizes'. If we view the New Testament as an historical development it is not so easy to state the answer precisely, but if we take a static view there is a pattern, a local community as at Corinth where individuals are free to take part under the guidance of the Spirit. But such a type of gathering requires a high degree of spirituality, failing which there will be faults and disorders as at Corinth. Is not this where some of our meetings fail? Those who meet with us merely from parental tradition are never likely to match up to this standard: it requires personal convictions of a high order, and a frequent self-examination on the part of us all, and a close walk with God. This leads on quite naturally to my third question. I must confess that the living power and spontaneous vitality have often seemed to be lacking, though of course it is possible the fault may be in one's own spiritual state and lack of perception. But however true this may be, I do not think it an adequate explanation: the chronic condition of not a few meetings, with small numbers and few conversions is evidence of something amiss, the fact all too often that the present generation is living on past traditions. There can be as much formality in a meeting as was deplored in other spheres, and it is surely the realization of this which has prompted such a movement as C.B.R.F. Is the solution to leave the assemblies to sit under the ministry of a godly preacher or even to be such ourselves? Some see that as the answer, and we can only wish them God-speed, as they follow what they see to be the guidance of God. It must further be admitted that some men of God may find a wider sphere and exercise a more fruitful ministry in other fields of service, though the silent years of John the Baptist and of the Lord Himself suggest that opportunity and activity in service is not the sole criterion of usefulness. What counts most is response to the call of God whenever and wherever it may come. In addition it would appear that this wider sphere is normally limited to one class, those intellectually fitted to take an intensive course of study.

But in the meetings there are many men of God who would never be likely to take a degree or diploma, but who are spiritually gifted teachers whose gift should be developed and used in the local church in a way not so easily possible in other circles.

Here I feel we are beginning to get to grips with the answer to our problem. Many are seeking the solution in greater organization, the planned syllabus and the like. Organization is what the Church tried at the end of the First Century when the spiritual glow subsided. Fervour gave place to form, and the organism pulsating with a living prophecy tended to become an organization with a programme of set service. We need not be less intellectual nor need we be disorganized, but rather let us be infinitely more spiritual, leaving adequate scope for the operation of the Holy Spirit. In a local assembly there may be a brother qualified to take a series of studies for six months or a year: if such is the gift the Spirit has given him let him use it and us profit by it, without fear of a 'one-man ministry'. It may well be that only to one has the Spirit given such a gift in that church. But let us not over-hastily think that a scheduled programme of intellectual lectures will adequately replace the spiritual food to be imparted by a teacher sent from God filled with the Spirit. I came from system to seek spiritual vitality: I continue to this day, hoping to see more of it.

(2) H. Lowman

I did not begin with a 'P.B.' background! As a child I was sent to a Church of England Sunday School, from which after a few years my parents allowed me to transfer to one of the so-called Churches of Christ (a kind of Baptist denomination), at which I was subsequently converted at the age of sixteen. After a few years I came to feel that the Churches of Christ were not sufficiently faithful to the Scriptures, and left them to join a group of Christians, which met in a private house and endeavoured to get back to early church doctrine and practice. However, some years later some of us came to the conclusion that our existence as an isolated group was not satisfactory, for we had no fellowship with any other group of Christians, and so we left our little group, which then disbanded, for it was quite small. I looked around a good deal, and was ultimately attracted to a small hall outside which texts of Scripture were displayed. I thought that if their desire to display the Word of God was any indication of their esteem for it, I might be happy among them, and so I found myself a member of an 'Open Brethren' assembly.

'Open Brethren' are very far from perfect, and the down-grade drift evident in other church communities is to be seen among them, but the following are some of the reasons why, although I have every reason to be fully aware of their shortcomings, and throughout my forty-one years in their assemblies have always had my eyes open to see any other churches nearer the Scriptural pattern, I still remain among 'Open Brethren':—

1. The prominence given by them to the Bible as the Word of God, and the Christian's guide.

2. The soundness and uniformity in all essentials of their doctrine and practice throughout their assemblies, and in particular their observance in Scriptural simplicity of the two ordinances expressly appointed by the Lord Jesus, viz. the Lord's Supper and the baptism of believers by immersion.

3. The practical expression of the truth that the true Church is that body which comprises all in any land who are truly born again, and only such.

4. Their evangelical zeal both at home and abroad.

5. The natural delight in the things of God so generally found among them.

6. The absence of a clerical class (which in the early church so soon led to the abomination of the Mass and kindred evils), and of the many accretions in services, vestments, general practices, elaborations of church buildings, etc. devoid of divine authority, and which the general tenor of Scripture so strongly condemns.

To conclude, I find other ecclesiastical communities so deficient today in the above matters, and so unlikely ever to alter for the better, that I cannot conscientiously take my place among them, in spite of the virtues which some of them possess, and of the fact that I have benefited tremendously throughout my Christian life from the written and spoken ministry of gifted men among them.

(3) Michael Thomas

After reading the eleven and more contributions in No. 8 of this *Journal*, I can only conclude that I have been very fortunate. I joined the Brethren in the expectation that among them would be found a better expression of the will of God for His children in matters of church life and order than elsewhere and I have not been disappointed—but to go back to the beginning.

I was brought up in a God-fearing Methodist family with prayers learned at my Mother's knee, grace at meals and family prayers after breakfast on Sundays. By the time I was twenty, confirmation at boarding school, some sporadic church going and a lack of interest in the family place of worship left me lost and uncertain. But at that age I was led to Christ by a friend of mine whom I met through my students' society and I was quickly plunged into the fellowship of the local evangelical Church of England and the work of the local Crusader class.

After the war I moved to various parts of the country, never really at ease nor at home in any church I attended. But I had by then enough contact with Brethrenism generally and a local assembly in particular to make it practicable and easy to join—in fact they asked me to preach and I did! I was old enough and wary enough not to expect perfection but, looking back, there were three things I looked for and which in substantial measure are or should be found in assembly life today. For these I sought and have not been wholly disappointed.

I. *A respect for Scripture.* By and large, we are a people of the open Book. It does not always work out that way but in principle, and broadly speaking in practice, we seek to do things, e.g. to regulate our church life and order, according to whatever there may be found on the matter in the Bible. It is true, of course, that there are also a fair ingredient of tradition and some stuffy prejudice, but the latter are more than outweighed in my experience by a practical application of God's word to our particular situation.

II. *A recognition of Gift.* It would indeed be a wonderful church where there was a complete fulfilment of this principle. It would involve an assessment by someone (?elders) of the true calling of every member and the adjustment of our arrangements so that everyone functions to that calling. Call it idealism or what you will, it does not quite happen like that one hundred per cent, but then I am fortunate, as the assembly to which I belong is noted for its open-hearted way of doing things. No one is reprobated for engaging in all sorts of 'outside' work, such as Crusaders in our case, or in the case of others visiting Old Peoples' Homes.

III. *A relevance to the mid-twentieth century.* Potentially we are in an excellent position to be continuously up to date and therefore to speak to those around us according to the will of God and their present need. We have only a short history as a denomination, so we are not burdened with centuries-old controversies. We are quite genuinely independent as an assembly, so that we are free from cumbersome organisational top-hammer. In the best sense of the words we ought to be really efficient and effective. It is in this respect that I have been a little disappointed with Brethrenism, but I would not exchange our present liberties and opportunities for the restrictions and frustrations of other forms of church life and order.

So I joined the Brethren and have not left them. May God give me grace to remain with them in love and charity.

(4) S. F. Warren

Reading the scripture, in a Church of England which had no evangelical leanings, led to my conversion and to a love of the Word as the sole authority for faith and practice. Baptism followed in a Baptist Church. I longed increasingly for fellowship with true believers but disillusionment followed as I was moved from place to place in my Forces days, when I found no consistency in denominational churches. I was deeply disturbed to find church membership open to all and sundry, whether professed believers or not.

Eventually I was 'fished' off the street by a faithful sister from an assembly and my joy was full as I discovered groups of Christians who looked to the Word of God for their authority and guidance, who welcomed true believers into their fellowship, who in a simple act of remembrance demonstrated the priesthood of all believers, who had a concern for the lost and a massive missionary outreach. Five years had then elapsed since my conversion.

I soon learnt that assemblies varied in strength, in doctrinal emphasis, in the calibre of their leadership, and in their spiritual power. Nevertheless the basic conditions I had sought were satisfied and I accepted that God had brought me to these companies and that they were to be my spiritual home. In my misguided zeal, particularly in my early days, I was a rebel but the assemblies have been, and remain, the school of God for me. Godly men have taught me by precept and example. Difficult situations (and fellow believers!) have been used to further my knowledge of God. There have been times when I have felt frustrated and ready to run away, but the consciousness that this is where God wants me to be has been paramount.

To me the indigenous character of assemblies is a strength. I soon learnt that my idea of the perfect assembly was not necessarily the will of God for a particular locality. The responsibility before God for the guidance of each company rested squarely on the local elders (however appointed and whatever their limitations). I saw again and again that true spiritual leadership eventually was given its opportunity.

My wife had a similar, although separate experience. Together we have always been associated with small, struggling assemblies. Our general principle has been to go the nearest, whatever its colour or limitations, and to give ourselves in its service. We have never been short of something to do. When, despite entreaty, elders have been hesitant or opposed (fortunately this has been rare if due deference has been given to their position by early consultation), God has opened other ways of service. There has been ample opportunity for systematic Bible teaching, evangelistic effort, and missionary endeavour from the home, if not always in the assembly building. Looking back neither of us has ever found the customary restrictions have hindered our service for God.

Whilst recognising that every company of Christians has its limitations, we know where we stand and we are confident that the assemblies are where God wants us to be.

ON RETURNING TO THE BRETHREN

(1) R. D. Finch

All the points mentioned in the June issue have been encountered during my experience in assemblies in several parts of the country, the degree or intensity varying from assembly to assembly. To summarise, the complaints are thus:

1. Bigotry and non-cooperation with other denominations.
2. Only part of the Gospel is preached (albeit the most important part).
3. Ungifted speakers on the gospel platform (usually from an outside area on a casual visit).
4. Total subjection of the women in the meetings.