

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.

5. Dictatorial elders who will not tolerate new ideas.
6. Boring morning meetings.
7. Lack of Bible teaching (although I have found that one hour's private study is worth more than a whole series by a gifted teacher).
8. Frustration at a sense of achievement.

Of these, items 6 - 8 reveal a lack of spirituality on the part of the individual.

One more common complaint is the way elders are appointed, a voting system being preferred to that system—a system which only reflects the popularity of the person, and may not be in any way related to his suitability to guide in spiritual matters.

I had nothing to do with assemblies, until I was sixteen, in fact I never knew they existed, having been brought up in a pagan home and saved at a Crusader Class. Having tried several local churches without satisfaction, I eventually landed in an assembly through a friend. After a while, owing to the immovability of the elders, two of us made up and had printed at our own cost, invitations to the Gospel Service along with an outline of the Gospel itself. Having distributed them door to door, again by ourselves, the result was that we were called before the elders and warned.

Owing to the war being in progress, I left the district, and over a period of years moved around several assemblies, eventually ending up at a very 'live' Baptist church for my wife's sake. After a short while we moved back into the area where I first made contact with the assemblies.

Shortly after, seeing the need, I started a Bible reading for young Christians in my home, which, although the elders agreed to it in the beginning, was soon stopped, anyone coming to it was threatened with disciplinary action. I bought some modern texts to display outside the Hall, but they were politely returned to me as unacceptable.

My work took me to another part of the Country. Here we came across an assembly dominated by one man, who threw up his arms in horror at the thought that there might be Christians in any other denomination.

Having memories of the few months we were at the Baptist Church, we decided to leave the Brethren for precisely the reasons given previously. For five years we went Baptist, which we now consider to be five lost years of our lives. The services make one spiritually lazy (if one is not already lazy) and not only are women subject to silence in the church but men as well. In many places such things as prayer meetings have not been heard of, and fellowship is non-existent.

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But what should be concerning us all more, is why we as a movement make no impact on the unsaved, because that is the best source of recruitment and the field is unlimited. I suggest one reason is that one of the golden rules given in the Word of God has long been overlooked i.e. Psalm 51: 12, 13 and 126: 2. One can usually tell who are going to an assembly on the Lord's Day morning by the miserable look on their faces!

(2) Dr. E. W. Ives

I found the subject of your June number a thoroughly fascinating one, and the contributions both disturbing and stimulating. My own departure from the Brethren, after fifteen years in fellowship was accompanied by none of the traumas and frustrations which others experienced—I simply moved to a new district where there was no assembly. I could have travelled nine miles to a tiny meeting but I have always believed that a Christian is called to witness in the place where he lives and works. Thus I set out to find a spiritual home. The local Church of England was moribund so I went to the Baptists, to discover that they believed in religion. Another of the Free Churches believed in God and it was with relief that I arrived at the Methodists to discover that they believed in and preached Christ. The Methodists welcomed me and opportunities for service opened, first in the Sunday School and then in the pulpit. Few Methodist societies would be described as 'sound' and 'conservative evangelicals' are a minority. Nevertheless I found my preaching welcomed and my views listened to with sympathy. Therefore, when I moved again to my present district where there are several assemblies, it nevertheless seemed right to continue with the Methodists, a decision which has been confirmed by an ever increasing opportunity for witness.

First of all, what do I miss? Above all the Lord's Table which, as observed in the assemblies, can be the purest form of worship. Of course it is often ruined by the imperceptive, the unimaginative and the hide-bound, but my experience has been that complete disaster is less common than critics suggest. Admittedly the Brethren form is difficult, requiring time, patience and concentration; admittedly it allows any participant to mar the worship of all; but the more ordered forms found elsewhere do, in my opinion, sacrifice richness and variety for safety. Another thing which I miss elsewhere is that absence, in a good assembly, of clerical element. There are gatherings where a local 'high priest' presides, but the best assemblies nurture the development of gifts of all kind in a way impossible in a society which has one recognised minister. The incidence of 'passengers' is, consequently, lower in the assemblies than elsewhere. Among the virtues of the Brethren I must not, finally, omit their doctrinal uniformity. The parent can be sure that the Sunday School will teach sound doctrine, the preacher know that his message will fit in with all the other messages delivered before. Where everyone understands the faith in approximately the same way there is agreement on direction and 'working together'.

What disturbs me when I visit an assembly? First of all the atmosphere of holy isolation, the evil consequence of the virtue of uniformity. Since working with others who understand the Faith in a way which differs from my understanding, I have had continually to ask what I mean by this expression or that which would have been greeted in an assembly with routine approval. The average 'gospel' message is couched in a private language, and very often Brethren conversation is the exchange of clichés. Akin to this is the general air of unreality which pervades assembly life

and especially assembly speaking; it has no relevance to the real world of everyday life. Typology, analogy and allegory are sources of spiritual profit to some, but to outsiders (and others?) they are meaningless. In what other Christian denomination would it be possible to argue that the Sermon on the Mount has application only to a future 'Kingdom Age' or to fall out about prophecy? In attempting any evangelism there is need to start with the actual needs of men now, not with their theological condition (however important); in ministry there is need to explain the requirements, the potential and the practice of following Christ. I have always felt that a discourse on the Tabernacle was not the simplest way of achieving either of these results. This leads to the third point. The 'gospel' proclaimed so regularly in the assemblies is a weakling version of the real thing. Instead of declaring the whole counsel of God for the salvation of the whole man, one theory of the Atonement alone constitutes the message. How often do pulpits tell of right and wrong, how often of the discipline of the narrow way, how often of the character of God? And yet these were major themes of our Lord's teaching. Many evangelicals (for the Brethren are not alone at fault here) have reduced the gospel to theological algebra (man + sin = hell); men are not saved thus. Of course the gospel is a redemptive gospel, but that is not to say that preaching the gospel consists in explaining the mechanism of redemption.

Another deficiency which I observe is the absence of any care or provision for the 'fringe member'. Having made no profession he, or she, is condemned to an endless diet of gospel services unless they leave for another denomination where the distinction between 'ins' and 'outs' is less marked. No-one wishes to admit the unconverted to fellowship, but the idea that there is a clear distinction between the converted and the unconverted is false. For many their journey to God is very slow; such people must be catered for by an assembly, not brow-beaten to make a decision for which they are not yet ready. The Brethren thus need to make provision for a morning family service before the Breaking of Bread. The address should be expository (expounding the faith and applying it to modern living), rather than evangelistic—although all preaching and ministry calls for a response. Far too many assemblies (though less than of old) 'fence' the table; it would be perfectly scriptural to invite those of the family service who wished to obey the Lord's command to stay to His table. I stress the notion of a family service, for the traditional Brethren Sunday morning makes no room for the children. My small daughter accompanies us to the first part of our Methodist service; when we visit the assembly where my parents are in fellowship she has to stay at home.

What I have learned from my sojourn in a 'denomination'? Principally two things. I realise more and more the importance of continuing in the Christian faith. While with the assemblies, the emphasis was all upon being converted, now I lean to the view that a conversion experience may or may not be significant, and all according to whether the individual continues in a state of being converted. And 'walking with the Lord' is not the way of negative goodness so often propounded, but the road of

active positive righteousness—‘doing’ not ‘being’ good. In the second place I see more and more the glorious simplicity of the gospel. In the assemblies I learned that conversion had definite stages—conviction etc., etc.; I no longer believe that any norm can be laid down. The response which God requires is so simple and the story of the penitent thief the measure of the knowledge and faith that is necessary.

Have I left the Brethren? I do not think so. There may be a time when I am called again to work within that fellowship, and with the ecumenical problems in Methodism that time may not be long away. If I do, I trust that I shall bring a greater perception of the gospel stripped to its bare essentials, a greater appreciation of the virtues of the assemblies, and some experience which will help to meet the deficiencies I now perceive. In the meantime, I regard the assemblies with affection as the fellowship in which I was nurtured and to which in spirit I so much belong.

(3) J. J. Wales

Many of the reasons which prompted me to leave the Brethren over eighteen years ago were the same as those given by a number of contributors to the June issue. Principally they were excessive legalism and a spirit of exclusivism.

My wife and I have been in fellowship with a large Baptist church in our district during these eighteen years, our family have in turn all been baptised as believers, we have found many things to do, and I have served as an elected deacon for fifteen years. Such a large church has many disadvantages, the services are generally attractive and well run, there is a lively missionary interest, a good standard of musical accompaniment at all the services and there is always something going on.

On the other hand there are problems. There is the question of affiliation to the Baptist Union (only a nominal adherence in our case) and a lack of provision for eldership as such, the elected deacons attempting, rather inadequately I feel, to fill the dual role.

The two greatest weaknesses spring, firstly, from the relegation of the Lord’s Table to be a mere appendage of the morning or evening service, thereby robbing it of that essential element of real spirit of worship; and secondly, the overall acceptance of the ‘one man ministry’ set-up which, while giving a recognised leadership, undoubtedly has the effect of precluding gifted members from exercising and developing latent gifts for teaching, preaching, exhorting, pastoral care and so on.

The ‘reasons for joining the Brethren’, both positive and negative, set forth by one of your contributors, seem to me to touch upon the most vital issues. On the positive side the opportunity of giving practical expression to worship at the open and more centrally placed worship meeting provides a most valuable spiritual exercise and also gives time for quietness and meditation which is not normally found, at least in non-conformist services. In addition, emphasis is laid upon the priesthood of all believers in this approach to corporate worship and by the rejection of any form of clerisy a greater sense of personal responsibility is fostered.

Finally, local autonomy can produce a healthy independence while at the same time leaving freedom to realise the concept of the oneness of all believers.

If some of these basic ideas were acted upon generally in assemblies of Brethren with vision and spiritual energy then the much needed 'religionless Christianity' and the search for ecumenicity might be realised; there would be a common meeting ground for all believers and a fold would exist to which many of the 'wandering sheep' might return! Above all, the Lord might find here an instrument for revival which is so sorely needed everywhere.

(4) Anonymous

As one who left the 'Brethren' and then returned nearly twenty years later, I would like to record a few thoughts. I was brought up in assemblies, and stayed there until I was about thirty. Then I moved to a different part of the country, and the Christians there were in a watertight compartment as regard other Christians, and worried themselves about small matters such as the length of women's hair. At the same time most of my Christian interests were inter-denominational, and I think also that at that stage of my life I was not ready to make the social sacrifice involved in attending the Assembly. For this and other reasons I tended to drift during the war period and for some years afterwards, and I was not happy in the Lord.

After periods in different churches, the Lord was gracious to me in bringing me to a small village assembly where I was joyfully received in His name, and I am still there.

In this assembly we receive all who know and love the Lord. As there are several with different traditions behind them, we have no rules regarding baptism, which is left to the individual conscience. We permit sisters to pray, give out hymns or words of exhortation, not only at the prayer meeting but also at the Lord's Table—it is illogical to do one without the other. We would also permit a missionary sister to give a talk about her work to the whole assembly. We have a musical instrument at all services, there being no efficient leader.

Finally, I rejoice to know the grace, mercy and love of my Lord, who brought me back, not to the 'Brethren', but to the brethren, and I am sure that He is able to do the same for others who may be in the same position as I was.