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THE BRETHREN MOVEMENT IN THE WORLD TODAY

By DONALD TINDER

When I use the term “brethren movement” or “brethren”, I want you to put quotation marks around it, because biblically and theologically the brethren movement refers to the whole people of God. All of us are “brethren” since Jerusalem. So it is only for reasons of historical accident that this term is applied to a particular, distinguishable movement for which practical and historical reasons might be found to so designate it. But then, this is not uncommon; after all, the so-called Orthodox Christians are not the only orthodox ones, the Baptists are not the only ones who believe in baptism, the Presbyterians are not the only ones who believe in presbyters (= elders), and so forth.

“The Brethren Movement”—I would like to put it first within the context of the whole development of the Christian church. Everyone agrees that Christianity began as a movement which called *out* from the world—people who were Jews, people who were Gentiles, people who followed a variety of religions or people who were following no religion at all. In that sense it was *particular*; it picked out particular persons, often coming as families to respond to the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ; and these people were gathered together into congregations planted by the apostles and those in fellowship with them.

It continued this way for several centuries. Then through a variety of events it came about that the Roman Emperor professed Christianity, and soon it became the thing to do to become a Christian. And hardly before you knew it—though it took a good many decades in actual practice—Christianity had changed from being a particular movement, made up of a few people in any given place, of a small proportion of the population, seldom more than a few percent; it changed from that to be what we might call *comprehensive*, so that everybody was a Christian, every baby born into a household was baptised, and the church became co-extensive with the nation or the empire. Oh, there were a few dissenters here and there, but for the most part ninety-five percent were nominally Christians. Thus the church changed from a particular group to a comprehensive group. And so, by the Middle Ages, with the exception of a few Jews and occasional travelling Muslims, the church and the various nations were co-extensive—they were equivalent. The politics in the churchly realm and in the more properly speaking political realm were scarcely distinguishable.

All the time that this was going on there continued to be unrelated and intermittent particularistic movements that came out of the church in any given area. Sometimes these were what we call today heretical—all of them were called heretical in their own times. The comprehensive church which called itself the Catholic Church believed that any group of believers unrelated to it was by definition heretical, and therefore had no business existing, and the use of the arms of the government to suppress these groups was eagerly pursued. Some of them were genuine heretics by any standards, some of them were not. It is hard to tell because very little trace of them

remains today. One group that did come out before the Protestant Reformation, that was recognised as Protestant and joined with that movement upon discovering it, was the Waldensians in much of what is now Italy. And the Waldensian movement is one of many. It happens to be the one with the most survivors of the many groups that withdrew in medieval times. And these groups were not related to one another, and many of them hardly aware of one another. They came out in different centuries and in the various corners of Europe.

At the time of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century the comprehensive idea was continued by many of the Protestants. The result was a comprehensive church involving all of the sides. Some who remained loyal to the Bishop of Rome came to be known by the name Roman Catholic. Those who earlier separated from Rome in Eastern Europe were the Eastern Orthodox and included all the people in these lands, or all the people who had not become Muslims. Then with the Protestant Reformation came the addition of Anglicans in England, Lutherans in Northern Europe, and the Presbyterians or Reformed—various kinds of Calvinists in Scotland, the Netherlands, parts of Switzerland and South Germany. And so you had a continuation of the comprehensive ideal, though in the case of Protestants this was side by side with the recovery of many of the biblical emphases on doctrine, but *not* of the biblical emphasis on the church. For the great reformers felt that the situation of the church had changed since the time of the New Testament; and while the New Testament church could not be anything other than a small group of believers, fifteen centuries later they believed the church rightly included everybody that it possibly could in the society.

But at the same time as the Anglicans, the Lutherans, and the Calvinists were emerging from the Roman church—with a reformed doctrine but with the same ideals of comprehensiveness—there were some believers arising who often took the name simply of “brethren”, “saints”, “Christians” One of the men who arose among them as a leader and was recognized for his teaching abilities was a man named Menno Simon, a Dutchman. And so eventually the name Mennonites came to be attached to these groups, including many who had never actually been ministered to by Menno Simon directly. These Mennonites continue right down to the present, many of them quite active here in Western Canada through having to flee the lands of Europe, where they were initially welcomed but later hostility was directed towards them.

In the seventeenth century, movements arose in England that similarly had the ideal, like the Mennonites, of people coming out of the established society and the established church of whatever form, to be committed believers, people who followed the New Testament not only in its various doctrines but also in its concern for the church as a community distinct from the world. Not at first, but eventually the name Baptist came to be associated with many of these believers. Some of them who took even more radical directions on various areas of doctrine and who in many ways thought that the New Testament processes were only temporary became known as the Quakers, the Society of Friends.

Meanwhile in Europe still other movements emerged. The original Mennonite movement had become ingrown and had ceased to be evangelistic, in part because of the intense persecution that sapped it of its energy and its leadership. So other movements arose, such as the Moravians (building on a small remnant of pre-Reformation believers), and a group arose in the early seventeen hundreds in Germany which took the name simply of "Brethren". Because they believed in immersion (in fact immersion, three times—once each for the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit)—they got the name Dunker Brethren. But the persecution was so intense that soon after their beginning they almost all had to flee to the colony of Pennsylvania, and from there they spread across the Northern and Western United States. The Dunker Brethren was a group that initially grew by winning people from the state church to a personal commitment to Jesus Christ, but by persecution and through various other factors, as they emerged in an alien land, they also became largely ingrown; today they persist, for the most part, through natural reproduction.

Turning back again to England, in the seventeen hundreds the great movement that arose was the Wesleyan Movement. Wesley did not intend to found a new church and he was not particularly upset with the way church government had come to evolve in his country and in the rest of Europe; he was primarily concerned with getting people converted and forming cell groups of those who were true believers. But his policies and his practices made a separation from the state church inevitable, though not with the same concern for reproducing a New Testament pattern that the other groups I have mentioned have manifested. The Wesleyan movement had even more influence upon the American continent than it had in its original homeland.

Then in the early eighteen hundreds, this time originating in the United States itself, was a very interesting movement indeed. Among the men who were initially most responsible for it were a father and son named Thomas and Alexander Campbell. They were Scotsmen, members of a smaller Presbyterian body, who had come across to the Northern United States. Through contact with some men in England and in Scotland who had new ideas about the church that went back to the New Testament, but also through their own thinking and reflection on the Bible, especially as they came across to this country, they began to realise that the whole division of Christians into all these denominations that we have mentioned so far was contrary to the will of God. Christians had come to live at ease with the existence of various denominations; the Lutherans, the Anglicans the Presbyterians and Reformed, the Mennonites, Baptists, Quakers, the Dunker Brethren, and others that we could mention had come to co-exist with one another, sometimes to have certain degrees of co-operation, especially during times of revival, but not to be too concerned about this division into various groups that was so evident among them. And many times, of course, they spoke different languages—they came to North America at different times—so their co-existence was not so disturbing to many of them. But others were disturbed by it, because as they read the New Testament they got the impression that God intended that all believers be one.

Therefore the Campbells and others who quickly joined with them began to preach that Christians should be guided by the Bible alone, not by their denominational traditions. Though the Campbells were themselves of Presbyterian background, they felt that the Calvinism of the Presbyterians was not nearly so clear in Scripture as the Calvinists felt it was. They also came to believe in believers' baptism, but in a somewhat different way from the way the Baptists believed in it. To them baptism was of much more importance; it had a much more important role in the salvation of the individual. On the other hand, they were not so happy with the Wesleyan emphasis on the emotions. These men were a little bit more sombre in their approach, and so to them salvation could not be dependent on various kinds of emotional experiences, which seemed to them bordering on hysteria at times, but was a process that involved the mind, as well as the will. It was a process in which, though emotion played a role, it was not the dominant role.

This movement caught fire on the American frontier, and even to this day it is not widely represented along the eastern seaboard but rather in the states of Kentucky, Ohio, Tennessee, and Indiana in particular. Many whole Baptist congregations went over to this movement which had two different names associated with it—one was simply "Christian", and the other was the name "Disciple". These movements, as they gradually came together—different people at different times and places being responsible for the emergence of them—fellowshipped one with another. They searched the Scriptures, and they began to find that the New Testament called for all Christians to be simply "Christians", that it called for the Lord's Supper to be celebrated every Sunday (at least, the examples seemed to be that way). They did not admit the distinction between the clergy and the laity and did not allow the existence of a hierarchy with authority over the congregations. Such congregations were independent. This movement arose on the American frontier, beginning in some respects in 1800 but for a long time existing as part of the Baptist movement; but by 1830 it began to go its separate way from the Baptists, and thereafter the movements have been distinct. Today some five million Christians in North America are heirs of this movement. Because of the name of Campbell, they are sometimes called Campbellites, but their churches themselves are known simply as Christian Churches or Churches of Christ.

Now at the same time as the Campbellite movement was getting started in North America another movement was getting started in the British Isles, a movement that became known as the Plymouth Brethren because one of the largest and earliest congregations (though not the first) was founded in the port of Plymouth, England. In many respects the so-called Plymouth Brethren and so-called Churches of Christ movement had amazing similarities. Both stressed the fact that all Christians should be one, but not through the existence of an institutional hierarchy such as Medieval Catholicism had tried. They all believed that one's doctrine should be examined by the Scriptures and that the Scriptures were adequate to guide the church in what it was to do. They were not inclined to accept the distinction that had evolved between the clergy and the laity, which the

Catholic church had hardened into a sturdy doctrine of the priesthood and which Protestants had modified but not completely eliminated. The parallels are very interesting, but yet there is a significant difference. There was something about the Brethren Movement which distinguished it from all the other groups that I have mentioned up till now—distinguished it in theory, distinguished it in the beginning, but human nature being what it is, unfortunately did not always continue to distinguish it thereafter. What was the difference? It was simply this: that all the other groups—Mennonites, Baptists, Moravians, Quakers, Dunker Brethren, Wesleyans, Campbellites, and others like them—all these groups were based upon calling people, oftentimes people who already were Christians, out of the established churches, or out of the comprehensive type of church, on the basis of a common agreement concerning what the Scriptures taught: an agreement as to a way that baptism should be, an agreement as to whether Christians should participate in the armed forces, agreement on doctrines that distinguished Calvinists from Arminians, and so forth. These various groups were based on a view of unity, but unity by conformity. Everyone should join together in them (this was especially, of course, the emphasis of the Campbellites, but earlier the Baptists had preached it just as strongly); but in order to join one had to agree on many different areas of doctrine, covering a wide range of activities and beliefs.

The Brethren Movement was different, for *the unity that the Brethren sought was to exhibit a unity that was already there, rather than to create one by seeking people to come to agree on a long list of points.* The Brethren said, “We recognize in all these different denominations people who are one in Christ and yet, because of the traditions and customs of the denominations, we cannot sit down and break bread together; the clergy say we cannot. We have to go to the Methodist church, we have to go to the Baptist church, or we have to go to the Anglican church; but we cannot simply break bread together, we cannot identify ourselves together as Christians because we each have to take our own particular party that we’re going to line up with”. The early Brethren said it ought not to be this way. We ought to be able to meet together and exhibit the unity that is given to us by God. We do not have to agree on every point of doctrine, on every issue of practice in order to be able to meet together. If God has made us His children, if we are able to recognize each other as children of God, that in itself is sufficient reason to be able to exhibit our unity in a practical way. In effect, the early Brethren theory, and often the practice, called for making decisions only where they were unavoidable. You had to decide, for example, whether or not to Break Bread every Lord’s Day; you cannot avoid that decision. But in many other matters, they decided they would not try to force a particular line of things, for this would be to exclude some who were genuine “brethren in Christ”. So on the question of baptism, for example, there was liberty. Some of the people came from the Anglican background; others came from the Baptist background; they often carried with them their various views. Sometimes there was change, of course, but often a person felt that the view he held before was still valid; and so they said, “Well, that’s all right. We can still meet and

express our unity in Christ even though we don't agree on baptisms. This can be left for each individual, for each family to pursue". There were differences of varying degrees on Calvinism; while there was not much pure Arminianism, certainly consistent Calvinists would feel that the Brethren had a strong tendency in that direction. In other respects the Brethren Movement exhibited the kind of zeal for expressing the unity of the body of Christ, and then for taking this unity out to the world as a testimony that God had united people of various backgrounds. Some of the nobility, many of the upper classes, were joined together with those of the lower classes, people of varying backgrounds, some from state churches, some dissenters—to testify to their unity in Christ and to carry the gospel.

Two of the key distinctives that emerged throughout the movement arose out of the desire of Brethren to testify to their Christian unity. One was positive: the Lord's Supper—the one loaf, the uniting ordinance. In breaking bread they remembered what God had done for them through Jesus Christ, and they testified that they were made "one body" in Christ, one out of many. The common worship of the believers around the Lord's Table, not only served to repeatedly commemorate what Christ had done, to keep the focus on His work upon the cross and His triumph through the resurrection, but it also served as a testimony that believers were "one" and that they were free to come and express their unity in their corporate worship to God. One testimony to the unity was negative: the elimination of the distinction between clergy and laity. This was related to the Lord's Supper, because it was felt by all the other groups that the Lord's Supper had to be administered by an ordained clergyman. And since different groups did not recognize the ordination of other bodies, this was in itself a factor which led to disunity among believers. As the Scriptures were searched and as church history was looked into to see about the emergence of the clergy, it came to be realized that this was not God's intention, and that Christians simply should meet together, recognizing that God distributes spiritual gifts among them but that He does not set up one class of men as those who alone are custodians of the ordinances. Therefore, by eliminating the clergy and laity distinction they were free to gather together, to break bread as one body in Christ. And so set did these distinctives become that anywhere in the world today when a group of Christians emerge who have never heard of Plymouth, England, or the movement associated with it, start to Break Bread regularly and do so without having a separate ordained clergy they are usually branded Plymouth Brethren, whether they like it or not. (Oftentimes, when they find out what happened to the Plymouth Brethren, they don't like it!) But a pattern has been established based upon those practices which distinguish it from other groups.

But, as is often the case when a movement arises which seeks to recapture biblical ideals, the Enemy is at work to sow discord, dissension, to compromise the original vision, to tarnish it, and even to destroy it, if possible. And it happened with the "Brethren Movement" as well. It has already been indicated that many of the continental movements became very introspective and ingrown, and persist, not by the original evangelism

which got them going, but instead merely by biological reproduction. And so it is that the early Brethren movement, which the documents indicate originated as a testimony to the unity of believers, has in many parts of the world and in the eyes of most church historians as well become a byword for the extremes of divisiveness amongst believers.

How did this come about? The answer is complicated, but part of it is that there were two different ideals which were present at the beginning, and as soon as an occasion arose they exhibited themselves in an open division. On the one hand, there was the emphasis of withdrawing from the existing Christian bodies as a means of testifying to the unity of believers; the emphasis passed from testifying to *unity* to the idea of testifying to *purity* by separating from those who did not agree on the Lord's Supper and its importance and on the need for eliminating the distinction between clergy and laity. This ideal which shifted in the direction of "the purity of the Body" also began to stress uniformity: what one congregation did—what it taught, what it practised—was to be very similar indeed to what was done in other parts of England and in other parts of the world.

Now the other tendency which was present from the beginning was that believers should testify to their unity in whatever ways possible. Those who were able fully to gather together to break bread and meet together in regular congregational fellowship should do so; those who for one reason or other did not desire to leave their traditional fellowship or denominational background, whatever it might be, should still be co-operated with in evangelistic work, in Bible Society work, and other kinds of co-operative endeavour. Moreover, in any given congregation that does exist for the purpose of breaking bread and testifying to the Lord, there could be *diversity* from place to place, different emphases and different styles, and within each congregation there could be differences of understanding.

An issue arose which is complicated to explain and which, on the surface, is not quite related to this; but, as one penetrates beneath, one finds that when the smoke had cleared, within twenty years after the Brethren movement had started, it divided in two different directions. The larger group at the time, known as the Exclusive Brethren, stressed the separation of believers and their uniformity one with another after having separated. The other side was called Open Brethren, for they were open to receive other believers without expecting uniformity and were open to continue fellowshiping in specialized activities with believers who had not broken with their denominational background.

Originally the Open Brethren were smaller, but down through the decades they have become much the larger—in part because of a greater evangelistic zeal. Exclusive Brethren were held together for a generation or so, especially through the primary leader, John Nelson Darby, who had no official position but whose authority was largely recognized. Darby was born in 1800 and he lived until 1882. The division between Open and Exclusive Brethren occurred during the years 1845-48. For the next thirty or so years the Exclusive Brethren continued as a vital and living group, welded together by the personality of this unique man. But such was the

danger inherent in the emphasis upon uniformity that within a decade of Darby's death the Exclusive Brethren were divided into five distinct groups, each given the nickname of a prominent teacher in their circle: Kelly, Grant, Stuart, Lowe and Raven. Because the Lowe brethren were quite numerous upon the continent of Europe, they are frequently called the Continental Brethren. When Mr. Raven died the man who emerged as his unofficial successor was James Taylor, and his son followed in his footsteps, so the Raven brethren came to be known as the Taylor brethren; they were the largest of the groups, though these groups were found in varying strengths in various parts of the world. The story of what happened to the Brethren Movement is sad. What arose with the intention of being a beacon of unity for Christians by which they could exhibit what God had done among them, had become instead noted for division, for quibbling, for splitting one from another upon issues that by almost any candid examination are less than essential (though, of course, to the people participating in them they seemed to be very serious indeed).

The process did not stop with the division into the five different groups of Exclusives. Within twenty years after that the Grant brethren had divided and would divide again; the Stuart brethren had divided; the Lowe brethren had divided and the smaller group had itself sub-divided; and the Raven or Taylor brethren had divided. The process is continuing to the present. There have been reunions among some portions of the exclusives, though very often when there is a reunion there is a further division by those who do not want to reunite.

What went wrong? It is hard to analyse. Certainly it is not wise to trivialize these believers, to make fun of them, or just to assume that they were made up of worse stock that tended to be divisive by nature. I think it is better to see at work here the natural outworking of a specific principle, the principle of *unity by uniformity*; i.e. unity by conformity to what happens to be the prevailing view; unity on the basis of what distinguishes Christians from one another, rather than on the basis of what they have in common simply as believers.

The Open Brethren followed this second path; they sought to demonstrate the unity which all believers already possessed in Christ and to co-operate with other Christians to the extent possible without demanding uniformity. To be sure, they followed this path with varying degrees of commitment; many of them, especially those that arose outside of England and came into the movement later were, for practical purposes, not much different from the Baptists in their initial understanding, for they came to believe that to belong to the Brethren was to accept a whole long list of certain ideals and doctrines and practices; and they could not understand why anyone would want to join with the movement that did not agree with them on these points. The Open Brethren have avoided significant divisions, though there was one group nicknamed "Needed Truth" (the "needed truth" being that there needed to be a formal organization of a Presbyterian type on the congregational, the national, and even the world level). But that was a very small group (although some who did not actually leave the Open Brethren absorbed many of the influences of that group).

For the most part the Open Brethren have avoided division; yet for that same reason one cannot speak of the Open Brethren generally. One can speak of the Salvation Army as a united movement, with one head who can be identified and located. One can speak of the Roman Catholic Church—though, of course, it has considerable diversity in it now—which is (outwardly) one structure. One can speak of various kinds of Exclusive Brethren, each of which, though without a formal institution, is represented by congregations which are very, very similar to one another all over the world. In other words, many denominations, for one reason or another, have a certain unity so that one can speak of a denomination and the direction in which it is going as a whole. But the Open Brethren are not this way. There is considerable diversity among them. The Open Brethren, because their emphasis is upon the local congregation instead of the fellowship as a whole, vary from place to place, even in a city and certainly from country to country; thus it is impossible to make generalizations about what they are like. Personally, I think this is a necessary strength of the movement, one that needs to be retained if it is to have any particular relevance as a testimony to the whole body of Christ, the whole people of God, as to the way that the church should be.

There are four particular emphases or principles which were characteristic of the Open Brethren from the beginning, though in varying strengths and varying degrees, and which are important today. These need to be recognized as part of our heritage and need continually to be examined to see how we are practising them and whether there are ways in which they should be altered, reformed, enhanced, and taught to others as part of the heritage entrusted to us—not to preserve for ourselves but to pass on to others in the body of Christ.

The first of these principles or emphases concerns the clergy and the laity. God has never seemed to be too closely bound to men's ideas in this regard. Many of the great saints in the history of the church were not men who were recognized as clergy, and many even in our own times who have been raised up by God for evangelistic or teaching purposes were not counted as clergymen by one group or another. And on the other hand, many people who have been recognized clergymen have not evidenced spiritual distinction. God does not seem to pay much attention to these categories. And I think that the Brethren Movement, if it is to be true to its heritage, has to continue to recognize this, and has to follow after the way that God seems to be working with the church at large. However, in our zeal for emphasizing that there is no biblical basis for distinguishing clergy from laity we sometimes neglect and even completely distort other biblical teaching, for example, concerning the diversity of gifts and the fact that some men (and women too) are to exercise their spiritual gifts on a full-time basis and were supported by the churches among whom or on behalf of whom they ministered. Thus there is a role for those who are full-time ministers of the Word, as long as such people are not regarded as representing the whole of the ministry of the people of God. The full-time worker in the New Testament is the one who develops the gifts of others; indeed, part-time workers do this as well. The full-time worker is not to do the

work of the ministry: he is one who is called of God to develop, to strengthen, and to train others to do the work. All of us from the biblical point of view are “clergymen”. (I think it is better to look at it that way than by saying all of us are “laymen”.) All of us have gifts from God which are to be exercised for the purpose of building up the body of Christ.

This was one of the earliest distinctives of the Brethren Movement, and it is a truth we do not need to be ashamed of and one that still needs to be proclaimed. We need to recognize, however, that at times we honour this principle more by lip service than by actual practice. Within the brethren there has arisen, not so much a dominating group of clergy as rather a passive group of laity, who allow others to do the work of the ministry. In many congregations which have full-time pastors at the head there is a greater participation by more people in the work of the ministry than in many Brethren assemblies. This was not the intention of those who, under God, were the founders of the movement. All of us are ministers of God—some are called to full-time ministry, but all are ministers.

The second distinctive of the early Brethren Movement concerns the Lord's Supper. It was an enormous step for these first brethren to begin breaking bread simply as Christians, meeting around a common table, because, for all of them, the Lord's Supper had been part of the churchly practice. Even for those who were not Anglicans, the Lord's Supper was something that was done under the authority of a recognized elder or clergyman and in a very formal and official way; and the idea of a spontaneous participation in the breaking of bread was something that was quite revolutionary in its day. We can imagine something of the joy as they thus began to remember the Lord Jesus Christ in this way, and ever since the Lord's Supper has been the means of attracting other Christians to this fellowship. But, at the same time, it must be admitted that all too often the Lord's Supper has become something which in its own way has developed its own ritual, its own traditions, its predictability. While some of us may like it and even prefer it that way, we have to admit that it is no longer the attraction for other Christians that many of us long for it to be. Why is that? Part of it may be the feeling that only certain kinds of prayers or utterances are appropriate. The hesitancy of younger people or of newcomers to take part is due to fear that they might say the wrong thing. Thus one can go to many assemblies where scarcely ever a voice is heard of someone under forty years old. The impression is given that somehow if one says the wrong thing God is going to be greatly displeased and thunder will come—or something like that.

The Lord's Supper in the New Testament is not given to us with a certain ritual or form to follow. The Great Church of the Middle Ages evolved a highly complex form, eventually in a language that the people did not understand, so that it became something ceremonial and far-off. We, too, have to be careful that we do not let the same thing develop among us. The Lord's Supper should be something that is always fresh. There need to be certain patterns, so that people are not always wondering what is going to happen next, yet also freedom for spontaneity, for diversity of

the way in which worship to God is expressed. The Lord's Supper is still a precious means of testifying to the unity of believers. If it is not conducted with the proper concern for honouring the Lord and for allowing for diversity and freshness, it can become just another ritual, not very distinguishable from the ritual of the more formal churches.

The third principle is that of co-operation to the degree that is possible. Many denominations have the "all or nothing" philosophy: either agree with us all the way, or we will have nothing to do with you. The early Brethren did not look at the matter that way, at least, those who later sided with the "Open". They felt that while the goal was to have all Christians meeting together and identified fully one with another, on the way to this goal one could co-operate with one's brethren in Christ even when one did not see eye-to-eye with them in some things. Even when there was disagreement on the role of denominations, upon the role of the clergy, and upon other things like this, there was still room for co-operation. Thus members of the Open Brethren movement, down through the years and in most countries of the world, have participated in transdenominational activities to a degree disproportionate to their size. Missionary Radio, for example, has both national Christian and European-American missionaries from the Brethren participating in it to a far greater extent than the size of the Brethren Movement would warrant. In publishing, in Billy Graham crusades, in movements such as the Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship, the Gideons, the Christian Businessman's Committee, and many others, Brethren are free to participate. In fact, they are encouraged to participate as they follow through with the genius of the insights of the original (Open) Brethren Movement that we should co-operate with our fellow believers to the extent that we are able to, and to the extent that they are able to co-operate with us. Participation in these other activities should not be regarded as somehow in competition with what goes on in the local congregation. All of us are to be identified with a local congregation, but God calls some of us, maybe even many of us, to be identified also with specialized groups, with other brethren who may not be Brethren with a capital B but who nevertheless are brethren in the sight of God. This transdenominational co-operation is something that is encouraged by a careful examination of the biblical insights of those who first dared to begin meeting in the name of the Lord alone for the breaking of bread.

The fourth important emphasis of the early Brethren movement is that of the freedom from the bondage to ecclesiastical tradition and hierarchy. The early brethren believed that the Holy Spirit was active in their presence, that *He* was the representative of Christ on earth—not some man, or some body of men—and that the Holy Spirit was able to guide individuals and groups of individuals as to what they were to do, and that there was to be continual re-examination in the light of the Word of God of the best way to carry on the commissions which God had entrusted to the church. One of the strengths of the Brethren Movement to this day, I believe, is the way that individuals can have a burden from God to start out in a certain direction and make it known to others. Many important works of God all around the world have started in this way, through the

initiative of individuals. Because the Brethren movement does not have an over-arching hierarchy or a group of authorities from whom formal approval or sanction must be obtained before any new direction can be taken. And this is something that we should prize. But alas, though the movement began with a sense of freedom from tradition, it often has developed a tradition of its own. Thus if a new group of Christians arises or people begin to do things that are similar to the way that Brethren have done them but different in little respects here or there, there is a tendency to separate oneself from them lest one be contaminated, or to let them go their own way. This was not the intention of the original movement. The original movement was a coalescing of groups that started independently in different parts of the world and that joined together when they found one another, even when they didn't have complete agreement. And so it should be with a lively congregation and with the Brethren assemblies even today that, as they find the Spirit of God at work, to try to fellowship with others even when there is not complete agreement, believing that if God has joined us together in the body of Christ we have the duty and the privilege of exhibiting the unity that we have in Christ by working toward even greater unity to which the Scriptures summon us.

These four principles, then, are among those that originally characterized the early Open Brethren and that characterize the movement to a greater or lesser extent today. They are principles that need to be continually re-examined. And we always need to recognize that throughout church history the tendency in groups has been to depart from their original ideals. We have no reason to think that we are immune from this prevailing tendency. But, under God, if we are conscious of it, the Holy Spirit is working just as much as He was back in Plymouth, Dublin, and other parts of the British Isles in the 1820s and 1830s to bring a visible testimony to the unity of believers in Christ.

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