

William Collingwood

The "Brethren"

A Historical Sketch

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THE “BRETHREN”

A Historical Sketch.

BY

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PREFACE.



FEW remain who remember the “Brethren” (so called) in their early days, and so great have been the changes during the short three-quarters of a century, that few now seem to know anything of their origin or first principles.

This is regrettable on many accounts: for their own sakes, who can ill afford any loss of what distinguished their first period; for the sake of the Church of God, who are losers by any diminution of that bright testimony; and for the Lord’s honour, in so far as the change has failed to sustain it.

As one whose acquaintance with them dates back to the period previous to their first disruption, I have thought it right to leave on record, briefly, what I may be able to tell of the leading facts in their history.

No attempt is here made at biographical notices – names are mentioned only so far as necessary – the purport of the paper being to show the characteristics of the movement, rather than the persons engaged in it.

August, 1899.

W. C.

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THE “BRETHREN”;

A Historical Sketch.

I. EARLY DAYS.

ABOUT the year 1825 there were in Dublin three friends who, intimately associated in sympathy and Christian work, while belonging to different communities, were constantly together during the week, but always separated on the Sunday. In course of time it appeared to them to be anomalous and wrong that, though they were personally united as children of God, they could not publicly join together in recognition of their common brotherhood. In seeking a remedy for this it was found that neither could with a good conscience accompany the other to his usual place of worship. The Baptist could not participate in the indiscriminate communion or formal services of the Established Church, nor would the Pædobaptist be admitted to fellow- [6] ship with the Baptists. They looked round, but in vain, for some community where all might meet without imposing on the conscience of each other the taking part in what was “not of faith” – which would, more or less, do violence to their individual convictions. At one time they seemed to have found it, yet, at the last moment, in conference with the elders of that community, conditions were required which would defeat the object they had in view. They came to the conclusion that whatever might be their attachment to their several denominations, they were under no allegiance to them, and that so far as they were causes of division, they were manifestly not in accordance with the teaching of God’s Word. But they were under allegiance to Christ to fulfil what He had enjoined. So far as they were individually concerned, it was for them to recognise formally their oneness in Christ. And this they saw was to be done, according to Scripture, by the communion of the Lord’s Supper, the partaking together of the one bread and one cup, which in all ages has been universally regarded as the expression [7] of Church union, though practically it has become the mark of fellowship in some special “Church” – that is, section of the professing Church – instead of the communion of all God’s true people. On this conviction these brethren acted, and finding nothing in Scripture to require them to wait till others should so act, nothing to indicate the need of a sacred place or of an ordained minister, they met on the first day of the week in the house of one of their number to break bread together in remembrance of Him.

Shortly after this, Mr. William Stokes, leaving his house on a Sunday morning, met Mr. Patterson, a Scripture-reader, who, after the customary greetings, asked him where he was going. “Going!” said Stokes; “Why, you see, I am going one way, and you are going another.” Patterson, recognising the feeling that prompted the reply, answered, “Oh! it’s there you are, is it? Come with me, and I’ll show you what will suit you.” He took him to the place where those three met, already joined by two sisters; so now they were seven.

The late Lord Congleton, one of the three, [8] to whom the writer, having heard this narrative from another, repeated it in order to ascertain how far it was correct, confirmed it as a substantially true account of the circumstances.

From this small beginning the movement grew. Mr. Stokes was not alone in finding here what met, so far as it went, his yearnings after a realisation of the brotherly unity which formed the subject of Christ's last prayer and His New Commandment. Many thoughtful and earnest Christians were attracted by it. And of such, so long as it remained on its original ground, it repelled none. It was not necessary to sever their connection with the Churches they had been associated with. This they might retain as to all matters that they could conscientiously participate in, and so long as they were allowed to remain. Nor was there a thought of requiring agreement in, or judging one another in respect of, any point of ecclesiastical doctrine or practice on which children of God might fail to see alike. To set up a new Church, a denomination or sect, was not only far from their purpose, [9] but was jealously watched against. The tendency to do this was denounced more than twenty years later by Mr. Darby himself, in the writer's hearing, as a declension from first principles. The chief aim was to exhibit, in a Scriptural way, *the common brotherhood of all believers*. They recognised no special membership. That they belonged to Christ was the only term of communion; that they loved one another was the power of their fellowship. In principle, it embraced all whose faith and walk showed that they had spiritual life; in practice, all such of these as would avail themselves of it.

This ideal could be attained only by a return to the absolute simplicity of the Apostolic model as found in the New Testament. To bring in anything of a contentious character would defeat it. There must be nothing that human tradition had introduced to divide God's people. None must be stumbled or grieved by the presence of what was not clearly and strictly Scriptural. Only so much should be required, or encouraged, as all true Christians must needs be agreed in. Though some might [10] personally prefer the presence of an ordained minister or any favourite practice or teaching, at least none should have reason to be hindered or excluded by that to which he could reasonably object as being positively wrong. As at an earthly father's table, where on Sunday the family are gathered, differing in their ages, dispositions, occupations, and opinions, all realise their family oneness, and find it no place to press individual tastes or political discussions; so this was the Father's table for all His children as they met together on the day of rest.

Consistently with this, they habitually called by the title of "Brother" or "Sister," any whom they regarded as one of the family of God, though ever so far from being actually associated with them. Hence by an unfortunate inversion of terms – as the world must give them a name – they became popularly distinguished from other Christians as "The Brethren." Any such distinctive title they always repudiated. That of "Plymouth Brethren" was given them as becoming known by being gathered there in considerable numbers, and their periodical, [11] *The Christian Witness*, emanating from thence. Their attitude toward other Christians was shown, for example, at Hereford, when Mr. Venn, the godly Rector, was holding a public discussion with a Unitarian, and they sent him word that they would spend the time in prayer for him. It was, moreover, quite a common thing to see the clerical dress at their largest meeting in London.

The principles thus briefly stated were in full force when in 1844 the writer sought a place with them at the Lord's table. He plainly expressed his intention, at the time, of continuing to attend the ministry of the clergyman through whom he had received much spiritual blessing. The answer was that this would be no bar to their full and hearty fellowship; that so far as they were concerned – though it was not likely to be profitable to himself – he was free to go to as many of the evangelical communities as he thought fit; but

being recognised as a child of God, there would always be a place for him at the Lord's table whenever he would come. And this was not an exceptional case; it was the rule in those early days.

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II. DISRUPTION.

THESE days of happy fellowship were not always to last. As the numbers increased, elements of weakness were brought in, and seeds were sown which, after a while, bore bitter fruits. The endeavour to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace was giving place, in some notable instances, to a spirit of controversy, a habit of sitting in judgment on their fellow-servants, and attacking the practice of other Christians in whatever they differed from them. Public attention was drawn to those who thus acted, rather than to those who retained their first love, and they thus earned for the "Brethren" the unhappy reputation of being at variance with their fellow-Christians, instead of that of aiming to promote the fellowship of all the family of God. The testimony of their first days was thus beginning to grow dim.

This could not long be without the leaven of controversy finding lodgment among themselves. Prophetic speculation provided the opportunity. Side by side with the [13] recovery of the truth of the unity of God's family, had come that of Christ's personal return and millennial kingdom. This subject, so blessed in itself, gradually usurped the most prominent place, and supplanted the former. It so occupied their minds that, not content with it as a hope, and with its simple and practical teachings, they dived into speculations beyond their depth, soon to lose themselves in questions of doubtful disputation, and finally of division. Scripture everywhere was now to be looked at in a prophetic aspect. And especially the Psalms, which, being regarded as belonging to the Jewish Remnant in the latter day, and so supplying a link in the prophetic chain, led to disputes as to the spiritual condition of the Remnant, and hence as to the Spirit of Christ as seen in them. On these points the two most prominent of the "Brethren" were divided. Both were treading on dangerous ground when they began to deal with the mysteries of the Person of Christ and to seek to trace them out from these connections.

One of them was shown to be teaching [14] serious error as to the relation of Christ to the federal headship of the first Adam. Attention was called to it in 1847, when it was put forth in an exposition of Psalm vi. This at once excited a very general protest, followed by the disallowance of its author as a teacher among them. Mr. Darby, who two years previously had separated from him – chiefly on personal grounds, not on account of this, for in his "Narrative" then printed he described this doctrine, or what was substantially the same, among others, as "not exactly unorthodox teaching" – now took it up as the burning question, and called on all, as a test of their faithfulness to Christ, to make a clean separation from any who might have the remotest association with his opponent.

Many were moved, and rallied to his standard. Some, however, hesitated to respond to his summons to attend a meeting at Bath, there to "judge the evil." Among these was the Church meeting at Bethesda Chapel, Bristol. This Church was mainly on the platform of the so-called "Brethren," though that position had been reached from [15] different points. Those already spoken of had begun with disallowing whatever appeared to rest on tradition, taking (so to speak) a blank sheet of paper, and adopting as their Church principles and practice only what they clearly saw to be required by Scripture. On the other hand, George Müller

and his fellow-labourer, Henry Craik, who were instrumental in gathering the Church at Bethesda, had, before coming to Bristol, discarded one by one whatever in their former practice they found to be unscriptural. Thus they had a similar open fellowship and open ministry, and the same simplicity of worship. Only that while the former had adopted no order in Church government, as of elders and deacons, the latter had retained these as of divine and permanent arrangement.

The Bethesda brethren, while standing aloof from the violent mode of action demanded by Mr. Darby, sought to deal with the difficulty in what they believed to be a more godly and scriptural way, by vigilance lest the error discovered at Plymouth should come in among them, rather than by giving [16] it publicity, until it had so far become known as to call for this step. Then in a series of meetings they brought the matter before the Church, and it was declared that no one holding those doctrines could be received in communion.

But they refused to place themselves under the leadership of one who they believed had taken a wrong course in separating himself two years previously, and had shown a wrong spirit throughout. This refusal was denounced by Mr. Darby and his friends as "indifferentism" to the honour of Christ, and "War to the knife" was declared against any who similarly withheld themselves. Separation was henceforth to be the order of the day. The rule of reception on the ground of individual brotherhood was reversed, and it was enacted that the condition of communion should be the absolute severance from any whom the Brethren acting under Mr. Darby – now organised as a body, and soon afterwards claiming to be "the one assembly of Christ," in effect the "one body" – might by their leaders condemn, in consequence of non-submission to [17] their demands. This new law was enforced with the utmost rigour. Any assembly receiving a person from *another assembly* where they were received from *some other* which was under their ban – and so on *ad infinitum* – was summarily cut off.

To justify this course as applied to "Bethesda," charges were made against them, not merely of complicity with error, but of heresy actually taught among themselves. These charges were so grave that many were afraid for a time to continue in fellowship with them.

There were some, however, who thought it their duty to "inquire and search, and ask diligently whether it was true and the thing certain." (Deut. xiii. 14, xvii. 4.) The result of such inquiry was that these accusations were proved to be wholly untrue, the evident outcome of party spirit.

But this step, of going to Bristol to inquire, was met by the affirmation that "the Holy Ghost had settled the matter at Bath," and it subjected these brethren to the further censure of Mr. Darby. It was a distinguishing feature of those under his [18] teaching that such inquiry was not to be encouraged, if indeed permitted. In the words of a worthy brother, a leader in one of their gatherings, when appealed to by the writer as to the duty enjoined by the above-quoted Scriptures, "it would be dishonouring the Holy Ghost to call in question the testimony of those He had raised up as His witnesses." Under such a system false witness is sure to grow apace. According to Isaiah lix. 14, "Truth is fallen in the street, and equity cannot enter." But it was thus they "judged the evil," as they called it.

Amid the war of pamphlets on the subject Bethesda resolutely refused to go into print. Nothing was published with their sanction; and when at length a letter signed by ten of their number, explaining their position and practice, was laid before the Church, it became a special object of attack, their accusers persistently, and in spite of all their protests, making their words to mean what was never intended by them.

It cannot be denied that the immense influence of Mr. Darby's personality dominated the situation. The writer, during the [19] ten years that followed, gave himself to the task of seeking to reconcile the separating brethren. He had been intimately acquainted with many of the most prominent, and with all these he endeavoured by personal communication to promote re-union. In each case it was only too evident – in fact, there was scarcely an attempt to conceal it – that, under whatever variety of detail, their confidence in Mr. Darby primarily or ultimately decided their action. Nor was this to be wondered at. He was a man of commanding intellect; and so long as this was used on the side of truth and love, his ministry and writings were deservedly prized. And now that his powers were put forth, in full force and with unsparing severity, to demand separation as if it were faithfulness to Christ, he carried with him many earnest minds who thought that thus they would be on the safe side from complicity with heretical doctrine. On the other hand, those who had informed themselves of the facts saw that by following this course, so far from escaping the danger of evil, they would be guilty of partaking in a system of false witness and unrighteous [20] judgment, and a sinful abandonment of the walk of love and obedience to the Lord and His Word.

These latter had no leader. Although Bethesda, as the most important of the unfettered assemblies, became the name by which they were branded, its influence was confined to a narrow limit. As an example of this, when a sister brought to Liverpool a letter of commendation from Mr. George Müller, it was some nine months before she was received there. And when, for admitting her, Liverpool was put on the list of proscribed assemblies, a brother from thence, visiting a distant town where, if anywhere, Mr. Müller's name might be expected to be a passport, it was not without hesitation that he was received.

Thus the division was hopelessly consummated. There was no appeal from the decision of those who led the seceding body on the assumed authority of the Holy Ghost. The command to "come out and be separate, and touch not the unclean thing," they enforced with the utmost rigour against any who did not submit; and even where, in the [21] case of some more reasonable among them, the personal accusations failed to obtain credence, the hitherto unheard of ecclesiastical principles which were built up on the ruin of the old fellowship sufficed to bind them fast.

Fifty years' experience has shown that those who exonerated Bethesda from the charges of false doctrine were right in their judgment. Not only was there no ground for such charges at the time, but from that day onward, so far as is known, no such imputation has on investigation been substantiated. Nevertheless, there has been the reiteration of the old slanders, grossly exaggerated, and sometimes magnified into the most incredible absurdities. No Church has more jealously maintained all that is known under the name of orthodox truth.

On the other hand, those who seceded and formed a body under Mr. Darby have been divided and sub-divided into many parties by the presence among them of divers and strange doctrines, chiefly about the Person of the Lord. Mr. Darby himself did not escape the fall. Some of his best [22] and most devoted friends had, before long, to leave him when they found he was holding and teaching views similar in substance, though not exactly alike in form, to those he had condemned [sic] in Mr. Newton. And so their divisions have multiplied.

As this "Sketch" is limited mainly to personal reminiscences, and to the history of "Brethren" in connection with the early movement, it is not necessary, if it were possible, to follow further those who have left it. They have taken a position as far removed from the

original ground as they are separated from actual fellowship. As to either, they retain nothing in common with those they have left, except that they still have the same custom of "breaking bread" on the Lord's-day, and an open ministry. The latter being to the popular idea the distinguishing mark of the "Brethren," the two classes, different as they are in all other respects, remain confounded in the minds of those who see only the external form.

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III. LATER DEVELOPMENTS.

THE utter severance on the part of those thenceforth known as "Exclusive" restored to the Open Brethren, in good measure, the freedom to act on their original principles, though during the twenty years that followed they had indeed their troubles from the opposition of those who had left them, as well as from internal sources.

The origin of the movement did not admit of formulating a system of Church order. The "two-or-threes" meeting thus in the fellowship of love called for nothing more than the appeal to Scripture in any cases of discipline that might arise. This apparent absence of rule and government attracted some who thought to find there a liberty suited to their natural tastes, or opportunity not found elsewhere for the exercise of their gifts, or the like. Hence, from a spirit of insubjection, or love of pre-eminence, or jealousy in the interests of their own work, difficulties arose which sometimes grace overcame, but at other times did not succeed in overcoming. These, however, though [24] hurtful, only partially affected the general aspect of the movement.

But there was another element of mischief, the old tendency to exclusivism, so natural to earnest minds where the higher claims of love and forbearance are lost sight of. Early in the seventies, this, hitherto suppressed or discouraged, began to assert itself in public teaching, and soon spread over a considerable area. Baptism, and such-like matters, hitherto open questions, were now to be enforced as essentials to fellowship. The "one-man ministry," and whatever was not in accord with their own peculiar lines of thought, was classed as "evil," and was to be dealt with in judgment, to the exclusion of any who might be associated therewith. No longer recognising, as at the first, the rule laid down in Romans xiv., that each servant of Christ is responsible to Him only for what he himself holds or practises in His service, they fell in with the idea which had marked the former separation, that each is responsible for all that is done by those with whom he has any fellowship, and that he can clear himself of the guilt [25] of participation in it only by separating from them.

Where such teaching found a place, either the meeting was divided, or it shut itself off from those who refused to adopt its views. The sorrowful conditions of 1847-52 were reproduced, though under a different plea. The line of separation was not like the former, absolute. It was a thing of degree. This spirit of exclusivism found acceptance, in measure, far beyond the circle of those who took the stand of separation upon it. It was easy to fall into this snare, where, the original motive no longer holding the first place, the special views and practices of "Brethren" came to be looked upon as the principles of their fellowship and the object of their testimony. And thus too often a sectarian spirit has been exhibited on the part of some, in sad contrast with the bright characteristics of early days.

To prevent misunderstanding, it ought to be clearly stated that, while "Brethren" claimed for each other full liberty of conscience in all matters of ecclesiastical doctrine or practice on which true children of God [26] may and do differ, they have never countenanced

or tolerated among themselves any departure from the old faith of the Gospel or the inspiration and authority of the Holy Scriptures. The scepticism which of late has infected the professing Church has found no footing among them. There has been no "down-grade" in that respect. If they have to stand aloof from certain communities, it is because those seeds of unbelief are sown and watered there, not on account of their ecclesiastical position. Where the old matters of faith are maintained, there is full association with godly men and ministers, whether of the Established Church or other denominations, as far as each can act in common.

IV. THE PRESENT ASPECT.

THE short history thus outlined sorrowfully tells how the works of the flesh have marred what was begun in the Spirit. Well were it for the Lord's honour if the sad story could be consigned to oblivion; but the fabric thus raised, so contrary to the original design, is before the world, and has well-nigh obliterated the knowledge of the truth that lay at the foundation. It is only with the hope of bringing this again to light that these pages are written.

On the short but comprehensive rule given by Christ to His disciples, "All ye are brethren," their fellowship was based. In it they found their warrant for their course of action. In the Scriptures that amplified and gave directions on the subject, they sought the details for their guidance therein.

No special tenets, whether of belief, as on prophecy, or of practice, as of open ministry, were the grounds of their gathering or the object of their testimony. "Fellowship," not "separation," was their watchword. To this large embrace some came in who were not like-minded, and whose ways and doings have wrought mischief and caused the way of truth to be evil spoken of.

* * * * *

From the declension into the later form of sectarianism there has happily been a reaction on a large and important scale. The closing years of the century have seen the gatherings of these brethren somewhat more [28] in unison with the mind of former days. Not indeed that there is now the simplicity which was characteristic of those days. That can hardly be looked for. Succeeding generations present new phases and new needs which may be met without departing from the rule of God's Word. What sufficed the little groups of earnest Christians who gathered to the happy fellowship in love sixty or seventy years ago, scarcely meets the requirements of communities which have grown up under different conditions, and where the same dominant motive is not so generally realised. Possibly the warrant they found for their simple practices has been too much regarded as a command from which there must be no deviation. It may be that in their reaction from the prevailing assumptions of a clerical order they went to an undue extreme in rejecting all definite recognition of those who were called to addict themselves to the ministry of the saints. Perhaps what they deemed the "rule of the Spirit" was pressed beyond what Scripture would justify, due place not being given to godly government [29] and order. These, however, are points of detail, not essential matters.

After what has been shown, it can hardly be claimed for "Brethren" that their present attitude fairly exhibits the high standard of their earliest days. Their calling was to bear witness of the oneness of all believers, and their union in love. This for a time they in good measure fulfilled, and God was pleased to use their testimony in arousing among His people the latent desire to break through sectarian barriers and assert the higher claims of the common brotherhood. Certainly from the date of their beginnings this has been gathering force. We have seen the "Evangelical Alliance," which, though it fell far short of "Brethren's" ideal, was a step in that direction. So of the "Keswick platform," and the more recent "Federation of the Free Churches," in so far as it aims at uniting the Lord's scattered people in worship and service to Him. Far more than these external organisations is the manifest growth of the desire in the hearts of true believers to stand on the ground of their common [30] Christianity rather than on the distinctions which divide them.

"Brethren's" mission seems to have been to set this on foot. It ought to have been theirs still to take the lead, and show the example. So it might have been, had they held fast what they had at the first; but so great an honour needed a lowly state of heart which may have been found wanting. Even now, according to the measure in which it is present, God may see fit to use those who seek to cleave to His Word, for the blessing of His people in these last days. They have still their work to do in maintaining intact the inspiration and authority of the Scriptures, the heavenly calling of the believer, and the power of a godly life.
