

# Observations and Reflections of a Concerned Missionary

By Philip Nunn  
Apdo. Aéreo 122  
Armenia, Quindio, Colombia  
email: philipnunn@netxos.com.co

8 March 2002

After 8 years seeking to serve the Lord in Colombia, we returned to England in December 2000 for a 12 month sabbatical. A number of brethren have shown interest in our travels in Europe during this year. We had the opportunity to visit 7 conferences and about 50 different assemblies spread over England, Germany, France, Holland, Italy, Spain and the US. We were privileged to meet many lovely believers and enjoy their warm hospitality. All of these used to be in “happy fellowship” when we left in 1992. Now there is disharmony and mistrust and even division among some of them. Some have asked “what is your position”. Here I shall now try to describe honestly what I have seen and what I have been told as I travelled. It is based, obviously, on saints and assemblies visited, yet the sample is probably broad enough to provide a reasonable objective current picture. I follow it with some reflections, our personal concerns and some suggestions.

Part A: Personal background

Part B: A view of “our” assemblies towards the end of 2001

Part C: Trends and serious concerns

Part D: Some ideas and suggestions

Part E: Issues worth rethinking and discussing

Part F: Conclusion

We must assume full responsibility for any factual errors. If any exist they are not intentional and I am very happy to correct them. We take for granted your familiarity with portions of Scripture associated with issues covered, thus the lack of biblical references. Our aim is to inform and share our felt personal concerns, hoping it will generate healthy discussion and inspire divinely led bold actions.

## Part A: Personal Background

The father of my English grandfather joined the Brethren movement in East London in the late 1800's. The Tunbridge Wells division on the early 1900's divided his 5 sons, my grandfather eventually settling with the Kelly set of assemblies in the 1938 reunion. One of his brothers still remains in a Tunbridge Wells assembly in Essex, and the other 3 left the Brethren movement many years ago. To my surprise, the Tunbridge Wells brethren still accuse “our” set of assemblies of denying the “unity of the Body of Christ” since we rejected an assembly decision (which our ancestors considered questionable), and have not yet repented properly!

My parents, Peter Nunn (England) and Anne Marie Wilts (Holland), felt called of the Lord to devote their life to missionary work in South America. As a family we left England In 1967, studied Spanish for a year in Costa Rica, arriving in Colombia in 1968. I grew up here in Colombia. It was here that I gave my life to the Lord and begun to serve him in children's work and in the youth group. At the age of 17 I left my home in Colombia to study in England. Adjustment was not easy. My communion with the Lord was in Spanish, now I tried to pray personally in English. I found the King James translation of the Bible particularly difficult to adjust to. English hymns were quite a contrast to Colombian songs. Somehow I expected my brethren in British assemblies to show the same outward enthusiasm and freshness I had lived in Colombia. We humans are usually critical and resistant to change, and even at the age of 18 and 19 I found myself becoming quite judgmental of observed and felt differences.

## **BRETHREN WITHOUT HISTORIC AWARENESS**

It was soon after my arrival in England that I discovered that I formed part of the so called "Brethren". Until then I had simply seen myself as a Christian, meeting in New Testament style assemblies, each practising healthy biblical principles. As a child I had travelled a couple of times in Europe and North America visiting assemblies with my parents. In my childlike understanding I noticed that throughout the world there were also assemblies like our own. But even then, we children noticed differences between assemblies and discussed these with our parents. Sometimes slides had to be rearranged before an evening presentation to extract some potentially offending picture. I still recall the fascination as, at the age of 22, I read "A Historical Sketch of the Brethren Movement" by H. A. Ironside (I was so engrossed in the book that my suit case was stolen from next to me while travelling by underground to visit my grandfather in east London! – an experience one doesn't forget). It was so strange to discover the existence of a variety of "Brethren" networks of assemblies, each believing that they are the "real" representation of the one Body of Christ on earth. In Colombia the gospel is preached with much enthusiasm, gifts developed, assemblies established, problems addressed, but with no explicit reference to Darby, Kelly or Brethren history as such. We promote what the Lord has given us in a simple way: we say we are an assembly of local true believers who hold and teach the Scriptures as the only basis of authority. We enjoy confidence and thus free fellowship with a number (currently about 60) of other assemblies round the country, benefiting from a fair amount of interchange at conferences, youth camps, gospel campaigns, training projects, etc.

Perhaps it was the freshness of the early Brethren which caught my imagination: the exit of believers from rigid mechanical hierarchical ecclesiastical structures to the freedom of meeting simply around our dear Lord Jesus. Their movement away from formalities and man made traditions and customs to the glorious freedom of the Spirit of God. They seem to have studied Scriptures with a sense of expectancy, even suspense, wondering what new light the Lord may choose to shine on His word. They shared their findings freely in conferences and magazines, correcting and balancing each other in the process. One could not help but ask: where has this liberty and freshness gone?

## **WE HAVE ALWAYS BEEN DIFFERENT**

It was in those days that one enlightening thought did come to my mind: **Our world-wide fellowship of Brethren assemblies has never been uniform in doctrine, format and**

**practice.** Each assembly has taken on certain character from those families who formed it or later joined it. Assemblies that started with many ex-Quakers, ex-Anglicans or ex-Baptists retain many of their original characteristics. Assemblies formed by regrouping of ex-Lutherans in Germany or Switzerland carried into their new assemblies their form of spirituality, and clearly some of their customs. It explains our incoherent stand on baptism. The same phenomena can be seen today here in Colombia with the formation of new assemblies with mainly ex-Catholics. Under no circumstances, for example, will assemblies here accept baptism of babies. That is something they associate with the corrupt Catholic Church which they have emphatically left behind (this is doctrine). The wide translation and circulation of Brethren books, together with conferences and the development of shared hymn books, has promoted a degree of similarity, but felt differences die hard. It explains why my Dutch grandfather, Harm Wilts, a full time labourer among assemblies world-wide for many years, was visited a number of times by some German Brethren encouraging him in fairly strong terms to stop the camp work he was developing among the young in Holland. It is no surprise then, to find differences (some significant, and some strongly felt) as one travels between assemblies and more so between language zones.

## **WHILE AT LONDON UNIVERSITY**

Between 1981 and 1985 I completed a degree in Mathematics and a Masters degree in Statistics at Imperial College London. I became more and more disillusioned with Brethren assembly life as I experienced it. I would seldom miss a Sunday at one of the assemblies in London (Upminster, Portobello, Oake Room, Sutton) and would frequently preach at one of the London assemblies on Sunday evenings. Yet during the week, I became involved with a Christian group at University called the Navigators. During those 4 years involvement with them, I regained discipline in my Christian life and again experienced the joy of becoming outward looking with my faith, leading fellow students to Christ and helping them grow in discipleship groups. On a visit to the US, I travelled to a conference with brother Grant Steidl (a servant of the Lord among assemblies in the US). I discovered that he also had worked with the Navigators in the US. He shared the crisis point in his life where he felt he had to choose between working with the Navigators and working in the assembly. We simply have not got the energy and time available to do both properly. I was also discovering this.

Somehow I got hold of some of Watchman Nee's books on the Church and the Work. The Lord used them to enthuse me with the vision of the key role of the Church in the plans of God ("I will build my church"). Evangelism and discipleship are important, but God's strategy of expansion is through the growth and constant formation of new assemblies. To me the future was clear. I was driven by a new vision and not by fear of being defiled. I thanked the Navigator friends for the good years, and directed our energies towards the assemblies in the London area.

## **PREPARATION FOR MISSIONARY SERVICE**

After graduation, I worked 3 years as a statistician for the UK government. During this time I met and married Anneke Lemkes from Alphen (Holland). Having felt a call to missionary work "somewhere", we also felt the need to prepare as much as possible. Of course active assembly life is among the best preparation. We wished to go further. Following the lead of brethren like sister Heleen Voorhoeve (still in Egypt) and brother Cor

Bruins (was in Egypt, then Lebanon, now in the UK) we enrolled for a one year of studies in seminary in Toronto (Canada). We left the UK in 1988. Notice that in those days there was freedom to do this. It was an interesting year of growth, devoting serious time to study basic Greek, systematic theology, OT Prophets, and more. Also a time to enjoy Christian fellowship primarily at Mississauga and Willowdale assemblies. North American assemblies seemed to me to be fairly accepting of differences, given that historically they were composed by emigrants from Holland, Germany, Egypt, Italy and more, each with its peculiarities.

We returned to London England for another 3 years. I worked as a statistician in the commercial department of a large electrical company. The Lord gave us our first 2 children. Encouraged by two "Gideon" brothers in our assembly, Anneke and I joined the Gideons for one year. We found it to be a challenge and joy to take Bibles into schools and hospitals in South London. Many times we have used the Gideon strategy to distribute the "Good Seed Calendars" here in Colombia. In 1992 we were commended by our assembly to serve the Lord full time and set off to Pereira, Colombia. We valued the advise and support of many interested saints, but we never felt controlled by any central body. As far as we best could, we desired to serve the Lord and be directed by Him.

### **A FRUSTRATION AND A GOOD LESSON**

Having received a good salary while working in London, during the first year or two in Colombia we had some financially tight moments. My question was this: Why could the Lord provide us with ample and stable financial backing while in England through a large pagan company, yet such suspense and difficulty through the Lord's people? We learnt to accept it, and things improved. But back then we learnt an important lesson: The electric company gave me predictable financial stability, but in exchange it was my boss. The company controlled my working hours. Perhaps the unpredictability in waiting on the Lord for finances is the price the Lord's servant must pay to distance himself from possible control or pressure by some givers. I have discovered that money has a sad but strong way of influencing what should be the Lord's work. It has been said that "the Lord's work done in the Lord's way never lacks the Lord's support" If this is true, my dear fellow worker, let's never compromise the Lord's authority and leading in our life for the sake of financial stability.

## **Part B: A View of "our" Assemblies towards the end of 2001**

What used to be our world-wide network of assemblies referred to by some historians as the KLCG group (Kelly-Lowe-Continental-Glanton) can at present be classified in, I suggest, 5 distinct types or categories:

### **(1) The "Must Stay Alone" type:**

These are usually families or small groups of families which have withdrawn from all previous contacts and remained alone at home or in very small networks (e.g. the Den Helder group). Some have lost confidence in all known Christians, others are simply confused. Some break bread alone, others only when visiting some "trusted assembly" in another city or country, others just don't. I suspect some of the confused see their position

as temporal, waiting for the dust to settle to see which assembly or network of assemblies the Lord would have them join. These are a minority.

**(2) The “Old Paths – State Your Position” type:**

These dear saints are convinced they hold on to the truth as discovered and practised by the early Brethren. They feel these old paths (as they understand them) are under attack by “new teachings”, and that it is now time to “clean up” the Brethren fellowship. They recommend withdrawal or separation from all those believers who would not “state their position” against “new teachings”. This has been a painful process for all concerned. Their key figures travel a lot and write a lot. They are keen to develop and circulate lists of “declared” assemblies and then encourage others only to receive believers from these assemblies. These are strongly supported and financed particularly by concerned brethren in the Dillenburg area of Germany. They claim to be the “balanced middle”. In North America an assembly only has to put in writing that “we don’t want to depart to the right or the left” to be classed in this group.

**(3) The “Old Paths – Moderate” type:**

These dear saints are convinced they hold on to the truth as discovered and practised by the early Brethren. They feel these old paths (as they understand them) are being attacked from 2 sides: by forceful brethren who seek to pressure a new narrow code on all assemblies, and by other brethren who seek to discard our assembly distinctives. These are usually quiet assemblies. Few enter into correspondence but they do resist pressure to sign letters, statements and positions which, in their view, are not Biblically justified. Externally many of these assemblies look virtually identical to type (2) assemblies. Some (not all) of these assemblies are implementing minor changes such as changing timetables of meetings, allowing the use of different Bible translations in the meeting, relaxing rigid dress and hair length codes, eliminating the general condemnation of radio and television. Some (not all) of these assemblies who didn’t allow men and women to sit together in the meetings, now allow families to sit together. Perhaps we could class these as custom changes, nothing of real substance.

**(4) The “Reality At Any Price” Type:**

Like the rest, these are assemblies of very concerned believers. They are concerned about our growing isolation from normal society and little evidence of the divine life of Christ among us. They are convinced that God was real among the very early Brethren, but that the movement has lost its cutting edge. Christ is still building His church (maturity and numerically) yet our assemblies in Europe and North America have been (with very few exceptions) in steady decline for more than a century. Our periodic internal strife and inflexible traditions make it very difficult for us to ever recover. Some of these still value and preserve their Brethren roots, others have lost interest in Brethren historic connections. Their main goal is to become a real living Christian community which can be used of God to reach out into the secular real world of today.

**(5) The “We’ve Had Enough Of It” type:**

Sadly for our assemblies everywhere, many have just had enough of years of tensions and criticisms (we Brethren can be quite harsh sometimes!), letters and accusations. Not

many have the moral, mental and physical strength to enjoy the Lord and remain fresh spiritually under such conditions. Regardless of who is to blame, the fact is that many other Christian congregations are now enriched with the presence of many families who used to enjoy happy fellowship among us. I have come to the realisation that in the English speaking world at least, this steady bleeding away of hurt saints has been our legacy for over 150 years.

## **GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTIONS**

For the benefit of those who travel and since a number have shown interest in a global picture, I present here some broad distributions. I hope no one feels bound by this classification. They are descriptive. The distributions are based on conversations with serious local brothers and I sincerely see them as a fair approximate reflection of how things stood when I visited these areas during the second half of 2001.

### **(1) The “Must Stay Alone” type:**

Most countries seem to have some of this type. I heard of the existence of these in England, Holland, France and Germany.

### **(5) The “We’ve Had Enough Of It” type:**

Perhaps all countries have recent sad stories of this type. Personally we heard reports of these in Holland, US & Canada, England and Switzerland.

### **United Kingdom:**

- (2) The “Old Paths – State Your Position” type: 1/3
- (3) The “Old Paths – Moderate” type: 2/3

The situation in the UK is further complicated by the “Eternal Sonship” issue. I have heard a number of damaging incorrect reports on this issue. What is NOT disputed among UK assemblies is that (1) Christ is eternally the Son of the eternal Father is the natural interpretation of Scripture [to deny it is error], (2) the error does not consist in denying the pre-existence nor the deity of Christ, and (3) all the UK assemblies say they hold to the eternal Sonship and would not allow anyone to teach the contrary. Some UK assemblies differ (and this is not new) as to whether or not to receive a believer who cannot positively affirm that “Christ was the Son of God in eternity past” on the grounds that this statement is not explicit in Scripture.

### **East Germany:**

- (2) The “Old Paths – State Your Position” type: 1/4
- (3) The “Old Paths – Moderate” type: 3/4

### **West Germany:**

- (2) The “Old Paths – State Your Position” type: 7/10
- (3) The “Old Paths – Moderate” type: 2/10
- (4) The “Reality At Any Price” Type: 1/10

**French Switzerland:**

- (2) The “Old Paths – State Your Position” type: 1/3
- (3) The “Old Paths – Moderate” type: 2/3

**German Switzerland:**

- (2) The “Old Paths – State Your Position” type: 2/3
- (3) The “Old Paths – Moderate” type: 1/3

**France:**

- (1 and 2) The “Must Stay Alone” type and  
The “Old Paths – State Your Position” type: } 1/3
- (3) The “Old Paths – Moderate” type: 2/3

The attempt to enforce acceptance of some unwise assembly decisions has caused the polarising of French assemblies. I was told that some 10 assemblies joined under a very narrow “position” letter, but most are resisting the pressure to accept a questionable decision and join them. Some assemblies have divided.

**US & Canada:**

- (2) The “Old Paths – State Your Position” type: 9/10
- (3 and 4) The “Old Paths – Moderate” type and  
The “Reality At Any Price” Type: } 1/10

From the many American brethren I know, I would expect most to fit naturally into type (3). I find it odd to see them expressing exclusive fellowship with type (2) in Europe. My suspicion is that the “Lake Geneva Report” (being a radical type (4) discussion document) frightened most assemblies to reply to a Wayne invitation to state “position”. Type (2) was presented as the middle ground, thus most assemblies were thus linked.

**Holland:**

Given that many assemblies have divided, I found it particularly difficult to get a feeling of what is going on. My guess would be a broadly equal distribution between types (2), (3) and (4). I may be quite inaccurate here.

**Italy:**

Some of their leading brethren signed position letters during 2001 joining them to type (2). From their practice (e.g. happy camp work, freedom to work with the Gideons, sisters cut their hair), I would expect them to fit more naturally into type (3).

**Spain:**

The small assemblies here are dominated by type (2) from Germany and French Switzerland (visits and finances). French type (3) brethren who used to visit Spain and, I understand, were very much appreciated there, have been asked to keep out. The Spanish have linked with the type (2) assemblies.

## Part C: Trends and Serious Concerns

As I think and pray about the situation, I see no simple right and wrong, no easy choice. We would not, therefore, sit as judges over you or any dear saint who has chosen, been pushed or by default fallen into a particular type of assembly. Although some of our ways of dealing with these problems I find painfully inconsistent, manipulative, political and at times cruel and hypocritical, I do not wish to attach blame to any dear brother in Christ (in due time Christ himself will sort that out). I do feel a burden of responsibility to expose some damaging and dangerous trends. If where you gather none of these trends are evident, praise the Lord and keep your eyes open. If you disagree, don't suffer any more, simply discard this paper. Time will tell. If, however, you see what I do, and you share some of my felt concerns, let's seek His face and His courage to resist and, if possible, reverse unhealthy trends.

### **SERIOUS CONCERNS ABOUT TYPE (2) ASSEMBLIES:**

These represent very warm, loving and hospitable believers. It is with much generosity that they support the Lord's work at home and abroad. They pull together and support each other. They are sincere in what they understand to be Scriptural, with a great love for detail and order. Once convinced a path is biblical, they display a steady hand in implementing the "principle" not flinching even as they refuse to break bread with godly members of their own families who would not feel free to sign letters, distancing themselves from life long co-workers and friendships, splitting otherwise happy young fellowships on the mission field, and the like. I am convinced that these dear brethren feel acutely the pain their procedures inflict on others. Yet the blood they see around them does not appear to encourage them to stop to reconsider if their principles or their understanding or application of them could be at fault. To doubt the process is to show weakness, lack of conviction, to be a lover of men rather than of God. In faithfulness to the "principles" they grit their teeth and press on.

In their strong desire to implement order and avoid the possibility of defilement, I fear the "**Old Paths – State Your Position" type (2)** are becoming increasingly narrow and have clearly departed from what most of us understood the "Old Paths" to be. This fellowship is dangerously approaching the behaviour of a sect. Consider the following recent developments:

[1] Movement towards central administration: – **Conferences:** Before, our conferences were open to all who love the Scriptures. Conferences like Dillenburg in Germany now require assemblies to send a list of names. Some conference convenors now request interested saints to "state positions" in order to be welcome at the conference. – **Finances:** A frightfully high proportion of finances supporting national labourers, missionaries, conferences, ministries, etc., is managed by one committee in Germany. Whether this small group of brothers are aware of it or not, assemblies world-wide are influenced as their funds are sent or withheld. – **Mission field:** It used to be our general practice to require 3 conditions for new missionaries: 1. a call from the Lord, 2. the backing of their home assembly, and 3. a welcome from the assembly on the mission field (if there was one). Now in some sectors a further approval of a committee is required, a committee which in some cases also wishes to direct the servant to where they think he should go (if anywhere).



[2] The new function of address lists: – **Answers required for inclusion:** We Brethren have always been against the idea of having a list of “members” of an assembly or an official list of member assemblies. I like the wording of a listing used by our American brethren “list of some assemblies and individual Christians ...” They represented some assemblies the compilers (a group of individual saints, not a formal authority) knew and felt free to recommend. In principle, every individual or assembly is free to offer his own list of friends or assemblies. The list is as trustworthy as is the compiler. Every list is useful to those who know and trust the compilers. Recently, however, written returns have been required from potential entrants. Thus the list compiling process has now been used to create a circle of fellowship, and not simply to describe it, as in the past. This to me is a new development. – **Loss of local freedom under Christ to receive visitors:** Although we claim to be listing some assemblies, and that the list is not official, in practice for most it has become official. Assemblies are now afraid to receive Godly visitors from non-listed assemblies. The loss of freedom to practice what American Brethren call “occasional fellowship” is a sad unhealthy narrowing development. Some of our assemblies have always been rigid on this point. But many, until recently, were free to exercised this Godly discernment.

[3] Co-operation with Christians from non-listed assemblies now viewed as defilement: As individual believers we each have differing consciences. That will always be so. Some with a broader heart feel free before the Lord to do some things other believers prefer to abstain from. Some assemblies have always graciously allowed for this, and a degree of inter-assembly tolerance existed in most countries, and definitely internationally this liberty has been respected. Now, some of the current “position” letters class virtually all forms of contact or co-operation with believers from non-listed assemblies as being defiling. Are we sure we must insist that all brethren must repent and separate from co-operation or association with the Gideons, Wycliffe Bible translators, New Tribes Mission, meetings of Christians at schools, universities and at work, and the like? This is a new development.

[4] The attempt to cover our other significant differences: In the desire to encourage assemblies and individuals to state a “position” on one or two issues, we seem to forget that we harbour many other serious differences. What has kept our assemblies together over the years? Our bond has been stronger than that provided by address lists. Some shared hymn books have helped. But one thing is sure, we have never had doctrinal uniformity. Some denominations have divided over their understanding on Baptism. We seem to allow every brother to hold and practice his own understanding (historians know that early Brethren leaders avoided early division by agreeing to silence on this issue – a compromise we’ve inherited). Some assemblies exclude from the Lord’s table sisters who have cut their hair, or who can’t promise never to cut it (take note, this is a reception issue). Some are barred from ministry in the assembly if a TV is discovered in their home. Others encourage moderation and do not make this an issue. Some assemblies are rigid on dress code, both male and female. Others relaxed. We differ on how to deal with divorce and remarriage. We differ on the use of musical instruments, videos, films, drama and other evangelistic tools. We differ on how to deal with demons, some even hold that they are no longer active! Some assemblies accept the moderate use of alcohol and smoking, others refuse those who do. Some give the impression that tithing has nothing to with the church, others encourage it, others ignore it. Some assemblies feel contaminated by a believer who celebrates Christmas with his family at home, some assemblies have even had a Christmas tree in their meeting hall. Those of you who travel have

probably lived a number of these things and know that these differences are real. Has our inter-assembly bond and harmony been sustained by hiding these differences? Must we strive to eliminate differences? Although some of these differences are uncomfortable, hiding them can breed intolerance.

Perhaps those who currently lead in pressing for withdrawal are aware that if a position is required on some of our other strongly felt differences, we would seriously fragment world-wide. **Will there be another wave of “tightening” once the current position is hardened? Is it a matter of time before we are asked to state our position on another issue and thus live through another schism?**

[5] Restrictive flow of information: Our vision as Brethren has always been to work for the Lord and not for a particular denomination or subgroup. Letters and reports of this work have freely circulated among any who wish to pray for the Lord's work. With concern I see this changing too. Some desire that missionary reports should only circulate in certain magazines. Recently we were asked why one of our news letters appeared in a magazine prepared and circulated outside type (2) assemblies. We have never placed restrictions on circular letters and articles in the past. As long as the meaning of our writings is not changed, why not let any interested saint read, be encouraged and pray? Our vision as Brethren has always been to work for the Lord and to depend on HIM for financial support, allowing the Lord to choose the channels. The Lord's servant should refuse funds if those who give wish to control him, that is, to come between the Lord and servant. I think most of us, if not all, still agree with that. Recently, however, I have been asked if I have received finances from assemblies X and Y. The view is that we missionaries should only receive funds from type (2) assemblies and from outside individuals, but not from non-listed assemblies. To me this is something new and unhealthy.

### **SERIOUS CONCERNS ABOUT TYPE (3) ASSEMBLIES:**

It is fair to say that brothers and sisters in the “**Old Paths – Moderate**” **type (3)** assemblies retain a deep appreciation of truths recovered by early Brethren. They hold strongly to the unity on the One Body Of Christ, they respect all assembly decisions which evidence the mark of God on them. They value inter-assembly fellowship and seek to support one another. Being moderate they do not wish to let go of valued truth but neither be tightened beyond their consciences. We humans tend to be extremist, thus this difficult moderate balance is to be respected.

[1] The danger of insisting on man-made traditions: We all find it difficult to accept change, be it new food or a new hair style. Changes in how our assembly meetings function also hit us hard, be it simple things like a change in seating arrangement, the time of the meeting or the use of a new hymn book. Brethren in type (3) assemblies have come under much criticism and have been accused of being “liberal”, “open”, “independent”, “weak on convictions” and more. This is painful and has encouraged some assemblies to move on to become type (4) assemblies. The opposite danger, as I see it, is that in an attempt to show that we are holding to the old paths and are not “liberal”, we hold on to the external man made traditions associated with the old paths. As one dear Swiss brother in a type (2) assembly explained to me while visiting him last year: if we allow brothers and sisters to sit together in the meeting, that will be the beginning of all the “new teachings”, it would be, in his own words “the head of the camel”. This excessive fear of change is also evident in many type (3) assemblies. Most man-made traditions have

noble origins, but insisting on them after their “sell-by-date” will make us increasingly less attractive to outsiders, and frustrate the next generation of insiders.

[2] The danger of paralysis by fear: Many dear saints in these assemblies do not know if others consider them “in” or “out”. The fear of being refused fellowship or being defiled or of causing more problems ensures that many stay away from an assembly while on holiday or avoid weekend visits. In some areas, inter-assembly visitation, which can be so encouraging, is at an all time low. The fear of man does cause paralysis, distancing those who should enjoy fellowship. Even the apostle Peter slipped on this one. Unless this changes, increasing loneliness will set in.

[3] The danger of passive hurting leadership: The tensions and accusations among otherwise godly older brothers, have eroded the esteem and respect in which we held many of our leading figures within the assemblies. It is now more difficult to accept “reliable reports” at face value. It is now more difficult to lead, to motivate and to inspire. Also more difficult to follow with a clear conscience. Leadership in type (2) assemblies rally together and keep in relatively good spirits. In contrast, leadership in type (3) assemblies are very hurt by accusations and the rupture of long life long friendships. Energy reserves seem to be low with little evident enthusiasm to seek a new large vision from the Lord and seize new opportunities. Unless leading brethren choose to rally together, encourage each other and seek His mind as to the future, I fear that prolonged stagnation will lead to a slow death.

#### **SERIOUS CONCERNS ABOUT TYPE (4) ASSEMBLIES:**

One cannot help but admire the fervent desire of brethren in the “**Reality At Any Price**” **type (4)** assemblies. If well directed, it has the potential to be used by the Lord to inspire the next generation of believers. In a way, it probably reflects the attitude of early Brethren who were willing to pay any price to be real and radically biblical and different from existing religious structures. My concern is that some may well be in danger of “throwing out the baby with the bath water”, that is, that important, useful, positive biblical distinctives rediscovered by early Brethren may be forgotten or purposely set aside.

[1] The danger of following fashions: It is no secret that the Christian world, and the evangelical one in particular, goes through fashions. At some stage the fashion was to interpret the Christian life as that of a soldier with disciplines, order, valour, etc. From that era we have formation of the “Salvation Army”, and we have also inherited a number of hymns like “Onward Christian Soldiers”. During the last century the emphasis was strong on the Holy Spirit. For some decades there was a strong emphasis on holiness, popularised by the Holiness Movement. A decade or two ago, the fashion was “power”, power evangelism, power praise, power in ministry. Most fashions are an overemphasis on one or two doctrines or aspects of the Christian life. Usually the overemphasis is a reaction to something that needed correcting. There may well be positive things in some fashions, but we must resist being carried away by the current.

The mega-church is now in fashion. Super large churches require professional teams to live up to audience expectations. They usually reduce serious body participation. This is an unhealthy trend. There is a theory going round that if all churches in a city unite, cities are transformed for Christ. While in London I saw a very popular video titled “Transformations” in which Cali, Colombia is used to “prove” the point. I don’t doubt that Christ can transform lives, families and cities. The Lord did it with Niniveh, He can do it again. I don’t doubt that God is working in Cali, but it is still one of the most dangerous cities in Colom-

bia. I have been told that there is much “sheep stealing” (especially talented and musical sheep) between these big churches. Exercise a bit of healthy scepticism. In the same way that “reliable reports” among Brethren are sometimes not so reliable, the same can happen outside! Not every model that fits the data is reliable for forecasting. Not everything that “shines” in the Christian world is gold!

Last year I took a few courses at Spurgeon’s College in south London. The college itself is a training school for Baptist pastors. To my surprise, perhaps one in ten students were sisters preparing to become pastors in Baptist churches. I do not recall this being so among Baptists 15 years ago. Not all Baptist churches agree with this. There is a trend within Christianity today to give men and women equal roles in the church. The Anglican church, Assemblies of God, and many other groups promote sisters in leadership within the church. From what I read, the acceptance of practising homosexuals within Christian churches is also growing. When we treat aspects of Paul’s apostolic teaching as simply “cultural”, we open the door to subjective selectivity. My dear brothers and sisters, do you see the danger?

[2] The danger of trying to be popular: My personal view is that type (4) assemblies by default have a tendency to attract the relaxed and self-centred saint. They are the saints who are not too concerned about biblical detail as long as “I can be me”, it works, and we have a nice time. These dear saints make leading these assemblies more difficult since sometimes they constitute an influential minority. Of course, the majority are not so! There can be the danger of avoiding controversy at all cost. Many feel that they have suffered “oppression” under rigid and sometimes dogmatic leadership, now wish to enjoy a new freedom. Some erroneously seem to think that the assembly is a democracy. A serious preoccupation is for these assemblies to become reactive assemblies: we were not allowed to use a guitar, so now lets do it. We were not allowed to sing other songs, so now we will. Changes should be positively induced, that is, there should be a sense that this is what the Lord would have us do. Positive changes can have wrong motivations, and this is damaging. It can promote a culture were the assembly is seen to exist for our benefit and not so much for His glory.

[3] The danger of disintegration due to loneliness: Once tired of being informed and asked to judge problems in others assemblies even in other countries, some prefer to distance themselves from other assemblies. This is shown by little interest in conferences, camp work, news letters and magazines. Unless the assembly is large with many gifts and families, the lack of a wider ministry, friendships and fellowship leads to a sense of loneliness. Young families and the youth will soon search around for their own camps, seminars and mission opportunities. The gifted may search for a wider sphere of service, and it may well lead to the end of the small lonely assembly.

[4] The danger of disintegration due to lack of identity: Some of these assemblies are in danger of moving away from the Brethren roots to such an extent that they wish to disown them completely. This, together with a desire among some to imitate current “successful” evangelical groups, may well lead to disintegration a few years down the road. If we have nothing distinctive, and we are trying to imitate others, why not simply close down and join them?

## Part D: Some Ideas and Suggestions

Having lived most of my life in a missionary context, I am very aware that it is easier to find fault and to criticise than to be positive and constructive. I see the evident hand of God working for His glory among believers who do things I personally disagree with. It is evident to me that the life of Christ and His power in ministry is manifest through imperfect Christians and imperfect assemblies. If our dear Lord would only bless perfection, he would never use any of us! I suggest our driving passion should not be to try to replicate some golden era in our distant past history (assuming they were perfect in form and doctrine), but to position ourselves in such a way that we become useful and effective instruments in His hand today, individually and collectively. Moses served his generation, Luther served his, Darby his, you and I are called to serve our generation. We cannot hide behind past glories and old books. On this, I suppose, we all agree. Here go some personal suggestions:

### **(1) The “Must Stay Alone” type.**

I have little to say here. I am not aware of having visited any of this type last year. If you have young children, for their sake do not extend your isolation more than necessary. Be careful to avoid an over critical spirit which may well make it very difficult for you to fit happily in any assembly made up of humans in the future.

### **(2) The “Old Paths – State Your Position” type.**

Perhaps I may be allowed to make the following suggestions to those leading and those gathering in this type of assembly:

[1] Express your concerns: Most sects become slowly so. A series of small changes, each change too small to fuss about. Gradually personal liberties are eroded, centralised authority is strengthened and unhealthy procedures implemented. In a loving yet firm way, express yourself. It is not normal but it is possible for an assembly to reach a wrong decision. You have a godly duty to speak up. Resist pressure to sign letters that conflict with your conscience. If you have done so, have the courage to make public your reconsidered view. A clear conscience is indispensable for happy communion with the Lord.

[2] Promote real harmony and acceptance: Perhaps through missionary reports, magazines, regional and international conferences, we could educate ourselves to accept each other with our differences. Perhaps we could openly talk about them in the light of Scripture without accusing each other, rather stressing the real basis of our unity. In some assemblies clapping while singing is the cultural equivalent of singing hymns with Bach and Beethoven tunes in four voices. We need not impose our ways on others. Could it be that both can be just as pleasing to the Lord?

[3] Assembly lists: If you really agree that these lists are “by no means official”, ensure that in practice your assembly does not treat them as official. Lists are useful, but we shall give account to Christ, and not to list compilers, as to who we receive and who we reject.

[4] Fund committees: It is efficient for a committee of brethren to distribute the funds collected by many assemblies (or all assemblies in one country). But it is dangerous, since it puts in the hands of a few a disproportionate influence or power of action. Wasn't this one of the concerns early Brethren broke away from? At the risk of being a bit less

efficient, I suggest the formation of many funds in each country, each representing one large or a couple of smaller assemblies, each stating clearly what projects they support, increasing accountability to the brethren who give. Better still, to follow the lead of our American (The Fund For Christian Service: FFCS) and Dutch (Nehemiah Fund) brethren. They act as clearing houses for gifts of individual saints and assemblies. This encourages individuals and assemblies to read reports and consider carefully where the Lord would direct them to give, rather than sending it automatically to the national missionary “black box”. The degree of efficiency will depend on the degree in which local saints depend on the Lord for their guidance. Perhaps we could take that risk.

[5] Careful speech: The dear brethren you and I may currently differ with are still very much part of His Body. In exaggerating the doctrinal significance of some of our differences and accusing our brethren with harsh words, we are hurting the Body and thus Christ himself. Paul could have accused Barnabas of being too liberal, too lax in the Lord's work, showing family bias rather than respect to the holiness of the Lord's things. He could be accused of trying to defile the work of God by including an ungodly John Mark. Paul could have accused Barnabas of lack of submission, unwillingness to take his proper place in the Body of Christ. Letters could have been written to the saints that Barnabas shows evidence of independence and denial of the unity of the Body of Christ. Barnabas could have easily accused Paul of being legalistic, of usurping the role of the Holy Spirit, etc. Perhaps some of these accusations did take place, since we know there was such a “sharp disagreement” that the mission team split up. But there was no talk of putting each other out of fellowship and no evidence of pressure on all saints to judge the matter and choose between Paul and Barnabas. It is evident that any error or difference can be converted into a “vital” difference. Our differences on baptism can be so worded as to divide us, and perhaps some day they will. We shall give account of the words we say, what we write, what we sign. Let's make sure our guns are pointing at the real enemy.

[6] Maintain dialogue: Seek opportunities for open and friendly dialogue with your brethren outside your own type. It is through open friendly dialogue that the Lord can help us seek and retain balance. Silencing or excluding disagreeing voices creates a false sense of peace. Even the Jehovah Witnesses sect enjoys this type of internal harmony. There is nothing divine about it. The early church also had its healthy and sometimes hot debates. Let's not fear discussion and interchange. The Truth of God is able to stand alone.

### **(3) The “Old Paths – Moderate” type.**

If you find yourself in one of these assemblies, you may find some of the above suggestions to type (2) assemblies just as applicable. I would like, however, to add a call to all in type (3) assemblies, and their leadership in particular:

[1] Set your minds for action: I feel that many of these assemblies are in crisis. There is a dire need for visionary leadership, to leave behind the frequent talk of assembly tensions and injustices, and press on to a new enjoyment of the Lord. To seek from the Lord new open doors, and to inspire the young people and families to develop their gifts and use them in creative and biblical ways, in the assembly and among the lost world.

[2] Re-establish lines of fellowship: There is a need to put aside the fears of being rejected, and once again encourage inter assembly visitation. It is time for those with evangelistic or teaching gifts (old and young) to circulate freely among the assemblies to foment appreciation of what the assembly is, practical godliness and greater awareness

and interaction with the outside lost world. Invite these gifted brethren to your assembly. Work with them to arrange seminars, workshops, one day mini-conferences in your area. Create opportunities for them to be a blessing. Collect information and encourage local saints to benefit from regional and international conferences.

[3] Update teaching style: I believe that what attracts and inspires the current and coming generation is not “truth and doctrine” but reality – an authentic and radical Christian life. Naturally truth and reality go hand in hand, but without evident reality, there will be no interest in truth. The very early Brethren had reality and it was exciting. We have it in our roots. Let’s encourage and free our teachers and writers to express our interesting assembly distinctives in culturally acceptable forms. Don’t rely exclusively on distributing good old books. I fear that the reprinting of old Brethren books is on the whole only attractive to a minority, particularly to those with academic minds, historic interests or eccentric disposition. We must reach everyone! In some quarters, there is excessive focus on Old Testament types, allegories, shadows and pictures. We nearly give the impression that the Bible is a coded book. For sure Scripture contains imagery and some typology, but perhaps we over do it. Clear and practical presentation of God’s word is objective, challenging and powerful.

[4] Remain committed to be Biblical and practical: Probably much of the current frustration and rejection by some of Brethren roots, is mainly a rejection of our external forms, inconsistencies and strange traditions. We teach plural leadership, yet many assemblies have been controlled for years by one or two Diotrophes. We teach that under Christ there is no higher authority than that of the assembly, yet many assemblies are paralysed by the fear of possible censure of a labouring brother or a neighbouring assembly. We teach that every believer has at least one gift and should use it for the building up of the body, yet few leaders in assemblies spend much time and energy helping saints identify their gifts, develop them and create opportunities for them to serve. The most effective way to inspire and influence insiders and outsiders is to **live** a happy, healthy and growing assembly life.

[5] Encourage our sisters: Most Christian congregations have more sisters than brothers. This is partly because women live longer, but I think it reflects the fact that women are more spiritually aware than men. Having worked in evangelism and the formation of new assemblies here in Colombia since 1992, for every interested man we usually have 3 or more interested women. We must help our many gifted sisters find areas of service beyond their home, children’s work, cleaning the hall and making sandwiches for fellowship meetings (each duly rewarded if done unto the Lord). There is so much more they can do within the Scriptural limitations. For example, home, prison and hospital evangelistic visits. Reach out to asylum seekers. Write songs, articles, books and tracts. Influence local schools with the gospel. Run discipleship programmes. And much more! We must encourage them to be creative!

[6] Revitalise or die: I write this with felt heaviness. But I believe it is true. For some it may be too late to change, but unless assemblies choose to embrace reform in a happy, positive and biblical way, the future is bleak. While holding emphatically to what is clearly stated in Scripture, our 19th and 20th century man-made traditions must be adjusted or replaced with culturally sensitive outward forms. For this we need the collaboration of recently converted saints (if available) and families with children who are likely to be more in contact with current local culture. These may be key in helping the assembly to position itself to reach our generation within its culture. This is what we work at every day here on

the mission field. We don't want to replicate British, German or Dutch style assemblies in Colombia. We hold to and teach the same core doctrinal content in a culturally acceptable package. We wish to encourage the formation of genuine Colombian style assemblies. We desire that those who visit us feel at home in the assembly, be it in music style, language, dress code, seating arrangement, hall decoration, teaching style, etc. It would be a great pity if our "strange forms" would make it difficult for non-Christians to come to Christ and happily remain and grow within our assemblies. The apostle Paul, with a good reason, tried to be all things to all men. He resisted the strong Jewish lobby who added cultural complications making it difficult for Gentiles to come to Christ.

#### **(4) The "Reality At Any Price" Type.**

There is no doubt that an interesting movement of God took place in the early 1800's, at the start of the now called Brethren movement (it was not the first movement of God, neither the last, but it was a real one). Quite a few of these recovered teachings have now influenced and in some cases been absorbed well outside Brethren fellowships. Many pastors no longer function as "one man ministries", participation by the "non professional" is encouraged, plural leadership is respected by many, appreciation of the Body of Christ as going beyond denominational structures, a movement to allow the Holy Spirit more freedom in Christian meetings, much use of the dispensational model (still strong in evangelical circles in North America), etc. How did we influence? Partly through literature and open conferences, partly through generous Brethren funding of healthy initiatives outside Brethren assemblies, partly through so many believers leaving the Brethren movement and carrying with them many of these teachings. Perhaps we could ask, do we still have anything worth fighting for? Do we still have a distinctive worth living up to and worth exporting? I believe we do.

If you find yourself in one of these assemblies, perhaps I could encourage you to steer clear from some of the real dangers outlined before. You may well find some of the recommendations to types (2) and (3) are very applicable to your situation also.

#### **(5) The "We've Had Enough Of It" type.**

If you have already left us [and if you ever read this letter!], perhaps I could ask you to forgive us for causing pain to you and your family through some of our rigid (non Biblical) traditions, our judgmental ethos, and our internal strife. Please turn away from the temptation of nursing bitter memories. They do no good. Recall the happy times of fellowship, the camps, the conferences, some of the good teachings we shared. Don't become cynical of Christian fellowship. Christ is still building His Church. Be an active part of it. In the event that no one has ever said this to you, thank you for your years of contribution within the Brethren movement. With our many "warts", the Lord has still used you and me for the blessing of people at home and on the mission field. Don't forget that your labour in the Lord among the Brethren has not been in vain.

In the event that you feel you are on the way out but haven't actually left your assembly yet, perhaps the Lord may use something in this paper to help you recapture a fresh vision of what assembly life can be like. I pray something may inspire you to work with others for a healthy and Scriptural development in your home assembly. You may well find that others deeply share your concern.



## Part E: Issues worth rethinking and discussing

We Brethren are classed by some among the most arrogant and divisive set of believers on earth. Why do we sometimes give this impression? Before I married, my brother and I fitted a new kitchen in the old house we were to live in. Since it was our first kitchen, we followed the assembling instructions carefully. When something didn't **look right**, we would stop, restudy the design and discuss it together. If we concluded we had gone wrong, we would try to correct it. Looking over more than 150 years of Brethren history, one cannot help but feel that something has gone seriously wrong. Our marriages have their problems, but the Lord designed them to stay together. Why don't we Brethren manage to stay together? On the whole, it is fair to say that we are all God fearing, passionate lovers of Christ and the Scriptures, keen to please our Lord above all else. If I may say so, we Brethren are a bunch of fairly friendly and nice people really. Why then do we divide again and again? Why do we hurt each other so much? Is repetitive structural division the divine design to protect the holiness of the House of God? Is there another way?

Some say our problem is the carnality of some difficult leading brothers. I would disagree. No doubt there is some carnality, and carnality complicates our problems, but even with 100% non carnal saints, our theology seems to require repetitive schisms. If you allow me the expression, our problem is not primarily one of hardware but one of doctrinal software. The observed evidence suggests a virus that every couple of decades forces upon us a division. Some assembly somewhere makes an unwise decision or picks on one of our differences, makes it "vital" and then forces assemblies everywhere to take "positions" on the issue. We spit into 2 or 3 roughly homogeneous assembly networks. After the split each new group licks its wounds and later praises the Lord for the peace and harmony we now enjoy without those difficult and ungodly brothers. But historical evidence shows that the peace is short lived. Unless we identify and correct the virus in our software, it is just matter of time before we shall divide again. Why not? Could it be possible that we are misreading some of the divine assembly instructions? Here are a number of issues worth studying in a fresh way and discussing locally and more widely.

### **Authority:**

Clearly Christ has delegated authority in the family, in the Church and in society at large. It is universally agreed that Christ is the head of the Church and we should all submit to Him. This is simple when we all agree. In practice, how should we reach a decision in an assembly? Does every brother and sister have a say? Only the brothers? Only some brothers? How do we know which brothers? Does an assembly always need consensus? Is consensus the only way of knowing we have the mind of Christ on an issue? Is it right for one or two voices to block an assembly decision? How to proceed when this happens? What role should outsiders play? Is there any human authority (a brother or a group of brothers) above that of the local church? Here the issue of Biblical leadership within the assembly is worth exploring.

### **Assembly Decisions:**

We normally understand an assembly decision to be a decision by an assembly acting on behalf of the whole church (or Body) of Christ. What is decided by the assembly is bound in heaven. Therefore it affects every believer everywhere. With this mechanism we say

we avoid independence of assemblies on the one hand, and we avoid human hierarchies on the other. As long as decisions arrived at by assemblies have the mark of Christ upon them, they are happily accepted by all. The process works well. It is when a serious concern arises as to the correctness of a local decision that this procedure begins to display undesirable features. Can an assembly bind an unrighteous decision in the heavenlies? Surely not. Not even temporarily. If the assembly happens to be a stubborn one, it will mark the beginning of a division.

Perhaps we could ask what is the essential nature of an assembly decision? That is, what makes a decision by an assembly an assembly decision? Is it the fact that all (or at least the leading brothers) agree together? Is it the fact that they circulate a signed letter? Or is it that a decision by an assembly is only worth anything if it is in agreement with the mind of Christ? Matthew 18:18 refers to binding on earth and in heaven. Matthew 18:19 states that the Father in heaven will do whatever two believers agree on down here. Will the Father really do anything two of us agree on? Surely both the binding verse (v.18) and the prayer verse (v.19) both presuppose harmony with the mind of God. If we are not in the will of God, the prayer and the assembly decision are simply empty words. The Father does not feel bound, neither should any of His children.

Brethren in type (2) assemblies are mainly of the view that assembly decisions are immediately binding world-wide, and remain binding until the assembly concerned retracts or is ejected from the fellowship. This may take months, even years. Type (3) believers say yes, all assembly decisions are binding as long as they reflect the mind of Christ. The great majority of decisions are of this nature. In essence these positions are very close, but they differ in practical procedures. But we have put so much weight on these procedures that they have distanced and then even divided instructed minds and good friends like Darby and Kelly in the late 1800's.

Another thing I puzzle about is this: If an assembly decides to refuse fellowship to a sister because she has cut her hair, is that decision ratified in heaven and bound on all everywhere? When this sister visits an assembly in the US or Italy we shall have a serious inconsistency because they would like to receive her. Or do some assembly decisions on matters of order and reception only have local or regional significance?

If an assembly in Europe decides to receive a believer accepting his Catholic baptism as a valid baptism, is that decision binding on all assemblies everywhere? If such a brother would come and visit Colombia, say, would the assemblies here be free to choose if they feel it correct to receive him or not? Is it correct to receive a brother holding to an error (at least considered an error by the receiving assembly) if the brother agrees not to teach it?

### **The Unity of the Body of Christ:**

We Brethren are quite prone to point our fingers at other Brethren fellowships and accuse them of denying the unity of the Body of Christ. We can be especially stern when those closest to us refuse to be bound by one of our letters or decisions. My Grandfather's brother fellowships with dear believers in the Tunbridge Wells group since 1938. Even today they accuse us KLCG brethren of denying the unity of the Body of Christ because our ancestors rejected a decision taken at the Tunbridge Wells assembly in the early 1900's (and according to them, we have not properly repented). Is it possible to reject an unwise assembly decision and still hold firmly to the truth of unity of the Body of Christ?

New Testament references to the Body of Christ seem to refer to the collection of individual Christians and the relationship among them. Each individual saint has a particular gift, function and place within Christ's Body. The "body" imagery does not seem to refer to the interaction between different assemblies and much less between different groups or denominations. There is interdependence between the members, yet the Lord as head directs each individual saint. The relationships between different assemblies fits better under the imagery of the House of God. Christ is the head over His House, and He defines the order in it. If an individual or an assembly chooses to reject a godly decision made by another assembly, they should not be accused of denying the unity of the body of Christ, rather of rejecting godly order in His House. Kelly felt compelled to not accept an assembly decision. It seems unreasonable to me to accuse him of not holding to the unity on the Body of Christ. Our ancestors felt compelled by the evidence to reject a decision in Tunbridge Wells. Is there a Biblical mechanism whereby we can reject a local decision and yet not divide over it?

### **Association and Defilement:**

Assembly procedures or algorithms based on the Old Testament teachings given to the Jewish nation on defilement have caused much grief among us. Given the pain, the divisions, the inconsistencies and the isolation generated among us, I suggest our interpretations are worth careful re-examination. One cannot help but feel something is seriously wrong as one takes a step back and looks at the effects of this application.

Let's take one among many possible examples. Last year I met our dear old Australian sister Miss Beryl Harris in Switzerland. She is a veteran missionary devoted to the Lord's work among our assemblies in Zaire for half a century. She is not willing to sign a "position" letter **against her conscience**. The brethren in that area of Switzerland who dearly love her and have supported her for many years informed her that she could not participate at the Lord's table with them. To receive her would go **against their conscience**. She has now returned to Africa. I wonder how she must feel at her advanced and vulnerable age? How does the Lord see this? Is she really "evil"? Could she contaminate our dear Swiss brethren? Do we really need to treat her in this way? You will notice that she has also been excluded from the new US "assembly list". I sincerely doubt that our heavenly Father has excluded her. He obviously sees things differently. He does not treat His children and servants in this way. You and I know that, yet with pain in our hearts we still exclude each other! Why? It is related to our understanding on defilement.

The catchy motto "Association with evil defiles" is not found in Scripture. That in itself is no problem. It is how we interpret and apply this that causes such diverse and sometimes sectarian, even eccentric behaviour among us. Each of its three components are worth careful attention:

**(1) Evil:** We refer to moral and doctrinal evil. But what exactly should we class as evil? The New Testament has a couple of examples, but we have greatly extended this list. Is a doctrinal error on Baptism evil? Is it evil to exclude a sister who has cut her hair from the Lord's table? Is it evil to receive her? Is an assembly evil or defiled if it uses musical instruments in some of its meetings? Is unjustified defamation moral evil? Is distorting the truth moral evil? In practice, we cannot escape the fact that there is a great deal of subjectivity among us on this matter.

**(2) Defiles:** Our communion with the Lord is very stable, yet delicate. A small hidden sin, an ungodly or bitter attitude, a dirty conscience, an unforgiving spirit quickly robs the

sensitive Christian from the joy in communion with Him and with fellow saints. Defilement and uncleanness in the Old Testament are given primarily in the context of hygiene, medical and physical matters. We find a set of sensible instructions which should be followed precisely (no grace or personal subjectivity allowed) to protect the nation of Israel from small pox, diphtheria, cholera and the like. A defiled person was a carrier or a possible carrier of a contagious disease. What circumstances defiled the Jew are clearly described. When is a New Testament believer defiled? Do some sins defile and others not? Do all errors defile? If not all, then how do we determine which sins and which errors do and which don't? Can a Christian be defiled for years without knowing it? Does he have to do something or say something to be defiled?

**(3) Association with:** This, like the term "evil" is open to much subjectivity within our circles. For the Jew, to whom the instructions were given, the matter was quite plain: it was a matter of physical closeness or contact. When we treat these sensible Jewish instructions as typology and try to extract from them procedures for application within the day to day life of the New Testament Church, we are left with the task of defining the spiritual equivalent to "physical nearness and contact". Again, this becomes subjective. Some in our fellowship try to take it literally and do their best never to visit, enter the house or be good friends with anyone in a non-listed assembly (of course, eventually they allow for some special cases, e.g. if it is a close family member, or if the non-listed brother is very ill, etc., but by doing this they have incorporated personal judgement which was not allowed to the Jews) The Taylorite Brethren vividly illustrate this literal physical application. Others in our fellowship understand that this defilement by association occurs only when in public. They feel free to develop friendships with non-listed brethren, financially support some of their Christian work, some may even venture on family holidays with these, but, they would never consider preaching in the open air together, giving out bibles together, or any other Christian activity which may cause the world to think we are "together". There are others among us that feel that the association that must be avoided is the breaking of bread. They understand the Lord's Table as the possible point of defilement. These are happy to work with Gideons, enjoy a Christian concert, invite a friend to a well known evangelistic crusade in town, and the like. Others would say that to carefully receive a visitor to the Lord's table from a non-listed assembly would not defile, but visiting a non-listed assembly could defile. Until as late as the mid 1990's, all these perspectives were practised among us by different assemblies in "happy fellowship" in different parts of the world.

**Defilement's chain reaction:** Then there is the matter of the chain reaction of association. Realising the great psychological damage this teaching can cause in a fellowship, some say that the only defiled person is the evil person. His friends and fellow saints only become defiled if they also become evil, that is, if they accept his evil teaching, practice his moral evil or positively encourage him or join him in his evil way. Others explain association allowing for only 2 levels of defilement: Primary (the evil person himself) and Secondary (those who identify in any way with this primary evil or those who fail to make a public statement against him).

But the Old Testament teaching on defilement is much more radical than this. Because every defiled person is a carrier (or possible carrier) of an infection or a contagious disease, those who touch him become "risk" cases, and those who touch "risk" cases, become "risk" cases themselves. For very logical reasons, the defilement chain cannot be limited to one or two stages. It simply has no end. Unless we have a tightly closed and controlled network (like the Taylorites do), this can not be practised. Is that what we

need? Is that where some would like to take us? More important still, are we positively sure that these are the divine procedures to be applied in the Church of the Living God? The interpretation of types, shadows and allegories has always been a dangerous and somewhat subjective art. Could it be possible that some of the Old Testament instructions may have been given for exclusive use to the Jewish nation? Does it have to have a Church application to justify its presence in Scripture? If the Church is a mystery disclosed in the New Testament, perhaps it is in the New Testament that we will find all the mind of God for a happy, Scriptural and healthy assembly life. The Old Testament narratives would then be used as illustrations or parables of New Testament ecclesiastical truth, and not as the basis for it.

## Part F: Conclusion

The term “old paths” is not a very useful one, since it is not well defined. It means different things to different brethren. Early Brethren (Darby included) changed during the 19th century. To which 19th century decade should “old paths” refer? Our world-wide fellowship of Brethren assemblies has never been uniform in doctrine, format and practice, thus “old paths” to one sector of our assemblies means something different to another. It would be helpful if we agreed that “old paths” referred to the early church in the New Testament. This would bless us with objectivity and give us a worthy goal to strive for.

One thing is clear: our world wide fellowship of Brethren assemblies is changing. We are all changing. While our bond was strong and well focused, we were able to sustain a fair degree of differences among us. We allowed for a degree of liberty of individual conscience. We allowed for cultural and some doctrinal differences. We allowed for friendships and different degrees of co-operation with believers outside our circles. This is changing.

My felt fear is that the a sizeable set of assemblies, made up of many nice and godly believers who I have referred to in this paper as the “old paths – state your position” type, are heading towards **sect behaviour**. In some parts of the world the assemblies have always been very narrow. What is new, is the drive to ensure all assemblies become so. Many saints sense this narrowing shift, but feel powerless to do anything about it.

I observe that the other sizeable set of assemblies, made up of many nice and godly believers who I have referred to in this paper as the “old paths – moderate” type, are heading towards a **slow death**. As long as our gracious Lord Jesus Christ remains the Head of His church, there is still hope. But I feel a change in our mind set is necessary: a willingness to set aside some of our comfortable yet hindering man-made traditions, a willingness to become more outward looking, aggressively seeking to interact with the lost with the gospel of Christ, a willingness to develop new ways to present the old truths.

A third type of assemblies, made up of many nice and godly believers who I have referred to in this paper as the “reality at any price” believers, are in danger of **disintegration**. Unless our distinctives are recovered and presented in an attractive way, unless biblical principles on assembly life are upheld and made to work, the new generation may never know them and will slowly adapt to current evangelical trends. In time they will have no reason to stay and will leave. There are many godly men and women out there. There is also much pragmatism in Christianity today. Let’s not forget that the Lord has given us something worth sharing!

It would be unrealistic to expect you to agree with everything I have written in this paper. But if the Lord has used something here to catch your attention, may I encourage you to share your concerns with fellow saints. Discuss some of these issues in a constructive way in your home, in your assembly, perhaps even in regional conferences. Let's ask the Lord what He wants to do with us and through us in this our generation. Maybe the Lord will still have mercy on us.

“Then those who feared the Lord talked with each other,  
and the Lord listened and heard”  
Malachi 3:16