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Can We Recover the Brethren Legacy?

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“Christians ... often assume that if they have the truth, everyone who disagrees in even the slightest degree must be cast into outer darkness, lest we give aid and comfort to relativists ... So, I applaud the thrust of your essay ... I certainly hope that your paper will have a good hearing among the Brethren.”

John M. Frame

“I like your paper very much. You have made some excellent points ... You have put your finger on some basic issues.”

Harold H. Rowdon

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What kind of title is that?

Objections

I am sure that there will be various reactions to this paper even before its contents have been read just because of its title.

First of all, the objection could be raised that there is no need for anything to be recovered because nothing has been lost.

Wilful blindness can be the only reason for a reaction of this kind. The worldwide break-up of assemblies of the Brethren does not justify this attitude.

A second and more valid objection could be that an emphasis on “we” is misplaced. We cannot recover anything on our own. Only the Lord can help.

Yes, I would agree with this reaction – to a point. But the bad condition of things is not the Lord’s fault; it is our responsibility. If I sin my reaction cannot be: “Only the Lord can make things right again, so I won’t do anything about my sin.”

Solutions

True, only the Lord can forgive and bring a believer back into fellowship with Himself, but He can and will do it only if the believer confesses his sin. We can only expect hope for the Brethren if we are willing to confess our failings and be prepared to do something about them.

Some readers may admit to the seriousness of the present condition, but object to trying to do something about it because it is obviously the Lord’s judgment on the Brethren and should run its course. This attitude implies that what God wanted to give His Church through the Brethren was not that special and its demise need not be regretted. I disagree very strongly with this stance.

Something worth saving

To get any profit from this paper the need for help must be recognised as well as the willingness to do something in the conviction that there is something worth saving. The truth has to be faced and the problems identified. Only in this way can we get to the root of things and take effective action.

Where are all the quotations?

This is not a tennis match

I will not use quotations, biblical or Brethren, in this paper. Quoting doesn’t help much if for every quote the author uses five others are used by a critical reader to prove the contrary. This results in an endless back-and-forth of verse throwing, where all involved simply maintain their own position throughout. It is not helpful. A winner is not determined by who has the most quotes on his side. What I am trying to say here must be understood against the background of Scripture as such.

Is this just another of these attacks on the Brethren?

What I am definitely not attempting to do is prove the Brethren model or position wrong and another one to be right, e.g. I will not go into arguments for or against dispensationalism or covenant theology – at the most I will only point to their similarities.

Self-destructing system

This paper is not an attack on the Brethren, but to be able to proceed properly several things must be clear. We must realise that the Brethren have become a system. They are no longer what they were in the beginning, and this is the reason for their troubles. As a system the Brethren are self-destructing. Many assemblies are committing spiritual suicide by expelling believers from their midst who do not appear to conform to the system. I would be the first to admit that there are troublemakers who cause more damage than good in assemblies. There are cases where sin and self-will require being dealt with, but in many cases believers in good standing are forced to leave because they cannot accept the ultra-exclusiveness of their fellow believers. Many assemblies are bleeding and dying because of this. What often remains are bitter, self-righteous people who believe they have the truth and are its last faithful defenders or representatives.

Is the Brethren legacy based on negation?

Nobody has all the answers

It can be argued that the Brethren were founded on the premise that everybody else was wrong. There is truth in that. But the sharpness of this accusation can be softened by stating it differently. The Brethren were founded on the premise that none of us is completely right – the Brethren included. That is the Brethren legacy!

What was the problem in the last century, or what moved Brethren to do what they did?

Well, it was frustration with all the different Christian groups being in a kind of competition with each other. Cross-denominational fellowship was not really possible. You were either a Baptist or not. You were either a Methodist or not. You might be an ongoing Methodist, but it was expected of you to decide one way or the other. You either belonged or you didn't. If there were some things you disagreed with within the Methodist theology, well, then leave the Methodists or change your opinion.

Is truth relative?

In our modern day and age things have changed somewhat, but not completely. Today everything has become relative. Your truth is the truth for you. My truth is the truth for me. It is politically incorrect to call in question someone else's truth because it is not the same as mine. The idea is that there is no such thing as absolute truth. (My own personal standpoint is that there is absolute truth as revealed in the Bible, but as a finite being I can never claim to comprehend or possess it absolutely.) Different, even opposing, views are all seen as being equally valid.

Belonging for a reason

Nevertheless, people within different groups are in them because they feel they are more right than others. If you want to be part of a Mennonite fellowship, you still have to become a Mennonite and accept those points which distinguish them from others. There is a reason for your becoming a Mennonite and not an Anglican. You cannot be almost Mennonite just like you can't be almost pregnant. You either are or you are not.

Man-made rules and regulations

The Brethren rightly recognised the problems in the requirement to subscribe to certain givens. So they said: "Let's do away with these man-made givens, these badges and distinguishing marks which only serve to separate true believers from each other. Let's be no-name, no-creed. Let's leave man-made systems aside and come together on neutral ground* and see what the Lord will do with that." Well, the paradox is that a no-name, no-creed company of believers becomes just as distinguishable as others. They have their own unique characteristics and are easily recognised – just like the no-name articles in stores are just as easy to spot as the brand-name ones.

The Brethren became a group among many others, with all the shortcomings and faults, all the claims of being in the right which characterised other groups. They stopped short. Like Joash King of Israel they didn't strike the ground often enough (2 Kings 13:18–19).

It worked in the beginning

But for a short time in the beginning the endeavour worked. It worked because the early Brethren did not require those interested in what they were doing to leave their ecclesiastical positions and exclusively attend the meetings Brethren held. It may well be that this happened, but it was not demanded of believers. In the beginning of their history Brethren had difficulties with representatives of the Church of England who condemned them for not belonging to the Establishment. With time the Brethren became an Establishment of their own and looked down at other Christians who did not "belong" to them.

Two streams

What came to be called the Brethren Movement was not the idea of a single person. There were many people involved, from different backgrounds and positions in life. Within the movement some persons became prominent and later determined its direction. There were two distinct "streams", which can be called the "Darby" one (which became exclusive) and the "Groves" one (which tended to remain open), long before there were any troubles with Bethesda and the resulting "Open Brethren". In the beginning things were spread out more and made an impact. The movement didn't get CNN coverage, but it did make the headlines back then.

* I am well aware of the arguments and theology behind "being gathered on the ground of the unity of the body of Christ", but this was an understanding which became more defined later and in the beginning was not loaded down with all the implications it has today.

Some problems

Stagnation and crystallisation

The Brethren began by being open for the Lord's leading and guidance. They were willing to recognise what was of the Lord in other Christian groups. With time various viewpoints crystallised and became dominant within the movement. The mistake Brethren made was that they considered these viewpoints to have been the purpose for the movement itself. What came to be typically Brethren, what now defined them, was viewed as the reward for their openness for the Lord's leading. But the initial purpose had not been to be so distinguished or defined. They stopped growing at a certain point and made the development at that point mandatory for the acceptance of other Christians amongst them.

Requirements

It is probably well-nigh impossible to be in fellowship with the Brethren without being a dispensationalist. To be counted among their number there are several distinct teachings you have to ascribe to. No, you will not be required to sign on a dotted line somewhere, but what is required of you is just as rigorous and binding as if you did.

A law of cleanliness more involved and complicated than any Old Testament one meant to protect Israel from the influence of the nations developed. An intricate analysis of sin through association came into practice.

Human versus divine

The Brethren underlined the important truth that the Church belonged to Christ and not man. They rightly pointed to the fact that the leading of the Holy Spirit was sadly neglected in many Church organisations. The human element in the organisation of the Church was the cause for the troubles there were and should be replaced by allowing the Spirit to lead and control. Man usurping the Spirit's place, as ordained Pastor or in defining in advance how a particular Church service should be held, was considered evil. But the Spirit leads and controls through persons. As soon as people begin enforcing the observance of spiritual truths and obligations you have the human element.

Reconsideration necessary

Much called evil has to be reconsidered. No, the reader need not be shocked. I am not calling for a reconsideration of things like divorce, adultery, homosexuality, lying, stealing, murder and such things. Sin remains sin, and man's "advancement" does not change that. The Bible is clear on what sin is – even if believers in our day attempt to distort things like its teaching on homosexuality. I am calling for a reconsideration of labelling other believers who live dedicated lives "evil" because they are still within "man-made systems" or favour ordained ministries. The argument is often that, if these other believers were really as dedicated as they appear to be, they would realise the wrongness of their ecclesiastical position and leave. I do not feel it worthwhile discussing the present topic with persons of this attitude. Such persons are only convinced of one thing: that their position is right, and they will only be happy if others come around to seeing things in the same way.

Conflicts of the past

Many assemblies of the Brethren are so preoccupied with themselves and their history of “faithfulness” that they are not aware of positive changes in other Christian groups. The majority of Bible-believing groups today desire unity and mutual recognition. Members are no longer aware of the reasons behind divisions which may have taken place hundreds of years ago. The conflicts which were so important then simply no longer exist. Un-biblical standpoints or stubborn attitudes of past leaders and members cannot be applied to the contemporary situation. Forcing members to go back and deal with matters they might not even be aware of, or standpoints they themselves do not have, is a big mistake.

The early Brethren

Filtering the past through the present

Much has been said and written about the early Brethren. Very, very much by such looking back. Looking back they assess things from their present standpoint and the experiences gained in the meantime. They filter what they are dealing with. This applies just as much to such writers who were originally involved in the very beginning of the movement as it does to those who write about it today. Their later judgment of what was then is not automatically correct simply because they were there. Their later standpoints could easily colour their way of looking at the past. To this can be added that the Darby stream has received the greater hearing or publicity and the Groves one has been more or less brushed off as insignificant. In any case, what was later said about the early Brethren was not said by themselves in the beginning. Of course, this can all be a question of growth and maturity. Not everything was said that had to be said in the beginning because it was still in a stage of development. But was it right to draw the conclusion that what developed later was what was intended by the movement? Inherent in it?

I am convinced that this is where the greatest mistake has been made. The beginning of the movement was like gaining access to a magnificent mansion. Brethren became so excited by what they found when the door opened that they camped down in the hallway and did not go further to discover the other rooms in the house.

Nothing to add?

The Brethren lost their dynamic because they stopped being open for development. They settled down. The conviction which crystallised was that they had discovered (or recovered) all that there was to discover, especially as they came to believe that the Lord would return very soon and there was nothing more to learn about the truth. The original call for unity became one to uniformity. You were in the right if you thought like the Brethren and in the wrong if you didn't.

But does true unity require uniformity?

Would one universal Church be ideal?

Is it possible for just one Christian group to have all the answers?

We need variety

A single Christian group does not have all the answers. This does not imply that some Church structures are not more correct than others. The break-up of Christ's Church into different groups is a tragedy involving man's self-will and sinfulness. But it is also a blessing reflecting God's wisdom. Just think if there was only one universal Church as to outward form as there is one in spiritual unity. Conformity overlapping perfectly with unity. If things were to go wrong in this one Church, the whole would be contaminated. (See the Jehovah's Witnesses.) It is not possible to contaminate the whole Church today. It's sad that Christians can't seem to agree enough on important issues, but it is good that not all can be moved to follow a wrong path either. As humans we are one-sided and have our own views and opinions which we feel to be right. There are so many of us and we all complement and correct each other with our views. God didn't create just one kind of flower, but thousands of different ones: thousands of variations on the same basic theme. We do not only have roses, we also have daffodils, orchids and so on. Each is what it is and contributes to the whole. *Together* they all make up what "flower" means.

Is unanimity a proof of truth?

In this immense variety that exists there are many people who have the same or similar views. This brings them together, unites them. Often this can lead to the assumption that, when we find others thinking the same way we do, this is evidence of our view being the truth. It is only natural that common denominators attract, but error just as much as truth can unite. The dedication and unity of adherents to a certain view or idea does not automatically make it right – see for example National Socialism or Communism. Nor does it automatically imply that since so many have come to agree about the same things there is no more need for development and growth.

Are various Church groups part of God's plan?

Did things happen the right way?

We have to be careful here, but the break-up into so many different groups was probably the only way things could really work. It is very, very similar to the story of Man's Fall, of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Endless discussions can be held as to what would have happened if Man had not sinned. Was it planned by God? Does God plan evil? Did He simply foreknow it all? Could God have revealed Himself as loving Father in the same way we have come to know Him through the life of His Son here on earth and the sacrificial giving of Himself on the cross, without the Fall?

Forced unity enslaves

In the same way, we can endlessly discuss what the Church would be like if it hadn't split up. But it has, and God has made the best of it. On the one hand, outward unity is desirable, but given our human position not possible. The very many facets of truth we can see today would probably not be possible any other way. If we look at Christian organisa-

tions today for models of unity expressed in uniformity, we can mention the Jehovah's Witnesses. Aside from their heretical views, there is a strong "top-down" structure. Unity is artificially enforced. Things are the same worldwide. Everyone is taught and trained to think and speak the same thing. Members are slaves. A high price to pay for outward unity!

The Roman Catholic Church may at first glance appear to fall under the same judgment of enforced outward unity. Many believers view it as an enslaving system. But under closer examination one can see that within the outward unity a very large amount of variety is tolerated within the system. You can find shades of everything, good and bad, within the Catholic Church. There are some main points that have to be adhered to (many biblical), but after that there is a lot of freedom – more freedom than in some evangelical fundamentalist groups. But here is also powerlessness to deal adequately with evil, which can often run rampant within the system. The system has become so complicated that nobody can really control the whole.

Variety in unity is divine and biblical

We should work for and toward unity, but not necessarily outward uniformity. God embodies the aspect of unity in diversity in Himself, the One and the Many. Three Persons, one God. The Father is not the Son, nor the Son the Spirit, yet they are one. We have four Gospels, which present us with our Lord's life here on earth: four, not one. They differ (and even seem to contradict each other on some points), but are a unity, giving us a more complete picture of Christ than just one Gospel could have. Variety in the Church can be a good thing in different ways if used properly. Different groups tend to emphasise different sides of the truth. That is usually why they became an extra group: they felt other groups were missing an important point. This is bad if I am in one of these groups and blindly follow their lead in everything. It's not so bad when I'm outside. I listen to what the one group is saying, and I also listen to what the other group is saying. I can learn from both without becoming a member of either.

Correcting the past

When new Christian movements are started on the premise of having discovered something which the Church till now has not seen or has done wrong, it usually gives a strong impetus and determination to its advocates. But this can be very self-deceiving. In reality it is the desire to start anew, from the beginning, and to get it right this time. Looking at the Church's failings in the past can be very depressing and discouraging. It is much easier and more inspiring to say it was all wrong, to clean the slate and start over again, than to try to heal and repair. Nearly all movements resulting from something like this are short-lived or soon become in-grown. Members are so concerned about themselves and *their* fight for the proper understanding of the truth (viz. theirs) that they do not influence their environment in meaningful ways or really help the universal Church.

The value of new movements

Yet new movements or groups do open new avenues or remind the universal Church of truths which have been neglected or ignored. In the beginning they bring a surge of new life and energy, of revival even. But with time things begin to slow down and become stagnant. A movement quickly becomes a memorial, and people within the movement become content with what they have achieved. They keep repeating the same things over and over again as a kind of self-confirmation. It's a turning around in circles. No progress any more, no growth. Members are required to subscribe to the status quo. This either

results in members leaving to keep the flow going or other groups coming into existence elsewhere to influence the Church profitably again.

Different teachers

A wrong concentration

It seems that as believers we do not have too many problems in realising that no single person has a complete grasp of all of God's truth. The Lord did not give His Church just one gift, just one man. Concentrating all one's energy and attention on just one man, on one author can be profitable in one sense, but an immense loss in another. No one person, no matter how brilliant or dedicated, has all the answers. Studying every little thing he ever said or wrote can be a very stupid thing to do if it results in neglecting the work of others. Granted, in some obscure paper or letter there might be some precious insight of a particular author to be found which did not appear in his published works. But in general there is a main thrust or theme to every author or leader regardless of how much he developed. Dissecting him in detail is not as profitable as taking his main message, his main contribution, and comparing and combining it with those of others. This is the more profitable way to go about things. Keeping the memory and message of important people alive is one thing; building shrines is another.

Spread out and expand

God is manifold in His act of creation. This should be reflected in how we study. We can still retain our favourite persons and time periods, but should not close ourselves to the abundance that exists outside of our small circle of preferences. The more is made of who said what and that *he* said it, the less is actually realised of what he said and wanted to achieve. Having constantly to refer back to an author, needing to quote him for every little thing (like people do Bible verses) is not doing him justice and shows that his ideas have not really become a part of us.

Living not lecturing

If they were, we would act according to them less self-consciously – simply doing them. The more clubs and interest groups pop up and offer incense to an author's memory, the less really happens – though his “fans” think something is really being done because they talk about him so much.

Profiting from different teachers

Agreeing and disagreeing

If we take a close look at our own reading habits, I think most of us can relate to the following: We read an author who makes a certain claim. Another author says this view is wrong or weak and brings out what he feels to be clearer and better. All authors or teachers do the same thing: they have learned from other authors without accepting everything these authors say, and they have then developed their own model or viewpoint. We have a large number of different authors we read and learn from. (What is important is that we do not just read what we know will confirm our opinion or standpoint. Being afraid to read something I think might shake my position says a lot about how sure I am of where

I stand.) We can learn much, but don't accept everything. We feel one author neglected an important point, another emphasised a point too much. We feel one is completely wrong in this and another is right in that. What happens is, I develop my own model or view by filtering those of others. If I happen to be a teacher, I will begin spreading my particular view of things. What I teach becomes a part of the collection of "pick and choose"-ables. People take my views, combine them with others, modify them, and come up with their own. What happens in this whole process is that we are all, as a whole, coming closer and closer to the truth.

Advancing in understanding

I do not believe in evolution, but I do believe there is development. I believe that all the truth has been delivered to us, but I also believe that our learning is piecemeal and none of us can grasp it as a whole on our own. We are all, each one of us, over the centuries, contributing to the knowledge of the Church. The Church, as personified, has the truth, but not any one individual – that makes us dependent.

Profiting from different Church groups

Slowly but surely

We should be able to apply these experiences with individual authors to different Church groups. But that transition is often very hard – for some impossible. But we balance each other out as Christian groups just as much as we do as individuals. We actually help each other reach a truer form of Church structure through being different because our interaction, if we allow it to take place, causes us to think, to pray, to study. The good of our interaction is perhaps something we will not experience in our lifetimes, but future generations can profit from it. God's timetable is different from ours. We would like to see so much accomplished within our lifetimes – really within a few years. God doesn't work within lifetimes as to His Church (He does so as to individuals). He works through many lifetimes to reach His goal. The Christological controversies are one example. It took several hundred years until the Church's teaching was really clear on this point. Individuals during this period may have hoped or thought that their contributions were the final ones. But no, even if very important, they were only parts of a whole.

Convictions

Perfect unity is not possible this side of heaven due to our condition, but we should work towards it with all our energy. If my criterion for evaluating the correctness or wrongness of some Christian group is simply how much they agree or disagree with my view of things, I am in trouble. I can and should have convictions, a basis, unalterable principles. The attitude that everything is relative, that your truth is your truth and mine is mine, and we are both right as long as we're all happy, is wrong; very wrong. There *is* absolute truth. But as finite creatures we can never grasp this fully on our own. It is the greatest of illusions to believe this to be possible. Given our human condition this side of heaven, it is naïve to believe that it is possible for one Christian group to have all the right answers. Because we are finite creatures, we need the enormous variety there is, all the different things which contribute to completing the full picture.

Nobody's perfect

Given our sinfulness and selfishness, we need each other for correction as well. The Brethren understood this principle rightly in the beginning when they maintained that they were not trying to start something new but rather form a basis where this variety in the Church could be dealt with in a profitable way. It was only when they made themselves the standard of truth that things went wrong.

The heavenly and earthly viewpoints

There is something like a collective mind or understanding of the Church. In one sense the Church is already seated in the heavenlies in Christ and possesses everything in Him and with Him. In another, practical sense the Church grows in understanding and each believer contributes his part. Seen from God's side, from heaven, the Church is perfect and complete. From our side, the Church is still developing. The Church's understanding today is not what it was 400 years ago, and no one time period or expression of the Church in history can be picked out as having been ideal. Everything is only a part of what makes up a whole.

There is a reason for the delay

I dare to say that, if the Lord had come within the first century AD, the gloriousness of the Church would not be so wonderful as now. Oh yes, the believers then would have been extremely happy, but the Church would not have been in possession of things it is now. That this is so is easily proved in that the Lord has not come yet. It is the Christian hope that He will; but that He hasn't yet shows He wanted His Church to grow and develop. There has been much evil and unfaithfulness – that is sadly true – but there has been much good, and Christ wants His Church to profit from it.

Differing interpretation models

Not just one

There is not just one single valid way of interpreting Scripture. Scripture can be studied historically, compositionally, narratively, canonically, typologically and so on. None of these methods is complete in itself. The more use I make of different approaches, the more I profit from my studies. Each has its strengths and weaknesses. If I use only one method, I run the risk of becoming one-sided and more susceptible to error.

Changes and modifications

The dispensationalist approach to Scripture, as originally developed by the Brethren, does not contain all the answers either. It spread and affected a variety of groups who have no formal association with Brethren. These groups benefited from some aspects of dispensationalism, but they modified it in the process of assimilation. The major advocates of dispensationalism in the Christian world today are not the Brethren. Dispensationalism itself has undergone very many changes and adaptations. When speaking of it, you have to use modifiers to distinguish which branch of dispensationalism you are talking about. Dispensationalism blossomed forth as a new way of looking at things. Because it was new, it was attractive – as all new things are – but with the passage of time it became obvious that there were still a lot of loose ends. This is only natural. No model we come up with (or “discover”) has all the answers.

Dispensationalism opened up new avenues, but did not have the last word. In its interaction with others over the years, it has changed and developed. It has profited from input by others, and others have profited by its suggestions. What one can observe today, for example, is the meeting each other halfway of dispensationalism and covenant theology. Dispensationalists are recognising the value of the various covenants in Scripture and that there are certain aspects of the “Kingdom now” view which they can accept. Covenant theologians on their part are coming up with many different age divisions or time periods within God’s dealing with man over time.

Variety is essential

So many different worlds

There are many good things in the different Christian groups that exist – splintered light. Most groups consider themselves to have *the* truth, which is *not* the case. But in some way, they all contribute valuable insights to understanding God’s complete truth. Committing myself, “body and soul”, to just one group would wrongly narrow my horizon. The Catholic Church, the Orthodox one, the Calvinists, the Dispensationalists and so on, all have something to offer – bits and pieces that add up to a whole. While recently in Canada on a business trip, I saw countless different Churches on what seemed to be every other street, all reflecting so many different views. This drove the conviction home to me that we all live in our own little worlds or spheres. Worlds determined by our circumstances and environment, but also by our own choosing and creation. And, of course, divine intervention – but here we must be careful. We often ascribe too much of what is actually of ourselves to God. Within our worlds, everything makes sense because we are the “lords” of them. At times, our worlds touch those of others or even overlap – positively or negatively. What is so difficult is getting the overview, seeing the world in which all our worlds find themselves – God’s reality.

It’s time to grow up

We are too often happy in little worlds of our own making because they give us a sense of security. We are afraid to step out. We are afraid to mature, to stop thinking and acting like children. Becoming mature and grown-up is scary. We should retain our child-like wonder, but we shouldn’t hang on to the apron strings of some view which prevents us from dealing with the real world. We want things to be predictable so that there is nothing to surprise us and cause us to lose control. But Christ is never predictable. He is faithful and the same, yesterday, today and tomorrow. We can depend on Him, but we can never confine Him by determining what He can’t or shouldn’t do. As it is, He often surprises us!

I have spoken a lot of the good in various different groups. I am not blind to the fact that there is also a lot of bad, and a lot of confusion and error. But refusing to venture out of our own little worlds for fear of what might await us is wrong. We need to exercise discernment. This is a sign of maturity. Rules and regulations that we continually enforce to keep things the way we want them to be are not the answer. In Galatians, the Apostle Paul describes the time of the Law in the Old Testament as a time of enslavement, of childhood. Sonship or maturity means freedom. But this does not imply or entail not having standards of truth, it is just that we no longer use pre-fabricated templates and stubbornly apply them to everything without making differences.

Don't forget

We have to learn to make more use of the variety God has allowed to come about – to use it in a way which benefits all. The Brethren had the right idea, but they did not carry it through. The original idea was not that everybody was completely wrong, but the realisation that nobody is completely right. We should all contribute in helping to understand God's truth better. But we must, at the same time, be aware of the fact, and constantly remind ourselves of it, that we will not achieve a perfect and complete understanding this side of heaven. Not even if all Christians would contribute to it.

And, can we recover the legacy?

The Brethren legacy can be recovered. It is simply a matter of returning to the openness for the Lord's leading, as in the beginning. The hard thing is keeping it without slipping into the very human habit of wanting to organise, catalogue, crystallise things. The more restrictive Brethren have become, the more they have been working against themselves. To survive, and especially to carry on the original idea, they must return to the original openness.

We have to learn to interact with other Christians who really love the Lord and want to follow and obey His Word. Trying to press all of them into a single mould is not possible, nor profitable.

This is what Brethren history has taught us: no one group has the whole truth, and trying to unite all in a single outward form will not work.

Changes are normal and necessary

In many instances, what was right and good for a particular time has been frozen and propagated until this day, resisting all attempts of change or adaptation. A culture results with folklore-like traditions, as can be seen in Amish or different Mennonite groups. Things can become so frozen that hymns are continued to be sung which are hundreds of years old and include prayers asking the Lord to be with so-and-so who is languishing in prison in Alzey, Germany! We might not find this in this extreme form among Brethren, but the problems that arise when some assemblies would like to use a new or different songbook show how rigid things can become.

We don't have any descriptions of what an ideal Church structure or service should look like. Certain things can be deduced from what we find in Scripture, but no rigid guidelines. Why? Because things can and do change. The Lord leaves much to our responsibility as mature children who can make decisions themselves based on what they have learned from His Word. There is much room for freedom, but we will be judged accordingly.

Refusing to grow will also be judged. In our Lord's parable, the servant who hid his talent and did not do anything with it received the worst condemnation.

Getting the right attitude

I am not offering a model or pattern to follow here. No points 1, 2 and 3. What I am calling for is an attitude, a "renewing of the mind" – a willingness to profit from the past, but also an openness for the future. Patterns don't usually work if we try to imitate them. What works in one time and place, and was right then and there, will not necessarily work

here and now. There is variety, and we should be prepared to expect and accept it. To profit from it to God's glory. To continue to grow and mature.

My contention is that this is what was originally inherent within the Brethren movement. This being open for the variety in God's Church and attempting to benefit from it for the blessing of all was lost sight of and buried. Conflicts between "Open" and "Closed" groups only served to complicate matters and to prevent all involved from recognising that something vital had been lost.

Stop making demands

I am not attacking Brethren. I am convinced that the movement was God-willed. It is not the Brethren as such or the movement, but what we have made out of the movement that requires criticism. I am not asking Brethren to give up anything. I am pleading with them to be more open for interaction with other believers who truly love the Lord and His Word. Brethren need not "leave" something, but they shouldn't make this demand of others either. They should be concerned to see their place within the context of the Church and its history as a whole, and not claim to be the solution for all Church troubles.