

John Hall

The "Christian Brethren"

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THE "CHRISTIAN BRETHREN."

AND why devote an article to "the Brethren?" It is enough to reply, that questions are frequently and fairly put regarding them which the absence of a creed or "form of sound words" renders difficult of reply to most persons; and a magazine like the WITNESS discharges one of its functions when supplying an answer. The body designated "Brethren" or "Christian Brethren" by themselves, and "Plymouth Brethren" by others, is active and energetic, and assumes an {12} attitude so peculiar that ministers and others must give some attention to its features. The divergence from the doctrines held by such a Church as that of Scotland for example, whose creed may be accepted as a fair and definite representation of evangelical principles, is becoming so great as to raise the practical question, How far is co-operation with the Brethren defensible? Here is, for example, a pamphlet, "The Heresies of the Plymouth Brethren," urging grave charges against them, with too much show of reason to be treated with contempt. And here are "The Errors of the Darby and Plymouth Sect," from Nisbet and Co., reprinted from the *Record*, which represents the evangelical section of the Church of England. And finally, as a further reason for looking at the subject, the many pamphlets in circulation on the question appear (to say nothing of a somewhat hard spirit and harsh tone) to ignore what is good in the Brethren, and to make no allowance for the manner in which they have been carried to the extreme positions they now occupy. For want of better terms, we shall call them "the Brethren," assuring all sides that we settle nothing by adopting this designation. We have heard of men who would not read the *News of the Churches*, because its title recognised "bodies" as Churches, which they could not do. We are not so scrupulous. We talk of the "Independents" without implying our own bondage; and if a section of Christians choose to call themselves "Brethren," we shall take the name for all the purposes of a name, without feeling that we have written ourselves down as aliens.

If there be any inaccuracy in the representations we give on a few points, for we do not pretend to exhaust the subject, let it be ascribed to the difficulty of knowing a set of doctrines scattered up and down in innumerable small publications, and leading a sort of gipsy life in fly-leaves, hand-bills, and articles in religious papers, authenticated to the party by mysterious cyphers and initials, known only to the friends.

The history of the Brethren appears to be this. In the earlier portion of this century much deadness marked all the Churches, and many, who in God's mercy were awakened to seriousness, had no early grounding in the truth. Any child can find the end of a line – a process of measurement is needed to find the middle. We are all more or less children, and easily rush into extremes. Accordingly, when awakened, persons have said, "Here is a stated ministry doing nothing; better have no stated ministry." They have not yet rebounded to "better a stated ministry doing Christ's work." "Here," they say, "is a regular education that gives no real training; better no regular education." They have not yet rebounded to – "Better a regular education that gives a real training." In like manner, they have rushed from legalism to the denial of the obligation of the Divine law upon Christians. On many things they are sound and clear, and state the truth with freshness and point; while it must be admitted on others they are obscure and mystical. They have a special love for *ultra* statements; and being in a great degree in reaction against wrong things, they are extremely one-sided, and marked by "a bold and familiar way of dealing with Divine things, mingled with luscious terms and high-seasoned sentences." Yet we should deal gently with them, because they would not be what they are if the Churches

had done their duty; but we must tell them and others the truth, for, as Mr. Bickersteth said, "Satan is ever trying to join serious errors with revived truth."

But a simple enumeration of some of that points where, if they use language in its common meaning, they diverge from ordinary evangelical teaching, will better illustrate our meaning than general description. We have only the printed statements of their leaders as authorities.

1. They hold *peculiar views as to Christ's obedience*. While the Reformed Churches hold that Christ was "obedient unto death," from the manger to the cross, they hold that Christ's sufferings for sin were confined to his actual sufferings on the cross. Orthodox Christians in all ages have believed that *in life* as well as in death, Christ was a true substitute. The Brethren alone (except the Socinians) deny this, and say His sufferings as the sinner's substitute were exclusively confined to the tree.

2. They hold that justification *is simply pardon*. The orthodox Churches generally hold it to include acceptance as righteous, and commonly express it by the phrase, "imputed righteousness." This phrase they reject, and, as a natural consequence, they have to deny the imputation of Adam's sin, and indeed that Christ had anything to do with law. "A vicarious keeping of the law," says a leading writer of theirs, "*is unknown to Scripture*." When this deviation from evangelical truth was pointed out, the writer and his friends tried to show that the Westminster Confession, Calvin, and others held justification to be mere pardon. We think they signally failed in this attempt. Our Catechism is clear enough in asserting that in justification God pardons all our sins, and accepts us as righteous, for the sake of the righteousness of Christ, imputed to us and received by faith {sic} alone.

{13} 3. They differ from evangelical Christians *regarding the law of God*. They hold that Adam never was, and could not be, under law; that the Gentiles never were under it; that Christ never was under it; and that Christians are not under it, as a rule of life. To make out these statements, they seem to mix up the various senses in which "law" is used in Scripture, and to disregard the connection in which it is said to be set aside. We must admit that it is hard to conceive how these propositions can be held by good men, and also that it is extremely hard to understand their own theory "about law" and "about sin," which is a favourite phrase. We do not believe these writers intend to teach what is commonly known as Socinianism, but we see no logical barrier between them and Socinianism.

4. They are led, as a logical result of their views on law, to deny *the obligation of the Sabbath*. This doctrine leads to a practical quarrel with ordinary Christians, so directly, that the formal statement of it is not very common. It shocks many who could not appreciate a departure from sound doctrine.

5. They deny the progressive character of sanctification, and make *it practically one with justification*. This, too, follows from denying that the holy law of God is a rule of life to us. "Sanctification," says one, "is not a process. It is not a gradual work. It is not progressive." According to them, most evangelical Christians look for justification to Christ, and for holiness to themselves. They are fond of putting it in these words, and so make a plausible charge. They forget that while sanctification, as God views it, is complete, it is not so as the Spirit works it in us. They quote 1 Cor. i. 30, in proof that Christ is our sanctification as much and in the same way as our justification. They overlook the rest of the verse, which says, He is our "redemption," or glorification. On their view of this verse, our glorification is as complete *now* as our justification!

6. They hold peculiar views *about the Church*. They said it never existed till Pentecost; that there was no Church in the Old Testament; that believers were separate units,

but that till Christ came no Church existed; that the Church consists only of Gentile believers and the elect remnant of the Jews, brought to Christ from Pentecost downward. On this point, we content ourselves with referring the reader to the article in the present number, "One Church under all Dispensations," than which nothing can be more conclusive.

7. They differ from ordinary Christians on the subject of the ministry; abjure special training for the work; reject the idea, in theory, of one man being appointed to minister to a people; and consider that they honour Christ in leaving it to any one who is internally moved to instruct the saints, or preach the Gospel to sinners. Their churches are independent of one another; but this is the only thing in common with Congregationalists, except, indeed, the *theoretical* absence of a creed. They hold several half truths on this point, and are here, perhaps, in more manifest recoil from abuses than elsewhere. Christ gives ministers as His gifts, and the Church is to recognise and accept them. All this is true. But are Christ's gifts not to be improved and made the most of? And what reason is there to think, as is hinted, that nowhere are they recognised but among the Brethren? This point is discussed at much length in the pamphlet already referred to, "Errors," &c., being a reprint from the *Record*; and the stand-point assumed by the writer may be seen from the sentence, "In no Church in the world is there so ably taught a ministry as in our own Church, and in the sister Church of Scotland." The Brethren have something here in common with Quakerism; and the practical issue is, that they have either a "one-man ministry" or none at all; while, with an assumption of special liberty, they seem not to have more of it, to say the least, than other Christians.

8. On the subject of the Holy Ghost they startle by their originality. "Prayer for the Spirit is a denial that He was given to abide for ever with the Church." It is "unbelief." "The Spirit having been given, it is a *mockery* to ask God to repeat His gift." The "rational consequence is almost blasphemy." "Dear Brethren, prayer *for* the Spirit is unscriptural – what we need is prayer *in* the Spirit." It appears that the Irvingites have the credit of announcing this theological quibble, which probably passed at the time for a "deep truth," and was thought to show "wonderful knowledge of Scripture." Mr. Cox says, "I recollect hearing the excellent missionary, Williams, observe, when some one spoke against the Irvingites, 'that he had not met with such Scriptural and Bible-searching people since he had been in England, as they were.' Such they *were*, and loud were their pretensions; they have been tried, and we see the result." *We* have not seen it, but we hear their worship is Romish, and their doctrine is said to be Rationalism. As to the quibble above named, it is enough to say, "Christ was given eighteen hundred years ago, therefore to pray, 'Come, Lord Jesus,' 'Be with us, Blessed Saviour,' is almost blasphemy." As to prayer for the Spirit, the reader may turn {14} to Luke ii. 13, Eph. i. 17, and iii. 18, and texts almost innumerable of a like kind.

9. They are alone in their views of our Lord's second coming, expecting Him to come *secretly* and take away His saints, dead and alive, so that it shall not be seen. They distinguish between "the day of the Lord," and "the coming of the Lord." They deny that God's people go to judgment, and some of them anticipate at least three separate resurrections. We do not profess to have enumerated all the deviations from the Evangelical creed, nor to have refuted the error; we have only thrown in a sentence occasionally where a reader might be even momentarily put in doubt. We do not allege that all Brethren hold all these views; for they are divided, it seems, into three parties, one following Mr. Newton, one following Mr. Muller of Bristol, and one following Mr. Darby, who writes as J. N. D., and is followed by C. H. M. (Mackintosh), and C. S. (Stanley). We do not wish to disclose names intentionally withheld, but these names have been for a long time

public, without any disclaimer. We do not set up the orthodox evangelical view as if *it* were a *standard*. The Word is the standard. We only wish to show what is peculiar regarding the Brethren. It cannot be alleged that these are trifling matters. They do not count them so themselves. They are the most indiscriminate fault-finders – (we speak of their writings) – in these kingdoms, and make no secret of what they think the duty of all Christians, namely, to quit the "sects" that are called "Church of England," "Church of Scotland," and so forth, and join those who "give up every sect, and meet only in the name of Jesus," as if *that* saved from belonging to a sect! as if the Corinthians who said "I am of Christ," were not as bitter sectarians as those who said "I am of Cephas!"

We have only to say in conclusion, that it is with extreme pain we have had to write down these things. But questions so serious demand public explanation, for they lead to practical issues. If men in the name of Jesus preach what they sincerely think true, they exercise their right. But we have a right and a duty too in the matter, especially if, to take a single example, our plea for holiness is described by them in such a formula as this – "It is the old story of going back to the law, and mixing it up with the precious Gospel, the very thing which the Spirit expressly condemns." We can easily see how trouble will arise, how Tract distributors will give out these errors in tracts; teachers in Sabbath Schools, young men in "Christian Associations," and good men who, in prayer-meetings, *will not confess sin*. This cannot long continue without inconvenience, to say nothing else, and the sooner things are adjusted the better. Let us know where we are – what we are – what we are doing. Christians, of all others, should be open as the day, and in Christian co-operation especially, mutual confidence, is a primary element. For the sake of the Brethren themselves, these things should be examined. In deference to a supposed high spirituality, and profound acquaintance with the Scriptures, their views have hitherto been gently dealt with. We have seen them glide into opinions that we denounce as errors in others, and have held our peace. Our very homage to their piety has become a snare to them, and they trample on our pride, with yet greater pride. Gladly acknowledging the real good in them, and making great allowance for their position, the writer can honestly say he has done his utmost to think their departures from "those things most surely believed among us," slight; that "a friendly eye would never see such faults;" that they were "sound in the main," and that intercourse with other Christians would rectify their errors. It is with bitter regret these hopes are abandoned. To hold sincerely the views enumerated above is to step upon an inclined plane, at the bottom of which the creed, or rather no creed of Rationalism brings forth fruit in arrogance and extravagance. The present generation, retarded by early education – for the Brethren are, as a rule, drawn out of existing churches – would not, probably, reach this climax, but what is there to restrain their children from following their opinions to their logical results?

CORRESPONDENCE.

*[The Editor does not hold himself responsible for
the opinions or statements of Correspondents.]*

THE CHRISTIAN BRETHERN.

TO THE EDITOR OF THE EVANGELICAL WITNESS.

MY DEAR SIR – It is no doubt difficult to ascertain the opinions of a body constructed on the principle of “limited liability,” yet many of your statements relative to the Brethren are singularly opposite to what I have always understood to be their views, and have been disavowed in Mr. J. Darby’s recent tract, “Brethren and their Reviewers,” so that I cannot but think you have somehow misapprehended them. I shall note these discrepancies according to your own enumeration.

“(2.) They hold that justification is simply pardon.” John Darby says, pp. 18, 19, “Righteousness has a double sense. What is inherent, *i.e.*, characterises the nature of persons. But it is also used relatively or judicially. A man is held to be righteous – righteous in God’s sight. Because of Christ, God holds him, relatively and judicially, to be perfectly righteous, according to His own divine estimate. Righteousness is imputed to him.” What Mr. D. denies is that Scripture ever “speaks of imputed righteousness as of a sum of righteousness, existing first and then imputed.” The *status questionis* is not, *Are believers accepted as righteous?* – that is agreed on both sides – but, *Are believers accepted as righteous, because Christ kept the law in their stead, or because God regards them as righteous in virtue of their union with Christ risen?* This is the point in question. Of course I have not the slightest intention of discussing the merits of this or any other point embraced in this letter. I would, however, submit the following extract to writers on both sides. In his book on Leviticus, p. 105, Mr. Mackintosh says, “Christ was ‘made sin for us that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him.’ He took our position, with all its consequences, in order that we might get into His position with all its consequences. He was treated as sin, upon the cross, that we might be treated as righteousness in the presence of infinite Holiness. He was cast out of God’s presence because He had sin upon Him – by imputation – that we might be received into God’s house, and into His bosom, because we have a perfect righteousness by imputation. All that was due to us as ruined sinners was laid upon Him, in order that all that was due to Him as the accomplisher of redemption might be ours. There was everything against Him, when He hung upon the cursed tree, in order that there might be nothing against us. He was identified with us in the reality of death and judgment, in order that we might be identified with Him in the reality of life and righteousness. He drank the cup of wrath – the cup of trembling, that we might drink the cup of salvation – the cup of infinite favour. He was treated according to our deserts, that we might be treated according to His.”

“(3.) They hold that Adam was not under law.” J. N. D. says, “Paul teaches that Adam was under law,” p. 22.

You say they teach “that Christ was never under the law.” Again, J. N. D. says, “It is simply false. I say He kept the law surely – He was born under it.” They, however, deny that Gentiles were under the law, or that Christians are under the law as a rule of life.

“(5.) They deny the progressive nature of sanctification.” J. N. D. says, pp. 44, 45 – “Scripture speaks of sanctification as both absolute and progressive. In 1 Thess. v. 23, we get what may justly be called progressive sanctification. Again, Heb. xii. 14. These fully

justify speaking of progress in holiness, or practical setting apart of the heart and mind to God by its being filled with Christ, provided that the first truth be held of a primary setting apart, which is absolute and once for all, and that in the way of a new life, being born of God, of water and the Spirit." This really looks very like your own statement, that "while sanctification, as God views it, is complete, it is not so as the Spirit works it in us."

"(6.) They say the Church never existed till Pentecost." What they state is, that the Church spoken of in Eph. i. 22, v. 23–32, as the body of Christ, did not exist till Christ was risen and the Spirit given; and they limit the use of the term *Church* to Christ's mystical body. It does not answer this to refer to an article proving that God has always had a professing Church on earth.

To return for a moment to John Darby's view {49} of the Gospel. It is this: – Christ was born under the law; fulfilled its requirements to honour the law and satisfy its demands, so that He might be a "holy thing" fit for a whole burnt-offering; and suffered its penalty *in our stead*. In doing so, He died. Believers died with Him, and so "died to that [the law] in which they were held." Christ abolished the law by fulfilling it. He rose from the dead, and believers were risen with Him. "They are no longer in the flesh at all, but stand as risen in the presence of God in the position in which He stands, *with all the value of His work upon them*, and accepted in His person according to His acceptance, now that He is risen." P. 37. All the commands, injunctions, and discipline of the New Testament are applicable for the regulation of this new and resurrection life.

On the whole, it cannot but be obvious to those who are the sincere friends of the Brethren that there are some among them who delight in extreme views, nice distinctions, and the exercise of intellectual gymnastics on high themes, and that this is not edifying to the simple-minded believers, and highly dangerous to the speculative ones. – Yours, &c.,

TO THE EDITOR OF THE EVANGELICAL WITNESS.

DEAR SIR – Many will be gratified to observe that you have pointedly directed the attention of your readers to the teaching of those calling themselves "The Brethren." On almost all points of doctrine they entertain peculiar views, and it is full time that the character of those views should be investigated, and the question seriously considered, how far those holding them are entitled to the confidence of the Christian public.

A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump. Slight deviations from orthodoxy in the master not unfrequently pass into dangerous heresies in the hands of his followers. "Satan," it has been rightly said, "has generally employed learned men – men had in reputation for zeal and piety, to hatch his errors."

This principle is illustrated in the history of "Brethrenism." As a reaction, it has carried its followers to extremes. Evils, which we believe were always inherent in the system, have become developed. It is a very different thing, as now known in this country, from what it was in its origin, as regarded by the large heart and exhibited in the devoted life of the saintly A. N. Groves. Intended to be a protest against sects and sectarianism, it has produced increased isolation and division among Christians. That which was to heal the wounds of Christ's body has only rent it more, adding two or three new sects to those already existing. They who were to be united on the common platform of bearing testimony for the truth, are now engaged in strenuously defending and industriously propagating the most dangerous errors.

The errors pointed out by you – all of which, it can be easily shown, are maintained and defended by leading men amongst "the Brethren," – do not refer to trivial or unimportant subjects. They affect the very foundation of our faith – they change the whole

character and aspect of our religion. We must speak plainly – we believe that they are not only dangerous and injurious, but that they are subversive of the gospel of the grace of God. Either “the Brethren,” – I am speaking of those who adhere to Mr. Darby – preach “another gospel,” or the doctrines which we preach, and which have been taught and believed in the Reformed Churches for the last 300 years, are not the truth of God, and can only ruin souls. This is the issue to which the matter has come.

Of the many dangerous opinions which they hold, the most dangerous and pernicious consists in their setting aside the law of God as a rule of the believer’s life. This heresy – known by the name of doctrinal Antinomianism – runs through all their writings, and crops out everywhere in their system. It is distinctly stated and defended by both Mr. Darby and Mr. Mackintosh. I quote only one sentence from the latter. Speaking of the law, he says – “In a word, then, it is evident that a sinner cannot be justified by the works of the law, and it is equally evident that the law is not the rule of the believer’s life.”

This heresy – for we must so call it – has always been justly regarded with dread and aversion by the Churches of Christ. Under every form which it may assume, it is evil, and only evil. It strikes at the root not only of religion, but of morality. A correspondent of the *Record*, reviewing the writings of “C. H. M.,” well says of it: – “This heresy of the Darbyites is a matter so vital that it tinges every part of their doctrines. It pervades and perverts their whole system. The gospel they teach and preach is a totally different gospel from that taught by the saints of God in past and in present times. The law of God cannot be taken wholly away from the gospel of God, and yet leave anything deserving the name of gospel behind it. ‘C. H. M.’ writes of something higher, better than the law. Let him tell me what it is. What specifically is the morality, the heart’s holiness, that is higher than the commandments demand? Who exemplified it? for Christ did not. The law contented Him. That and that alone was in His heart. The ark was empty of all besides the two tables of stone. Let ‘C. H. M.’ put his higher law in writing, that we may read it and test it. It is not in his books. We believe that his books deserve a place among the most pernicious books that can be named. He teaches that we have nothing whatever to do with the commandments, and that they have nothing whatever to do with us. Out on such gospel, say we; out upon it, for it is continuance in sin that grace may abound.”

It has been supposed by many that the deviations of “the Brethren” from orthodoxy are few and unimportant – that they differ from other Christians on only a few points relating mainly to ministry and worship. There is an impression that their doctrinal views are sound and scriptural. Some, attracted by “good words and fair speeches,” by promise of a pure communion, worship eminently spiritual, open ministry, &c., have joined the system, without acquainting themselves with its doctrinal basis. Their books and tracts are extensively circulated. The system lives by proselytizing. Its adherents are zealous in making known their views and in seeking to draw to their meetings the young and those under serious impressions.

Under such circumstances, to set forth distinctly the opinions which they hold, and the doctrines {50} which they teach, will be of essential service in saving from error and delusion the young and inexperienced. – I remain, truly yours,
Londonderry. J. C.