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My People: The Story of Those Christians Sometimes Called Plymouth Brethren

Robert H. Baylis

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A volume on the history of the Brethren movement in North America has long been needed. Robert Baylis has sought to fill this gap in American ecclesiastical history. To do so, Baylis set out to tackle five questions about the Plymouth Brethren: (1) Where do they fit into the larger scheme of Christian history? (2) How did this particular stream of Christian history get its start and acquire its distinctives? (3) What were the foundations of the movement on this continent [i.e. North America]? (4) What developments brought into being the rather complex structures that make up the Brethren movement today? (5) What opportunities, problems, and challenges face the Brethren as they look toward the twenty-first century? (p. xvi).

In order to accomplish these tasks, Baylis divided his 25-chapter book into four major sections: The British Origins, 1825-1882; Pioneering Days in North America, 1871-1920; The Golden Age of Independent Brethrenism, 1920-1960; and The Brethren in the Space Age, 1960-. Four appendices include selections on how others have seen the Brethren, a list of sources, a roster of commended workers from 1881-1995, and reports gleaned from workers over 120 years. Also included in the volume are over 100 historical photographs and illustrations.

Clearly, Baylis, who has a lifetime of association with the Brethren Assemblies, loves the movement of which he writes and attempts to tell its story in a positive way. While this volume probably will not attract many readers outside the Brethren movement, those within the movement will find many old acquaintances here. After discussing the origins of the Open and Exclusive Brethren in England and Ireland, Baylis traces the roots of the Brethren Assemblies in North America to the pioneering efforts of Scottish and Irish revivalist evangelists of the nineteenth century (including Donald Ross, Donald Munro, James Smith, James Campbell, John Knox McEwen, John Gill, and Alexander Marshall). Then he recounts the spread of the movement across North America through the efforts of the second generation of pioneers who followed in their steps (including J.J. Rouse, William J. McClure, T.D.W. Muir, and others). After introducing a third generation of pioneers (including A.P. Gibbs, T.B. Gilbert, Harold Harper, August van Ryn, and others), Baylis documents a fruitful period of mid-century expansion and development through camps, conferences, schools, publishing, service organizations, missions, and ministries.

Baylis's strengths are many. He includes a helpful discussion of ten cardinal principles of the early Brethren. He makes clear the distinction between Darby's teachings on unity through separation and the church in ruins doctrine on the one hand and the Open Brethren restorationist theology and emphasis on unity through common life in Christ on the other hand. He points to the different ethos between those parts of the movement represented by pioneer evangelists versus church planters, itinerant workers versus resident workers (about which Lester Wilson's 1944 article on page 154 is a gem), Gospel Halls versus Chapels, and Open versus Tight assemblies. Another strength is Baylis's introductions to evangelistic efforts among ethnic groups, including French Canadians, West Indians and African-Americans, Italians, Germans, Hispanics, and Native Americans.

Unfortunately, the volume suffers from several weaknesses. Since Baylis is not a trained historian, he basically offers a condensation of the work of others (Rowdon and Coad for the British background and McLaren and others for the North American part). Much of the

volume is extended quotations and reads like a compilation of material drawn from Brethren magazines, reports, and books. Key figures make cameo appearances or are presented in vignettes drawn from out-of-print biographies. There is little theological analysis on important doctrinal issues in Brethren history in North America, such as the theology of baptism; and numerous editorial errors are evident throughout the book.

I believe Baylis underestimates, or at least under-reports, the influence of the interfacing of the Grant assemblies and their leadership on the so-called Open Brethren assemblies. I also think he underestimates the influence the exclusive writers had on the Open Brethren and their teachers and how this affected the ethos of the Brethren movement in North America. Further, Baylis attributes the distinction between the Tight and Loose assemblies to the influence of the Needed Truth movement between the years 1910-1920. While I believe the latter movement had a tightening influence on some parts of the Brethren in North America (especially in Canada), I think there was more happening at the time than is recognized in this narrative. And while Alexander Marshall and J.R. Caldwell are heralded as leaders in the rejection of the Tight position, both first must be acknowledged as having contributed to it.

The chronicle of a movement whose early history was marred by controversy and schism ends as 'a house divided'. In the final chapter Baylis chronicles the takeover of Stewardships Foundation and the ensuing battles with Stewards Ministries and Interest Ministries, along with the resulting lawsuits. Without beginning to scratch the surface of the pamphlet wars that have occurred in recent years, Baylis summarizes seven stages of 'the Stewards Controversy'. Readers may find this section most helpful since many inside the movement have no idea what has happened. Perhaps a future historian will gain access to the official records of SF, SM, and IM and be able to chronicle what really happened, why it happened, and the results of it. The irony is that Baylis identified Interest as the one place among the Open Brethren in North America that was on the cutting edge of new developments. One cannot help but wonder that if this was the best, what does that say about what happened to it by those who now control the movement organizationally.

Baylis takes the title of his book from Isaiah 63:8, in which God called Israel 'my people' and said that he was their Saviour, and applies it to the Brethren movement. Perhaps this is significant, for just two verses further on the Scripture continues, 'Yet they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit. So he turned and became their enemy and he himself fought against them' (v. 10, NIV). The present tragic situation among the Brethren emphasizes just how much they have rebelled against the Lord and grieved His Holy Spirit. It demonstrates just how tight the so-called Open Brethren are in North America and that they, as a movement, have not reflected the magnanimity of a George Müller, Henry Craik, or Anthony Norris Groves. North America is a long way from Bristol.

Ross H. McLaren