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‘Aspects of Christian Brethren Spirituality’

Ian S. Rennie

in J.I. Packer and Loren Wilkinson (eds), *Alive to God: Studies in Spirituality*

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Ian Rennie’s contribution to Dr Houston’s *Festschrift* is an important survey of the ecclesiastical milieu into which the early English Brethren movement was born in the third and fourth decades of the nineteenth century. It is thus an interesting companion to Timothy Stunt’s review of the Irish background, noticed elsewhere in this issue: and it is significant of his perspective that Rennie (in contrast to Stunt) should champion the accuracy of the title ‘Plymouth Brethren’.

Like Stunt, Rennie based his paper on wide reading of the relevant literature, including a number of unpublished Ph.D. theses from both sides of the Atlantic, and from this reading draws out significant strands which entered into the spiritual development of the early Brethren leaders. He attaches particular importance to the rise of an essentially conservative (both socially and theologically) strand in contemporary Anglican Evangelicalism, which he dubs ‘the new Evangelicals’: to the pioneering and international ministry of the Scotsmen Robert and James Haldane: and to the premillennialism of Edward Irving. From these sources he teases out some of the most characteristic and persistent elements of Brethren spirituality—the intense gleaning of spiritual sustenance from the Bible, the rejection of the validity of church structures, separation from society at large, and their sense of the immediate activity of the Holy Spirit in the church. His emphasis on what he calls this ‘charismatic spirituality’ of the Brethren is an important and often overlooked feature—though it was commented on by such a shrewd observer as Griffith Thomas years before the modern charismatic movement was born.

A final, and perhaps less familiar, source of Brethren spirituality Rennie traces in what he calls a ‘hyper-Calvinism’ derived from Robert Hawker and the ‘Western Schism’ of clergy from the Church of England in the second decade of the century. From this source Rennie derives teaching on an eternal and complete union with Christ, the rejection of human planning and organization, and attitudes to eternal security and the moral law.

Summing up, Rennie sees Brethren spirituality as emerging from a ‘creative tension’ between conservative and radical-progressive ideas. He then comments briefly on its wider influence on Evangelical Protestantism, particularly in America.

Enough has been said to make it clear that this is primarily a study of historical roots, rather than of Brethren spirituality in itself, and to that extent the title of the essay is perhaps misleading. One looks in vain for a fuller appreciation of Brethren devotional writing and hymnology, of Groves’s deep spirituality in his *Christian Devotedness*, of Müller’s example of faith, of the mighty warmth in Darby at his best, or for that intense devotion to Christ expressed in the finest of their hymns and in works such as Bellett’s *The Moral Glories of the Lord Jesus Christ*. It is a pity, for there is just enough to show that Rennie both appreciates and is capable of conveying the substance as well as the nascence.

In qualification of the excellence of this study, one must question whether Rennie has given full credit to those other influences that lay upon those early Brethren who parted from Darby at the great disruption. There is no reference to the early and non-Anglican shaping of Henry Craik or George Müller (and in particular to the Pietist influences on the latter). A study of contemporary references to their ministry in Bristol—as well as of Craik’s own writings—might well modify some of his judgments. His treatment of Groves is somewhat flat: for Groves’ thoughts and beliefs changed perceptibly during his lifetime. He does not

refer to the influence on key individuals of dissenters such as the Paget sisters; or to the Quaker influence in the wake of the 'Beacon' controversy of the 1830s that Timothy Stunt has made his own speciality; while his reference to the effect of the influx from the mid-century Evangelical revival is perfunctory.

These matters are important, for despite the persistence in Open meetings until well into the present century of many of the ideas which Rennie elicits from his study, few would understand from it the immense difference between experiences in fellowship in the Open churches of say North London or Bristol, or indeed the more vigorous areas of Scotland, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, from those in their contemporary Exclusive assemblies. (Spurgeon, no friend of the 'Plymouths', was very much aware of the difference!) And as increasingly historians of the movement become conscious of its international dimensions and of the indigenous growth in many lands, there will be many who, on reading this study, will say (as F.F. Bruce said in another context) 'the Christians with whom I [enjoy] fellowship, when hearing or reading about movements between 1825 and 1848, did not feel that this was where they came in'.

One minor matter of correction. In his footnote 53, Rennie speculates that a comment that those who formed the original Bristol assemblies had been baptised as believers indicates hyper-Calvinist influence there. Such speculation is unnecessary: both Müller and Craik had been baptised as adults well before they came to Bristol, and the introduction of the practice would have been theirs.

Roy Coad