

**Primitivist Piety: the ecclesiology of the early Brethren**

James Patrick Callahan

Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, Studies in Evangelicalism vol. 12, 1996, 287pp. \$48.00 + packing & postage or £46.00 ISBN 0-8108-3126-0.

Copies obtainable from Scarecrow Press, 15200 NBN Way, Blue Ridge Summit, PA 17214, USA or Shelwing Ltd, 4 Pleydell Gardens, Folkestone, Kent, CT20 2DN

Not long ago a friend pointed out to me that virtually all the non-polemical studies of Brethren history have been written by people who, at least for a time, were Brethren and therefore have known the movement from inside. Dr James Callahan is no exception to this claim, but he dares to be objectively critical without being judgmental. His study is detached and valuably based on a thorough reading of early Brethren writings and the most recent historical scholarship. An added bonus is his discovery of a novel (Andrew Picken, *The Sectarian* (1829)) with a valuable description of the Walkerite predecessors of the Brethren in Dublin. Dr Callahan's book has ample quotations from a wide range of Brethren works published in the 1830s and 40s, including several important articles from the *Christian Witness*, which will make his work a valuable source book.

These extracts are used to substantiate a somewhat elusive thesis—namely that the basis of Brethren piety was their commitment to primitive Christianity and that their rejection of existing religious bodies and their eschatology were based on this, rather than the other way round. Part of the problem is an inadequate definition of some of the fundamental terms of the discussion. Traditionally the word 'piety' has been associated with reverence and devotion but in a parenthesis (p.xii) we find that for the author it is 'one's spiritual well-being' which might be thought by some to be rather nearer to salvation. Rather more straightforward is the meaning of 'primitivist' when referring to the Brethren's ecclesiastical aspirations except that the Brethren's Tractarian contemporaries like John Henry Newman were also attracted by a primitive ideal. Dr Callahan considers the parallels between the Brethren and the Oxford movement, as epitomised by the relationship between the Newman brothers, and dismisses them as merely 'circumstantial' citing Brethren rejections of Tractarianism from 1837 to 1840. This, however, is to forget that earlier (1833-34), Sir Charles Brenton, one of the Brethren who seems to have escaped Callahan's net, was finding common ground in correspondence with Charles Golightly who was then regarded by John Henry Newman as a Tractarian ally (see postscript to this review, pp.120-1 below).

Callahan's definition of 'primitivist' is further complicated when he insists that the early Brethren were primitivist but 'anti-restorationist' arguing that for all the Brethren, including Groves, separation was 'the primary element in [their] response to evil' (p.189) and that Darby's view of the ruined Church was that of Brethren generally. Making a distinction which this reviewer finds hard to identify, Dr Callahan says that the Brethren 'were primarily concerned with practising an ecclesial piety which obediently followed the New Testament's portrait of the church; but specifically disavowed an attempt to restore the spiritual state of apostolic Christianity' (p.207).

A more fundamental problem is finding any real unity in the early period of the Brethren movement when in some ways it was little more than an ecclesiastical 'Cave of Adullam', and, although his citations are meticulously referenced, Callahan seems to make little allowance for the development in Brethren thinking in the first decade of their existence. In 1840 Darby, Groves and Newton (to take the three most obvious examples) were very different in their theological (not to mention social and emotional) outlook from what they had been in 1830. To claim that 'Darby and Groves were really not that different in principle' and that Groves was 'a nicer sectarian but a sectarian nonetheless' (p.159) seems to be

putting them both into an early Brethren Procrustean bed. Some common ground briefly shared by two men travelling in significantly different directions is a tenuous basis for establishing an 'early Brethren position'. To be fair to the author, who is consistently loyal to his sources, he recognises that, in contrast to Darby's, Groves's 'ecclesial piety was founded upon the hope of a restoration of the apostolic church' (p.181). Callahan may nevertheless be charged with something like organizational sleight of hand when he omits any reference to Groves in the following chapter where he concludes that the Brethren as a whole believed 'that the restoration of the apostolic church was impossible' (p.184). To exclude Groves from the early Brethren like this is to underestimate the following he had among Brethren like George Müller and John Howard, the latter wrongly described by Dr Callahan as a 'detractor from [sic] the early Brethren' (p.215). In fact, in 1839 Howard was a founder member of Brook Street Chapel, one of the oldest Brethren assemblies in the London area. His criticisms were directed at the 'Darbyites' in the post 1846-9 division and not at the Brethren in general.

It is disappointing to find in a well-researched and attractively produced book of this sort, a title page referring to the 'Brethern' [sic], an index in which most of the page references must have two subtracted from them, and a plethora of misprints (especially in the Bibliography), one of the most delightful of which has the Brethren damning the Reformation 'with faith praise'! However Dr Callahan's achievement transcends these blemishes. He has served us well by rearranging familiar and less familiar material in a different pattern, by asking some new questions, and by stimulating us to look at the movement from a significantly different angle.

### **Postscript**

The inexactness of party labels and loyalties and the fluidity of ecclesiastical attachments and groupings in the 1820s and early 1830s has been consistently ignored by Church historians not only in connection with the Brethren. In 1834 when J.H. Newman was beginning to despair of the Anglican establishment he became fascinated with the idea of India as a *tabula rasa* where a purer and less Erastian church could be established. The idea seems to have been prompted by reading 'a most sensible account of the state of India' by John Tucker, CMS Secretary in Madras, who 'makes mention of having seen Mr Groves [whose name was known to Newman through his brother Frank] who is resolved to leave Bagdad for good[;] in almost every word of which [account by Tucker] [—] and it is full of practical and doctrinal matters, [—] I agree. Tho' he is a Calvinist, I do believe our differences would in India almost be a matter of a few words', (I. Ker and T. Gornall (eds) *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*, Vol. 4 (Oxford 1980) p.338 cf. pp.361-2). When Groves first met Tucker (February 1834) he described him as 'a sincere and holy man, though strong in his prejudices as I think them.' After his second encounter (August 1834) he writes: 'Dear Mr Tucker, who has the charge of the Church Missions, asked me before we parted, to join him in prayer; and we spent a holy parting moment near our uniting Lord, the savour of which so remains on my heart, that I feel how impossible it is for anything to divide when love reigns and rules.' (*Journal*, pp.281, 332). Passages like this are hard to square with the claim that Groves was a sectarian. They also raise the interesting question as to how Groves might have responded to John Henry Newman in person or vice versa.

Timothy Stunt