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The Brethren in Barbados: Gospel Hall Assemblies 1889 – 1994

Sylvan R. Catwell

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In many of the large number of countries in which there are churches connected with the Brethren movement, there is an increasing interest in recording their history. This well-produced, carefully-researched and easily-readable book is an early example. As is often the case, it began as a Bachelor-level thesis. It falls into two parts. First, there is an overall history which looks at both growth and decline, and at key themes such as outreach, the social activity of the churches, the significance of women's ministry, and doctrinal stances. The second part comprises chapters summarising the history of each of fourteen Gospel Hall assemblies. This is in essence the author's rough working, but it is valuable and interesting in its own right.

Catwell's focus is on the Open Brethren churches in the island. He sets their story, however, in the context both of the origins of the Brethren (necessary perhaps for ignorant examiners, though there are some tendentious claims implying links with the Pietists, the Dunker Baptists and the Haldanes' Congregationalism) and of the nineteenth-century activities of Exclusive groups in the island. The latter demonstrates how Old World divisions were quickly mirrored in Barbados, given the propensity of Exclusive teachers to exercise international ministries.

The experience of the Open assemblies underlines again how extraordinarily dynamic was the missionary, evangelistic and church-planting endeavours of the grouping in the seventy years following the 1859 revivals. Catwell's analysis of growth and decline in Barbados closely matches that of the Open Brethren in many parts of the old, English-speaking world: the decline since 1960, and the reasons he adduces for it, show how strong is the 'DNA' of the movement across the world. He brings out some interesting features: the key initial role of women missionaries in founding of the work—they were truly evangelists and church-planters, whether as single women or spouses; the crucial role of full-time input in church-planting and growth; the

pan-Caribbean nature of Brethren work, reflected for example in the campaigns of Willie and Wildish, the work of Sydney Calcraft in the 1930s and 1940s, and the fact that five of the Barbadian churches were founded by C.O.Y. Lowe who hailed from St Vincent. Also noteworthy is that the missionary influence was largely British rather than North American, despite the growing influence of the USA in the Caribbean following the Spanish-American War of 1898. Also significant was white Caucasian leadership—Catwell controversially emphasises the difficulties resulting from the withdrawal of white missionaries and the local preference for white-led churches.

His concluding assessment is the policy conclusions of a full-time, formally-trained leader of one of the churches. Here, he places himself firmly on the progressive side of the movement, in emphasising the crucial role of full-time input (though Lowe's work rather contradicts this), the importance of releasing women into spiritual ministry, the need for training and education in church leadership, the need for strategic vision and managerial competence, and the problems resulting from an aging church leadership which has neglected or obstructed the gifts of younger, willing people. All this your reviewer could hardly dissent from, in view of his own writings! But the agenda (written a decade ago, of course) is rigorously modernist, rather than post-modernist: there is little reference to prayer, to the wider spiritual dimension, to the role of the Spirit. My recent experience in the Caribbean is that these dimensions are present, particularly among worship leaders and in women's ministry in song. But the established leaderships are distinctly cautious about them—"We will now begin the meeting proper [with a Sankey's hymn accompanied on the organ or piano, after the worship leaders and singers have finished]." And these features certainly must not penetrate a traditionally-formulated Breaking of Bread, oh, no!

Neil Summerton