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**Elitist Leadership and Congregational Participation among
Early Plymouth Brethren**

Timothy C.F. Stunt

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Superficially the Brethren appear to be a democracy. Some outsiders even had the misapprehension that they were communitarian. As Timothy Stunt demonstrates in this carefully crafted essay, nothing could have been further from the truth in the early days at Plymouth.

The paper partly establishes the social bounds of the early movement through a marvellous quotation from Joseph Philpot, the Strict Baptist minister who had earlier been influenced by Darby, writing in 1842. He listed as one of the characteristics of Brethren '*an aristocratic atmosphere, a kind of Madeira climate which suits the tender lungs of gentility*' (p.328). Not all the early leaders were aristocratic or rich, of course, but they were educated and identified with the professional classes. The prevailing attitude towards the working-classes was one of paternalism.

The heart of the paper is a study of the tensions at Plymouth between liberty of ministry, an impulse inherited from the exasperation at what the early leaders perceived to be the unspiritual restraints of the churches they had left, and the control of unedifying contributions. The position adopted was one formulated, it would appear, by Captain Edward Foley: 'stated ministry but not exclusive ministry', meaning that there was a recognition of who should teach locally but an openness to others who might be gifted. But the unprofitable were stopped. Stunt cites a vivid example from Newton's recollections of an illiterate Plymouth rag-gatherer proposing the church should obey Christ's injunction to wash each other's feet, only to be met by Newton's lofty put-down: 'It appears to me that what you are saying is not to edification, and I beg you to stop'. Newton added 'and happily he did' (pp.331-2). In the disputes

between Newton and Darby, the latter was able to pose as the working-man's champion, but his attitude was not significantly different from Newton's and he was capable of the same paternalistic behaviour.

Of course, this was a phase of the movement, and Stunt notes that 'Open Brethren would soon be perceived as a working-class movement associated with gospel halls and a less sophisticated ministry' (p.335). The emphasis on the variety of gifts triumphed and it meant in later years, the writer notes, 'that Brethren meetings for worship were noted for a somewhat heterogeneous series of contributions' (p.332).

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